



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE  
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

**DÁIL ÉIREANN**

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

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## DÁIL ÉIREANN

*Dé Céadaoin, 2 Nollaig 2020*

*Wednesday, 2 December 2020*

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

***Paidir.***

***Prayer.***

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### **Pay for Student Nurses and Midwives: Motion [Private Members]**

**Deputy Mick Barry:** I move:

“That Dáil Éireann:

notes that:

— 4,000 student nurses and midwives have been working on the frontline in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic;

— these students are carrying out essential work and are compensating for the long-term understaffing of our health service as well as covering for Covid-19-related absences of qualified staff;

— 11,369 health care workers have been infected with Covid-19, 16.6 per cent of all cases in Ireland, 59 of whom were admitted to Intensive Care Units;

— the chronic understaffing of our health service was a problem before the Covid-19 pandemic, and that the necessary measures to address this understaffing have not been addressed by successive Governments;

— these students were briefly paid the Health Care Assistant (HCA) rate in Spring in recognition of the essential nature of the work, but this payment has since ceased, and they now receive no payment for their work;

— the financial cost to the students of carrying out this essential work is sizeable, with many students paying well over and above their travel and accommodation allowances to simply be able to attend the workplace;

— the personal and mental health cost to student nurses and midwives working in such high stress and high-pressure jobs are enormous, as well as the obvious risks to their health and the health of their family and/or those they live with;

— even before the Covid-19 crisis, the role these students were playing in their placements was more essential work than training;

— these students are actually paying for the ‘privilege’ of doing unpaid work in their placements, with fees of between €3,000 and €7,500;

— the vast majority of these students are women and their exploitation is also a reflection of gender inequality;

— these students utterly refute the recent claim by the Minister for Health that his refusal to pay them for their placement work is in order to ‘protect their education’;

— student nurses and midwives assert their education has never been protected while on placement because of the burden of essential nursing and care work, alongside academic work, while simultaneously needing to do other jobs to survive financially;

— during the Covid-19 pandemic, the opportunity to work in other jobs to earn income and generally survive has been largely cut off because of the risk of bringing Covid-19 infection in or out of their hospital placement;

— the health services across the country have faced huge difficulties in recruiting and retaining staff for many years, due to the chaos and under-resourcing across the health service, the low pay and the long hours of work;

— many nurses, midwives and doctors emigrate to Australia and other countries, where the pay is higher, and conditions are more favourable; and

— a survey in 2018 showed that, 71 per cent of 4th year student nurses and midwives were considering leaving the country, 79 per cent of them identified increases in pay and improvements in staffing and working conditions as the required incentives to retain nurses and midwives in the public services, and 76 per cent of them found that staffing levels are not adequate to support the learning of student nurses and midwives in the clinical setting; and

calls on the Government to:

— immediately reinstate the payment of student nurses and midwives who are in placements during the Covid-19 pandemic at the HCA rate;

— urgently engage with student nurses and midwives and their union representatives to establish a bursary or payment system that will fully acknowledge the work they do in our health service and will cover the costs of travel and accommodation for the length of their placements;

— abolish all fees for students who are training to work on the frontline of the health service in order to stem the ‘brain drain’, and allow the Health Service Executive to recruit a sufficient number of staff to run our health service at safe and adequately staffed levels; and

— ensure parity of pay, conditions and esteem for nurses and midwives with all other paramedical graduates, including the 37-hour week.”

I will share time with Deputies Gino Kenny and Paul Murphy. I am moving this motion on

behalf of Solidarity-People Before Profit, which has been campaigning on the issue to which it relates for quite some time now. We wanted to bring the motion before the Dáil this morning for a full debate. The purpose of the motion is to seek to end the non-payment of nurses and midwives for the work they perform in our hospitals. We appeal to all Deputies to support the motion and reject the Government's amendment.

What is the most dangerous job in Ireland in 2020? The most dangerous job is to be a healthcare worker. One in six Covid-19 cases relates to a healthcare worker. That is more than 11,000 individuals.

In June, the Oireachtas health committee heard that Ireland had the highest rate of infection among healthcare workers in the entire world. The Government amendment places a great deal of stress on the fact that the number of Covid-19 patients in the hospitals is less now than it was in the first wave in the springtime. It ignores, however, the fact that 50 nurses must still take sick leave every day because they have contracted the disease or because they are close contacts of someone else who has.

Student nurses and midwives know what it is like to be on the front line. More than 3,000 of them have been working in our hospitals in recent months alone. It is fair to say that without the effort and sacrifice of those people, our health system would have collapsed. It is also fair to say that for a student nurse or midwife, the issue of Covid-19 risk is very much an issue nowadays. Yet, these student nurses and midwives are paid precisely nothing. Think about that. Thousands of people without whose toil the health service would collapse are paid nothing. In the springtime, the Government appealed to people to come out of their houses and stand on their doorsteps to cheer and applaud our nurses. It described our healthcare workers as heroes, and yet thousands of those workers, student nurses and midwives are paid nothing. That is wrong, and Government Deputies know it is wrong.

Student nurses and midwives make big financial sacrifices just to come into the hospitals and work for nothing. Many held other jobs such as, for example, in nursing homes. They had to give up those jobs when the time came to go into the hospitals. For many, the income from those jobs they had to give up was the money that paid the rent. This is not to mention the fact that student nurse and midwives must pay fees, which are substantial and which range from €3,000 to €7,500 per year.

No doubt some Government Deputies will point to the issue of internship pay for fourth year nurses, but what about first, second and third year nurses? No doubt some of them will point to the allowance, but the allowance is modest at €50.79 per week. For many, it would not pay the parking costs in the hospitals in which they work, and only a minority of student nurses and midwives receive it.

In other countries, student nurses and midwives are paid. In Australia, student nurses and midwives are often paid more than €15 per hour. In Canada, they are paid more than €12 per hour. Here, however, a student nurse who received the allowance all year round would receive a little more than €2,500. A person would need to work for 140 years at that rate of compensation to make what the chief executive officer of the HSE makes in just one year. What does this say about our treatment of our young people? What does it say about our treatment of women? The majority of student nurses and midwives are young and the vast majority are women. Is their exploitation a reflection of gender inequality? Of course, it is; you bet your life it is.

The State has several tools at its disposal which could be used to tackle this injustice. For starters, it could immediately reinstate the payment of student nurses who are in placements during the pandemic at the healthcare assistant rate. This rate was paid to student nurses and midwives in the springtime. The arrangement has since been terminated. It can and should be reinstated. A second tool the State has at its disposal is to establish a student nurses and midwives bursary. In other words, a payment to students which would take full account of the contribution they make to our health services, and also the costs of their travel and allowance. A third tool would be to abolish student fees for those training to work on our health service's front line. There is no shortage of options.

The State will pay a price for treating student nurses and midwives in a mean fashion. Treating student nurses and midwives as skivvies might save the State some money in the short-term, but it is tremendously costly, both to our health service and our society, in the medium term or even the not-so-medium term. In 2018, a survey was conducted which showed that 71% of all fourth year student nurses were considering leaving the country on completion of their courses and 79% identified increases in pay and improvements in staffing and conditions as required incentives for the retention of nurses and midwives within the public health services. The alienation of student midwives and nurses by the State, with its mean-minded policies, comes with a heavy price.

I understand that there are negotiations taking place between the Department and the Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation, INMO, on the question of student nurse and midwife pay. I hope that those negotiations bear fruit soon. As I said, Solidarity-People Before Profit has been campaigning on this issue, as have student nurses. I think this is the first Dáil debate on the issue, but I stand to be corrected. If these issues are not addressed soon, I doubt very much that this will be the last debate on the matter.

**Deputy Gino Kenny:** We have clapped and saluted our front-line workers who have been at the coalface of this war against Covid-19. The vocation of nursing is facing its greatest challenge but it is also having its finest hour. When we, as a society, have needed them the most, healthcare workers have been there for us. The members of the nursing profession have a long, illustrious history of caring not only for their own profession, but also for society as a whole. They have seen the terrible impact that Covid-19 has had on their colleagues. Thousands upon thousands of healthcare workers across the world have died looking after people like us and anyone who is watching this debate. The pandemic has taken a terrible toll, not only physically but also psychologically. Imagine being in an intensive care unit, wearing personal protective equipment, PPE, and holding the hand of a person in their final moments. It is truly amazing and touching to think about. We are indebted to the people who are there during others' final moments, because the person who is dying could be any of our mothers, fathers, brothers or sisters.

It was just over a year ago that nurses were compelled to go on strike over pay and conditions. Nurses should never have to go on strike but they did for a number of reasons. It was not only for the sake of their own profession but related to wider aspects and the bigger picture of our health service and the direction it has taken. They were fighting for their profession, the retention of staff, pay and conditions, and all that goes with those things. These are the kinds of substantial questions about which we talk. Last year, more than 5,000 leaving certificate students showed their first preference was to study nursing and midwifery. There is an over-subscription of applicants who want to go into nursing. We are today raising the issue of what happens at the end of that process.

I know many student nurses because I have worked with many of them and have a lot of good friends who are nurses. They say that they love their job but are burnt out by the nature of the work and the way they are treated. That is particularly true of student nurses in their undergraduate years. They feel used and, in the words of the INMO, they feel exploited by what they have to do in wards. They recognise that they were given equivalent rates of pay to healthcare assistants, HCAs, in April and May but that has since been withdrawn for no good reason and even though they are obviously doing exactly the same work. That needs to be reviewed in a substantial way.

The Minister has spoken about placements and education training. Nurses are, of course, on wards and training but they also have to live. Pay of €50 per week is a pittance, and in the bigger picture, this is quite a wealthy country. We should have nurses who qualify and do not then feel compelled to emigrate. Some people might want to go to other countries after they graduate. However, a substantial number of nurses want to stay in this country but feel so burnt out after four years that they do not want to stay anymore. If even 50% of those nurses who go abroad were to stay in this country, there would not be a shortage of nurses here. There is, in fact, a worldwide shortage of nurses. We have to examine that. Why are student nurses and doctors leaving the State after being trained? They want to stay here but are compelled to leave. Covid-19 will be gone eventually, and when it is, we need to look deeply into why the medical professionals in this country want to emigrate once they are trained.

There are matters of legacy here for society and the Government. The lesson to be learned about student nurses is that health should be put before wealth. The legacy of student nurses is about remuneration, respect and retention. Those are the important three words. If we can concentrate on them, we can hold on to our nurses at a time when this Government and society need them the most.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** In six minutes or so, the Minister of State will stand up and explain why the Government does not think that student nurses should be paid. She might say that they should not be paid to protect their education, but before she does, I would like her to listen to the words of a student nurse who has been on the front line of the fight against Covid-19. Ms Maeve Evans is a student nurse from Dublin South-West. She wrote to me and explained:

To choose a life of becoming a nurse or midwife is not easy. Many of us have worked throughout Ireland's first wave of Covid-19 when it struck our acute hospitals and various other healthcare facilities. We helped out in our already struggling healthcare system and yes, we were given a round of applause then, but now we are being hushed.

I worked as a Health Care Assistant for 12 weeks in a nursing home during the pandemic under the HSE student nurse contract. I was offered little to no supports and genuinely found this traumatising. I had to start anti-anxiety medications and seek mental health treatment after this experience.

I currently get 25 euro per week during my placement. This amounts to about 65 cents per hour worked.

I love nursing, trust me I would have dropped out by now if I didn't. But the way we are treated and valued right now is embarrassing. I am embarrassed that our government values us so little.

It is time to stop hushing these front-line workers. The Minister of State should agree to



treat Maeve, and all student nurses, with respect. She should agree to pay student nurses a decent, living wage.

We were told by then Taoiseach, Deputy Leo Varadkar, that “not all heroes wear capes” but when it came to the student nurses fighting Covid-19, it seems that this Government believes that not all heroes deserve pay. That is perhaps part of the usefulness of the hero narrative. They are heroes rather than workers. Superman, Batman, Spiderman or whoever else does not have to be paid. It is a disgrace that this Government expects thousands of student nurses and midwives to work for free in our hospitals. The reality is that our hospitals are completely dependent on these front-line workers. They are putting their health and lives at risk to care for those in need. The least they should get is a living wage but instead of being paid by this Government, they are expected to pay thousands of euro to the colleges for the privilege of working in our hospitals. In the past, many of them had to work a part-time job on top of working in our hospitals in order to make ends meet but due to Covid-19, they are not allowed to do that for fear of catching and spreading the virus. How then, are they supposed to survive? It is time to scrap the fees for these student nurses and pay them a living wage for their work.

It is interesting that in March, the Government recognised that student nurses deserve to be paid. Under pressure from the unions and the left, the Government offered them the healthcare assistant rate of €14 per hour but that plan was quickly scrapped. The Government is trying to return to the normal scenario of relying on their free labour. Many students are getting nothing and some tell me they get an allowance of €50 per week or so, a rate which amounts to €1.36 per hour. Even the fourth years are only getting minimum wage or less, despite doing skilled work in difficult conditions.

It is worth comparing and contrasting the treatment of student nurses with the treatment of Deputies and Ministers. A Deputy can get a travel and accommodation allowance of up to €650 per week on top of a bloated salary, while student nurses are told they are lucky to get €75 per week in allowances. How on earth can the Government justify this? What exactly is a student nurse who is working away from home supposed to do with a €50 per week accommodation allowance? It is an insult. I imagine that if the Minister of State was told that her accommodation allowance was being cut to €50 per week, she would be up in arms. Why is she not up in arms about the treatment of student nurses? Instead of these insulting allowances, we have to recognise the work that is done by student nurses and pay them a living wage.

We know, and it has been referred to, that over 3,000 healthcare workers got Covid-19. Nurses, doctors, healthcare assistants and student nurses literally put themselves in harm's way in order to help to fight the virus but they did not get the support they needed. Even to this day, the INMO is saying there is not full health and safety protection for student nurses. In particular, it highlights the need for payment if one has to go on Covid-related leave. It is time to listen to the nurses and other front-line workers and provide the support and protections that they need. In reality, it is part and parcel of a Government approach of tackling Covid-19 on the cheap, of doing healthcare on the cheap and of underfunding our public health service as part of promoting a two-tier health service.

I was recently contacted by junior doctors in Tallaght University Hospital who say they are doing shifts of 24 hours or more every weekend at the moment. They say that when the shift change is meant to happen in the morning, the staff simply are not available and it is those who have worked all evening who then have to do the new admissions, which could be 20 people per day. There is a real consequence to refusing to fund a public health service, which includes

funding testing, tracing and isolating in terms of Covid-19. We are experiencing our inadequate public health service. As part of trying to build a properly funded, one-tier quality national health service, we must agree to pay the student nurses now.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** The Deputy identified somebody clearly and I made a presumption he had that person's permission to do so.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** Yes.

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

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

“notes:

— the exceptional contribution that nurses and midwives, including students, have made to the Covid-19 pandemic response;

— that this was particularly important during the first wave of Covid-19 due to the high number of hospitalisations and workforce pressures;

— the associated move to temporarily suspend clinical placements with students becoming healthcare assistants and paid accordingly;

— the difference at the present time with lower hospitalisations coupled with a larger workforce allowing for the protection of educational clinical placements;

— recent positive developments for the nursing and midwifery professions, including:

— safe staffing framework;

— enhanced nurse/midwife role;

— review of placement allowances and stakeholder engagement;

— specialist practice roles;

— advanced practice;

— Expert Review Body of Nursing and Midwifery; and

— national foundation education programmes for graduates;

— the importance of continuing to protect undergraduate clinical placements;

— the existing supports for student nurses and midwives on clinical placements, including:

— clinical placement allowance for accommodation of €50.79 per week of placement;

— reimbursement of additional travel costs for placements;



- Clinical Placement Coordinators at Clinical Nurse Manager 2 level (senior grade) with ratios of 1:30 in respect of student nurses and 1:15 in respect of student midwives;
- student allocations officers in all clinical sites;
- trained preceptors on all clinical placements (one per student);
- a 36-week paid internship placement in 4th year, paid at the approved rate, that is €22,229 on an annual basis for psychiatric nursing specialism and €21,749 for all other nursing disciplines and midwifery; and
- four hours per week protected for reflection on practice; and
- the progress for student nurses and midwives on additional supports due to Covid-19, including:
  - payment of the Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment for those working in the health sector who may have lost their employment as a result of Covid-19, including students in these circumstances;
  - occupational health supports equal to those for employees/qualified staff;
  - weekly oversight, at senior multi-stakeholder level, of clinical placements and any challenges arising;
  - a review of placement allowances, inclusive of independent appraisal and stakeholder engagement;
  - commitment to early agreement on any potential changes to allowances; and
  - new opportunities for students to achieve learning outcomes across a variety of settings, including remote environments and telehealth.”

I welcome the opportunity to address the House on student nurses and midwives on behalf of the Minister for Health, Deputy Stephen Donnelly. The Minister has advised that he cannot accept the Private Members’ motion and accordingly, asked that I move the Government’s amendment on the continued commitment to the education programmes for our student nurses and midwives.

I want to pay tribute to the nurses and midwives, and all their healthcare colleagues, who have continued to deliver care across the system during this unprecedented time. The past nine months have demonstrated, more visibly than at any other time in our recent history, the dedication, skill and commitment of our healthcare workers and I am acutely aware that this was not without risk, particularly for everyone on the front line. There are, as of 31 October, 39,608 whole-time equivalent nurses and midwives working in the system.

I want to explain to the House some of the notable differences between surge 1 and surge 2 of Covid-19, particularly in terms of the response required. There are around 280 patients in hospital with Covid-19, compared with around 900 in April and May. In addition, it is estimated there will be an additional 4,176 staff employed across the health service by the end of 2020, with 991 of them in additional nursing and midwifery posts. Also, the absenteeism rate for nursing and midwifery is currently around 5.6%, which is much lower than the 9% rate in

the first phase, which led to a workforce crisis. These combined factors have made a difference in managing surge 2. Fewer senior nursing and midwifery staff needed to be redeployed. Therefore, those who facilitate the supervision structure for clinical placements have largely remained in their roles, providing appropriate levels of supervision in surge 2.

During the first surge of Covid-19, it was not possible to maintain clinical placements for undergraduate students safely. Given the emergency, the students were offered temporary healthcare assistant contracts as an initiative to provide much-needed support for the HSE's response to Covid-19. Given the late stage in the academic year of surge 1, it was necessary to ensure that all students progressed to the next academic year. A mechanism was put in place so that students could gain clinical hours if they worked as healthcare assistants in appropriate care areas. For example, they would work in a medical ward if medical learning was required for completion of a student's course. This was supported by the regulator, the Nursing and Midwifery Board of Ireland, NMBI, the HSE, the chief nursing officer, the higher education institutes and the directors of nursing in each area. Unnecessarily standing down clinical placements at this stage in surge 2, when it is still possible to provide them safely, would have a significant negative impact on the students and their ability to catch up and gain suitable clinical experience. Clinical placements are scheduled throughout the year for each student and with 4,505 students to accommodate in all required care areas, there is little room for flexibility.

Nursing and midwifery offer an exciting and rewarding career. There are many options across a range of specialties for nurses and midwives on completion of their undergraduate programmes. Recent developments in the professions in Ireland include a safe staffing policy with evidence of positive outcomes for patients, staff and organisations. There is also an enhanced nurse and midwife role. Today's graduate nursing and midwifery students can, after one year and 16 weeks of suitable experience, apply for an enhanced nurse or midwife role with a starting salary of €37,161. That does not include those allowances or pay premiums that are also available. I mention advanced and specialist practice, where the policy of the development of the graduate to advance nursing and midwifery practice provides a framework for graduate nurses to draw upon their undergraduate programmes and translate their broad-based experience and knowledge into action.

The recent commencement of the expert review on nursing and midwifery is also an exciting development. It is expected to report with recommendations in 2021 and will be an important milestone in the evolution of the nursing profession in Ireland. We should be proud of the standards of education and practice that exist in this country. We have an excellent educational and clinical infrastructure for undergraduate student nurses and midwives. The purpose of the registration education programme is to ensure that upon successful completion, the graduate is equipped with the knowledge, understanding, professional attributes and skills necessary to practise as a competent and professional nurse.

Student nurses and midwives are not paid for clinical placements in their first three years or in the first three months of their fourth year. This supernumerary status is critical for learning in complex environments and is the optimum clinical learning environment. This places students on the front line in a learning capacity, additional to the workforce and fully supervised, for certain periods during each year of their training. This ensures that students can safely learn, observe and take part in the wide variety of clinical skills acquisition required for qualification. The wording "clinical placement" does not adequately capture the essence of what is required or expected of the students. Clinical placement represents 50% of the undergraduate programme, defined by the regulator, the NMBI. Placements are essential for the development

of skills, knowledge, professional behaviour and attitudes, representing a key component in the undergraduate students' attainment of competence to practice as a registered nurse or midwife.

During each clinical placement, nursing students must achieve all domains of competence and all indicators at the stated minimum level. Levels of competence vary each year and move through a complex learning process, from novice in year one, learning through exposure and-or participation in clinical care under direct supervision, to year four, where students are achieving a level of advanced beginner or competent practice under distant supervision.

I now want to focus on some key benefits of the undergraduate nursing and midwifery programme which, as the Government amendment points out, is second to none. Our four year degree level programme is one of the main reasons that Irish nurses and midwives are in great demand throughout the world. The move to the graduate programme level has created opportunities for nurses and midwives to extend practices and provides the necessary sustained change to operate in advanced and specialist practice roles. To facilitate this, graduate nurses have access to educational programmes that are funded by the Exchequer at foundation, diploma, masters and PhD levels. Paid study leave is also available. New graduates can continue to develop and acquire new knowledge and skills, applying evidence-based practice to real-world situations. This creates an environment that supports expanding scope of practice and the available evidence has shown this results in greater job satisfaction, better patient outcomes and improved service quality.

This year, €2.2 million was invested in new advanced practice posts. This not only creates more opportunities for graduate nurses and midwives to work in integrated care environments, but it also assists in responding to the increase in the complexity of healthcare needs and service reform. Advanced and specialist practice are daily demonstrating important impacts and outcomes for patients, such as timelier access to services, reduced waiting lists, hospital avoidance and better integration of services through enabling nurses and midwives to practice to the fullest extent of their licence.

Earlier this year, in response to the emerging pandemic, health sector management and trade unions, including nurse unions, convened weekly engagements focusing on the matters arising from Covid-19. This collaboration has been key in addressing many of the evolving important issues that were of concern to our front-line health workers, including PPE, redeployment and occupational health and wellbeing. I want to pay tribute to health sector trade unions and management for this engagement to date and thank them for this important work. Covid-19 is still with us and the Department and I are supportive of management and unions continuing with this forum for as long as necessary.

In March of this year, the Department engaged with the nurse unions on the Covid-19 emergency that was impacting on student nurse and midwife placements due to take place between April and May. Following intensive engagement, the Department and the HSE put in place a temporary arrangement for student nurses to apply for healthcare assistant, HCA, roles while placement was suspended. This temporary measure ended in August. On behalf of the Government, I want to express my gratitude for the contribution made by these students in providing support to our health service in times of acute need.

Yesterday, officials from the Department completed a review of the current placement accommodation and travel allowances for student nurses and midwives. The Minister is currently considering the output from that review and will outline his approach to this matter soon. It

is likely that further engagement with the trade unions will be required before this matter concludes. In conclusion, I want to be clear that I do not underestimate the difficulties that student nurses and midwives have experienced over the past nine months.

**Deputy Bríd Smith:** I first want to note the absence of the Minister, Deputy Stephen Donnelly. We cannot be in two places at the one time but it is a bit of an insult that he is not here this morning to make a statement on this matter.

I want to tell him and the Minister of State that this Government amendment is among the most outrageous and misleading efforts I have seen in years, and it also has enraged the students, who know the reality of their situation. Perhaps the most outrageous idea is that their unpaid work in our hospitals and on the front line is not as important now as it was in April and May. The reasoning is threadbare and flies in the face of the experience of nurses themselves. They are working to plug the gaps caused by the huge strains on our health service now, as they did in April and May. The difference is not that things are much easier now because of better staffing or lower infection levels. The only difference is that now the Government is not paying them anything.

At the start of November, the Government told us a review of the allowances for placements was taking place. This amendment takes the fact that the Government still has not improved the €50 a week as some kind of positive. The sum of €50 is all that is given to these workers. They may have to travel or to live hundreds of miles from home in temporary accommodation, often with huge costs in getting to and from their jobs. It is astonishing that more than 4,000 workers on the front line in the fight against Covid are in this situation. The misleading amendment from the Government gives the impression that its motivation is to safeguard the education of these students. That assertion and the rest of the amendment has enraged those nurses. If the Government thinks a vote here is the end of the issue, it is very much mistaken because this campaign will continue.

I noticed yesterday, as I looked back at the coverage of the strike last year by the Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation, the abundance of photographs of smiling Fianna Fáil and Green Party candidates pledging their support to the nurses' cause. This betrayal of the next generation will not be forgotten or forgiven by these workers or their families.

Part of this neglect and the outright abuse is because nurses are overwhelmingly women. If we think back over the years to the various strikes and battles that nurses have had, it has always been the case that the fact this was overwhelmingly a female profession meant they had to constantly fight for equality and parity with similar professionals. The last strike in 2019 was centred around that demand for equality with other degree-based professionals. Their treatment then and in previous disputes with governments and the HSE was based on a belief in blatant discrimination and also on downplaying the importance in general of the role of care and the caring professions in our society. It is no accident that these professions are still overwhelmingly female.

Over the years, in the debates in the Dáil, the issue of the treatment of student nurses has arisen time and again. In 1998, 2000, 2011 and 2013, well before the pandemic, student nurses and their representatives had to fight for basic provisions. Mary Harney and a previous Fianna Fáil Government at one stage wanted to remove all payments from student nurses in placement. Others tried to reduce it and, like many other public sector workers, they faced demands for cuts during the austerity years. Time and again, the State has shown a history of contempt and

disregard for nurses, student nurses and the caring profession in general. There is a theme in that, for all the platitudes in recent months, nothing has changed.

The most laughable claim in this amendment centres around improved staffing. The reality is that much of this so-called improved staffing is temporary staffing and the increased use of agency staff. In the October figures, we discovered there are now almost 200 fewer permanent nurses in our health system than there were pre-pandemic. There were 41,572 permanent nursing and midwifery staff working in the HSE last December and this has now decreased to 41,370. There were just 2,289 temporary midwives and nurses working in the HSE in December last year and this had almost doubled to 4,026 by August of this year. We know it was through the Be on call for Ireland plan that many were recruited via agencies, such as CPL, with inferior contracts that exclude proper sick pay and proper access to other standards and conditions. The Government's promise to provide 1,146 additional acute hospital beds cannot run without proper, full-time, permanent staffing levels. The numbers quoted by the Minister of State are temporary and agency staff, and will not address the ongoing staffing crisis in our hospitals.

The Government's treatment of student nurses nearly guarantees a continued haemorrhage of skilled staff from this country in the future. They will leave with bitter memories of their treatment and go to other countries where nurses are given the respect and the pay they deserve. It is not the case that the issue of safe staffing has been resolved. The reality on the wards is not what is in the Minister of State's amendment, which sounds as if the life of a student nurse is wonderful and that they are able to concentrate solely on their education. They and the INMO know the reality. The Minister of State can stick her head in the sand and pretend otherwise but that does not change reality.

Additionally, we know that the high rate of Covid-19 infections among nurses has continued with 353 healthcare workers contracting Covid-19 between 15 and 21 November alone. The reality of the Government's decision to reopen from level 5 is that when the next lockdown arises we will see even greater numbers of healthcare workers infected. This will place even greater demands on the student nurses the Government is treating with shocking contempt. Its policies on the reopening from level 5 has yet again guaranteed that another lockdown, surge in infections and crisis on our wards is central to paying the price for the failure to wrestle with the virus. Central to that will be the efforts of those student nurses. The Government's amendment confirms that its treatment of them is, once again, one of contempt. By January, no doubt the Government will be lauding the efforts of our healthcare staff. We will probably clap them again. In dealing with the failure of this Government, its words will ring hollow following its amendment today.

Green Party Members are not here but I wish to speak to them. It has become standard for us over the past number of months to appeal to that party on the basis of it having stood in the election for the desire for change and having stood on the INMO pickets in the past year when it fought for equality and a decent treatment of workers. It professed to support the demands to pay student nurses in March and April, before it entered Government. I am appealing to that party again today. All that has changed from April until now is that that party is in government now. The lives and the needs of student nurses, the vital work they do, the need to pay the bills and rent and to live their lives, has not changed. The Green Party is in government now but if it cannot use that position to advocate for the workers as part of that Government, what is the point in being there? Is it just to get so-called green policies passed that exclude the people who are at the heart of them. If one cannot save the planet other than by abandoning group after



group of vulnerable people in our society, there is no point in being in government.

I will finish with a quote from a motion put to a city council recently:

It's only fair and right that our student nurses are properly recognised and recompensed for the service to our communities during this pandemic. Right across the city we have Covid patients being tended to by NHS staff and their student nurse colleagues. The Health Minister must recognise their efforts at the most challenging of times with fair and proper wages.

I agree with that, and I hope all in this House agree with it, but this is a Green Party motion put to Belfast City Council. Does the Green Party here agree with its colleagues in Belfast? If student nurses in Belfast deserve decent treatment and payment, then student nurses throughout this country deserve likewise.

The Minister of State made a very interesting Freudian slip when reading her speech. She spoke of the nurses being “fully surprised” that for certain periods of the training of each of them that they would get the payment. She meant to say “fully supervised” but fully surprised indeed they are.

**Deputy David Cullinane:** I thank Solidarity-People Before Profit and Teachta Paul Murphy for bringing forward this motion which is very important. It is an issue many of us have been campaigning on for a number of months. I have had numerous engagements with the Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation, INMO, and have received thousands of emails from nurses and midwives on a range of issues over the past number of months, in particular on this issue. I also note the solidarity of senior nurses and midwives with their student nurse and midwife colleagues and the overall support for the call that has been made in this motion and in the INMO's campaign.

The Minister of State's speech and the Government's position on this rings very hollow. It is the same old rhetoric from the Government where it will say all the right things, it will clap the front-line workers on the back, tell them that they are heroes and essential front-line workers and that they are doing a great job, but when it comes to action I am afraid the Government is hiding behind its fine words. The reality is that student nurses and midwives are, and have been, doing an incredible job. Long before Covid-19 came along, pay and increased supports for student nurses has been an issue. It has become more of an issue because of the very significant and exceptional work those on the front line have done during this Covid-19 crisis. Student nurses and midwives, like all those on the front line, have been the glue that has kept our health service together and kept people safe. Hospital managers, consultants and specialists would not have been able to do their job had they not been supported by those student nurses and midwives.

Their demands are very simple. The Minister of State knows what they are and they have been calling for them for some time. The INMO's call is very reasonable. It is that we should pay all final year interns the same rate as healthcare assistants. This should be done without delay. The Government's amendment again mentions more processes and talks and that it will have to examine this, etc., which is the language the Government uses when it does not want to do something. The reality is that this can be done very quickly. In fact, it was done earlier this year and yet that payment was then removed for fourth year students. That should be immediately reinstated and those fourth year students should be on same rate as healthcare assistants.



The INMO is also calling for an increased and expanded clinical placement allowance for all other students. The Government's amendment to the motion states it will examine, look at, discuss and so forth, but it does not give any commitment. That is what I mean when I say that the Government's statement and its contribution today rings hollow because this can be done very quickly. The only people who are stopping the Government doing this are the Government itself. If it really believes this issue should be dealt with and that first, second and third year students should have increased and expanded clinical placement allowances, then the Government can and should do it very quickly.

The INMO is calling for a provision of full health and safety protection to all students, including payment if they have to go on Covid-19-related leave. That is not the case at the moment, which I find extraordinary. We all know of the efforts that have been made by these workers over the past number of months. Many of them have experienced burnout given the work and the overtime they have done, and I am talking here about all nurses and midwives, including student nurses and midwives. The enormous trauma they have been through in dealing with a very difficult situation has to be acknowledged and commended but not just with fine words. It has to be backed up by action, substance and firm policy commitments by the Government and the State, saying that we recognise the work they do.

The Minister of State knows what the issues are and what is being asked of her Government. Fourth year interns should be paid the healthcare assistants' rate and first, second and third years should receive greater allowances and not the pittance they are paid at the moment, which is a disgrace. We need more action from the Government.

**Deputy Louise O'Reilly:** I often hear Deputies in the Chamber declare they have an interest in a matter that is under discussion. I declare my interest now which is that I very proudly represented nurses for a very long time. Usually when Deputies are declaring an interest it is because they own a pub but I am very proud of my work record and to have represented nurses.

I was very cross yesterday to hear the Leader of the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte's party claim credit for the nursing degree. It took a great deal for me not to burst out laughing. We know well the biggest strike this State has ever seen in terms of the number involved and the duration was in 1999 and that it led to the nursing degree and the professionalisation of the work of nurses. It was not gifted to them by the Fianna Fáil Party. To suggest that it was is quite frankly outrageous. The nurses themselves know exactly where it came from.

As has been pointed out previously, this campaign will not go away. These nurses are strong and they are determined. When I was a kid my granny told me, long ever before I joined the world of work, that if I worked for free, I would never be idle. The Government is asking these students to work for free. It is asking them to go into Covid wards to do the kind of work most of us would not be able to do or would not have the courage to do. In her speech, the Minister of State said we should be proud of the standards of nursing education. Of course we are. We do not need a lecture from her. We are damn proud of our nurses. However, when the Government gives them a round of applause and a pat on the back, that is hardly fair. Would the Minister of State like her kids to work all week for a pat on the back and a round of applause? That is not what I want for my daughter. I want something better.

The Minister of State also said the supernumerary status is critical for learning in complex environments. She is bang on. It absolutely is but these people are not supernumerary. Supernumerary means one is there but not counted as part of the roster. The people in question are

actually working and are not supernumerary. They are actually going into Covid wards and working. Due to the state of our health service and its understaffing, they have no choice and have to work. They are effectively on the roster and part of the staffing complement.

Before I came into the Chamber I received this from a student nurse:

I have made sacrifices for my placement. I have chosen to feed my children before myself on 13-hour shifts, paid two rents, walked to and from hospital in the pitch black. I pay for the privilege of propping up an understaffed system.

In an ideal world, they would be only doing all of the learning to which the Minister of State referred but, in truth, they are working. The Minister of State said that our four-year degree level programme is one of the main reasons Irish nurses and midwives are in great demand throughout the world. She is dead right because they are of an absolutely high standard. Many of them are driven abroad by Government policy, however. Successive Governments have made our health service a deeply unattractive place for them to work. Many of them came home to sign up to Be on call for Ireland but they have been treated with nothing but disrespect.

We need these people. If we ever imagined for a moment that we did not need them, the past few months have shown us just how important this core group of workers is. They are the single largest group of workers in the health service. They happen to be predominantly women. It is not an accident that this predominantly female workforce, time and again, find itself at the back of the queue. That is simply not fair.

I urge the Minister to withdraw her amendment to the motion and to support the motion.

**Deputy Mark Ward:** I welcome the opportunity to speak on this motion on pay and conditions for student nurses and midwives. I thank Solidarity-People Before Profit for putting this important issue on the agenda today.

Members have all stood to give a round of applause to all front-line workers, including in this mutual appreciation, to student nurses and midwives. The Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation has stated its student members are being exploited during Covid, however. Students on placements in hospitals are facing additional Covid risks and are effectively asked to work as staff for no pay. Many have also faced income loss as they are no longer able to work part-time as care assistants while studying due to the risk of Covid while working in a care home.

Melissa, a student midwife from my area in Clondalkin, is a single mother of two. Melissa, like many single mothers, has not only had to push against but break the glass ceiling in order to improve her and her family's life. She was accepted into Trinity College Dublin to study midwifery, in itself no mean feat. She has had to manage to juggle her kids, her home and her studies. In her first year, Melissa has had to do six weeks' work placement. This has increased to 14 weeks this year. She is expected to be a student, a mother and a nurse all rolled into one. Nursing placements are always tough but Covid has meant they are under incredible pressure. Melissa has had to work on a Covid ward and has had no choice in this matter. She has carried out all duties of a midwife and has been on the front line for 39 hours a week. Melissa receives no allowances or pay for this. She has had to pay her own travel costs and lunches on top of the everyday normal expenses that families have.

The Government has taken advantage of students like Melissa and their dedication to their vocation. Mothers do not stop giving birth during a pandemic. Just when students managed to

break through the glass ceiling, the Government managed to put another barrier in their way. Instead of clapping, the Minister of State should put her hands deep down and reach into her pockets to pay these students what they are worth.

**Deputy Mairéad Farrell:** I commend Solidarity-People Before Profit on bringing forward this motion. It is scandalous that student nurses are not paid at the best of times. It is even more outrageous in the middle of a global pandemic. These student nurses have been central to our front-line response to this pandemic but have been left in financial hardship by the Government. Many students nurses from Galway have contacted me telling me how hard they have had it. One woman told me:

I have done 15 weeks unpaid placement each year. This consists of three 12-hour shifts each week, a total of 36 hours a week. The weeks when I have been on placement were extremely difficult. As the placement is unpaid, I also worked in the hospital at the weekends as a HCA through an agency. The shifts at the weekends were also 12 hours and some weeks I would work 60 hours in the hospital only to be getting paid at the weekends as a HCA.

The only time these students receive any financial support is when they work outside of the area that their college is in. That consists of €50 year a week to cover accommodation. One would not get accommodation with that in many places. For many, that does not even cover the cost of transport, let alone accommodation. One woman told me the best accommodation she could get beside her placement was for €85 a night. This is not even paid weekly but paid weeks later. It is only available if one travels a certain distance from college. Accordingly, in many cases students have been forced to commute from home due to Covid-19 and they receive nothing as this their placement is near the college.

Another nurse told me:

While in my third year, I had placements in Roscommon. The €50 a week did not even cover my train ticket - the bus would not get me there on time. I was getting up at 5.30 every morning because I could not stay up there.

The pandemic means that many student nurses cannot work their part-time job because of the risk of infection. How can they support themselves if they have no income? Some of them have children. How are they supposed to support their families? This is having an untold impact on their health. One woman told me:

Each time I have been put on clinical placement, I have been forced to work 54-hour weeks, 32 hours unpaid on a placement in the hospital and 22 hours in my weekend job. I cannot explain how many times I have considered dropping out because I cannot handle the financial stress.

The Minister of State needs to act urgently.

**Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire:** If nurses could be paid in applause and lip service, they would be truly wealthy. The fact is that they cannot. Lip service and applause does not put food on the table, clothe a family or pay the rent. We can call them heroes and thank them for all the wonderful work they do. Unless progress is made on these issues, however, then they are entitled to feel aggrieved.

The allowances some student nurses get vary wildly depending on their university, college or hospital. One nurse got in contact with us to say that her placement in St. Vincent's hospital was €22.70 a week, 62 cent per hour worked. It does not even remotely cover her transport costs, not to mind enough to keep herself.

*11 o'clock*

In the final year of a nursing qualification, student nurses must go on a paid internship. The wage of that internship stood last year at €14 per hour, matching that of the healthcare assistant role. This year the wage has reduced. In the year of Covid-19 it has reduced to €9.48, which is below the minimum wage. One student has been in contact with us to say that:

We are not just students, we are fully integrated into our placements, and despite being a student every patient that I have ever met has called me 'nurse'. One can be sure that this is replicated right across the system. To my patient I am more than just a student, but to our Government I am no more than that.

Nurses are leaving the country when they graduate and this is another thing. Aside from the rights and wrongs of this, which are profound and very obvious, there is the foolishness of this. There is a global shortage of nurses, and Ireland has some of the best qualified nurses in the world. They are of a very high standard. Is it any wonder that they are going to the Middle East, Australia, Canada or wherever they are going at this time when they are treated this way? Not only is this profoundly wrong and not only is this making it far more difficult for people from a background where they do not have money to try to qualify as a nurse, it is profoundly foolish and stupid. It is costing us in the long run. We are losing some of the best nurses in the world because we are treating them poorly and we show them no gratitude. Is it any wonder that they are not staying here? We need to address that for the nurses and for their families, and we need to address it for everyone in this country too.

**Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh:** I welcome this motion being brought forward by Solidarity-People Before Profit. I absolutely condemn the amendment put forward by the Government. During the discussion this morning I was minded of the time I spent in London. Hundreds of thousands of our nurses were forced to emigrate there, and nothing has changed. All the camogie and football teams there were full of nurses that this country did not want. We are giving them the exact same message now. There is no justifiable reason anyone would oppose the payment of student nurses and midwives who are on the front line during the global pandemic. Because we put a label of "student" on nurses, we think that it is *carte blanche* to be able to exploit them in the way that we have exploited many other students around the accommodation crisis and everything else that has been done. We should not be here in December trying to shame the Government into doing the right thing.

Student nurses have stepped up heroically. So far, 3,179 healthcare workers have contracted Covid-19. That is more than 7% of all cases. They deserve to be paid for the work they are doing. They need to be paid for the work they are doing. Students on placements often worked weekends at various forms of care facilities. That is how they support themselves through college. Due to Covid-19 they have had to give up these part-time jobs due to the dangers of cross-contamination. The Government comes across as completely out of touch when it does not dawn on it that many of these students need an income to live on. They are not paid. They are unable to learn and on top of this they are expected to pay €3,000 in fees, and often multiples more in rent. We are telling them to give up their job, to work for free, and they still must pay

the highest fees in the EU. Yet we wonder why we have problems retaining nurses if this is how they are treated. Something absolutely must be done about this. They are not asking for a handout. They are asking to be paid for the very hard work they do. My colleague was right in saying that nobody calls them students. They are called nurses because of the work they do. I thank them for the work they do, but we need to step up to the mark.

**Deputy Alan Kelly:** I have been spokesperson on health for several years and have sat in committees with the current Minister for Health. I put it to the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, that it is very disappointing that the Minister, Deputy Donnelly, cannot be here for this debate, considering what he has said in the past on this issue, including having queried why so many of our nurses were abroad and would not work here in Ireland. I would like the Minister to dwell on what he has said on this issue and on the questions he asked in this regard in the past. It would have been good if the Minister was here to listen to what we have to tell him today in querying why so many nurses have left our shores for the UK, Australia, and Dubai. They are, however, still leaving. I have been contacted by people who are going to leave this country again. They came home to fight Covid but cannot get permanent jobs. Some of them are from the Leas-Cheann Comhairle's county. They are leaving again. That is madness. A Government has fundamental problems in this area if it allows this to transpire. The Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, might just take this back to Government.

Why are they leaving still? The answer is very much in the attitude of how the Government is replying to this motion. I thank the proposers of the motion. The unions, SIPTU and INMO, have been shouting from the rooftops about this for some time. Nurses are at breaking point. I must declare that a family member is in nursing and I have relations who are trying to become nurses, like many other people here. The nurses are at breaking point. They feel they are not being treated well. Student nurses feel they are being treated diabolically. They are having to act beyond what is in any way normal for a student nurse and they are effectively full-time nurses. They are put to the pin of their collars, being supported by their families to be able to go through this to become nurses. They are putting themselves at risk, many of them have got Covid and many have become very sick.

If this was to be measured against public opinion, I put it to the Minister of State that the public fully believes that nurses and student nurses should be paid appropriately. Student nurses are being treated disgracefully. The work they are doing is slave labour. What the Government is doing to them is morally wrong and morally unjustifiable. It is something the Government could sort out quickly and it would not cost a lot. We are coming up to Christmas. Just sort it out.

I have heard various people say that there is a worry about setting a precedent. There is no worry here about precedent. There is precedent about a whole range of other areas. I do not believe that anyone in the House or any member of the public would have an issue if student nurses were paid appropriately, given the way they have worked during the pandemic. If the Minister of State agrees, then let us make it happen. Why can the Minister of State not do this? The Minister of State did answer me.

They are putting themselves at risk, they have already paid €3,000 in fees for blended learning, and as we know they have had to give up part-time jobs because they cannot put other people at risk due to their work and the chances of getting Covid. Because of this, the process by which they pay their fees, accommodation, transport and everything else is way more difficult because they cannot get additional income. We have made various hulabalos about how



much we support them and recognise them, but coming up to Christmas I believe the Minister of State has only one choice to make.

I will now read out something from a nurse. Let us call her Sarah Jane, because then she will know who she is. She works in the most overcrowded hospital in Ireland, which is University Hospital Limerick, which is the main regional hospital in the area where I live:

The issue of pay is not because we the student nurses and midwives across Ireland are money hungry. The day I walked into nursing I knew I did not want to be anything else. It is a vocation. I have never asked for anything in return. The issue here is fair pay for fair work. In understaffed and underfunded hospitals we carry out many of the same tasks as qualified healthcare assistants, yet we receive no pay for it. Why are we being treated like this by a Government who say they cherish us?

All nurses across Ireland support student nurses like Sarah Jane. Student nurses and nurses who are qualified all support them. This Government really needs to feel the wrath of the nursing community. I say this quite publicly. The Government needs to feel the wrath of the nursing community and the healthcare community in general with regard to how we treat young people, how we are going to be understaffed again into the future and how we are pushing so many nurses throughout the country into actually leaving the State and going to Dubai, America and Britain again.

That is exactly what we are doing. If the Government is not going to deal with this, we in the Labour Party have a plan to make it do so. We will consider that after the vote on this motion.

This matter is unconscionable. As a party that represents workers, we will not stand and tolerate a Government that treats workers like this. It is effectively treating them as second class workers, telling them they have to work the same way as other nurses but will not be remunerated or treated with respect. It is also asking them to put their lives at risk. That is what the Government is doing. In any form of society, that is wrong. It is wrong to treat workers like this and we will not tolerate it. Other countries across the world are acknowledging healthcare staff in some form at Christmas time. It is very difficult to go past words but some form of recognition or remuneration would be helpful to all healthcare workers. However, I am sure many of them would give that up if the Government would deal with this issue now, before Christmas.

Another issue that has come to my attention is that nurses are being asked to renew their membership of the Nursing and Midwifery Board of Ireland, NMBI, for 2021. After everything healthcare workers and front-line heroes have done throughout 2020, they now have to pay for the privilege of working in our hospitals in 2021. Surely it is not too much to ask that this fee be waived. The Minister needs to examine this issue. These people gave up so much during Covid. They gave up annual leave and gave up time with their families in order to provide childcare. They did everything. Surely in the coming weeks the Government can waive this payment, for one year only, as an acknowledgement of their work.

**Deputy Holly Cairns:** Needless to say, we should not be having this debate. There should be no need for it. We should be paying our student nurses and midwives for the work they do in our overstretched and understaffed hospitals. Students on mandatory placements are effectively working as staff for no pay, which is simply unacceptable. The practical and vocational nature of nursing and midwifery means their education involves working on wards. They are a vital



cog in our healthcare system and we need to recognise that. We need to recognise it with more than platitudes and social media posts. We need to pay them for their work.

This situation is exacerbated by the pandemic, as many student nurses cannot access part-time jobs to supplement their studies. Earlier this year, students in first to third year were paid as healthcare assistants for their placement and final year intern students were also paid at this rate. The Government must reinstate this payment immediately and make it permanent.

This motion highlights larger issues in the sector, where qualified nurses with years of experience do not receive pay that reflects their level of work, education and dedication. Responding to my question on the gender wage gap a few weeks ago, the Tánaiste pointed out that gardaí are paid more than nurses, “probably because of this tradition that one was seen to be a man’s job and the other was seen to be a woman’s job”. We have to conclude that this rationale is a factor here as well. Student nurses and midwives are not paid properly or supported because of the occupation’s status. Many caring roles in our society, in which women are over-represented, from childcare to healthcare, are relatively low-paying. This is a sad reflection on our values.

There are no valid arguments for not paying our student nurses and midwives. The Government amendment acknowledges “the exceptional contribution that nurses and midwives, including students, have made to the Covid-19 pandemic response”. Why then is the Government not willing to pay them for this work?

**Deputy Róisín Shortall:** It should bring shame upon the Minister for Health and the Government that our student nurses and midwives are being exploited for cheap labour under the current clinical placement scheme. There is no other way of describing it. This has been a glaring issue for many years now but the severe additional pressure placed on student nurses and midwives this year during the pandemic has brought it even more to the fore, and rightly so. There has been a public outcry over this exploitation. The Social Democrats fully supports today’s motion and we thank the Solidarity-People Before Profit group for bringing it forward.

The fact of the matter is that essential work is expected of students on clinical placements, for which they are not duly compensated. That is what this issue boils down to. Major problems have been layered onto that central issue this year, which I will come to in a moment. The issue at the heart of this matter is ongoing and unaddressed and it is about cheap, exploited labour being used to fill essential work. A student nurse who was in touch with me recently said:

We are not just students. We are fully integrated into our placements and despite being a student, every patient I have ever met has called me ‘nurse.’ To my patients, I am more than just a student. But to our government, I am nothing more than that.

Student nurses and midwives work, on average, 15 weeks per year for the first three years of their degree. The students who are lucky enough to receive a clinical placement allowance get a meagre €50.79 per week, while others receive nothing in compensation. Even that €50 per week is nowhere near enough to cover the cost of transport to attend a placement, that is, the cost of going to work, let alone tuition fees, accommodation costs or living expenses. In their final year, these students complete 36-week internships as rostered staff members and are paid €15,056. That is very far below the minimum wage rate.

This is not about pay in isolation. It is also about the fact that these students are expected to fulfil the duties of staff nurses and midwives. Chronic understaffing in our health service has made this the reality for some time now but it has clearly been intensified this year because of

our circumstances. Over 16% of Covid-19 cases have been among healthcare workers. The nature of their work has placed them at increased risk and led to higher than normal absences from clinical settings, with students expected to fill those gaps. The Minister has tried to defend the *status quo* and justified students' lack of pay because the placement is part of their education. This is what a student nurse said to me in response to that:

It is no longer just an education when we are filling staffing gaps, when we are taking up roles unsupervised, or staying back late to help out. It is no longer just an education when qualified nurses and midwives are too overwhelmed, when staffing levels are dangerous. It is no longer just an education when students are breaking down in changing rooms, forced to skip meals to afford transport or rent, or when their wellbeing is compromised.

It is shocking to consider that that is what we are doing to our student nurses. We try so hard to get people to stay in this country after training but is it any wonder we have a difficulty when this is the way the Government treats our valuable student nurses?

It is clear from students' first-hand experiences that this is not a purely academic exercise. They are filling critical roles in our health service. On top of that, the pandemic has prevented many nursing students from holding part-time jobs as they would normally, in particular as healthcare assistants, because of the risk of cross-infection. Students are expected to perform the essential roles and duties of rostered staff. They are severely underpaid and in many cases are not paid at all. Now, on top of that, they are prevented from holding any other employment that would help them cover their daily and weekly costs. The increased level of pay awarded to final-year nursing students this year needs to be made the standard, but there is still no commitment to guarantee this pay for interns starting their placements this January.

I will conclude by raising the cost of registering for nurses. Given that nurses have been through what amounts to a war zone this year, that so many have contracted Covid and that we have absolutely depended on them to save lives and keep our health service going, the least that can be done is to waive the €100 NMBI registration charge this year. I ask the Minister to consider the points made.

**Deputy Seán Canney:** I thank the Members who brought the motion before the House. As a Deputy living in and representing Galway East, I have received many letters and emails from student nurses and midwives and their parents and families, brothers and sisters, because we are simply doing something that is wrong. Many of the nurses who have contacted me are young people. They are the youth of our country and our future. They took on the career of nursing because they are young, bright and brave. They want to contribute to our society and to our health service. They are also human and at risk of getting Covid-19. What do we do? We treat them with disrespect, and in a way that says they are different, but they are no different from any other child or young person in the country. They should be treated with the respect and dignity they deserve. They have to pay for student fees if they do not qualify for grants. They must pay for accommodation if their placement is elsewhere. They must pay for the cost of that and the expense of their travel to work. We all know this - the Minister and the Minister of State know it, and the Government knows it. We need to do the right thing. A fourth year apprentice carpenter receives 80% of the full-time rate of a qualified person. I ask the Minister to research that and examine the calculations of that. At the same time, we treat these student nurses with so much disrespect. If we are to retain these people and they are to have respect in government, politics and the health service, we need to ensure we treat them with dignity.

Sometimes the Government can hide behind precedent. We know that precedent has gone out the window with Covid. It is gone because if we have learned anything it is that we have made a call on Ireland to come together and to work together. We are all in this together and the student nurses and midwives need to be there too. We must ensure we treat them with the dignity they deserve.

I ask the Minister of State to tell the Minister for Health to pay the €100 NMBI registration fee as a small token of thanks to all the nurses who have done so much since the outbreak of the pandemic, and will continue to do so. It is a small investment in our future and shows a small bit of respect for the nurses.

I will conclude by referring to the healthcare workers who are paid under section 39. These fully qualified people are working but are not being properly paid. This is another disgrace that we have allowed to exist in society.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** In March, the then Minister for Health, Deputy Harris, made a promise to student nurses and midwives. Now he is in the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, but he still has influence in this regard. Let us call a spade a spade: when he made that promise, it was nothing but a PR stunt. It was incredible to see that following the announcement, the Minister was trending on Twitter because hundreds, if not thousands, of students were delighted that he had made this promise. What has happened is that the Minister has reneged on the promise. Student nurses were offered employment by the HSE and if they took that employment they were no longer considered student nurses. They were employed directly by the HSE and their work would not count towards their placement hours. The Minister, Deputy Harris, sought to pull the wool over those students' eyes. It was cheap for any Minister to promise to pay someone, especially anyone working on the front lines in some of the most difficult conditions in the State in the middle of a pandemic, and then to renege on that. It was tight-fisted and disgraceful. It was allowed to happen. It might be advisable for Twitter to fact-check the tweets that the Minister, Deputy Harris, puts out because there is no veracity there now.

We need to do right by those students. People who do a hard day's work demand and deserve a fair wage. The standards of the Oireachtas and in this State should be based on decent workers' rights, where a worker who puts in the hard yards is properly paid. If we do not have that standard for students and workers in the health service, we do not deserve that standard ourselves.

The second important issue, which any Minister with a little foresight should recognise, is that one of the key threats to our health service in the last 20 years has been our inability to retain key healthcare workers. It stands to reason that if one treats workers wrong - if they are stiffed on the proper income to which they are entitled - they will find a market or location that will value the work they do and they will move there. As a result, the State will find them very difficult to replace. Over the years, the loss of these key workers has meant the workload on the remaining nurses has become more difficult which in itself drives people out of work.

I ask the House to contrast the radical difference in treatment by the Irish and Scottish Governments. The Scottish Government recognises the work that nurses have done and is giving them a £500 bonus. The Irish Government goes on Twitter, virtue signals, stands up in the Dáil and applauds their work, and then demands €100 from them to retain their jobs for this year. The fact that the €100 is for retention should set alarm bells off in the Government. The Minis-

ter should do right by the student nurses and midwives and by the nurses and staff we have now.

**Deputy Richard O'Donoghue:** On my first day in the Dáil, I spoke about hospitals. I have said that every person training in this country, whether they are an apprentice blocklayer or an intern, should get paid. I ask the Minister to ensure the male and female student nurses on whom we depend are paid properly. They are the people on whom we have depended all our lives, and never more than during Covid-19.

I now turn to the €100 that the Government is seeking from the nurses. I would like to read a small extract from a letter I have received from a nurse:

The disrespect shown to us, especially today has tipped many of us over the edge. If the Irish government had one scrap of decency, they'd pay our retention fee this year.

Every other healthcare worker in the world is being rewarded for working through Covid but once again we're being punished.

A round of applause was all we are worth. Enough is enough.

I and so many more will spend Christmas in work and not with our families ... we sacrifice so much and get absolutely nothing in return.

That is from a nurse. This disrespect from the Government is what our student nurses have to look forward to. The Scottish Government has rewarded its front-line staff with £500 this Christmas, but the Irish Government says "No". Instead they are to be charged €100. That is serious disrespect.

**Deputy Michael Collins:** I fully support this motion. Nurses, student nurses and midwives have worked hard and deserve better. Their conditions are shocking, especially those of student nurses. I am inundated with emails on this issue from student nurses and their families. They work hard and pay their accommodation and student fees. They are front-line workers. Apparently the best thing the Government can do for them is to clap for them, pat them on the back and thank them. Empty promises and empty clapping are not delivery. The HSE has enough funds. It is top-heavy with managers. It should start dropping managers and direct some of that money to student nurses, who are paid little or nothing for the hard work they have done.

I pay tribute to nurses, who have worked very hard. Many nurses flew home from Australia, America and all over the world because their hearts and souls were in the job of protecting the people they had grown up with. They were very shoddily treated by this country. I pay tribute to the community hospitals in my own constituency at Schull, Castletownbere, Bantry, Dunmanway, Skibbereen, Clonakilty and Kinsale, and to all those working in nursing homes. Nurses and student nurses have worked tirelessly during this pandemic. I make particular reference to Bantry General Hospital.

Every Deputy here has mentioned the €100 registration fee. The Government could at least be seen to do something by waiving that fee. Even though €100 is a pittance, that would have shown respect. The Government should have left the clapping to us and focused on delivering for nurses and student nurses. They do not deserve to be treated like this.

We are losing patience with the HSE. The cross-border directive could be nearing its end and the Government is doing little or nothing about it. Instead it is trying to find ways to make cuts to services for ordinary people.

**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:** I have continually condemned the Government and the HSE for their stupid ads and posters saluting front-line workers. I have said time and again that the Government should honour nurses' pay agreements, take care of student nurses and midwives and give them the pay they deserve. People working in the catering staff of hospitals throughout this country have not received a pay increase in 13 years. Moreover, student nurses are charged registration fees. These should have been waived. The young nurses we train feel they will not be adequately paid in this country so they are forced to go abroad. They work in Australia, England, America and around Europe. We want them to be able to see a future and start a family at home. We want them to be near their parents and grandparents. I want to stand up here today and speak on behalf of the student nurses from the county I represent, County Kerry. Student nurses and their parents have been in contact with me to ask me to make a case for them. That is exactly what I am doing today.

I plead with the Minister of State to forget about the posters. I do not want to see another ad paid for by the HSE and the Government saluting the front-line workers. I do not know who dreamt up the stupid clapping. That was probably the biggest insult. Finally, I refer to section 39 workers. I compliment Mr. Donie Doody from County Kerry, who represents the SouthDoc drivers and receptionists who have been affected by the provisions for section 39 workers. These workers have not been paid what they are entitled to and I wish to advocate on their behalf.

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** I am glad to have the opportunity to support this very important motion. Our student nurses must be treated fairly and with respect and dignity. Electricians, plumbers, mechanics etc. are all paid as apprentices. Student nurses who serve on the front line need to be looked after, respected and paid. I also call for the €100 registration fee to be waived for this year. We should respect the nurses who did so much for the people of the country this year.

I call on the Government to restore parity to section 39 workers. I have also been asked by Mr. Donie Doody and the great workers who operate SouthDoc in Killarney and Kerry to advocate the restoration of their pay. Other section 39 workers whose pay was reduced in 2010 have had their pay restored since 2018. Why are these people neglected? They are preparing to go on strike. It is sad to think that these staff members, drivers and workers, who work late at night and give so much to the SouthDoc service in Killarney, are being left behind. I call on the Minister of State to ensure this matter is rectified immediately.

The risks faced by nurses on the front line must be taken into account. Like senior nurses and all others on the front line, student nurses are putting themselves and their families in jeopardy. They can contract the virus while working and take it home. I am pleading with the Minister of State. This is very important. The Government must restore pay to section 39 workers and respect student nurses.

**Deputy Catherine Connolly:** I thank People Before Profit, Solidarity and RISE for moving this motion. We have not discussed this matter since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, although we have all raised it through oral and written parliamentary questions and Topical Issue debates. It was an urgent issue from day one. I thank the parties I have mentioned for using their Private Members' time to bring this motion when there were other things they wished to raise.

The Ministers of State, Deputies Butler and Rabbitte, have been sent into the fray when the



senior Minister should be here to discuss this issue and many others. His absence is not acceptable. I have said this before. The Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, sat here all morning, and the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, is here now. I welcome their presence, but in view of the importance of this issue and its background, the senior Minister should be here.

Speaking of background, I spent ten years of my life on a regional health forum. I saw the public health system systematically undermined while every effort was made to further the private system. There is a background to this situation. Time does not allow me to deal with all of that and it is not necessary to do so. I will mention some snapshots of the situation in 2019, just before we went into Covid-19 with a health system that was not fit for purpose. As a result of this situation, the Government took actions which made things worse for people on waiting lists for operations. Our public system was utterly unfit for purpose following actions taken by various governments.

Irish hospitals were already working at almost full capacity. According to figures from the OECD, Ireland had a hospital occupancy rate of 95%, one of the highest in the OECD. This was about 20 percentage points above the OECD average of 75.2%. In other words we had very little spare capacity. As a consequence, dreadful decisions had to be made to keep hospital beds free and an agreement was made with private hospitals to leave their beds empty. I can pick any statistics but I will pick only a few. By the end of November of 2019, just a few months before Covid, we had seen the highest number of patients on trolleys in any year since records began, with more than 100,000 people having gone without beds in the year to 29 November. According to the INMO, in 2019 there were 1,157 fewer nurses and midwives working in the HSE than in 2007. Some 40,000 nurses went on strike in 2019 over pay and staff shortages. According to the INMO at the time, and indeed some clinical directors of various hospitals, the dangers of overcrowding and chronic understaffing put patients at grave risk.

That was the background leading into Covid. Today we have a speech that I doubt the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, or the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, wrote. It is five pages long and disingenuous in the extreme. It does not deal with the issues or the very brief request set out in the motion. The first page of the motion text is long but the second page has simply three very basic requests. The Minister of State's speech refers to excitement. It states: "Our four year degree level programme is one of the main reasons that Irish nurses and midwives are in great demand throughout the world." It refers to the "exciting" career of nursing and midwifery. I agree with that and I agree that nurses and midwives are in demand, but these five pages fail to explain why our nurses and midwives are in such demand throughout the world but not in demand in their own country. Surely at least a page of this speech might have focused on what we need to do to pay our nurses adequately while they are training and following their training, how we might retain them, and what package of actions are necessary for us to be able to cherish them.

I felt embarrassed about the clapping. I clapped for the nurses on two occasions. I did so with some shame. The hollowness of my clapping and all our clapping was deafening because at the same time we were in receipt of constant representations from nurses and student nurses who were not really being protected. There was the whole debacle over the protective gear and so on. They carried a huge burden without any payment. Then for a little while we brought in some payment for them and then took it away again, ostensibly because the situation had changed. The situation has not changed. It has changed to the extent that we are not using as many intensive care beds and there are not as many in hospitals, but we will face, as the Minister of State well knows, another surge in January or February.



What is being asked for here is a temporary Covid-related measure, as I understand it, and Covid is still very much with us. We talked about €18 billion in extra funding going to businesses and other organisations, and rightly so, but not to the student nurses and nurses on whom we depend. Any study in psychology that I ever read or looked at in a previous life showed that people got better more quickly as a result of interaction between nurses and the patient. I might add the porters and cleaners as well, whom we should treasure much better. That was the greatest predictor of a patient getting better, not the actual doctors. I pay tribute to them as well but they were not a predictor of patients getting better.

There are a number of practical problems here. The nurses could not work outside because they could not risk the spread of Covid when they went back into the hospital so they were deprived of that source of income. “Sorry” is the wrong word. Deputy Butler is a Minister of State. It is the senior Minister who should be in here looking at this and not giving us a five-and-a-half-page speech telling us how exciting this career is. We have listened today to all the contributors. Excitement is not something at the forefront of nurses’ minds. They are trying to cope with Covid, struggling with mortgages and trying to raise children in a career that is not valued, despite the fact that they have degree status. I am not putting that forward as something that gives them status, but they wanted those degrees and worked for them themselves. We are not giving the right recognition to nurses at any level but today we are looking at giving them, during Covid, the payment they deserve.

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** It is clear from the debate that Members right across the House share a gratitude and pay tribute to the student nurses and midwives and all their healthcare colleagues, who have provided and continue to provide care across the health service. All nursing and midwifery students, from first year to fourth year, have returned to full-time student capacity since the end of September. The final year interns will commence their 36-week clinical placements in accordance with the agreed pay and conditions of those placements. These students have agreed learning objectives to ensure that the final stages of learning remain supervised and supported. As the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, explained earlier, while Covid-19 remains a presence affecting all health services, so much more is known about the virus now than was known at the beginning of its first surge. This is clear in the number of Covid-19-positive patients who currently require acute hospital care. All healthcare workers have access to PPE. While Covid-19 remains a serious threat, the situation now is not as it was in March. This has affected the management and deployment of healthcare workers.

Irish nursing and midwifery graduates are in great demand nationwide and worldwide. A main reason for this is our four-year degree programme. The clinical placement in the fourth and final year of study focuses on the development of skills, knowledge and professional behaviours for our future nurse and midwife graduates. An important element of the clinical placement is the four hours per week during which the student reflects on his or her placement. There are many opportunities for graduate nurses and midwives to further their careers by way of further education programmes that will develop their skills and knowledge. Additional funding of €2.2 million will provide for additional advanced nurse practitioners and advanced midwife practitioners. The numbers employed in these grades are continuing to increase.

The nursing and midwifery career path in Ireland continues to evolve. The Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, outlined many of these developments earlier. The expert review on nursing and midwifery is expected to report in 2021. I am sure that the recommendations of this report will provide the future roadmap for the development of the nursing and midwife professions.

It is important that proper engagement remains between health sector management, the student nurses and midwives and their representatives. Covid-19 has an impact on how we all do our work, but this is particularly true of our student nurses and midwives and all our healthcare workers. Such engagement will assist in addressing concerns as they emerge.

I again commend the student nurses and midwives on the role they provided when the pandemic struck the State. The way in which all of us live our lives has changed. The pandemic has shown the importance of supporting the work to protect our student nurses and midwives and their graduate education.

I have listened intently since arriving in the past hour to every single contribution that has been made and it has struck me that every single Deputy has raised the annual retention fee for the nurses. This €100 is the annual retention fee for the professional register and is part of being a regulated professional. I have taken plenty of notes and I will bring those thoughts back to the Minister. As I said, every single Member I have heard has raised the issue of the registration fee and how the nurses feel it is unfair after the effort, the work and the commitment they have shown over the past seven or eight months and the fact that they have really put their shoulder to the wheel. I take on board every point that has been made and I will feed those points back to the Minister.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** I thank all those Deputies who rose to support the motion tabled by People Before Profit and Solidarity in support of the students and midwives and our call that they should have the healthcare assistant rate they were given earlier in the pandemic restored and that, more generally, they need to be paid for their placements because it is work, not simply education. The fact that they have to pay fees for the privilege of being exploited on the wards and while working on the front line, not just during the Covid pandemic but, more generally, while playing a role in holding our entire health service together on an ongoing basis, is an absolute scandal.

I do not say it lightly, but the absence of the Minister for Health, Deputy Stephen Donnelly, from the Chamber during a debate about thousands of student nurses and midwives who have protected us all, put themselves in harm's way and fought on the front line during this pandemic is nothing short of an insult. The speeches of the Ministers of State, Deputies Rabbitte and Butler, which were almost in the realm of fantasy in terms of depicting the reality of the work of student nurses and midwives and their role in the health service, were an insult. The amendment tabled by the Government is an insult. It all really exposes as the purest hypocrisy and as totally hollow and disingenuous all of the applause and praise the Government parties heaped upon student nurses and midwives earlier in the pandemic.

The decision to refuse the request of student nurses and midwives to pay them for their work has shown that the applause and praise meant nothing. It is a direct breach of a promise and commitment made by the Taoiseach on 20 October. I raised this issue with him on foot of conversations with Phil Ní Sheaghdha of the INMO, who brought it to my attention, and then with thousands of student nurses and midwives who contacted me and with whom I have held Zoom meetings and so on. I raised the matter with the Taoiseach and said it was completely unacceptable that the healthcare assistant rate that was given to student nurses and midwives in the early part of the pandemic - under pressure, it has to be said, from the student nurses and midwives and their unions and so on - was being removed. The Taoiseach agreed that it should be restored. He has since rolled back on that promise.

The Government amendment provides outrageous excuses for breaking that commitment and refusing to pay student nurses and midwives and show them the respect they deserve. The arguments put forward by the Government in the amendment are threadbare. They could be summed up as stating that the Government's refusal to make this payment is justified on the grounds that Covid is not as bad as it was in the early period of the pandemic and that the Government is protecting nurses' education. It is almost Orwellian doublespeak to suggest that is why the Government is not paying them. The amendment states this is justified by the great improvements the Government is apparently making in staffing levels in hospitals as well as supposedly reducing the dependence on student nurses and midwives to hold wards and health-care settings together. Of course, the other excuse is the wonderful opportunities that exist for student nurses as a result of reforms and improvements the Government has made.

Rather than going through why I think the Government amendment is nonsense, disingenuous, hypocritical and fanciful, I would like to speak about Zara, who is one of the hundreds of people who have written to me or attended meetings as part of our recent "Behind the masks" online campaign. She read the Government amendment and her response to it covers most of the points I would seek to make on it. She states that the point the Government is making in the amendment is an absolute joke. She is a second year general nursing student who just finished a two-month placement last week. While she was on her placement, she and one staff nurse were responsible for 12 patients on multiple days. The ward did not bring in a healthcare assistant to work in the area as there was a student there. She states that to say there is safe staffing and that the Government is protecting the education of student nurses and midwives is an absolute joke. She makes that point that they are expected to work with Covid patients for free. While she was on placement, three wards in the hospital had Covid outbreaks and were shut down. Approximately 100 staff had tested positive for Covid in the hospital and her ward was turned into a Covid ward. She believes it is laughable for the Government to insinuate that because there are fewer hospitalisations now than in the first wave, there is no risk involved in student nurses and midwives working with Covid every day for their education. She also points out that most student nurses and midwives do not even get the miserable €50 allowance for accommodation which, in any event, would not go next or near to covering the cost of accommodation. As one student nurse put it, it literally would not cover the cost of a cardboard box.

I would like to refer to another heart-rending story of the many that I received. I will not mention a name in this case, which involves a lone parent with four children who had been homeless during her training. She did her unpaid placement in her third year, during Covid. She had to give up her job to do that placement and has subsequently had to drop out of her nursing course because of the cost of fees. She also got Covid-19. This is just scandalous. It is shocking beyond belief.

Áine, another student nurse, has said that they are not there purely for education. She has spoken of how they work 13-hour days as part of a team, taking on their own caseloads to cover staff shortages. She suggests that if those in government set foot in any public HSE hospital in Ireland, they would see that for themselves. She argues that student nurses and midwives should not be used to replace staff nurses if they are not being paid. The stories go on and on. I do not know who wrote the speeches of the Ministers of State but, as Áine said, it is clear that the person in question is either uninformed or is deliberately misrepresenting what is going on in hospitals not just during Covid but all of the time, including pre-Covid, in terms of the roles that student nurses and midwives are playing.

During one of the online meetings I had with the student nurses and midwives, Sarah said

that when she is finished her training she would not work for the HSE in a fit. She said that she is leaving. One after another, the nurses and midwives echoed that sentiment. The point was borne out by a survey carried out by the INMO in 2018. More than 70% of the student nurses who took part in the survey said they intended or were likely to leave because of the terrible conditions and the experience of burnout. They also pointed to the direct impact of the work that is imposed on them during their education as contributing to that burnout, as well as the conditions they have to face as nurses when they are qualified.

Deputy Kelly referred to the emails that have been received today regarding the €100 registration fee for the NMBI. For nurses and midwives to be again asked, in the midst of a pandemic, to pay for the privilege of going in and working on the front line, endangering their health, is truly an insult. Is it any wonder that there was an enormous strike by nurses and midwives over the issue of the inability of the HSE to retain nurses and midwives who we need desperately? In the face of the pandemic, we need them now more than ever, but they are leaving in their droves because of the terrible conditions they face. Student nurses and midwives have to pay from €3,000 in fees, and up to €7,500 if they have previously done another degree, for the privilege of being exploited. It is shocking.

As many student nurses have pointed out, there is no doubt that if this was a majority male profession, they would not be treated in this way. There is a deep gender bias in this treatment of student nurses and midwives and their exploitation and it has to end.

I can tell the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, who is present, that the Government and the Government parties have engendered the fury of tens of thousands of nurses and midwives, as well as their healthcare colleagues, over the treatment of healthcare workers and student nurses and midwives during Covid and more generally, as well as over this insulting amendment. I appeal to the Government to withdraw the amendment.

*12 o'clock*

The Government must end this exploitation by paying students nurses and midwives what they deserve for the critical role they play. I ask the Government to treat our healthcare workers properly and stop making them pay for the privilege of providing a service to our society and our health system by imposing extortionate fees on them.

Amendment put.

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

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

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Yesterday, Leaders' Questions went considerably over time. I ask leaders to have regard to the allocated time.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** Figures published yesterday by Banking & Payments Federation Ireland show a surge in mortgage approval rates for October, driven by first-time buyers. Behind that figure is a very worrying spike in house prices, which reflects the broken housing policies of this Government and the previous one. On average, first-time buyers are now borrowing €10,000 more than was the case last year. It is worse for other borrowers, who are bor-

rowing €15,000, on average, more than was the case last year. This reflects a very serious hike in house prices, which is a problem at any time but is outrageous in the middle of a pandemic when the incomes of so many people have collapsed.

The continued increase in housing prices is being compounded by Government policy. In July, the Government turbocharged the help to buy scheme, a scheme that disproportionately benefits high-income earners, transfers taxpayers' money directly into the pockets of developers and increases property prices. The Government was warned by the ESRI and others that expanding this scheme would inflate house prices, which would hurt the majority of people who are trying to buy a home, but the Government did not listen. Meanwhile, workers on much more modest incomes are totally left behind. Take-up of Rebuilding Ireland home loans for first-time buyers is down. Applications in 2020 are down by 45% and approvals are down by 50%. Since Covid, shockingly, drawdowns have collapsed by 70%. This is a consequence of the Government's discrimination against workers on the wage subsidy scheme.

A comprehensive, affordable housing plan is urgently needed. The Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, spent the summer telling anyone with a pair of ears that his affordable housing plan would be published in September. We are now in December and there is no plan. The Government is five months in office and its promise to tackle the housing crisis from the get-go has fallen flat. Homes remain unaffordable for people on average incomes, rents continue to rise and house prices are up for first-time buyers despite the pandemic. The Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage said last week that he has banned co-living yet, this week, a co-living development was given planning permission in Dublin.

This is not a Government that is serious about tackling the housing crisis. Behind all of the statistics and figures is an entire generation for whom home ownership is now a pipe dream, people who will struggle to keep a secure roof over their heads, people who worry about their rent and people who are in extraordinarily precarious positions, many of whom live in the box room of their mother's home, sometimes with their own children. Their situations, stories and lived reality prove that the Government's housing policies are not working.

I believe that all of this can be fixed, but only with ambition and a very significant change in policy. So long as the Government's housing policy is fashioned for wealthy developers, this crisis will remain as a feature of life in Ireland. This is the truth that must be confronted. When will the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage finally publish his affordable housing plan?

**The Taoiseach:** First of all, the Deputy is incorrect and is wrong. We know that Covid-19 has had a very significant impact on the housing situation in 2020. It is true that Rebuilding Ireland home loan approvals have been down this year because of Covid-19 and significantly so in quarters 1 and 2. The pandemic impacted significantly on the building sector because of the first lockdown, and that has followed through. Commercial mortgage approvals, by the way, were down 30% in quarters 1 and 2 of 2020.

The Government, in the budget, has brought in a €3.3 billion investment programme for both social and affordable housing. It is the largest ever scale of investment in housing by the State. The issue will be delivery of construction and getting the projects built. The commitment is to deliver social and affordable housing in various forms. Covid has also created another situation which will ultimately have an impact on housing. That is the enormous increase



in household savings throughout the country because of the impact of the crisis on spending in the economy during the past nine months. That is being evaluated in terms of its potential impacts on the market over the coming year.

The Minister provided significant resources in the budget for affordable housing in different formats, not just through the serviced sites fund but also through the local infrastructure housing activation fund and undertaking to deliver a new affordable purchase shared equity scheme for first-time buyers and a new funding model to accelerate the delivery of cost rental homes through the approved housing body sector. Some €200 million has been put into financing the Rebuilding Ireland home loan scheme. The Government is absolutely committed to it and legislation will be brought forward by the Minister in the coming while to deal with the affordable issue. Legislation relating to the Land Development Agency is also progressing and we have put a very priority on it. We discussed the issue at the last meeting of the Cabinet subcommittee on housing and we see it as an additional important lever in terms of getting increased capacity.

The Deputy keeps on talking about developers and so on. The bottom line is that the output in 2020 will be approximately 18,000 houses, if we get there. Covid has had a very negative impact. Next year, the target could be around 25,000. Up to 12,500 of those houses will be approved housing body and local authority housing. There is no huge private sector out there at the moment in terms of house construction. That is the reality. The approach to housing has to be multipronged and multidimensional. It cannot be a one-dimensional, ideological approach, which the Deputy's party has advocated for too long and that has resulted in a lot of schemes being voted down or delayed. We need supply of housing in different forms. We need the private sector to develop housing, we need social housing developed at an unprecedented scale, which we are committed to and which we have provided the resources for, and we need affordable housing that is supported by the State, which we are committed to doing and which we are going to provide funding to do. Cost rental models and newer initiatives will also be supported and financed.

Our approach is to ensure that at all levels, at local level and at national level, there is a whole collective effort to get houses built and avoid situations such as we had last week where a scheme for 950 houses was delayed for ideological reasons. That is not sustainable if we are genuinely to tackle the housing crisis we face in this country. The Government is only five months in office but I can tell the Deputy that we are very determined to get to grips with the housing issue and resolve it.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** I will try to bring the Taoiseach in touch with some glimpse of reality. The people I referred to who are locked out of the housing market do not have massive household savings. In fact, many of them are struggling just to get by. They pay rent, which has gone through the roof, and they struggle to have any savings. Many of them have lost work and income. They are relying on a proactive approach from a competent Government to deliver a housing package, including an affordable housing plan. Covid or no Covid, the Minister said repeatedly in the summer that we would have an affordable housing plan. That plan has not materialised.

We cannot go to Christmas without that plan being produced for all to see and scrutinise and then to be implemented. Those are the facts. I take no comfort from the Taoiseach's vague assurances that something will happen at some time. Will the Taoiseach tell the House, on 2 December, where this housing plan is? It was promised to us last summer. When will it be published and when will we see it?



**The Taoiseach:** I am not saying that people who need affordable housing have massive savings. That is why we are supporting them. That is the reason we put €150 million into the help-to-buy scheme which the Deputy refuses to support and which she attacks whenever she gets a chance. We want to give people support to enable them to buy homes. Approximately €760 million was provided in the budget for affordable housing, there was €110 million in new measures towards a shared equity scheme, €150 million for the help-to-buy scheme, €205 million for the Land Development Agency, LDA, €210 million for the Rebuilding Ireland home loan scheme and €50 million for the serviced sites fund. That is a comprehensive range of measures.

The bottom line is that, ideologically, the Deputy is not very taken by affordable housing. If she is sincere, I wish to work with other parties in the House. For example, is it not time we got on with the Oscar Traynor Road site, or do we want to put it back for another five years and just come to the House with a load of rhetoric about people waiting to get houses at affordable prices? That is what will happen. The Deputy continues to refuse and vote against schemes throughout the country because they do not fit her ideological frame. With respect, we have gone beyond ideology in the housing crisis. We all cannot have it our own way in terms of the ideal model. The Government is prepared to support social housing at an unprecedented level, as well as affordable housing and cost rental. It is time others worked with us in that regard.

**Deputy Alan Kelly:** Yesterday, I raised the requirement to have a Minister in charge of the roll-out of vaccinations for Covid-19. In fairness, the Taoiseach said he would consider the issue. I hope he does so by the end of this week. I fundamentally believe we need one. The volume of people who have been in contact with me agree. We must have a situation where somebody working in this eminent task force is not being second-guessed and that he or she does not have to go through the line Minister or line Department and worry about whether the decisions he or she is being asked to make are going to be questioned. Professor MacCraith is an excellent man and can chair the group, but there must be a Minister in charge. He does not have executive authority to make quick decisions. Decisions will save lives, businesses and jobs and will open our society. I accept we must do it properly, but we must do it with as much speed as possible.

Consider what is happening in Finland, France, Denmark and now the UK with regard to their plans for the roll-out. I am not saying our situation is always comparable, but equal haste and thought must be put into this. I am concerned that the task force has only met twice. I do not believe it should be just meeting like that - it should be permanent. We have seen Ministers continuously appearing for weeks, and the Taoiseach has joked about this in the past, with high-visibility jackets during emergencies, storms and so forth. This is the biggest emergency we have ever faced, or will face in our lifetimes. How the roll-out of the vaccine will be carried out requires a national standing group with a Minister in charge.

Dr. Noel Browne was the first Minister for Health in this country. He is a hero of mine and of the Labour Party. His sole role was to get rid of tuberculosis, TB. He helped to do that. The current Minister must do the same with Covid-19. The plan is due to be announced on 11 December and I do not expect the Taoiseach to have all the answers about what will be announced. However, I ask him to confirm that the following areas will be covered: the vaccines procurement process; storage; the order in which people will get it; the rules on how it will be administered; and the rules on how society will reopen. Various companies and organisations are advertising, for example, Longitude is now being advertised for next July for 120,000 people. If somebody arrives there without a vaccine, will the person be allowed to enter?

There is also the public health campaign. An issue that is important for me is the IT system that will deal with this. I come from an IT background. The only unique identification code for citizens in this country is the personal public service, PPS, number. We must have a database that can be interrogated with regard to who gets the vaccine, who does not get it, underlying illnesses, age and so forth. I presume the announcement on 11 December will outline what we are doing in all these categories.

**The Taoiseach:** I set up the task force. This is an issue of national priority that goes to the top of the Government and I will stay on top of this until everything is resolved. To be clear, much of the experience and expertise resides in the Department of Health and the HSE. They have been involved in a range of previous vaccination programmes with the national immunisation advisory committee and so forth. One must draw upon the large amount of residual expertise and experience there.

For the information of the House, Pfizer/BioNTech and Moderna sought market authorisation yesterday from the European Medicines Agency, EMA, and Ms Emer Cooke, an Irish person, briefed health Ministers this morning. The agency will assess the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine by 29 December at the latest, and perhaps before that. Notwithstanding what happened in the UK yesterday, the responsibility of that authority is huge in terms of recommending a vaccine as safe and effective. We should not create a pressure zone on the regulatory authority to do the right thing here. I say that generally. That is important.

The work of the task force is proceeding at pace. Yesterday saw the delivery of up to nine ultra-low temperature fridges to the country. The trucks are stored in Citywest. The Deputy is correct - we know what the essentials of this will be. Logistics is a key work stream that is being worked on. On the IT infrastructure, an entire database will have to be created with regard to who gets what. There is work on the workforce that administers the vaccine. Due to the scale of this, it will be more than the normal workforce that would administer the vaccine. There is also surveillance, monitoring and interpreting the data subsequently in terms of how it is working, the outcomes and so forth. There is the sequencing of who gets the vaccine first, in what order and how that happens. Of course, communications will be a vital strand. Then there is the overall governance and oversight of the operation.

With regard to the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine, the infrastructure is already coming into play with the ultra-low temperature storage fridges that have arrived into the country. They will be commissioned by the middle of next week. Then they have to be distributed within five days from the central depot when a vaccine ultimately arrives here. The view on Moderna is that the EMA is looking at early January for a meeting to assess its market authorisation application.

**Deputy Alan Kelly:** I appreciate the information the Taoiseach has provided to the House. This is not in any way about politics, and I mean that sincerely. My party believes we must up our game here. The Taoiseach will be aware of the adage, "Fail to prepare, prepare to fail", from his fellow Cork man. We cannot have that. We must get it right. I fully support the Taoiseach in this regard.

However, with regard to the information he provided to the House, I believe information will have to be provided continually and not just as a result of me asking a question on Leaders' Questions every week. I honestly think a Minister should be in charge of this group. I urge the Taoiseach to do that, and not because it is coming from the Opposition. I will not be running around saying that he followed what I suggested. It does not matter. This is way too big for all

that political rubbish. We need a standing group that will be able to communicate and deal with all of the issues. For instance, if private companies say they want to vaccinate all their staff, will they be allowed to do so? Can people buy the vaccination privately themselves? What about the interrogation of the infrastructure from an IT perspective? All of that needs to be put in place very quickly. We need somebody in charge who is going to make all those executive decisions. We do not need to have a situation where others who are working for the group and doing their best will be worried about it.

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

**Deputy Alan Kelly:** We also do not need a situation where the communications on how we are going to implement all of this will be done once or twice a year in the Dáil.

**The Taoiseach:** That is the reason I established a task force.

**Deputy Alan Kelly:** The Taoiseach is going to be busy.

**The Taoiseach:** There has to be proper line accountability, right to the Minister for Health in the first instance in terms of supervision.

**Deputy Alan Kelly:** It is under the Department of the Taoiseach.

**The Taoiseach:** I set up the task force and it will report to me. It will report on 11 December. Generally speaking, I prefer to let it get the job done, get it sorted and dot the i's and cross the t's. The task force can present the plan and we will then operationalise it. The HSE will be a key driver of the operationalisation of it and the Department of Health will have oversight of that, as will the Minister for Health. As I have said, in terms of sequencing, there is a significant experienced team in the Department of Health that has overseen many immunisation programmes over the past decade or so.

**Deputy Alan Kelly:** They were of a different scale.

**The Taoiseach:** This is of a different scale. That is why we have brought in external expertise and those people are represented on the task force. It is important to draw on those strands that are then clearly accountable to a Minister. It is easy to nominate someone and put him or her in charge but he or she would not necessarily have the line accountability or authorisation over officials or agencies. That is an issue that will have to be sorted. I accept the Deputy's overall point. He is making a constructive contribution to the debate. All of us in the House-----

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

**The Taoiseach:** -----will have a significant role to play on the communications side to make sure that there is a good national collective take-up of the vaccine.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I thank the Taoiseach very much.

**Deputy Róisín Shortall:** There is a fair degree of caution and concern among the public about what is likely to happen over the next month or so in respect of Covid rates. In that respect, I feel that a lot of the public health messaging is quite weak and needs attention and reinforcement. I prevail upon the Taoiseach to try to get that right because people still do not know what the arrangements are going to be over Christmas. They want to make arrangements and plans at this point and they still do not know what exactly the guidelines and regulations

will be covering that period.

I wish to raise an issue with the Taoiseach that I have raised several times over the past nine or ten months. There is potential for a significant increase in the rate of the virus in the area of international travel. We have talked about this several times. For some months we have been in a situation where there is essentially no oversight of the guidelines on international travel. The advice is that one has to self-regulate for a 14-day period and there is no oversight of that whatsoever. We know that text messages go out and there are occasional calls, all with the intention of giving public health advice but nothing to do with oversight or monitoring of that. We also know that there is very little back tracing, so we do not have any reliable data on the extent of the importation of the virus.

In light of the changes to travel arrangements, I wish to ask the Taoiseach about three areas. On the question of people having to have a test before they come here if they are coming from an orange country, or being able to have a test within five days of coming from a red or green country, what is the oversight arrangement for that? I asked the Tánaiste about this a few weeks ago and he said that it may need legal underpinning. Does it need legal underpinning and what is being done about that?

My second question relates to situations where people come here and opt to have a private test after being here for five days. If they test positive, what will the arrangements be for ensuring there is adequate tracing of contacts?

The final area I wish to ask about concerns the revelation in recent days that significant problems are being caused by a lack of communication between the North and here. The loophole that exists whereby people who come through Dublin Airport, or other airports in the Republic, do not have to follow any particular guidelines at all is known as the Dublin dodge. There are implications for us here, but serious implications for the North as well. We know that the Northern Ireland Minister, Mr. Robin Swann, has expressed serious concern about the lack of co-ordination there. We are heading into a period where there is going to be a lot of travel over Christmas and the new year. What safeguards will the Government put in place in that regard?

**The Taoiseach:** As a general point, I do not accept that the public health messaging is weak right now. I think people fully understand what is required between now and 18 December. I have seen increased mask wearing on the streets, which indicates that people are taking on board the messaging. After 18 December, people are fully aware of the communications. There will be a very comprehensive two-pronged communications strategy, #savechristmas, but also one that is devised for young people by youth advocacy groups, #antiviral, which will be a very comprehensive one on platforms accessed by young people.

In response to the point the Deputy raised on source tracing, next week on 8 December the HSE will commence a new strand of source investigations. It will go back seven days to get to the location where a spreader event began. That capacity exists and the HSE has been working on this and preparing for it. That will be important as an extra tool that is available to the HSE and the public health teams to identify super-spreader events, or events where the virus spread would have originated.

In respect of international travel, the Tánaiste did reference legal underpinning. The Government is looking at ways for the arrangements that have been made in terms of testing and other measures to be made mandatory, or for the legislation to act as a deterrent to people who

might try to avoid having to take a test or adhere to the guidelines. It has been a challenging area, although it must be said repeatedly that travel has reduced dramatically over the year by 96% or 97%. Fewer people are travelling year-on-year. Many Deputies in this House, including from Deputy Shortall's party, have lobbied us on the aviation sector and spoken about how empty the airports are. We have put in a package to try to keep them going and to keep their liquidity intact, because international connectivity is vital to Ireland. The situation is being examined by the Government and legal advice is being taken on what additional measures can be taken to underpin legally the guidelines that we want people to adhere to in terms of testing.

On people coming into Dublin Airport and travelling to the North, we have worked very hard at co-ordination between North and South and with the North-South Ministerial Council. The two CMOs have engaged regularly on a whole range of issues. From a public health perspective, the Border has presented challenges. Of that, there is no doubt. As the Deputy knows, the various levels of restrictions have not been in exact alignment at various periods-----

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

**The Taoiseach:** -----which has also been problematic in terms of the spread of the virus on both sides of the Border but in particular close to the Border itself.

**Deputy Róisín Shortall:** The Taoiseach's response does not inspire confidence. There is a lot of nervousness about the real dangers of the importation of the virus, but the Taoiseach has not provided any reassurance at all. We are into December now and we are likely to have a big increase in travel over Christmas and the new year. What the Taoiseach is saying is that at this point the Government is looking at whether there is a need for a legal underpinning of the regulations. That is really late in the day. It is not sufficient for the Taoiseach to say that we have tried in regard to the North. There must be a system whereby there is co-ordination of at least the passenger locator form North and South. Otherwise, we are very exposed as there is a major loophole, with as many people as so wish being able to come through the airports in the Republic of Ireland, with no checks on where they have been and where they are going.

Mr. Robin Swann MLA has been pleading with our Minister for Health to take action and achieve co-ordination in the area. The response has been for the members of the Government to throw their hands in the air, shrug their shoulders and say it is very difficult or challenging. It is not good enough and we need action from the Government to limit the inherent dangers in the next month arising from travel.

**The Taoiseach:** It is mandatory to correctly complete the passenger locator form and we are looking at further potential mandatory obligations. As far back as the summer I spoke to the Northern Ireland Executive about the dangers of travel. We did not have the same exponential increase in the Republic as they did in the North after the summer because we were very slow in reopening travel in this country. I took much criticism at times for not reopening travel more liberally during the summer.

The story for the Republic right through to now is that we are the best-performing country in the European Union in keeping the virus spread down. That did not happen by accident. It happened because we have taken a conservative approach, relative to other countries, in reopening society and the economy.

Travel this Christmas will be more than 90% down on last year. It is the reality. That said, extra measures will be taken at airports not just with passenger locator forms but with follow-



up checks with those who have travelled in to ensure people are residing where they said they would or have notified a change of address. Random checks will be rolled out across airports and ports by immigration officials, who will select a proportion of appropriate arrivals to see whether they have supporting documentation for either essential travel or a negative Covid-19 PCR test in their possession.

**Deputy Michael Lowry:** The position with forestry licence appeals has progressed from being a crisis to complete chaos. Forestry owners in this country are beside themselves with worry and anger. At the year's end, we are without a satisfactory resolution to this ongoing problem, and despite legislation and relaxation of regulations, we are still looking at a period of up to two years for the backlog of appeals to be cleared.

I was happy to support the legislation brought forward by the Minister of State, Deputy Hackett, which would expedite the process for future applications. However, the problem remains in respect of the backlog. The Irish Farmers Association, IFA, has sought an amnesty to deal with delays. This proposed emergency solution is an attempt to deal with the scale of the problem. Without urgent action of this nature, we are consigning the sector to abject failure. What makes this crisis all the more frustrating for those involved is that it is a home-grown problem. The solution rests with the Government making proactive decisions such as an amnesty or dramatically increasing the staffing within the Department to process the backlog.

The longer this position is allowed to continue, the greater the damage to the industry. There are contradicting reports on the number of licences currently caught up in the appeals process. The IFA states there are 4,500 licence applications delayed, whereas a figure of 2,000 was recently quoted by Department officials. The IFA and many involved in the industry believe the Department's estimate completely underestimates the applications in waiting. They see this as a glaring anomaly as part of an effort to downplay the seriousness of the issue.

The delays in issuing licensing is demoralising and heartbreaking, and it is causing huge frustration and enormous financial pressure. Forestry farmers are enraged by the fact that they are not permitted to start work, pending a decision on their appeal. The Government must step up in a meaningful and effective way to halt this injustice and bring forward further measures to alleviate the hardship on the industry. Current problems have eroded confidence, with the result that few new forests are being planted.

The Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine has established that this year has seen only 1,900 ha of new afforestation, which is a staggering 35% reduction in comparison with last year. It is evident that national targets are alarmingly off course. We are underachieving in the sector, and the reasons for this poor performance can be associated with the costs and red tape involved with planting and managing a forest. There are too many disincentives to planting.

The Government must intervene to secure the future of forestry in Ireland. Will it consider an amnesty to allow clearance of the backlog and return the sector to some normality? The industry needs a fresh start and new initiatives to revitalise and restore confidence in a sector that is vital to our national interest.

**The Taoiseach:** I thank the Deputy for raising this very important matter, which relates to significant employment throughout the country. It was inherited by the Government and has been brought about by massive serial objections to forestry licences all over the country, which created paralysis in the system.

As the Deputy said, he supported a forestry Bill that was enacted in October, which brings the forestry licensing process in line with the planning process under the Planning and Development Act 2000. A detailed project plan is being put in place to address licensing files. The Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, with its Minister, is investing heavily in additional resources to deliver the implementation of this plan. The Deputy referenced an amnesty or the dramatic increase in departmental staff, and this staff increase is happening. I will engage with the Minister on increasing staff numbers more if necessary.

Ten permanent forestry inspectors are joining the Department to assist with licensing, with four starting this week, and these will be supplemented by another four temporary forestry inspectors. Meanwhile, 16 ecologists are working on forestry licensing, with more to be hired. Additional administrative staff have been put in place along with the recruitment of a new project manager.

October and November were the months with the highest rate of licence output to date this year, with almost 600 new licences issued. Felling licences issued represented in excess of 1.4 million tonnes in timber volume, which is almost as much as the previous five months combined.

The Minister, Deputy McConalogue, has also significantly resourced the forestry appeals committee, with four such committees now set up and hearing appeals. Previously there had been just one committee. Last week the Minister appointed an independent chair, Ms Jo O'Hara, the former director general of Scottish Forestry, to advise the Minister on the implementation of the Mackinnon report. This is a key commitment of the programme for Government, which was to review the approval processes for afforestation in Ireland.

The Minister has also established a reform of the forestry programme implementation group, which had its first meeting last week. I assure the Deputy that no effort is being spared to resolve these matters and our response is beginning to pay dividends in increased output. There was a very significant backlog leading up to this. The Government is committed to a well-functioning, environmentally sustainable forestry sector. We must maintain the momentum and focus while continuing to grow output so a significant part of the regional and rural economy can develop.

**Deputy Michael Lowry:** One other aspect of this is forestry owners, who are required to have forests certified to access the market. They have been refused access to panel builds in Tipperary and elsewhere around the country with uncertified timber. This is a market requirement that will have real implications for small forest owners throughout the country.

Forest management certification can lead to restructuring of existing forests over time through implementation of the required management plan. This would take community concerns into consideration. Certification on existing forests would deliver for local communities as well as for forest owners and the industry. Forest owners will need certification to sell their timber in the immediate future.

The forest service in the Department has recognised the issue and allowed for primer grant aid to be put in place. Unfortunately, this has not been acted upon and the grant has not been paid. Does the Government intend to initiate a programme of primer grant aid for the sector?

**The Taoiseach:** That is an important issue. I will speak to the Minister, Deputy McConalogue, and ask him to engage with the Deputy on the primer grant aid for smaller growers. The

wider matter of small growers must be addressed proactively and positively by the Government. I will engage with the Minister in that regard.

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

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** I am very concerned at the news this morning that AIB, a State-owned bank, is to proceed with 1,500 job losses and that there has been minimal consultation with the unions. Astonishingly, at the same time as AIB proposes to let 1,500 staff go at a time of very high unemployment, it is also seeking to buy back Goodbody Stockbrokers at a cost of more than €100 million. Not alone that, I understand that big bonuses will be back for the banking sector and will apply to this new entity. As we know, the Minister for Finance is a majority shareholder of AIB. What is the Government's view on these job losses? Has the Minister given AIB permission or approval to proceed? Does the Taoiseach know whether the Minister has raised concerns with AIB on this matter? If it is the case that Goodbody Stockbrokers comes back into the embrace of AIB, will there be a ban on large-scale bonuses?

**The Taoiseach:** The Government would view with concern any large-scale redundancies of that kind. Obviously, they are not mandatory redundancies. The indications seem to be that these are issues that will have to be worked out in negotiation but I will obviously discuss this with the Minister for Finance. Conversations will also happen with the banks although I have to stress that the Government does not run AIB. The Deputy knows, as does everyone else in the House, that there has been a very clear demarcation line between the Government and banks in terms of how the latter are operated, notwithstanding the size of the State's shareholding in AIB. That has been the position for well over a decade now and will remain so.

**Deputy Alan Kelly:** I am not sure if the Taoiseach is aware that a number of section 39 workers represented by SIPTU and Fórsa are demonstrating outside his constituency office in Cork at the moment. They have submitted a claim for pay restoration which the Labour Party supports. These workers have done Trojan work throughout the pandemic and are most valuable members of our community. I sat beside the current Minister for Health when in he was Opposition spokesperson on health and he supported this claim, in great voice. He wondered why such a simple issue could not be dealt with by the then Government and Minister. Now it is down to the Taoiseach and the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputy Michael McGrath. Will the Government honour what it said in opposition and deal with this relatively simple issue for workers that we all value?

**The Taoiseach:** I remember that occasion well. I also remember when the trade unions engaged with the Government and said they were in a process

**Deputy Alan Kelly:** They said they were in what?

**The Taoiseach:** They were in a process with the then Government at the time. That is what happened with that particular campaign at that particular time. Some of it was resolved at the higher level in terms of the larger organisations but there was engagement between the unions and the HSE at the WRC. We would seek to have these issues resolved through the proper forums. Of course section 39 workers are essential and section 39 organisations make an enormous contribution. To that end, in the recent budget we made very significant allocations to those organisations over and above the norm in terms of supporting them to get through Covid-19 and beyond.

**Deputy Jennifer Whitmore:** This has been a very long and difficult year for many people, particularly our healthcare workers including nurses and midwives. They essentially put their lives and the lives of their families on hold and put themselves at risk to look after our vulnerable. This week the Nursing and Midwifery Board of Ireland sent out a retention fee bill for €100 to every nurse and midwife in the country. Our thanks should go further than a clap on the back for these staff and in that context, does the Taoiseach agree that the aforementioned fee should be waived?

**The Taoiseach:** Again, organisations and regulatory bodies across the country manage and regulate their membership, including for registration purposes. It is not the function of Government to get involved in every single one at this point. The Government has put unprecedented resources in under the economy. The sums are extraordinary. The Government, through the taxpayer, is providing €1 billion per week to underpin economic activity in the country. We will continue to do that well into 2021. The situation has to be seen in the overall context.

**Deputy Mick Barry:** The actor Elliot Page announced yesterday that he is transgender and his announcement has focused world-wide attention today on the issue of transgender rights. The national transgender healthcare steering committee was set up to “develop a seamless and integrated service” for those who present with gender identity issues, with clear pathways of care so that the needs of patient and their families are placed at the centre of service delivery. The committee concluded its work nine months ago, in March, but the report and its recommendations have yet to be published, a fact that is causing real concern and a degree of bewilderment in our transgender community. When will the report and its recommendations be published? When will implementation of the report’s recommendations begin?

**The Taoiseach:** It is not satisfactory that the report has not been published, notwithstanding the pandemic. Much has happened since March and a lot of normal activity in terms of the way Departments operate has been put on hold but that in itself is not an excuse for the failure to publish this very important report. I will follow up on that, find out why the report has not been published and seek to get it published. Along with the publication, I will ensure that an implementation plan is put in place based on the report’s recommendations.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** Like most people, I hope that we have a safe, ethically produced and effective vaccine that will help the country to get back to normal. However, I am very concerned by reports that the Government has indemnified the private companies producing these vaccines. I am concerned that this has happened in secret, with no political discussion or scrutiny. Furthermore, when the Government indemnifies private companies, it takes away the economic imperative for those companies to make sure that their product is 100% safe and leaves the country potentially exposed to millions of euro in costs in the future. Has the Government indemnified these private companies or will it do so? If so, what will Ireland be on the hook for, potentially, if all does not go according to plan?

**The Taoiseach:** As part of the European pre-purchase agreements, the companies have been indemnified.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** For how much?

**The Taoiseach:** There is no set amount. The bottom line here is that we either want a vaccine in the middle of a global pandemic or we do not. Now, get real. This is unprecedented in terms of the progress around getting this vaccine done and without pre-purchase agreements, it

simply could not and would not have happened. The bottom line-----

*(Interruptions).*

**The Taoiseach:** This was very clear from the outset to those following the European debate on this. The European Commission, on behalf of the member states, entered into pre-purchase agreements with companies with a view to getting vaccines to deal with a virus that is crippling economies all over the world. If one looks at the trillions of euro that have been spent globally on trying to save economies, keep jobs-----

**An Ceann Comhairle:** We cannot get into a lengthy debate-----

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** How much?

**The Taoiseach:** The balance is correct in this context. It is the right balance.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I am sorry but I must ask Deputy Tóibín to resume his seat. Deputy Mattie McGrath is next.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** The Constitution is meant to be a sacred document and we are meant to be the custodians of it. The Government, by its actions on the advice of NPHET, is destroying the pub, dance and arts industries and is treading on the Constitution. I saw a report last night on the horribly-named wet pubs - I do not know who gave them that name. During the last lockdown, many such pubs made great efforts to have food prepared in their pubs or to have food brought in. This was done with guidance from the HSE and in line with the hazard analysis and critical control point, HACCP, system. They have now been summarily dismissed and told that they cannot operate under level 3. The Government is changing the goalposts all of the time. I want the Taoiseach to get real and to tell us what he has against the pubs. What does he have against artists and dancing schools? What he is doing is totally illogical and it will fail. The Taoiseach is the only person around here who needs a dose of reality.

**The Taoiseach:** I remind the Deputy that this virus kills people. Some 3,000 people on the island of Ireland have died as a result of this virus and many more have suffered long-term health impacts. That is the Government's only motivation in doing what it is doing.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** It is unconstitutional.

**The Taoiseach:** It is wrong of the Deputy to play politics with this issue and to ask rhetorically what I have against pubs. I have absolutely nothing against pubs.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** The Taoiseach should prove it.

**The Taoiseach:** The Deputy should not be so silly, for God's sake. This is too serious an issue-----

*(Interruptions).*

**The Taoiseach:** -----to reduce it to that. It is too serious an issue because lives are at stake.

**Deputy Michael Collins:** The Government has the pubs ruined.

**The Taoiseach:** The measure was enacted for the benefit of the public health.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** The Taoiseach is pitting one against another.



**The Taoiseach:** Evidence has been gathered which, unfortunately, has connected pubs to the spread of the virus in certain local electoral areas.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** That is balderdash.

**The Taoiseach:** It is all documented. No one would love to have the pubs open more than I would because they are a vital part of economic life across the country. That has to be said. This sort of divisiveness does not help our overall effort to deal with the crisis. That is why we have provided unprecedented supports to pubs to help them through what I accept is a very difficult and challenging time for them. It is a very difficult time for publicans.

**Deputy Michael McNamara:** It has been announced that residents in hospitals and nursing homes will be allowed to receive one visit per week. I understand that this is to protect them and other residents but we are now eight months into this pandemic; is there nothing more that we can do to ensure that families can see their parents, children or siblings who may be in hospitals? The issue of antigen testing and the screening opportunities it provides was discussed by EU leaders, including the Taoiseach, in November. Surely people who are willing to undergo regular testing or screening, as healthcare staff do, should be able to visit elderly or young relatives in hospitals or nursing homes or to accompany elderly relatives to tests. I recall bringing my late father to a test in University Hospital Limerick and we had to walk for literally kilometres. He would not have been able to do that alone, and he was not unique in that. We need to allow for a degree of humanity in our healthcare system.

**The Taoiseach:** The situation in nursing homes is heart-rending and very difficult. This was presented well last night by RTÉ's "Prime Time", which assessed the situation. From a humane point of view, this is very difficult and sad for residents and their families. It is heartbreaking to see the individual stories of wives who are not able to meet their husbands and *vice versa*. We have to take strong advice on this issue because the other side of the story is that nursing home residents bore the brunt of the first phase of Covid. There were very high mortality rates in our nursing homes. We are very anxious to prevent a reoccurrence of this during the second phase and through the remainder of the pandemic. That is where the balance has to be struck. On antigen testing, the HSE is looking at applying it in certain healthcare settings. Hospital settings may be first and we may follow on from there.

**Deputy Thomas Gould:** I started a petition last Friday which now has almost 1,000 signatures. It calls on SouthDoc to reopen its facility on the north side of Cork. I have contacted SouthDoc and asked whether it will reopen this facility. It has said that the closure of the service has had no impact on service provision. Almost 1,000 people would disagree. I have been in touch with the HSE which said that the closure since March is temporary but it has given me no timeline for its reopening. A comment on the Facebook page says that emergencies do not happen only on the south side of the city. There is a hospital and an ambulance base on the south side. We need the SouthDoc facility on the north side to be opened. Will the Taoiseach commit to having this vital facility open before Christmas?

**The Taoiseach:** As Minister for Health and Children, I established SouthDoc. I remember receiving a very colourful letter from the late Deputy, Jackie Healy-Rae, who was also an advocate for the service at the time. All of its facilities have made a very significant contribution. I will pursue the issue of the SouthDoc facility on the north side of the city with the HSE. I will ascertain the rationale for the decision and see if we can make progress on the issue.

**Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh:** I welcome the inquiry into the prescribing of valproate, known as Epilim, to pregnant women without informing them of the harm it was likely to do their unborn children which was announced last week by the Minister, Deputy Stephen Donnelly. I thank the Minister for keeping his word. When is the inquiry going to commence? Will the Minister engage with OACS Ireland, the families impacted and Epilepsy Ireland in designing the terms of reference in order to establish who knew what and when and why nobody did anything to stop it? The great tragedy of the valproate scandal is that the harm caused to approximately 1,250 children between 1975 and 2015 here, in addition to thousands in France and the UK, was totally avoidable. Can the children, who have now received diagnoses of foetal valproate syndrome and foetal anticonvulsant syndrome now receive the domiciliary care allowance? Families with a diagnosis are getting turned down and this is not right.

**The Taoiseach:** I understand the Minister, Deputy Stephen Donnelly, has initiated an inquiry into the sodium valproate issue. I will talk to him about the timelines, which I am sure will be published in due course.

**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:** I raise the very important issue of home care support assistants in County Kerry. I will explain what happens. The Taoiseach will know of the excellent work these home care assistants do in our communities taking care of people who want to stay in their own homes. They get paid travelling expenses for going to people's homes. Some use one or two full tanks of diesel or petrol every week in doing their work. They get paid retrospectively. In other words, they should get November's money this December. They have been told, however, that the administrative staff in the HSE who do the paperwork that would allow them to be paid their November travel expenses in December will not be there to do that work. In other parts of the country, home care assistants will be paid this expense. By the time January comes, these people will have incurred the costs of all their travel in November and December without receiving €1 for it. That is wrong. They have spent that money. There is wear and tear on their vehicles. It is a very important issue.

**The Taoiseach:** I will check that out with the HSE and see what the story is.

**Deputy Jackie Cahill:** We have 78,000 nurse and midwives and these must, by law, be listed on the register of nurses and midwives. The fee for such registration is €100. It would be good recognition of the great efforts front-line workers have made during the Covid pandemic if the State were to pay this fee for nurses and midwives this year.

**Deputy Martin Browne:** Given the dedication and hard work of our nurses during the pandemic, will the Taoiseach commit to waiving the registration fee for nurses? The attitude to nurses the Government has shown of late has been less than perfect. Earlier, when the motion on pay for student nurses and midwives was being debated, we heard how our student nurses were being undervalued, taken for granted and expected to work hard for little financial recompense. Our nurses deserve more than applause from Government. Their immense contribution to fighting Covid-19 at risk to their own health and to the detriment of their home lives must be recognised properly.

**The Taoiseach:** The Nursing and Midwifery Board of Ireland administers this retention fee on an ongoing basis. This issue has not been brought before Government.

**Deputy Martin Browne:** What will-----

**The Taoiseach:** Government has provided unprecedented resources targeted at improving

services across the health sector and at improving the working environment and working conditions of nurses.

*I o'clock*

The impact of the winter initiative can be seen so far in terms of the better flow through hospitals in emergency departments and so on.

That said, I will talk to the Minister for Health on this but there is a range of registration bodies in health which register a range of professionals across the health area. The Government focus today has been on more the general allocation of money to try to improve and expand services.

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** The Taoiseach has hurt many thousands of rural publicans, customers and people. What he has done, no other Fianna Fáil leader or Taoiseach in the past would have done to rural Ireland. What the Taoiseach has done is anti-village and anti-rural. Publicans and customers will have no Christmas. They are saying the Taoiseach does not care and that he has his job for another year or so and he is happy with that. The Taoiseach has belittled rural publicans and rural people. He does not trust them. Yet, there will certainly be plenty of unregulated drinking, as the Taoiseach and I know, and we will need good strong jeeps and vehicles to find them.

Talking about Roald Dahl and Mr. Fox and that kind of nonsense on the radio or television is no compensation to the people of rural Ireland. Where is the Taoiseach's evidence and scientific proof that pubs in rural Ireland were the cause or would be the cause of transmitting the virus? Where is that evidence? If the Taoiseach has it, he should bring it forward because he has not put it out yet.

**Deputy Michael Collins:** The publicans have served the people well throughout the length and breadth of rural Ireland. It is obvious to them that the Taoiseach is protecting the pubs in Dublin. He is afraid to open the pubs in Dublin but he is pointing the finger at every rural pub throughout Ireland. Their businesses are lying in ruin thanks to the Taoiseach. For four years, he was attacking them by backing up Fine Gael and that party's cuts and destroying them in every which way. Now, the Taoiseach is at the helm and he is doing the same. The banks are down on their backs. Their mortgages have to be paid. They are earning not one crust and the Government is standing idly by. The Taoiseach has led to their destruction and in every town and village in rural Ireland it will never be forgotten what the Taoiseach has done to these pubs. I can assure the Taoiseach that if he thinks it will be forgotten, he is a very foolish man at this hour in his life.

**Deputy Richard O'Donoghue:** Where I am living in Granagh, there is no pub open now within a 15-mile radius. The pubs in Granagh, Ballingarry, Croom, Feenagh, Ballyagran and Croagh are all closed.

What the Taoiseach is doing to all the people in my area, in a 15-mile radius, is shoving them into towns and cities if they wish to meet someone. We have small communities. We have small rural pubs where our people go to have a sociable drink. They are small monitored crowds. What the Taoiseach does not have in his statistics is how he is going to police the parties where people will congregate. The Taoiseach has no statistics for that. At least if someone goes to a pub there is written documentation of who has been there and who has not been there. The Taoiseach should stop nailing the lid on the coffin of rural Ireland.

**The Taoiseach:** Again, I have to say that I am not anti-rural, anti-village or anti-pub. There is nothing I would like better right now than a pint in some rural pub in an idyllic village in the west of Ireland - I can assure the Deputies of that.

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** Where is the Taoiseach's evidence?

**The Taoiseach:** That is not something I will be able to participate in for some time yet. That is not the fault of Government. It is not the fault of anyone. It is the fault of a virus, a global pandemic.

The ultimate objective of Government is to protect human lives and to protect those most vulnerable in our society. We have to make judgment calls. We have to make calls based on evidence. We have published the evidence. The evidence is available and we can look at it from August into September and right into October. Unfortunately, it is from the time when pubs were open. It is no fault on the publicans.

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** The Taoiseach has no evidence.

**The Taoiseach:** I have said repeatedly that I accept their goodwill in terms of their efforts to implement the guidelines. However, we need to consider the reality of what happened in many locations. One only has to look at the index going up in terms of the number of cases in certain areas after events combined with the opening of the wet pubs in my city. This is not only in rural Ireland.

*(Interruptions).*

**The Taoiseach:** It is also in cities. In Galway and Cork, for example, there was a significant increase at a given period as well as in rural areas. The evidence, unfortunately, is there for that.

The bottom line is that we could have taken a decision to open the pubs, but we would have done it clearly in the knowledge that we would have been contributing to an exponential rise in numbers fairly quickly. That is the issue, basically. Unfortunately, that is the issue. It is a genuine desire to try to save lives. People should not try to play politics to the degree that they are playing politics with it.

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** This the most anti-rural Government.

**Deputy Michael Collins:** They are putting more work on the Garda.

**Deputy Imelda Munster:** There is a situation at the moment in south Louth and east Meath where up to 5,000 pupils and 260 teachers are without access to a teacher supply panel. The Department of Education sent out a directive to the effect that special education teachers should step in where no substitute teacher is available. That is totally unacceptable because it disadvantages further special educational needs children. Why should they lose their resources because of the Department's shortcomings? Principals in my constituency have said that children will have to stay home if this matter is not addressed as a matter of urgency.

I contacted the Minister for Education more than two weeks ago. I got nothing back and there has been silence. Given that the Government said it is a priority to keep schools open and given the urgency of this, will the Taoiseach give a commitment to ensure a teacher supply panel is set up immediately for the south Louth and east Meath area?

**The Taoiseach:** I will engage with the Minister for Education and talk to her on this specific issue. I do not have the details before me.

The Government has made it an absolute priority to keep schools open. It is not only a Government issue; it is a societal issue and priority. It reflects well on Ireland that in the middle of a global pandemic we accept that the learning opportunities for children are our number one priority. This has posed challenges, not least on the supply side. We knew that in advance of September. That is why significant resources were made available by the Minister for Education to deal with the different challenges that emerged. We must do everything we possibly can to ensure children are not disadvantaged and that they do not fall victim to this virus in any meaningful way.

**Deputy Matt Carthy:** The programme for Government commits the Government to a review of the Mercosur trade deal. Many farmers fear that review is simply a delaying tactic on the part of Government.

This week we learned that deforestation in the Brazilian Amazon surged in the past year. Over the past 12 months a total of 11,000 sq. km of forest have been destroyed. Most of this forest is destroyed to make way for beef ranches. That beef is expected to supplement or remove Irish beef from supermarket shelves across Europe if the EU Mercosur trade deal moves forward. On the basis of this new evidence, will the Taoiseach now commit the Government to vetoing the EU Mercosur trade deal?

**The Taoiseach:** I have already signalled our concerns at European level in respect of the Mercosur deal and its compatibility with the climate change objectives of the European Union. Indeed, at the forthcoming summit next week I will be raising this in the context of discussions on climate change. There is a real issue about how Mercosur reconciles with the climate change agenda given the Brazilian Government's policy approach to the Amazon and to the wholesale destruction of the Amazon that is clearly under way. I do not believe the two are compatible.

The assessment referenced in the programme for Government by Deputy Carthy is not a delaying tactic. It is work that is necessary in any event and will be proceeded with.

**Deputy Johnny Mythen:** I imagine the Taoiseach is aware of the 27 Ability Programmes nationally. One such Ability Programme is provided by Wexford Local Development. It started in autumn 2018. This Ability Programme has already helped more than 70 young people with mild to moderate disabilities to participate and become part of the modern-day workforce. In County Wexford only 19% of people with disabilities participated in the workforce out of a possible 22,000. The importance of the Ability Programmes to participants and their families cannot be over-emphasised. These 27 projects funded by the Ability Programme are financed by the Departments of Finance and Social Protection, in line with the European Social Fund, ESF. To see these successful projects, including the Wexford Local Development project funded by the Ability Programme, close would be letting down our core principles of inclusion and the right to work. Will the Taoiseach commit to ensuring the continuation and certainty of these programmes, because the finance runs out in June 2021?

**The Taoiseach:** Yes, we will have a look at that again. These are good and important programmes, and we want to expand participation in them. I do not, therefore, believe that the money will run out in June 2021.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** That concludes Questions on Promised Legislation. Seven



names on this list and five or six on another list have not been reached. The lists will continue into tomorrow.

### **Estimates for Public Services 2020**

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

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

That a supplementary sum not exceeding €7,819,000 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 Revenue Commissioners, including certain other services administered by that Office.

Vote put and agreed to.

### **Committee on Budgetary Oversight: Motion**

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

That the Instruction by Dáil Éireann to the Committee on Budgetary Oversight of 28th July, 2020, be amended by the substitution of ‘25th February, 2021’ for ‘26th November, 2020’.

Question put and agreed to.

### **Ceisteanna - Questions**

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

1. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Taoiseach the status of plans to reopen society and the economy when level 5 Covid-19 restrictions are lifted. [38080/20]

2. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach the status of plans to reopen society and the economy when level 5 Covid-19 restrictions are lifted. [40168/20]

**The Taoiseach:** I propose to take Questions Nos. 1 and 2 together.

Last Friday, the Government agreed the approach for easing restrictions, including a phased move to level 3 nationally, with several exemptions in place for the Christmas period. These exemptions are designed to support people in having a meaningful Christmas, albeit different from other years. The main objective is to stay safe and to keep the Covid-19 case numbers down so that we can maintain the lowest possible level of restrictions into the new year. People are advised to plan their activities in advance, to limit their contacts during this period and to keep celebrations small.

It is also advised that being outdoors is safer than being indoors, and to ensure good ventilation when indoors with other people. From 1 December, households should not mix with any other households outside their bubble. People should stay within their county, apart from work, education and other essential purposes. People should continue to work from home, unless it is absolutely necessary to attend in person. No indoor gatherings should take place. Gatherings of up to 15 people may take place outdoors. Non-essential retail and personal services may reopen. Hotels, guesthouses and bed and breakfasts can reopen, with services limited to residents only. Museums, galleries and libraries may reopen. Cinemas may also reopen.

Gyms, leisure centres and swimming pools may also reopen for individual training only. No exercise or dance classes are permitted. Non-contact training may take place outdoors in pods of 15. No matches or events may take place, except for professional and elite sports, approved inter-county Gaelic games, greyhound and horse racing and approved equestrian events, all of which must happen behind closed doors. Public transport capacity is limited to 50%. Places of worship can reopen for services with restrictive measures, subject to review in January. Weddings with up to 25 guests are permitted. Funerals with up to 25 mourners are permitted. Higher, further and adult education should remain primarily online.

From 4 December, restaurants, and pubs operating as restaurants, may reopen for indoor dining, with additional restrictions, including requirements for meals to be prepared on-site, inside the premises. This includes access for non-residents to restaurants and hotels. Wet pubs remain closed, except for takeaway delivery. In recognition of the importance of the holiday season, particularly regarding visiting family, from 18 December to 6 January households can mix with two other households and travel outside of one's county is to be permitted.

From 7 January, the measures put in place prior to 18 December will apply, subject to ongoing review of the trajectory of the virus. The measures for cross-Border travel will be the same as for travel between all other counties, which means that from 1 December people should stay within their county, apart from work, educational and other essential purposes, while from 18 December to 6 January travel outside one's county is permitted. It has further been agreed that the use of face masks is now recommended in crowded workplaces, places of worship and in busy or crowded outdoor spaces where there is significant congregation.

**Deputy Alan Kelly:** I thank the Taoiseach for repeating all that. Yesterday was obviously a big day and Friday will be another big day. Regarding the trajectory of the virus, we do not know what that will be, obviously, but consideration might be given to when the Government is going to make some announcements concerning 6 January. I am not asking the Taoiseach what he is going to announce, just when that will be done. Will it be on 1 or 2 January? How much time will be given in respect of where we will be going from then?

The tourism sector is in major trouble. We can see that from what the chief executive of Fáilte Ireland, Paul Kelly, said today at a committee. I must declare that I used to work as a manager in Fáilte Ireland, so I know the sector well. Being realistic, the tourism sector is not going to get back to anywhere near where it was until 2022, at the earliest. It could be even worse. What additional supports are being looked for that sector?

An issue, which was touched on earlier and relates to the committee the Taoiseach has set up - I would like what I said in that context regarding a Minister to be considered - is that that committee will make recommendations to the Taoiseach, or whomever. The committee also needs guidance, however. I stress two things in this regard. The first is that the IT infrastructure

is not what it needs to be and we need to create it. We have had problems in respect of creating a public service card. There have been data issues in that area, so how are we going to ensure we overcome those issues in this scenario? The second concerns the Covid-19 passport, the technology behind it and, most important, the rules behind that-----

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I thank Deputy Kelly, but he is over his time.

**Deputy Alan Kelly:** In fairness to the professor, he cannot make those decisions.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Please, Deputy Kelly. There are three more speakers.

**Deputy Alan Kelly:** I accept that, but other people are given a little bit more latitude than I am.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Not really.

**Deputy Alan Kelly:** Regarding the Covid-19 passport, the committee has to be given guidance concerning what rules it must implement for such a passport.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Deputy Kelly, I try to be fair to everyone. That is not fair, so I am just going to overlook it. I really try to give everybody a little bit of latitude, but there are many speakers. I am going to move. I call Deputy Boyd Barrett.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** Even if there is a lifting of restrictions, one sector which is not going to see any significant recovery in its ability to earn an income involves people in music and many of the performing arts. The Taoiseach may have heard a controversy breaking out regarding the 1,400 applicants for the music industry stimulus package. Of those 1,400 applicants, some 83% were refused. That was insulting and demoralising for those musicians who applied for the package, many of whom are household names. That does not really matter, because they all deserve support since their industry has been, and will remain for the foreseeable future, decimated as a result of the pandemic. Only a miserable €876,000 was put into that scheme, so right from the outset the majority of musicians were going to be excluded from it. That is in addition to the fact that most musicians, artists, performers and SMEs involved in that industry have been excluded from the Covid restrictions support scheme, CRSS. Is the Taoiseach going to do something to give real support to the artists, musicians, light and sound engineers, etc., whose livelihoods have been utterly decimated? The supports given have simply not been enough.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** The Government has been at pains to reject the idea that its Covid-19 strategy has been informed by the interests of short-term private profit. It is now 100% patently clear that is what is informing, or at least partially informing, the approach of the Government. Yesterday the Taoiseach told the Dáil that “we took a more conservative approach on the household visits, and then traded that off with visits to hotels and restaurants”. In other words, the Government rejected the NPHET advice to prioritise what is essential for people at Christmas, which is visits by people to their families, broadly defined. They had recommended that starting from this week one could have household visits and that for the two weeks around Christmas one could have visitors from three other households. The Government rejected that. Why? So that it could open up restaurants and gastro pubs. It is plain as day that this is what the Government decided to do. In doing so, it put profit first. It put profit before people visiting their families at Christmas, which is essential. It also placed the whole country in danger, in my opinion, with excess cases, deaths and a third wave in January, for which the Government

is preparing the population as if it was absolutely inevitable, and a third lockdown that will be incredibly demoralising for people to go into. That is a consequence of the choices the Government has made to bend to the pressure of private sector business lobbying.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** My apologies to Deputy Mary Lou McDonald who was next on the list. There has been a lot of interaction.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** I understand and it is no problem. I have previously raised with the Taoiseach the specific challenges facing the commercial events sector. The sector accounts for approximately 90% of the five million events tickets each year pre-Covid, which in ordinary times delivers a significant stimulus for hospitality and tourism.

The event production industry Covid-19 working group, known as EPIC, has worked positively to highlight these challenges and to find suitable solutions to operating within public health guidelines. I acknowledge the Taoiseach's engagement with EPIC and his recognition of the contribution of the arts and culture sectors to our society and economy.

Following the Taoiseach's announcement on the lifting of restrictions, questions have been raised about the decision to reopen cinemas but not theatres. When asked to explain the differences between the two settings the Chief Medical Officer stated that theatres were not provided for in level 3 and that NPHET had not given consideration to distinguishing between the risk in the two settings.

Adherence to public health guidance is paramount, but as we have discussed on a number of occasions, providing the rationale behind these decisions is of the utmost importance. People need to understand the reasons behind the decisions that have such an impact on their daily lives and on their livelihoods. It would be helpful at this point if the Taoiseach could provide the rationale for the continued closure of theatres.

**The Taoiseach:** I will address question on the tourism sector first. Deputy Kelly correctly identified that the area will need a significant reboot after Covid-19. In the interim we are doing everything we possibly can to keep the edifice of our tourism sector intact through the variety of schemes we have introduced, including the employment wage subsidy scheme, the Covid restrictions support scheme, the pandemic unemployment payment and a variety of other restart grants, low-cost loans and commercial rates waivers. There has been a plethora of initiatives to try to underpin companies and business in the tourism sector. There will be a national economic plan, which is being developed, that will target the tourism sector. The budget will take on board the more than 30 tourism recovery task force recommendations in revitalising this sector as we emerge from this crisis. That plan will take us out to the next five years. Tourism is related to travel and to people's decision-making around their reluctance to travel right now. We have done everything we possibly can over the past while to try to do what we can to support businesses to get them through this very difficult period and to support our airports and connectivity infrastructure.

We will be keeping the trajectory and prevalence of the virus under review. We will keep the public updated on the next steps. As I have said, however, on the 6 January we will be going back to the pre-18 December position of level 3.

Deputy Boyd Barrett instanced the music and performing arts sector. The Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media will deal with that issue. I do not get into the micro-operation of schemes. The Government wants to be as fair and transparent as possible in

any allocation of funding. I will see that this will be done. I know the Minister is of a similar view. Quite a range of supports have been given to the arts through the Department of Social Protection and the Department Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media, and very significant additional resources were provided in the budget.

I must take issue with Deputy Paul Murphy in his warped interpretation and distortion of what I said yesterday. The Government is not genuflecting to short-term profit. I do not know does the Deputy represent at all the workers who are desperate to get back to work in the hospitality sector. They want to get back working and are concerned about the long-term sustainability of their jobs. They also want to be back at work. The Government is supporting the economy by €1 billion per week and underpinning work in the economy. Mental well-being is also a consideration. The Central Statistics Office research is very revealing in that regard. There was a whole balancing range of factors that gave rise to the decision to reopen restaurants and hotels from 4 December onwards. It was not about short-term profit. Deputy Murphy is so ideologically trapped that he is blinded to the everyday reality of the person on the street, the people who are out there working and who want to earn money for Christmas. The Deputy is so ideologically trapped that he cannot see the wood for the trees. The Deputy sees everything through a narrow, warped ideological frame. It informs every comment and statement he makes. His assertion was just wrong.

Deputy McDonald asked about cinemas and theatres. Again, what we were trying to do for the Christmas period was to have modifications of level 3 to help people to get through the period with a reasonable quality of life. This included galleries, museums and cinemas because they were not adjudged to be centres where the virus could spread, especially given the previous experience with cinemas. The problem with theatres is pinpointing what is or is not a theatre. We can all think of the obvious ones but it is a bit more complicated when one considers the various venues that present themselves, and with alcohol and so on. That is problematic in the decision-making on that. A call was made that cinemas, which would not add to the spread of the virus, could for the period of December open for people to get some break and some respite.

I have met with representatives from EPIC and we will work on that and engage with the Minister for Finance and the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media.

### **Cabinet Committees**

3. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee dealing with foreign affairs will next meet. [38076/20]

4. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee that deals with foreign affairs will next meet. [38620/20]

5. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee dealing with foreign affairs will next meet. [40064/20]

6. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his plans for travel abroad in 2021. [40162/20]

7. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee dealing with foreign affairs will next meet. [40169/20]



**The Taoiseach:** I propose to take questions Nos. 3 to 7, inclusive, together.

Matters relating to international policy and foreign affairs are discussed by the full Cabinet as and when appropriate, mostly on foot of memoranda to Government brought by the Minister for Foreign Affairs. I also engage bilaterally with the Minister on such matters, as appropriate.

International matters also arise in the context of the EU Common Foreign and Security Policy and other external policies of the European Union. When appropriate these are included on the agenda of meetings of the Cabinet committee on Europe. That committee last met on 8 October and is scheduled to meet again on 8 December, in advance of the European Council meeting of 10 and 11 December. While the agenda for that meeting is yet to be finalised, it is likely that a number of international issues will arise, including relations with Turkey and the United States of America.

With regard to international travel, given the current pandemic, it remains the Government's advice that only essential travel should be undertaken. This position will be kept under review as the situation evolves. As of now, I will only travel abroad when it is necessary to do so to represent essential Irish interests, as I have done when I have attended recent meetings of the European Council in Brussels. If I do need to travel abroad, I will follow the advice of the Government's scientific and medical advisers and observe relevant public health guidance. In the immediate period ahead, it is my intention to attend the meeting of the European Council and of the euro summit in Brussels on 10 and 11 December.

Strict protocols are in place for European Council meetings. The travelling delegation is kept to the minimum necessary, social distancing and other hygiene protocols are followed and diagnostic testing is carried out on our return. Other travel commitments for 2021 have not yet been finalised. A number of high-level events and summits that were due to take place in 2020 have been postponed to 2021. If they go ahead, decisions on attendance will be taken in due course. Any plans for further travel will also take account of the prevailing situation regarding the pandemic.

**Deputy Alan Kelly:** I understand what the Taoiseach is saying. The situation with our troops in the Golan Heights and Lebanon is very difficult because of restrictions on travelling abroad. Usually a Minister, the Taoiseach or somebody would visit them because of the significant work they do. This cannot happen at the moment and we need to support them. What else is being done in that regard?

I raise the issue of the presidential election in Belarus. What is Europe going to do about this? Belarus as a country is not a nice place, although it has very nice people who need support. My mother has been visiting Belarus for 15 years and working in orphanages there up to her 80th birthday. They are incredible people. Unfortunately, she could not go this year. We all know about the presidential election opponent, the teacher Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya. As the Taoiseach is probably aware, she spent some time in my county, in Roscrea. She is now in isolation in Lithuania while her husband is in jail. The way the public in Belarus have been treated as they protest about what has happened, and the way the army and government are treating them, is disgraceful. What sanctions are being proposed, through our European partners, for the Belarusian Government because of its behaviour?

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** Sunday marked the International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People. Ireland's strongest and most useful expression of solidarity would be

the formal recognition of the state of Palestine. This would honour the hopes and aspirations for peace and the dignity of the Palestinian people, who continue to live under the horrific oppression of the Israeli authorities as they ramp up their ongoing attempts at annexation of vast swathes of the West Bank. Israel continues to evict Palestinian families from their own homes. Just last week, Palestinian families in the Jordan Valley were forced out of their homes to make way for Israeli military training operations in the area. As communities throughout the world attempt to cope with the global pandemic, the Israeli Government continues to compound the challenges faced by Palestinians through daily acts of aggression. This year alone, Israeli authorities destroyed more Palestinian homes than at any time in the last five years. These vicious acts of destruction are not confined just to residential homes; humanitarian infrastructure has also been destroyed. The primary purpose of these violent and illegal acts by Israel is to make it impossible for the Palestinian people to maintain a viable homeland. The Irish Government's expressed disappointment is of little consequence to the Israeli Government. However, if the Government supported the Control of Economic Activity (Occupied Territories) Bill 2018, Israel would finally be held accountable. I ask the Taoiseach to engage with both of these matters: the recognition of the state of Palestine and the occupied territories Bill.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** What actions do the Taoiseach and his Government intend to take to pressurise the British Government to reverse its scandalous decision not to hold a public inquiry into the murder of Pat Finucane? Even David Cameron, in 2012, admitted to “shocking levels of collusion” and said it seemed that Mr. Finucane was suggested to the murderers as a target to kill by the police. The British Supreme Court has found that there was a failure to investigate this killing properly, but the British Government is determined to avoid a public inquiry because it is eager to cover up how high that collusion went in the British state. The refusal to hold a public inquiry is another example of the disregard it has for the lives of ordinary people on this island, as, indeed, it has for those of people in Britain and around the world. We are talking about the working of British imperialism under successive governments, hand in hand with loyalist paramilitaries, to target and kill people they considered problematic, in this case a lawyer, and using that to spread terror within working-class communities. The maximum possible pressure must be applied to the British Government to demand justice and a public inquiry.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** The biggest international issue we are facing is obviously the Covid-19 pandemic and the impact it is having across the globe. A vaccine that is safe and effective will be critical to exiting this current crisis. If the roll-out of a safe and effective vaccine is going to work, a number of key things have to happen. First, the profit motive has to be removed completely from the roll-out. This means that intellectual property and patent rights, which protect the technology for the vaccine in order that those companies can make a profit, have to be waived. I note that the Government intends to give indemnity to the pharmaceutical companies and that we are going to underwrite any problems there may be with the vaccine. What is the *quid pro quo* here? It should require all intellectual property rights to be waived and the raw data published, because we need honesty, humility and transparency in the roll-out of this vaccine if we are going to win people over to taking it. There should be no question of those pharmaceutical companies using patent or intellectual property rules in order to safeguard profits at the expense of the roll-out of this vaccine, not just in this country but across the world. If poor countries do not get the vaccine, its efficacy could potentially be undermined.

**The Taoiseach:** Deputy Kelly is correct about the difficulty of visiting and recognising our Army, which has done some fantastic work in the Golan Heights and elsewhere across the world and continues to do so, because of Covid-19. We will do everything we can to show our

Defence Forces again that we recognise the contribution they are making to international peace.

The European Union has moved on Belarus. We have condemned the ongoing mass and indiscriminate detentions, including of children, and the threats made by the authorities to take away the children of parents who protest. I am appalled by the shameful and needless death of Roman Bondarenko in police custody. The EU sent a very firm message to Minsk by imposing targeted sanctions against 55 individuals in Belarus, including Alexander Lukashenko himself, and we stand ready to go further. While Mr. Lukashenko has announced that he will stand down after constitutional amendments are adopted, it is clear that the repression of the Belarusian people continues. The European Union Commission has conducted a review of EU-Belarus relations and is working on directing European Union funds away from the authorities to provide direct support to Belarusian civil society. We and our European partners will continue to press the authorities to respect their international commitments to stop the repression of their people. I spoke to opposition leader Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya in August. She has a great love for Ireland and said that a piece of her heart is always in Ireland. She spoke fondly of her time in Tipperary. We support a sustainable, democratic and peaceful resolution of the crisis there.

Deputy McDonald asked about Palestine. Ireland has long supported a two-state solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. That said, Israeli policy is consistently jeopardising and undermining the prospect of such a solution. We urge the Israeli Government to cease its practice of demolitions, which is contrary to its obligations under international humanitarian law. We as a country provide emergency shelter and support to affected families through the West Bank Protection Consortium. We will prioritise the Middle Eastern peace process during our term on the UN Security Council in 2021-2022. We will do whatever we can to advance efforts towards a just and lasting peace.

We are aware of the situation in east Jerusalem and the long-standing threats of eviction which Palestinian residents continue to face in that neighbourhood, which has worsened in recent weeks. Irish officials in Ramallah visited the neighbourhood and they will continue to monitor the case closely. Our clear view is that the Israeli Government must uphold its international obligations on the treatment of civilian populations.

Settlements are illegal under international law. They actively undermine the prospects for a two-state solution. Ireland has consistently and strongly opposed settlements and this Government will continue to do so. We also work and repeatedly call on Israel to respect and respond to genuine concerns about the treatment of Palestinian prisoners. Ireland has repeatedly called to Israel the applicability of international human rights standards, and Irish embassies and missions in the region continue to monitor the situation closely. Ireland's humanitarian assistance to meet the needs of the most vulnerable Palestinians will amount to more than €16 million in 2020. This funding has been expedited to reduce the incidents and mitigate the impact of the pandemic among the Palestinian people.

When it came to power, the new Government adopted a position on the Occupied Territories Bill. I am not sure that the legislation in itself would act as any restraint on Israel's policy on settlements. We have supported legal avenues to differentiate between settlements in Israel, for example, by joining a case before the European courts last year on labelling of certain goods produced in settlements.

On the recognition of Palestine, the programme for Government makes clear that the Government will honour its commitment to recognise the state of Palestine either as part of a lasting

settlement of the conflict or, in advance of that, when we make a judgement and believe that doing so would progress efforts to reach a two-state solution or protect the integrity of the Palestinian territory. We discuss this issue on an ongoing basis with our European partners, due to the likely benefits of moving in step with our European colleagues.

I articulated my views on the Finucane case strongly in the Dáil yesterday. I will engage with the British Government and Prime Minister on the need for a full public inquiry into the murder of Pat Finucane. There was extreme annoyance and anger at the previous day's decision and, in particular, the reference to the PSNI and the Police Ombudsman, both of which had made it clear that there is no new material for them to take the case forward. We, as an Irish Government, will, as successive Irish governments have done, continue to put pressure on and engage with the British Government on the need for a full public inquiry.

Deputy Boyd Barrett raised the Covid-19 vaccine. Governments do not produce vaccines nor do they produce medicines. They do not have the capital wherewithal and have not engaged in the area historically. The important difference that I have seen, as Taoiseach now and as Minister for Health during the SARS epidemic, has been the far greater degree of co-ordination at international level, particularly at European Union level with the private sector. I know the Deputy hates the words profit and private sector. That I understand, but that ideology cannot get in the way of getting vaccines and getting them researched and produced at an unprecedented pace and rate. The pre-purchase agreements have been essential to enabling the capital and funding provisions that will underpin the production of the vaccines. There are no guarantees when vaccines are being researched, produced and manufactured. This is a collaboration between the private and public sectors at an international level, within Europe and the United States. Considering the trillions of euro that governments have spent all over the world in underpinning their economies, the expenditure involved here is only a fraction but will be far more effective in getting our economies back up and running and getting people back to work than anything else.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** We will move on as we have less than ten minutes for the last three questions which are grouped.

### **Departmental Strategy Statements**

8. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Taoiseach if his Department plans to publish a statement of strategy. [38075/20]

9. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Taoiseach if his Department plans to publish a statement of strategy. [40065/20]

10. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach if his Department plans to publish a statement of strategy. [40486/20]

**The Taoiseach:** I propose to take Questions Nos. 8 to 10, inclusive, together.

In accordance with the provisions of the Public Service Management Act 1997, my Department is currently developing its new statement of strategy for the next three years. The strategy will reflect the role of my Department to deliver the executive functions of the Taoiseach and Government and to support me as Head of Government to carry out my duties and implement

the Government's priorities over the coming period.

My Department engages with the formulation and implementation of Government policy, especially through the Cabinet committee structure, and ten have been established by this Government, reflecting the full range of policy areas that it will work on during its lifetime. My Department is playing a central role in co-ordinating the State's response to the Covid-19 pandemic and preparations and planning for Brexit. The strategy will also reflect my Department's involvement in other whole-government work, including the development of the national economic plan and delivering real action on climate change.

As set out in the programme for Government, a new shared island unit has been established within the Department of the Taoiseach to support a renewed push to use the potential of the Good Friday Agreement to deliver sustained progress for all communities. This unit will work towards a consensus on a shared island and will examine the political, social, economic and cultural considerations underpinning a future in which all traditions are mutually respected.

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

The new statement of strategy is due to be finalised before the end of the year. Following its submission to Government, the strategy will be published and laid before the Houses of the Oireachtas. It will also be published on the *gov.ie* website.

**Deputy Alan Kelly:** This is high level stuff. When is it intended to publish the strategy? Will that be done before the conclusion of the Dáil this term? It would be helpful if it was. The current statement of strategy is completely out of date.

How is the social dialogue, about which the Taoiseach speaks quite eloquently, perhaps from history, to work? What format or structures will be in place? Will the Government bring something new to the table regarding how we do things?

The Taoiseach spoke about the economy earlier. Will it be done sector by sector. I mentioned tourism but we need a sector-by-sector plan. It is about where we go after Covid.

On sustainability and the environment, it is rather embarrassing for the Taoiseach's Government colleagues, the Green Party, where it has been shown that progress in climate action has significantly slowed since the formation of the Government. What actions will be taken to remediate this? Just four of the 22 measures in the climate action plan that were due in the third quarter of this year have been delivered. Some were very deliverable, so why have they not been delivered? It needs to be prioritised. Will the Taoiseach explain why some have been delivered?

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** The Taoiseach accused me of giving a warped interpretation of what he said, so I will repeat what he said, which is very plain: "we took a more conservative approach on the household visits, and then traded that off with visits to hotels and restaurants". The Government chose not to follow NPHET's recommendations on household visits so that it could open up hotels and restaurants. It is very clear, it is not warped. The Taoiseach says that he did that not because of profit but because of mental well-being. I think that most people, if asked to choose between being able to visit family and friends or go to gastropubs and restaurants, they would say it is more important for their mental well-being to be able to visit family



and friends. It is remarkable how the whole issue of mental health has been abused during this pandemic by many people who never spoke a word about it previously, and now it has become a byword for reopening the pubs.

Like everyone else, I would love everything to go back to normal, to go out to the pub with loads of people and so on, but we are in the middle of a global pandemic and there are consequences for the Government's decisions to put short-term profits before public health. Interestingly, one of those consequences is decreased medium-term economic growth. Just last week, an article by Martin Wolf in the *Financial Times* pointed out that countries that have pursued an elimination strategy have had much better economic results. This roller-coaster of moving in and out of lockdown is a disaster for workers.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** I agree with Deputy Murphy. The main point I wish to make concerns another issue. The Taoiseach is taking a very serious gamble, as Deputy Murphy said and as I pointed out yesterday. The gamble will be disastrous if it results in the further restriction of family visits because infections go crazy in the next few weeks. The Taoiseach will be in trouble if that happens.

I wish to return to the arts and music industry. I suggest that the Taoiseach acquaints himself with it and develops a strategy. Our writers, poets, musicians, artists and the crews that stand behind them are shockingly undervalued. A row over this issue is erupting as we speak. It has been on the radio and in the news. More than 80% of the people who applied for funding for recordings under the music industry stimulus package have been refused. This is because the amount allocated to that package was miserable. People are insulted and demoralised. None of the other business support schemes, which run into billions of euro, sets limits on the number of people who could get them. If an applicant fit those schemes' criteria, he or she got the support. Only the scheme for musicians had a numbers limit. This restricted it to fewer than 20% of applicants. That is typical of the lack of respect shown by successive Governments to musicians, artists, entertainers, performers and crews. The Taoiseach should acquaint himself with this sector and it should be central to any strategy for this country.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** The Taoiseach's statement of strategy must place a strong and renewed focus on the very many challenges facing Ireland's young people. Youth unemployment now stands at 45%. The release valve of emigration, which was relied upon by successive administrations, is not available to us. The ball is now firmly in the Government's court. It must deliver innovative interdepartmental solutions to the big policy issues facing young people. Market interventions such as rent caps are needed. We need rapid delivery of public housing. We need social and affordable public housing. We need to end the unsustainable rents which have placed incredible and unacceptable burdens of stress on young people, sometimes leading to disaster. This is not just a financial burden - it is an emotional one as well.

I know many people who have been lucky, as I am sure the Taoiseach does. They have enjoyed every opportunity and advantage, got an education and worked throughout that time. They may have secured permanent employment in their chosen fields. However, they are still unable to see owning their own home as a realistic prospect. They look at the cost of childcare with absolute dread. This is an appalling legacy of previous Governments.

We have consistently voiced concerns about the existing job activation programmes. I do not have time to rehearse these concerns today, but this issue must also be addressed. I hope that when we finally see this statement of strategy it will have a very deliberate focus on our

young people.

**The Taoiseach:** The Government will publish a national economic plan that will deal the broader issues on the economic landscape. Housing will be a key part of it, particularly the provision of sustainable sources of social and affordable housing. In response to Deputy Kelly's question, I note that there will be key developments in the areas of digital transformation and the green economy. Those are two areas where opportunities will present themselves in the future.

The land development agency Bill 2019 is important from a housing perspective. The marine planning and development management Bill is particularly important for renewable energy and the exploitation of our seas' potential for economic development. I have made both pieces of legislation high priorities and I have worked with the respective Ministers in that regard. They are both complex Bills and it has therefore taken a while to get them over the line.

Deputy Kelly talked about the implementation of measures under the existing climate action plan which were due in the third quarter of this year. That is not fair to the Green Party. It is not its fault. This Government has only been in place since July. The pandemic has impacted on the implementation of some of its priorities. The Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications, Deputy Eamon Ryan, will update that climate action plan and take measures to accelerate the implementation plan. His Bill is progressing through this House as we speak. It will be strengthened before it comes out the other end of the legislative process.

My Department's social dialogue unit is seeking to enhance the structures and relationships by which we engage with the social partners and the substance of that engagement. We will build on the Labour Employer Economic Forum, LEEF, and make it more substantial. My unit will co-ordinate with the major social partners with a view to getting agreement on some key societal issues.

We have not maintained restrictions on household visits as a trade-off in the crude sense Deputy Murphy suggests. All the public health evidence and advice, particularly during the second wave, has identified visits to households as the cause of much of the spread of the virus. That applies particularly at level 2 and higher. That is why I said the Deputy's description was warped. There are always challenges. We cannot keep people locked up forever. I do not agree with the Deputy's zero-Covid-19 strategy in light of our geographical position. We have a Border with the North, a jurisdiction where we do not have public health control, and we are in close proximity to the United Kingdom and Europe. Others might differ, but I do not think we can pursue a zero-Covid-19 strategy. The level 5 restrictions were not as severe as in the first lockdown.

In reply to Deputy Boyd Barrett's point, I note that the Government put very significant resources into the music, culture and arts sectors in the recent budget. Several schemes and supports are available. I listened to this morning's commentary on the music industry stimulus package and I know the Minister is aware of it. I have no doubt that the Minister will re-engage with that process. There is no negative agenda towards arts and culture in this Government. The Arts Council has received a €50 million increase in funding. We prioritise the arts and believe in their fundamental importance to our society.

*Written Answers are published on the Oireachtas website.*

### **Pre-European Council: Statements**

**The Taoiseach:** Tá áthas orm labhairt leis an Dáil maidir leis an gcruinniú den Chomhairle Eorpach a bheidh ar siúl Déardaoin agus Dé hAoine an seachtain seo chugainn.

The agenda at the European Council meeting on Thursday, 10 December and Friday, 11 December has yet to be finalised, but is expected to include Covid-19, Brexit, climate change, security and counterterrorism and external relations, particularly with Turkey, the southern neighbourhood and the US. In addition, it seems likely that we will discuss the multi-annual financial framework, MFF, and the recovery package. We will also meet at the euro summit on 11 December to discuss banking union and capital markets union.

In my statement I will address Brexit, Covid-19, climate, the MFF and the euro summit. The Minister of State, Deputy Thomas Byrne, will address counterterrorism and external relations in his remarks.

*2 o'clock*

Next week's meeting will provide another important opportunity for European Union leaders to take stock of key developments in our collective response to the Covid-19 pandemic, which has dominated the past nine months. We agreed in October that we should continue to meet regularly to discuss Covid-19 issues and to co-ordinate our efforts. At our video conference meeting on 19 November we had very useful exchanges on vaccines, testing and our approaches to the lifting of restrictive measures.

Regarding vaccines, we discussed encouraging results from recent trials and national plans for their deployment when authorised for public use. As the House will be aware, Ireland is part of the joint European Union procurement initiative being operated by the European Commission on behalf of member states to procure a portfolio of suitable, safe and effective vaccines in sufficient quantities. Here at home, the major logistical, medical and ethical issues involved are being addressed by a cross-public service task force which we have established to oversee a national immunisation programme. I take this opportunity to acknowledge in particular the remarkable work being undertaken by the European Commission on supporting vaccine development and procurement. I pay tribute to President Ursula von der Leyen for her leadership in this regard. Once approved, Europe's citizens can look forward to the mass roll-out of vaccines in 2021, and there is now a light at the end of what has been a long and dark tunnel for us all. While we must continue to keep our guard up, especially over the festive season, we can at least now look ahead to 2021 with greater confidence.

Regarding testing, we discussed developments in the area of rapid antigen tests and welcomed the Commission guidance presented on 18 November. While the polymerase chain reaction, PCR, test remains the diagnostic standard, there may be potential for deploying rapid tests in certain circumstances. We agreed that there should be further work on mutual recognition of tests and their results.

In our video conference discussion a fortnight ago we all reflected on the growing Covid numbers across the European Union and the challenges ahead of the festive period. Circumstances are very different across member states, and key decisions here are a matter to be determined at national level in light of our differing circumstances. There is no room for complacency and we have to remain vigilant as we continue our fight against Covid. Every contact counts. While the agenda for our discussion next week is not yet finalised, it will be informed

by the work of health ministers at this afternoon's video conference meeting in which the Minister, Deputy Stephen Donnelly, is participating.

We will have the opportunity at next week's European Council to reinforce Europe's leadership role on climate. As we approach the fifth anniversary of the Paris Agreement, I strongly support enhanced ambition at European Union level and an increase in the European Union 2030 target to at least 55% emissions reduction. I support this being delivered collectively by the European Union in the most cost-effective manner possible, taking into account national circumstances and considerations of fairness and solidarity. When we met on 15 and 16 October, European Union leaders reviewed progress towards the Union's objective of climate neutrality by 2050, informed by the Commission's communication, *Stepping up Europe's 2030 Climate Ambition*. This includes the proposed emissions reduction target of at least 55% by 2030 compared with 1990 levels and the actions required to achieve that ambition. This approach at European level is consistent with Ireland's domestic approach, as the recently published climate action Bill illustrates. At our meeting next week I will again convey Ireland's support for increased ambition at European Union level while asserting the importance of fair sharing of the effort across member states. The target of at least 55% is certainly ambitious compared with our previous target of 40% by 2030. However, the Commission has studied the matter carefully and believes that it both can be achieved and is to our collective advantage. I hope it will be possible to reach consensus at our meeting that the new target should now be submitted to the United Nations as the European Union's commitment under the Paris process.

I expect that next week's meeting will also take stock of progress on delivering on the new €1.8 trillion multi-annual financial framework and recovery package agreed in July. Our agreement in July, which was reached by consensus, included measures to protect the Union's financial interests. These were among the most difficult to negotiate, with some member states seeking looser arrangements and others seeking more binding measures. The next step was to reach agreement with the European Parliament on the budget package, and the German Presidency has done a great job in finding a basis on which the Parliament can give its consent. This has now come back for approval in the Council. At present a small number of member states are not prepared to give the deal with the Parliament their support as they believe it does not align with what was agreed in July. Chancellor Merkel briefed us by video conference on 19 November and said the Presidency will continue its efforts to bring everybody on board. She continues to have my full support in this regard. It is important we get the recovery funding in place as quickly as we can while continuing to hold member states to account in upholding the Union's values in line with the treaties.

On Friday, 11 December, there will be a meeting of the Euro Summit in inclusive format, that is, involving all member states, not just those whose currency is the euro. This meeting usually takes place each December. We expect to take stock of the developments on banking union and capital markets union. The Minister, Deputy Donohoe, in his capacity as President of the Eurogroup, chaired the preparatory meeting of the Eurogroup on Monday, 30 November, and will update next week's meeting on key developments. There were important breakthroughs at this week's Eurogroup meeting on finalising reform of the European Stability Mechanism and earlier entry into force from the beginning of 2022 of the common backstop to the Single Resolution Fund. These are important steps towards completing banking union and strengthening the resilience and crisis resolution capabilities of the euro area. Both are very welcome from an Irish perspective. Leaders will also hear from President Christine Lagarde on the European Central Bank's latest assessment of the economic outlook against the backdrop

of unprecedented pandemic-related uncertainty. The clear emphasis that President Lagarde has established on ensuring the right mix of monetary, fiscal and structural policies for the period ahead is very welcome and I look forward to constructive exchanges with leaders to this end.

As Deputies will be aware, negotiations between the United Kingdom and the European Union continue this week. We are in the final, critical phase. I spoke by phone to Commission President Ursula von der Leyen last Friday. She confirmed that at that point differences remained on key issues. As of now, those gaps have not yet been bridged. I have every confidence that our chief negotiator, Michel Barnier, and Commission President Ursula von der Leyen will use every best endeavour and every opportunity this week to try to deliver a deal in the interests of all European Union citizens, businesses and employment. I believe this is strongly in the interest of the United Kingdom also, a point I made to Prime Minister Johnson when we spoke last Friday. This will mean reaching agreement on level playing field issues, fisheries and much more.

While European Union-United Kingdom contacts continue, one month out from the end of transition we have now reached a point in time when prudence demands that we must proceed with preparations for European Union contingency measures in case of no deal. I expect to see contingency measures discussed in Brussels over the coming week and in advance of the December European Council. Next week, when I attend the meeting of the European Council, it will be an opportunity to reflect with other European Union leaders on the outcome of the negotiations and to chart our critical next steps, deal or no deal. Our fervent wish, of course, is that the negotiators arrive at a deal, a sensible free trade agreement, that would be to the benefit of all whom we represent in terms of jobs, employment and our respective economies.

Next week's meeting of the European Council has a heavy and very busy agenda. It reflects the range of pressing issues currently at the top of the European Union agenda: Covid-19, climate action and Brexit as well as a number of external relations issues of pivotal importance, including the European Union's deep but complicated relations with Turkey, our relations with all the countries of the southern and eastern Mediterranean and consideration of the prospects to refresh and refocus our transatlantic relations following the recent United States elections. I look forward to engaging with my European Union colleagues collectively and bilaterally at next week's meeting of the European Council on all these issues and will report back to the House in due course.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** I am sharing time with Deputy Brady. There is less than a month to go to the end of the Brexit transition period. We heard the news from Europe this morning that Tory intransigence, particularly with regard to its dangerous Internal Market Bill, has brought negotiations to a cliff edge. Serious difficulties remain and the window to have any agreement ratified before the end of the year is now closing fast. The key areas of divergence, namely, fisheries, a level playing field and governance, are extremely important to ensuring that Ireland's interests are protected.

The British negotiating team insists that all fish in British waters are British fish, regardless of species, spawning grounds, migratory patterns and historical access. It also wants annual negotiations on quotas. The EU has accepted that there will be a big change from British membership of the Common Fisheries Policy. However, it is rightly looking for a sustainable, longer-term agreement that protects EU fisheries.

The intransigence of the British Government has left the Irish fishing industry facing an



incredible level of uncertainty. Some 34% of the annual catch of the Irish fishing fleet is taken from what are British waters under the Common Fisheries Policy. That is the scale of the threat to the industry from these negotiations. It is an industry worth hundreds of millions of euro and one that employs more than 16,000 people. Ideally, Irish fishers should retain the access to British waters that they enjoyed even before both countries joined the EU. However, any loss to that catch will require a renegotiation of how the Common Fisheries Policy is applied to Irish waters. This is an opportunity for the EU to look at the lack of fairness that exists for fishers, particularly here in Ireland.

Equally, the issue of the level playing field demonstrates just how important it is that we defend our hard-won protections under the Irish protocol. The protocol places the North under EU law regarding state aid and protects against slippage from EU trading standards. The attempt to undermine these protections through the Internal Market Bill shows that the focus of the Tory Government is a low-wage, low-tax, deregulated economy. Its failure to ensure sufficient oversight and scrutiny of labour standards, public health, environment, animal welfare and consumer protection is a major problem. In particular, divergence in food standards between Britain and the EU will put a strain on the functioning of the Irish protocol. The race to the bottom by the Tory Government will mean that the EU is much less likely to accept goods coming from Britain into Ireland, North or South, without rigorous checks. This, in turn, will create difficulties for industry and commerce across the island, but especially for the North. The Tories want a cheap competitive advantage at the expense of ordinary workers. I do not believe we can tolerate the undermining of the Good Friday Agreement by the Tories or their attempt to run roughshod over workers' rights and labour standards.

Regardless of the outcome of these negotiations, it is essential that the Irish protocol is honoured and implemented because it is our insurance policy against a land border. It protects the Good Friday Agreement, the all-Ireland economy and co-operation between North and South. As pressure now increases, there can be no blinking on the part of the EU negotiating team or by the Irish Government when it comes to the Irish protocol. A deal is absolutely better than a no-deal Brexit for Ireland, but we must remember that any deal, let alone a hard Brexit free-trade agreement, will be hazardous for Ireland. We must continue to ensure that a final agreement defends the interest of all the people of Ireland.

Ultimately, it is the reunification of Ireland that is the best solution to the Border and to the Brexit question. It is also the very best idea for the future of our island. As I have said before, the time is now to begin planning to realise the benefits of reunification. Much more is required beyond the ambitions of the Taoiseach's shared island unit. We now need an agreed forum, a citizens' assembly, to ensure that the practical discussion and preparation for reunification can begin. There is no excuse for anyone, much less political leaders, to stick their heads in the sand. The conversation on unity is for everybody and it is now time to progress that conversation.

**Deputy John Brady:** It is quite obvious that the glaring issue from an Irish perspective in the coming meeting of the European Council is that of Brexit. The illegal, irresponsible and in-temperate approach taken by the Johnson Government from the very outset has placed obstacle after obstacle in the way of an agreement. It has set out to dupe its own workers to support its machinations under a chorus of nationalistic jingoism. The domestic success of the Tories in morphing the issue of the level playing field into one of sovereignty has been such that they have been able to lead their own citizens down a pathway that leads to nothing but the erosion of their rights as workers, the unregulated destruction of the environment and the removal of

safeguards designed to protect the health and well-being of citizens. That is shameful enough, but they have given themselves licence to erect the architecture of their exploitation around Scotland and a sizeable section of our country to enforce the Tory writ against the democratic wishes of the people who reside there.

Having set in place the means to erode the social contract across the span of their reach, they are seeking to hold the shared fishing stock of these two islands to ransom, a ransom the price of which will mean a serious and potentially disastrous blow to the fishing industry in Ireland or, alternatively, unfair, unfettered and unaccountable trading access to Europe's markets for Britain. Reports that the EU Brexit negotiation team has offered to hand back between 15% and 18% of the value of fish caught by EU-registered vessels in British waters to the British must be met with alarm. There is no amount of money from Europe that could compensate for the loss of an industry that is a staple of communities along the whole coastline of our island nation. Ireland needs access to fisheries to be maintained as it currently stands, full stop. More than 60% of mackerel caught by the Irish fleet is taken in British waters. The EU must force home the point to the British that the disputed fishing stock is, in effect, a stock that is shared between Ireland and Britain. The fish spawn in Irish waters and then head north into British waters to be trawled by the fishing fleets of Europe and Britain. Ireland simply cannot allow such a valuable natural resource of this island to be taken from us by the grasping hand of English nationalism.

Regardless of the outcome of the negotiations, there is little doubt that Ireland will face unprecedented challenges in the aftermath of Brexit. The EU has previously recognised this and put in place the Brexit adjustment reserve fund to help those states most impacted by Brexit, with the general acknowledgement that Ireland would be the worst-affected of all EU states. I am, therefore, very concerned at reports that the French President, Emmanuel Macron, is intent on securing the lion's share of this fund, apparently to compensate French fisherman but, more realistically, to fund a re-election bid. Ireland's post-Brexit challenges are compounded by the cost of the Covid-19 pandemic. The €1.8 trillion recovery fund proposed by the EU to address the impact of Covid will see Ireland become a net contributor to the fund. The Government cannot and must not allow Ireland to be forced to relinquish its right to the majority share of the Brexit fund to satisfy the internal political considerations of any individual EU member state.

This morning, Michel Barnier, the EU chief negotiator, told EU ambassadors that if the UK finance Bill which is expected next week, breaches the Irish protocol, that is, international law, then Brexit talks will be in crisis and there will be a breakdown in trust. I should say there will be a further breakdown in trust. I do not trust the British Government at the best of times and least of all on this issue of the finance Bill it is bringing forward. In the event of a no-deal Brexit, the recovery fund will be crucial in helping Ireland to withstand the economic and social impact that will come from Brexit.

**Deputy Brendan Howlin:** In the short time available to me, I will concentrate my remarks on Brexit, although the Council meeting will cover a very wide agenda. This morning's briefings from Michel Barnier are not such as to give us great heart. Speaking yesterday to members of the European affairs committees of national parliaments, President von der Leyen reiterated the EU position that the continued access to the Single Market without quotas and tariffs demanded by Britain must be on the basis of accepting common standards and rules that are capable of being enforced. That is the simple position and it has been for months, but we seem not to be able to get beyond it. It is really now down to Boris Johnson, his true intention and his political judgment. Does he really want a deal? If the answer to that question is "yes", will he invest the political capital to achieve it?

Meanwhile, we must prepare for what is to come. I have raised the issue of connectivity on this island many times. I have been told repeatedly by the Department of Transport and the Irish Maritime Development Office that we have capacity. I was very glad to hear the announcement last Friday by one of the largest ferry companies in Europe, DFDS, that it will be providing a service from Rosslare to Dunkirk. I have been working with the Danish-based company for some time to establish this service, which will run six days per week. I understand it is heavily booked already, which belies the claim that there was adequate connectivity. Thank God there are companies willing to invest their own money to provide these services and we are not dependent on the planning being done by the authorities. I will have more to say on that elsewhere.

I read today that a House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts report on Brexit is scathing in its analysis of the UK's preparedness for Brexit. It identifies the risk of serious disruptions and delays at Channel ports which could potentially be catastrophic. In a most scathing attack on Boris Johnson's efforts in regard to preparing for Brexit, the chairman of the committee said, "A year after the oven-ready deal, we have more of a cold turkey..." Tony Connelly, RTÉ's excellent Europe editor, wrote an article this week on the implications of food chain supply issues between Ireland and the UK and between the UK and continental Europe. There are an immeasurable number of complicated issues still to address. We are as prepared as we can be but there will be lots of further issues that will emerge. We hope there will be a deal but, without one, we face real and substantial disruption. In that scenario, we will be very dependent on direct ferry routes off the island for a number of months from January. As I said, I am very glad there will now be 13 weekly direct continental sailings from Rosslare Europort to a variety of continental ports. I hope that will take significant pressure off the UK land bridge route should the potential chaos envisaged by the UK Committee of Public Accounts come to pass.

I want to comment briefly on fisheries. From the very beginning, this was never meant to be the final issue to be resolved. We discussed it at the stakeholders' forum from the start and the view was that it needed to be settled before we got into the final deal because it was the one issue on which the UK had a stronger hand than the EU rather than the other way around. I understand Ministers have been very clear in underscoring to the negotiating team that it is not to be left as the final stand-alone issue, in which scenario we could come off very badly. My understanding from a report in *The Guardian* today is that there is a revised presentation from the UK side offering 60% of catch demand, down from its previous offer of 80%. However, this remains very far off an acceptable mark.

Together with a resolution of the fisheries issue, the issue of agreeing common standards and rules that are capable of being enforced independently, as I have outlined, remains to be addressed. It is like Groundhog Day because we all have been saying that for a number of months. I believe in my heart that Boris Johnson is not so destructive of his own nation that he will want to inflict at least 2% additional harm on the growth potential of its economy over and above the Covid catastrophe. However, who knows? We need to be prepared for the very harmful consequences of that decision if it comes about.

**Deputy Seán Haughey:** We are reaching the endgame on Brexit. A landing zone is in sight and we hope the UK and the EU will land on it either by the end of this week or by next week. For some time now, we have been told that the contentious issues are fisheries, level playing field competition issues and governance. I hope a deal can be agreed. It is in the interests of Ireland and the EU and it certainly is in the interests of the UK, whether the British Prime Min-

ister knows it or not.

I want to raise a number of issues in connection with Brexit. There are reports of concerns about traffic delays occurring as a result of congestion at Dublin Port after 1 January. Delays in carrying out border checks could result in a backup of trucks in the Dublin Port Tunnel which could cause traffic jams on the M50 and the surrounding road network in Dublin. That must not be allowed to happen. Irish Ferries and Stena Line should be asked to stagger ferries arriving from Holyhead and Liverpool into Dublin Port. It is my understanding that Transport Infrastructure Ireland has also raised these concerns. An overflow parking facilities for lorries has been earmarked for Dublin Airport. The Department of Transport, Transport Infrastructure Ireland, the Dublin local authorities, the Garda, the Dublin Port Company and the Revenue Commissioners must all work together to try to resolve this issue. There is nothing surer than if the traffic in Dublin starts to snarl up, it will be one of the most immediate effects of Brexit that our citizens will experience. We need to prevent that.

As regards the UK land bridge issue, I welcome, like the previous speaker, the announcement by the Danish shipping company DFDS that it will provide a direct service between Rosslare Europort and Dunkirk six days per week. We already have services from Dublin and Rosslare to Cherbourg. Businesses must now be encouraged to trial these services and avoid the UK land bridge. The question arises as to whether there is enough capacity on these routes. The Irish Maritime Development Office says there is but the Irish Road Haulage Association is not so sure. I am not the first speaker to raise that question and we need clarification on it.

The European Council still has big decisions to make regarding the conference on the future of Europe. The Taoiseach did not say whether that would be on the agenda next week. We need clarification, for example, on who will chair it and when it will be launched. The issue of treaty change will no doubt come up for discussion when the conference is in place. The Covid-19 pandemic brought about a co-ordination of policies in respect of public health which was most welcome. However, on the question of whether health should become a competence of the EU, I am not so sure. I think the Minister of State will agree with me that there is plenty of scope within the existing treaties, especially the Lisbon treaty, to make progress. That existing scope should be utilised further to bring about the necessary improvements in the quality of life of EU citizens. We must also consult widely in Ireland on the conference, with stakeholders and various State and semi-State bodies, as well as citizens. We must actively engage with citizens on the future of Europe and this conference. I hope that suitable mechanisms can be put in place to facilitate that.

I wish to raise the stand-off that has developed on the multiannual financial framework, MFF, and the European Recovery Fund. The proposed MFF is for €1.8 trillion and the associated recovery fund is for €750 billion. Hungary and Poland want to veto agreement due to the linking of the budget to rule of law issues. This must not be allowed to happen. The EU must stand up for European values and insist that the rule of law is not compromised. It is up to the German Presidency to resolve this impasse, and I hope it can be done without compromising on the fundamental principles of the EU.

In that context, I refer to remarks by the Portuguese Prime Minister, António Costa. Portugal takes over the EU Presidency next month and he raised the possibility of a multi-speed Europe whereby like-minded EU states can press ahead in certain areas such as fundamental values, immigration, fiscal rectitude and so forth. Poland and Hungary are the problem children at present. Ireland was a problem child at one stage. I, and undoubtedly Ireland, would be op-

posed to any suggestion of a two-speed or multi-speed Europe. We are all in this together and we must resolve these problems together.

I wish to raise some further major issues, but I only have a small amount of time left. One is the digital services tax. Where do we stand in this regard? France is becoming particularly impatient. The OECD is dealing with this issue globally and the EU supports that. Presumably, the OECD will report in due course and the EU will consider the report. Ireland will have to give careful consideration to that. This has the potential to affect our corporate tax revenues and our economic model. It is something the Dáil should be conscious of and debate as the situation unfolds.

With regard to financial services and the City of London, perhaps we could get a report at some stage on how Ireland is doing in attracting financial institutions to Dublin arising from Brexit and banks leaving the UK and City of London. Paris, Frankfurt, Amsterdam and Dublin are all possibilities for the relocation of such services and Ireland should be proactive in this regard. I would welcome a report on that matter in due course.

I wish to emphasise the report published today by the Competition and Consumer Protection Commission on consumers engaging in online shopping. They should be very careful when dealing with purchases from the UK. The advice is that they should check where the business is based, buy from reputable retailers, check the cancellation and returns policy, check for additional taxes or charges, pay by card and check that the website is secure. These are important practical issues for consumers in this country as we engage in the Christmas shopping spree. It is important to get that message to the public loud and clear.

I have four seconds left, so I will not bother discussing the new migration and asylum pact. However, we must get agreement on it as soon as possible. Undoubtedly, it will come up for discussion at future European Council meetings.

**Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn:** I raised the threats to our fishing sector from Brexit with the Minister of State in previous debates. There is growing concern and alarm in our fishing communities at the news that Michel Barnier is offering 15% to 18% of a reduction in value in terms of access to what are deemed to be British waters. Under the Common Fisheries Policy our territorial waters and British territorial waters outside the 12-mile limit are divided for all member states of the European Union, based on a total allowable catch quota system. That offer was rejected, and there was serious concern about the offer.

It is time for us to state clearly to our European Union counterparts that what is emerging here, whether it is Britain accepting the 18% offer or much worse, requires a renegotiation of the Common Fisheries Policy. There is major concern. Approximately 400 European vessels that fish in British territorial waters are affected by this. They need a home to go to. An important statistic is that 34% of the entire catch taken by the Irish fleet is caught in what the UK terms British territorial waters. That is the serious level of threat we face. It is existential for a number of ports and long-standing fishing communities.

We must be straight with our European Union counterparts that this will require an urgent renegotiation of the Common Fisheries Policy. The Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine appeared before the Joint Committee on Agriculture and the Marine yesterday and gave a presentation. His senior officials would have assisted with drafting it. The presentation was clear that the annual negotiations that take place in December on the total allowable catch



and sustainable fisheries are up in the air due to Brexit, so we must be ready to renegotiate the Common Fisheries Policy. We must urgently protect the national interest and the interests of our fishing communities. There is massive anger already that we have given away so much of the immense resource in our waters. That has been sacrificed and we cannot allow any more to be given.

There can be no further erosion of our waters and we must regain what we will have lost in these negotiations through increased quotas in our waters. The message I wish to convey urgently to the Minister of State and the Government before these negotiations is that they must defend the national interest and our fishing communities and make it absolutely clear that we are not pawns in this game or pieces to be offered up in negotiations. We must not come out of this by destroying our fishing communities.

**Deputy Cian O’Callaghan:** My comments will be on Brexit but, first, I wish to say with respect to the rule of law that I am disappointed with the comments from the Taoiseach. He talked about continuing to hold member states to account in upholding the Union’s values. I do not see evidence of continuing work to uphold the European Union values with regard to member states.

Is it the view of the Taoiseach and the Government that the continued discrimination against LGBTI people and minorities by some member states and the creation of so-called LGBTI-free zones constitute upholding European Union values? Do interference with the independence of the judiciary, the suppression of free media and the silencing of civil society organisations in parts of the European Union by member states constitute upholding European Union values? They do not. It is important that we stand with the LGBTI community, the judiciary, a free media and civil society. We cannot pretend to ourselves that we are continuing to uphold European Union values here, because we are not. There has been an erosion of them for years now while European Union funding continues to flow into these countries. We need to make a stand and not kid ourselves that work has been ongoing on this and that we can continue to do it. What has been happening to date is not acceptable.

We can all see clearly now that the lies on which Brexit was based are unravelling and are being exposed. We have seen the comments from the independent Office for Budget Responsibility in the UK. It has forecast that Brexit will cost the UK economy 4% of GDP in the event of a deal and that is more damage than Covid has done to its economy. In the event of no deal, the UK will be looking at a cost of 6% of GDP to the economy. The National Audit Office in the UK has assessed its preparations for Brexit and it has painted a very bleak picture of widespread disruption as a result of the failure of its government to prepare adequately for new border controls. It also stated that it believes that new regulatory controls for goods crossing to Northern Ireland from the UK will not be ready for 1 January.

One of the main tenets that the proponents of Brexit in the UK talked about is that they could get great trade deals around the world to increase UK trade outside of the European Union. We know that 50% of UK trade is with the European Union and we also know that in key markets outside the EU, including America, China, South Korea and India, that the UK is losing market share and the value of its exports is in decline.

We also know that the UK seems intent on continuing to break international law. It has not withdrawn the Internal Markets Bill. More recently, the UK Government seems intent on bringing forward the new taxation Bill with clauses which will undermine sections of the Northern

Ireland protocol. The EU chief negotiator, Michel Barnier, correctly commented today that if this goes ahead it will put the negotiations into crisis. I would have welcomed a direct comment from the Taoiseach on that. It is an omission that he has not.

I wish to make two points on the threat of no deal on fisheries and what that could do in terms of the thousands of Irish jobs that are reliant on continued access to UK waters. First, we need to be very conscious of the amount of jobs that are potentially at stake. We are looking at approximately 16,000 jobs in the industry that could be lost. We could also be looking at conflict at sea. The operational capacity of the Naval Service is not what it should be, which is quite concerning in terms of Brexit. We also need to be mindful that the UK has netted more than €1 billion worth of additional fish in the past ten years because of its access to the EU fisheries policy. We also know that its fleet does not have sufficient capacity to catch all the fish in UK waters. The UK is very reliant on exports. Some 80% of scallops, squid, sole and ray caught by UK vessels are exported to the European Union. The UK does not hold all the cards in these talks. It is very important that Ireland and the European Union hold fast in the negotiations and that we agree a common approach on fisheries and on measures to conserve fish stocks in the future.

**Deputy Cathal Crowe:** I wish to share time with Deputy Neale Richmond.

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

**Deputy Cathal Crowe:** Next week's European Council meeting will deal with the European budget and the recovery fund, but Irish eyes will certainly be focused very much on Brexit. It was such a political gamble in Britain and it is finally coming to the endgame. Following what was stated earlier today by Michel Barnier, the next 36 hours are the most crucial of all, as Britain continues to dig its heels in on a number of issues, but most strikingly on that of fishing. The Prime Minister, Mr. Johnson, has taken a very simplistic, one-dimensional view of fishing and fishing waters around his country and ours because most of the stocks, in particular of mackerel, are spawned in Irish waters before migrating in an easterly direction where they are caught at their most valuable stage of development in British waters. It is crucial that fishing rights are held as a red line issue by the Irish Government as these crucial talks enter their final stages.

I note as well that it has been reported in today's newspapers that Michel Barnier has suggested that a transitional arrangement for fishing rights could be explored with the idea of a re-negotiation at the end of the period, which would be linked at that stage to the overall economic agreement of both Brussels and London. It sounds rather watery to me, if Members will pardon the pun, and we need far more certainty for fishermen who are following this afternoon's debate that their livelihoods will be protected at next week's meeting and by the European Union overall.

If we look at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, farmers have very defined boundaries and livestock that one can see. Occasionally, they break out of a field but, by and large, one ends up with the same count of cattle year-on-year and one's farming practice is very quantifiable. It is far more uncertain for fishermen. For them, there are no boundaries apart from international waters and they have to follow the fish wherever they are at a given time. Everything needs to be done to protect our very valuable fishing industry.

I will move on to the positive announcement we heard a week ago about the new six-times

a week ferry service between Rosslare and Dunkirk. It is a fantastic development which offers connectivity to continental Europe. However, I have two small concerns. I went on the website and looked at the journey time between Rosslare and Dunkirk. From when one leaves Rosslare, it takes 24 hours to berth in Dunkirk Port. That is a considerable length of time. It is five or six hours longer than the current journey to Cherbourg. It makes what is already a long route for truckers even longer. One haulier suggested to me that this could in time result in sea cargo being charged per kilogram because of the amount of time taken in transit. I hope that can be looked at.

I am not expert on shipping but on the surface it looks like the fleets that operate between Ireland, Britain and further afield to continental Europe are rather aged and it may be that new ships are required. Potentially, with Brexit looming there may be Government support in that regard.

An airbridge for cargo should also be considered for Shannon Airport. I highlighted in this Chamber recently that Boston Scientific makes very expensive, high quality scientific products and they sit on the apron of the runway at Shannon Airport right beside aircraft but they are trucked overnight from there all the way to Rosslare. From there, they go to Heathrow and they are flown back to the United States. That is illogical. We are doing everything to protect sea cargo and we must also look at air cargo and how that is supported.

Fisheries must be the red line issue that Ireland does not budge on as we approach next week's European Council meeting.

**Deputy Neale Richmond:** I appreciate the opportunity to make a few remarks on the, once again, crucial European Council meeting. I will limit my remarks to just two aspects of the upcoming Council meeting because there are so many other aspects such as the rule of law in certain parts of central and eastern Europe or in our near neighbourhood that merit discussion but eight minutes is quite limited.

The first issue is topical. It got quite a bit of attention earlier today during Leaders' Questions. That is the expected roll-out of a Covid-19 vaccine. To be honest, I welcome the news that the United Kingdom and, in particular, our cousins up North are soon to be rolling out a vaccine. One thing is quite clear: if it was not for Ireland's continued membership of the European Union, we would not have the chance of getting access to the millions of vaccines that have been bought by the European Commission for all 27 member states. This is going to be a crucial part of the upcoming Council meeting. My question to the Minister and to the Taoiseach, in his absence, is how this is going to be co-ordinated. How will the Government incorporate the overall European plan to ensure that the vast majority of Irish people get the vaccine in a speedy and safe manner? I give credit to the researchers in the various companies who have produced the vaccines and the absolute wonder of science that the vaccines have been developed in such a period. It is a testament to the great amount of work being done. Some of the companies involved are located on this island as well. Throughout this horrendous Covid-19 pandemic, Professor Luke O'Neill of Trinity College Dublin has always referred to the fact that the cavalry is coming. The cavalry is on the brow of the hill. It is about to come. Let us hope 2021 will be a far better year than 2020 in so many regards but particularly when it comes to public health.

I have a concern relating to some of the fake news, to be honest, that we have seen recently. There has been fake news about vaccines for years and many people have questioned them

incorrectly, by spreading conspiracy theories around the Internet, WhatsApp groups and elsewhere. This is a wholly irresponsible act and we must ensure every single Oireachtas Member steps up to the plate to embrace the vaccine and encourage public take-up.

This also extends to our friends in the UK, leading me to further Brexit matters. Over recent months many of us were taken by the decision made by some social media companies, particularly Twitter, to label posts that may be misleading or irresponsible. Perhaps we have seen that today with the vast number of MPs and Cabinet ministers in the United Kingdom claiming they are able to roll out a vaccine there due to Brexit. It is absolute nonsense that must be called out and corrected. We know the UK has not left the European Union yet and the European Medicines Agency is ensuring the vaccine can be rolled out in the UK. It is something that must also be brought into the debate about Brexit and the discussions as they will follow in the coming days.

I sincerely hope that following the Minister of State's General Affairs Council meeting this week and leading into the European Council meeting, we will be discussing a deal. As Deputy Crowe and others so eloquently put it, we have no doubt this will be an extremely narrow deal. Many of the issues will be a major concern in all our constituencies, and Deputy Mac Lochlainn mentioned the very real concern to fishing communities not just in Donegal but across our island, so there is a need to ensure fishing access is maintained.

Any deal achieved should be fair and equitable because as I have said a million times at this stage, there is no such thing as a good Brexit, whether it is for Ireland, the UK or the European Union. That is why whatever deal can be salvaged at this point should be fair. We must ensure the bare bones of that thin deal protects Irish and European interests.

My concern goes beyond this into whether we are likely to get a deal. Like other speakers, I am extremely concerned today by the utterances from the British Prime Minister's spokespersons that the British Internal Market Bill will be returned to Westminster with amendments next week and a new finance and taxation Bill is to come before the House of Commons which will include measures similar to the fifth section of the Internal Market Bill that, quite simply, ran contrary to the withdrawal agreement. As Mr. Michel Barnier said today, any actions by the British Government through the Internal Market Bill, despite amendments based on the very sensible decisions of the House of Lords in recent weeks, or through the finance Bill that runs a cart and horses through the withdrawal agreement would not be acceptable.

There is no way an international agreement can be concluded with a body that a year afterwards would absolutely rip apart an existing international agreement. What does it say about the British Government when it makes claims about China's responsibility to Hong Kong or to the incoming American President?

I will conclude on this point. The Minister of State and the Taoiseach have my very best wishes for the upcoming Council. I have no doubt every Member of this Oireachtas will continue to work steadily to ensure this country is looked after as well as possible in what will be an extremely difficult period.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** I must agree with much of what has been said today. If we base our thoughts on statements made in the past while, we seem to be looking at the crux of Brexit. We hope Mr. Barnier can deliver a deal. The National Audit Office in Britain has basically stated that there has been insufficient preparation, with insufficient systems put in place,

and with nothing on the cards but chaos.

We will have our own issues here. Earlier today we saw representatives from a number of port companies appear before the transport committee and it seems one of the traffic management systems for Dublin Port may be using the port tunnel as a car park in which nobody will park. Drivers will continue to drive around in circles. We will have many such issues. Like many others, I did not realise that to get a burger or fish and chips, we need many imports from Britain. We need a long-term solution involving the farmers of Ireland and the Irish Farmers Association. The Government must take a hand in this and we must deal with these problems. Last week we spoke about a solution in this House relating to a number of drivers who had done certificate of professional competence training in the North. There will be no small number of issues.

We are being told this is coming down to governance, a level playing field and fishing rights. It looks like this is a game being played by a British Government seeking fishing rights on which it does not seem to have the capacity to follow through. We cannot be the fall guy in this. We welcome the solidarity that has been shown, particularly on the Irish Border. That must be maintained. We must ensure this does not have an impact on a significant number of livelihoods in Ireland.

Whether we are talking about the withdrawal agreement or the possibility of a free trade agreement, this is about mitigating the worst aspects of Brexit. Some of that will be within our control but not all of it will be. There is a belief that this British Government is almost literally playing games because approximately 45% of exports from Britain go to the European Union. It requires a deal as much as anybody else. I could not say I could ever trust the British Government, and one could not trust this British Government in particular. We must ensure we can maintain the level of European solidarity and that there is no blinking whatever.

This week German Chancellor Angela Merkel and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen have made positive statements about a deal but indicated it will not come at any expense. We have heard what Mr. Barnier said, along with the comments of French President Macron. If we are talking about Brexit adjustment funds, we must go to the European Council with the argument that nowhere will see a bigger impact than Ireland. It is a necessity that this be followed through.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** I repeat to the Minister of State that as we go to the European Council, the question of ensuring a safe and effective vaccine is available to everybody in the world is critical to the effectiveness of the vaccine anywhere in the world, including in this country. People, including European leaders, need to get that into their heads. We do not need a repeat of the disgraceful position with retroviral AIDS drugs, when poorer countries were pleading to have access to the technology to produce generic and cheap versions for distribution but big pharmaceutical companies did not want to do it because it would cut into profits.

That must not happen and I repeat my earlier call to the Taoiseach. We need the waiving of intellectual property and patent rights on vaccines so they can be available to everybody. All data must be published if we want to get over some of the misplaced scepticism, although there may be some understandable suspicion of some of the pharmaceutical companies rather than vaccines. There must be honesty, openness and transparency, as it is the best way to encourage people to take the vaccine. I will be first in the queue. There could be a very strong public health campaign to overcome scepticism, explaining how smallpox, polio and so on were elimi-



nated because of vaccines. I underline this point in the strongest terms.

I will raise some particular matters for the attention of the European Council. We often hear the narrative that democratic reform is coming in Saudi Arabia and there was much trumpeting of how the country decided to allow women to apply for driving licences. What is said less is that the women who campaigned for women's rights in Saudi Arabia were subsequently imprisoned, almost certainly tortured and denied access to their families. In the case of Loujain al-Hathloul, she was moved to the terrorist court in Saudi Arabia on 25 November. This is a court that Amnesty International has indicated is essentially a tool for suppression of political dissent and where people are tried for crimes such as "disobeying the ruler", with heavy prison sentences and, in some cases, a death sentence.

*3 o'clock*

That is what is going on. Along with Loujain al-Hathloul we have Samar Badawi, Nouf Abdulaziz and Nassima al-Sadah. When Loujain al-Hathloul was brought into the court she was weak, shaking uncontrollably and her voice was faint and shaky. She was imprisoned for 21 to 22 years but has now been moved to this terrorist court. In October, eight youths, five of them minors, were brought to court and the Saudi prosecutor is seeking the death sentence for them for participating in demonstrations. This is despite the fact that Saudi Arabia is saying publicly that it is no longer going to seek the death sentence for young people. Seeking the death sentence for anybody is obscene, but especially for youths participating in demonstrations. We must remember, whatever the Saudis say, that this is the regime that murdered Jamal Khashoggi in the Saudi embassy in Turkey. This stuff is still going on. When is the European Union going to speak about this, instead of mouthing nonsense narratives that Saudi Arabia is embracing democratic reform? This is what is going on as we speak and something needs to be done about it.

I also wish to raise a matter that might be of interest to Deputies Michael and Danny Healy-Rae. A woman from Kerry wrote to my office about her husband, who is from Ethiopia. He was trying to get Teaching Council accreditation but he did not have the right papers so he returned to Tigray in Ethiopia to get same. He is now trapped there because at the beginning of November, the Ethiopian Government began a vicious bombing campaign against Tigray. The region is completely blocked off and its inhabitants are subject to indiscriminate bombing. This has the potential to turn into an absolute humanitarian disaster. The bombing campaign is being headed up by the Ethiopian Prime Minister who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize last year. Deputies should think about that. The European Union and the Irish Government needs to call this out immediately. It must demand a stop to the bombing campaign and the safe return of people like Kathleen's husband to Kerry and more generally, the safety of all of the innocent people who are being subjected to this vicious campaign. I call on the Minister and all of those attending the European Council to raise these issues as a priority.

**Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh:** Almost one year has elapsed since President von der Leyen presented the European Green Deal setting out an ambitious pathway towards making Europe the first climate-neutral continent by 2050. The agenda of the upcoming European Council includes the aim of agreeing a new EU emissions reduction target for 2030. These discussions do not often arise so I ask the Taoiseach to use the opportunity to the fullest to strengthen our commitment to proposed measures to tackle the climate crisis. I draw the Minister of State's attention to a letter that my colleague, Deputy Brian Leddin, in his capacity as Chairman of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Climate Action, sent to the Minister for Transport, Deputy

Eamon Ryan. The committee urged the Minister to support the European Parliament's newly-agreed position that emissions should be reduced by 60% over 1990 levels by 2030. The Taoiseach has been active in recent European Council meetings in working with other countries to support increased climate ambition at a European level. While Ireland has been described as a laggard in terms of climate action, we do have a proud record of constructive multilateralism on the international stage. With the Taoiseach's support, this new Government's increased ambition on emissions targets can be transposed onto the European stage to effect meaningful change across the Continent.

I wish to express my support for the Oireachtas committee's call for increased ambition, while also acknowledging the challenges this will pose for the community of European nations. I am under no illusions that a 60% emissions reduction target will be challenging in the extreme. Each additional percentage point of our ambition will be more difficult than the last. It is vital in this process that we bring communities with us and protect the most vulnerable in our society. Indeed, Ireland faces one of the biggest challenges in responding to calls for greater climate action. Between 1990 and 2018, emissions across the EU 27 decreased by 21% but in Ireland they increased by 9%. Each European country faces its own challenge in reducing emissions. For some, it is the widespread use of coal for electricity generation and heating or the presence of industry. Our twin challenges are reducing emissions from agriculture and transport, which together make up over half of our non-traded emissions.

This Government has declared unprecedented ambition in halving our emissions in a decade. It will be extremely hard to meet this target while continuing to protect farm family incomes and maintain connectivity in our communities. The challenge is definitely necessary but it is by no means easy. If the road ahead is difficult, it also brings with it opportunities. We have a huge untapped resource off our south and west coasts. If the last European century was powered by the coal fields of Silesia and Brandenburg, the one ahead may well be powered by Atlantic wind. We are laying the foundations for this in our Marine Planning and Development Management Bill, the necessary step to kick start the off-shore wind revolution. In Waterford, Limerick, Wexford, Wicklow and Cork, we have ports that are connected or adjacent to railway lines. We also have access to the very best of engineering expertise. It may well be that our blessing to Europe going forward is go mbeidh an ghaoth go brách ag do chúl. While our recent record on climate action may be poor, the programme for Government indicates that there will be a sea change in our future ambition. In this context, I urge Ireland to support the European Parliament's call for a more ambitious 60% reduction in emissions. It will be difficult to get all countries on board. Ambitious emissions reduction is hard for Ireland and will be hard for Europe but it is the right thing to do. It is right for Ireland, Europe and the planet, for this generation as well as generations to come.

**Deputy James O'Connor:** I thank the Minister of State for being here to discuss the important issues that will be addressed at the European Council meeting next week. I wish to take this opportunity to focus on economic recovery through the implementation of the agreement reached in July last. In terms of the rule of law and funding, it is imperative that these supports are put in place as quickly as possible for the recovery of our economy and society in the post-Covid-19 world. While Hungary may be somewhat preoccupied by internal matters at present it must, along with Poland, recognise that upholding the rule of law framework is fundamental to the proper functioning of the European Union. Any attempt to undermine that framework should not be tolerated. An enormous problem at European level, as the Minister of State is aware, is the disruption being caused by both of these countries. This is not about the simple

majority wanting to impose its will on the Hungarian people, as suggested by Prime Minister Orbán, but about upholding EU citizens' rights so that people know that they will always be safe and protected within the EU. This is critical in terms of buy-in from citizens right across the European Continent and within the EU itself. We are no longer living in a world of self-interested nation states but in a networked society where we as a people must uphold the values of democracy and freedom against those who try to take them away.

Funding under the NextGenerationEU programme is hugely important for the recovery of Europe. I hope that a consensus will be reached that maintains our fundamental values while also enabling us to begin our economic recovery, which is critically important. It is interesting to see many different, fantastic and ongoing EU-funded projects around the EU. In east Cork, the area I represent, a major project is underway to connect Ireland's power grid to the Continent of Europe for the first time by way of the interconnector between France and Ireland. That project will terminate in Yougal, the town in which I grew up. Projects between nations such as the interconnector help to build a degree of unity. We all understand how important projects such as the Eurotunnel in the 1990s were to the development of the European Union. We need to go back to that economic investment model which will be so important in ensuring that the strength of the Union is upheld. That is the message I would love to see the Minister of State feeding back to his European colleagues at the next meeting.

In terms of long-term development and state aid, the issue of our airports and European connectivity is so important. We have heard very significant discussions lately on the challenges facing the aviation sector. There is no question but that Ireland is the home of aviation in the European Union, if not the world, in terms of the organisations based here and the level of financial investment it has brought to our economy compared with worldwide averages. We need to work with our European colleagues to protect that. During Leaders' Questions yesterday, the Taoiseach spoke about another issue which is critical for Deputies, that of investment in antigen testing. We should, perhaps, consider testing on this basis. We know that such testing is not as accurate as polymerase chain reaction, PCR, testing, but it is far more convenient. The European Union should continue to lead the world in research on antigen testing. This will be very important if we are to live with Covid over the medium term because the roll-out of vaccinations will take a significant amount of time. We have to be proactive within the European Union in that regard. Of the top ten pharmaceutical companies in the world, nine have their European bases in Ireland. We are, therefore, in a prime position to lead that fight. I regularly speak to ambassadors on the importance of aviation not only to Ireland, but to all of our European neighbours. We should lead on that issue.

**Deputy Darren O'Rourke:** In my contribution, I will raise the issue of vaccines and the recent positive news in that regard. I will also refer to Ireland's role on the European stage, and Europe's role on the global stage, in ensuring that, as a point of principle, nobody is denied free access to a vaccine based on location, financial means or any other discriminatory criterion. There have unfortunately been 1.4 million deaths as a result of Covid. There has been positive news on the development of vaccines by Pfizer, BioNTech, AstraZeneca, Moderna, and Janssen Pharmaceutica, also known as Johnson & Johnson, in addition to the Russian vaccine. It is worth noting that these vaccines have been developed through very different development processes. Public moneys have been at the very heart of the development of some. Some of this money has come through the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations, CEPI, from which Moderna has received funding.

It is fair to say, however, that there have been significant levels of vaccine nationalism. Ire-

land is in quite a privileged position, as is Europe, but this is a global pandemic and we have a moral and ethical responsibility to lead from the front on that issue. In addition, from a very practical point of view, this is a global pandemic and we want to eradicate the virus globally. Therefore, in addition to our moral and ethical responsibility, it makes absolute sense to ensure that the vaccines are available to everyone who needs them. There are welcome developments at a European level including the COVAX facility and the new citizens' initiative, "Right to Cure". These are all motivated by the same intentions. In Ireland there are groups, including Access to Medicines Ireland, that have been campaigning on these issues for years. The global pandemic of Covid-19 has brought these issues into stark relief.

Yesterday, I attended the Oireachtas briefing on vaccine preparations by Professor Kingston Mills. The Government has a responsibility to do everything it can to ensure that supply lines and schemes are in place in Ireland.

I will make two points on the indemnity scheme. There is work to be done in that regard but those who take the vaccine are as entitled to the State's protection as the vaccine producers. It is very important work. The work that Professor Brian MacCraith and his group are doing needs to be supported in every way.

**Deputy Cathal Berry:** I welcome the opportunity to make a statement this afternoon prior to the very important meetings that will take place in Brussels on Thursday and Friday of next week. The Taoiseach outlined the very broad agenda that is on the table. I will focus my contribution exclusively on Brexit because it is the most urgent and most important issue from Ireland's point of view. I suggest that next week's summit is the most important EU summit of 2020 from an Irish perspective because it will either be the summit at which any tentative EU-UK trade deal will be signed off on, or the summit at which contingency plans for a crash-out Brexit on 1 January will be prepared. It is really important from our perspective.

I have two quick observations to make at the start. Like other Deputies, I welcome the increased capacity for shipping from the island of Ireland to continental Europe which was announced a few days ago. The two additional routes, which will run from Rosslare to Dunkirk and from Cork to Zeebrugge, will make a big difference. Using these routes will increase the transit time for Irish hauliers travelling from Ireland to continental Europe but will allow the UK land bridge to be circumvented. It is better than spending hours, or even days, sitting in a car park in Kent waiting for a ferry to Dover. It is a positive development. Our truckers will arrive on the Continent relatively well rested from a tachograph point of view. They will then be able to proceed with their onward journeys once they make landfall.

The second observation I would like to make relates to the common travel area. This is again a significant diplomatic success from Ireland's point of view. I commend both the Irish and UK diplomatic teams for almost striking a deal on the common travel area. I understand that there is a draft deal on the table which is ready to be inked. This deal will stand regardless of whether the EU-UK trade deal is agreed or not. That is a very positive development because the common travel area is of great importance to our students, our workers and any families that are split between the UK and Ireland. Those two developments are very positive.

Notwithstanding these positive developments, I have five concerns which I would like to articulate. The first relates to the utterances from London today in respect of whether the United Kingdom Internal Market Bill is to be resurrected and returned to the House of Commons next week. I urge the UK Government not to go down that road. I hope this is only a juvenile and

clumsy negotiating tactic. Legislation that specifically sets out to breach international law has no place in a democratic society. That draft legislation should be withdrawn.

I have raised my second concern with the Minister of State before. It relates to the ratification process. We are only 29 days out from a potential hard exit and we still do not have a lot of clarity on the ratification process. My concern is that there is not enough time left to ratify this deal from the perspective of the EU, of the UK or even of Ireland. Are we in Dublin going to debate a motion on any potential trade deal? Does it require further legislation? In any event, we are very tight for time. It may already be too late.

My third concern is quite similar to my second. I still believe we should be looking for an extension to the transition period, a grace period or a technical extension. Regardless of the formula of words used, this is something we should be looking for. I fully understand that the UK's stated position is that it does not want an extension in any shape or form, but we should bear in mind that 12 months ago it was the UK's stated position that it did not want any extension and that it was going to leave the EU on 31 December come hell or high water. I believe there is an opportunity to agree a grace period of a few weeks, perhaps to the end of January, to allow us to test our systems, to rehearse procedures at ports and airports and to make some final tweaks to our infrastructure and customs documentation. If that opportunity presents itself, we should seize it with both hands.

My fourth concern relates to the EU Brexit reserve fund - the €5 billion fund. In recent days we have heard that France seems to be keen to get its hand on as much as possible of the €5 billion fund. Ireland needs to be strong next week when we go to Brussels. No country in the European Union is more severely affected by Brexit than Ireland. The €5 billion fund is set aside to assist countries and sectors that are disproportionately affected. Ireland has a strong case and we should certainly be looking for the lion's share of the €5 billion to be assigned to the country and the sectors most impacted here.

We should always be mindful that there will be a future relationship beyond 1 January in whatever form it takes. Ireland should be open, diplomatically and from a trade perspective, to any developments in a year or two down the track. If we get a bare bones agreement in the coming days or weeks, we should still be prepared to revisit this and look at a more comprehensive agreement in a year or two from January 2021.

I wish Mr. Michel Barnier and the EU task force the best in the last days of the negotiations. To be clear, I very much look forward to engaging with my UK counterparts in whatever capacity that new relationship will become manifest post 1 January.

**Deputy Richard O'Donoghue:** This is only one example of an oversight. I was horrified but not surprised to see that on 24 November 2020 we had discovered, by chance, it seems, that there was a major export food problem with sausages and mince going to the UK. The current health certificate was only for frozen produce and had to be amended for fresh produce. I wish to remind the Minister of State that the UK is leaving on 1 January. Bord Bia dismissed this by saying the body had a plan. Have we got a plan?

Last week I spoke to the hauliers about their difficulty at the ports. Again, it was said that we have a plan. Thanks to the ferry companies, we have seen that Irish products are for a world-wide stage. They see the importance of having Ireland on these stages with the extra ferries being supplied.



Yet, it is still not enough. In 2019, UK exports to Ireland were worth £38.3 billion. Imports from Ireland were worth £24.4 billion. Some 37% of our food exports go to the UK. In total, €4.5 billion is the value of our food and drink exports to the UK and €4.5 billion goes to Europe on the land bridge.

Today, I call on the Taoiseach and the Minister of State to engage with the agencies like Bord Bia to make them accountable. We are only hearing about these restrictions at a late stage. Farming lobby groups like the IFA, Macra na Feirme and the ICMSA have come to me on many occasions expressing fear for their livelihoods and the future of their families in rural Ireland. There are 137,500 farms in Ireland and 75% of produce is mainly meat product. What exactly is going on in Ireland? A statement about the need to change export licences to be able to export to the UK sounds like last-minute talk. Are we ready for Brexit? I do not think so.

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** I am glad to get the opportunity to mention some important things. The first thing relates to fisheries. I appeal to the Minister of State not to leave our fishermen short. Their job is onerous and dangerous at the best of times. There are many in the Dingle Peninsula, Cahersiveen, Castletown Berehaven and all along the Kenmare Estuary. They depend a great deal on fishing. It is the one product that goes up through our village day and night. I am proud to see each load that passes up and glad to see it happening.

As Deputy O'Donoghue said, there is a problem and it has been highlighted. It is about meat-based products, including mincemeat and sausages. That must be sorted out. We must have adequate capacity for live exports and shipping. The Government seems to be saying that it is making progress, but I anticipate there will be queues and problems. These need to be sorted out.

There is supposed to be a problem with spuds and getting spuds from the UK. Let them keep their spuds if they do not want to sell them to us. We can plant our own spuds. Let them stuff Boris with the spuds they have and we will manage fine without their spuds. We are at the right time of the year. The Government should get out now and advertise this. It should tell farmers there is an opening for planting spuds. We are at the right time of the year. Perhaps the Government could assist them by providing seed potatoes or whatever. Now is the time to do it.

I have raised the most important thing in the House before, as has Deputy Michael Collins. We are asking for a bilateral arrangement to allow patients to seek cataract removal in the North of Ireland, where we have been doing this for more than three years. I call on the Government to go into deep discussions to ensure the bilateral arrangement will continue after 31 December. The Government must ensure we will be able to see after people and ensure they will not go blind in the early months of next year. There is only a short timeline between needing the cataract removed urgently and going blind. I appeal to the Minister of State because that is the most important thing in all the talks that needs to be sorted out.

**Deputy Marian Harkin:** I wish to focus mainly on two issues with regard to the upcoming European Council meeting: Brexit and Covid-19. Like many people have said, we are approaching make-or-break time on Brexit. Deadline after deadline has passed but a final deadline is looming. Mr. Barnier has been urged by many EU leaders not to rush into an unsatisfactory trade deal with the UK simply because the final deadline is looming. He has been warned not to fall into the Brexit negotiation trap laid by the UK. This trap is where agreement on other issues is reached and then fisheries is dealt with. The French European affairs minister has said that those in Downing Street were misguided if they believe running down the clock will work

to the advantage of the UK. He was clear when he said there can be no agreement unless there is an agreement that gives sustainable and wide-ranging access to British waters. He said our terms are known and they are not new.

We also need to play hardball when it comes to protecting our fisheries. The UK is well aware that the vast majority of its fish is exported to the EU. This includes something like 90% of cod, 93% of herring, 85% of mackerel, 80% of shellfish and over 50% of salmon. They are all exported to the EU. Landing fish is one thing but selling it is what delivers a profit. In that context, even though it may not reach the headlines, the EU has a strong hand.

The UK Prime Minister, Mr. Johnson, has got his Covid-19 regulations over the line. Perhaps this will give greater impetus towards finding an agreement on Brexit. I am keen to hear the Minister of State comment on that. Vast divergences still remain and it may be too much to bridge that gap. What is the view of the Minister of State on the prospect that if any deal is struck, it will be a narrow deal on goods only? What are the implications of that for Ireland?

Other speakers have spoken about the €5 billion fund. I know the Minister of State will do this but I wish to reiterate the point. We need to make the strongest possible case for Ireland to get its fair share of the cake because we will be the country most effected by Brexit. Earlier, the Taoiseach spoke about the need for contingency measures to be discussed because next week is critical. One of the consequences of a no-deal Brexit would be that trading between the UK and the EU would continue on WTO terms, which means tariffs on goods. What preparations are in place in respect of the agrifood sector? The food supply chain is a major issue for the whole country, but especially for the region which I represent, the north west, and also for the Border region. Indeed, the 2020 report from the European Commission, which underpins the country-specific recommendations, for Ireland specifically states that regional imbalance between the north and west region and other regions in Ireland is a serious problem and will impede overall national development. That is the situation now. Post-Brexit, however, that imbalance is very likely to be exacerbated and any Brexit strategy must take account of that specific issue.

Turning to Covid-19, I just listened to the 3 p.m. news headlines and Robin Swann spoke of vaccinations starting next week in Northern Ireland. What information does the Minister of State have regarding when we can expect to see vaccination rolled out across the country? Is he satisfied that we have the logistics, staff and capability sorted, so that when the vaccine comes on stream we will be able to immediately start an accessible and effective vaccination policy?

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Tá a lán ceisteanna ansin don Aire Stáit.

**Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs (Deputy Thomas Byrne):** Táim sásta ceisteanna a fhreagairt ach tá ráiteas agam. Tá mé sásta aon cheist a fhreagairt. Gabhaim buíochas as na ceisteanna a fuair mé ó na Teachtaí. Tá siad an-tábhachtach agus níl aon dabht ach go bhfuil an Bhreathimeacht, an coróinvíreas agus an rialú reachtach in ard na n-aigní anseo i Seomra na Dála.

The Taoiseach outlined the agenda of the European Council next week, which is a wide-ranging one, including discussions on Brexit, Covid-19, climate change and the multi-annual financial framework, MFF, and recovery package. Those have been the main issues raised by Deputies here, and I am happy to speak about them briefly. I also want to speak about other issues as well because it is important to have them on the record. I refer to the southern neighbourhood, relations with Turkey and the situation in the eastern Mediterranean, in particular.

I will address some of the issues which the Deputies raised, just to be absolutely clear. On Brexit, what is happening is that the EU negotiators are negotiating for the entirety of the Union. We have every confidence in those negotiators and we are in regular contact with the negotiating team. They know our priorities and the issue of fish is one of our top priorities. Deputies are right to say that. The problem here is not the Government and-or the negotiating team; the problem is Brexit. As Deputy Richmond said, there is no such thing as a good Brexit. The consequences of a no-deal Brexit for fishing would be utterly disastrous and worse than any agreement. In addition, the consequences of a no-deal Brexit for Britain in the context of fishing would be disastrous too, because it would not be able to fish its waters and its exports would be partially cut off. Britain's general trade would also be subject to major tariffs, which would have a devastating effect on all that country's industries, notably the sheep industry. It accounts for double the value of the fish industry, and 95% of production is exported to the EU.

I will contradict one thing Deputy O'Donoghue said. He seems to think that we found out on 24 November about an issue with processed beef. No, *The Daily Mail* found out about that issue on 24 November and published an article about it, which is perhaps when Deputy O'Donoghue found out. This is, however, an issue which has been widely flagged and one on which we are trying to seek resolution. It is an issue caused by Brexit, however. It is not the case that we want to ban sausages, but the EU has high standards of consumer protection and we want to ensure that our consumers are protected. That is why we have the rule regarding not allowing sausages or other prepared meats in from third countries. This is a difficulty. Any trade in either direction being removed is bad for business, as Deputy Cahill has often said to me. There is no doubt about that.

Brexit is bad for business but it is happening and our negotiators are working hard to ensure we get the best possible outcome to these negotiations. It is not fair if I do a running commentary on it, and I am not going to do that except to say that, by and large, I agree with almost everything said by colleagues regarding Brexit. All of us in this Dáil are on the one page and it is very welcome. All of us in the European Union are also on the one page and that gives us, in Ireland and the European Union, a strength and a resolve that is very welcome and to our benefit.

The issue of the rule of law was mentioned. This is an issue for the Ceann Comhairle. The Council of Ministers and the European Commission have suggested that national parliaments have discussions on the rule of law. I suggested to the Cathaoirleach of the Seanad this morning that we would do that. It is for the Dáil and the Business Committee to decide how business here is ordered, and not for me, but I would certainly welcome a discussion on the rule of law within the European Union. It is happening at European level, and Deputy Cian O'Callaghan and others have been very vocal about it. We need to be vocal as a country and I welcome that. We must be very tough in respect of the rule of law, because it is essential we stick to the values we profess.

On vaccines, I agreed with almost everything Deputy Boyd Barrett said. He hit out at the companies, unnecessarily, I think, but he is on the same page as I am on regarding the equity of access. Deputy O'Rourke mentioned that as well. We are part of the COVAX arrangement. When I was speaking to the Association of South East Asian Nations, ASEAN, summit yesterday, I stated that this is Ireland's policy. It is no good, as I saw stated in a newspaper article, if a 20-year old healthy person gets the vaccine here but a nurse in Africa does not get it. There is no doubt that the Government is of that view. The Government obviously has responsibilities here and it will be carrying them out. Deputy Harkin asked when will the vaccine be distrib-

uted, but that is a matter for the Department of Health.

The European Medicines Agency, EMA, is still checking the scientific research and the clinical trials with a view to having these various vaccines approved before the end of the year, I hope. It is not going to rush into that immediately, however, and I think that people will be happy that full and proper testing of the vaccines is taking place. No doubt the Taoiseach and the Minister for Health will be giving ongoing updates. We are, however, working hard at European Union level, including yesterday at the General Affairs Council, GAC, on the issue of Covid-19 co-ordination. It is another example of the European Union coming together and being of benefit and of greater value to the citizens of the Union. We would have been in a much different place were it not for the fact that the European Union is working together on Covid-19.

Turning to the issue of security and counterterrorism, at their videoconference on 19 November, EU leaders expressed solidarity with France and Austria, as did I, in light of the shocking terrorist attacks which took place recently in those countries. They agreed that a discussion on terrorism, and on measures to counter terrorism, should be on the agenda of the next week's European Council. Work on this issue is also taking place in other Council configurations, including the Justice and Home Affairs, JHA, Council. Today, EU justice ministers are focusing on hate crime. The European Commission is expected to publish proposals for an EU agenda on counterterrorism on 9 December.

Ireland supports a comprehensive response to international terrorism, grounded in full compliance with international law and human rights. We have been broadly supportive of the counterterrorism measures discussed to date. Ensuring respect for human rights and for the rule of law in the development of any counterterrorism policy will continue to inform our approach ahead of the discussion at the meeting of the European Council next week.

We will also be discussing the issue of our southern neighbourhood. The EU and its southern neighbourhood are deeply connected by economic, cultural and people-to-people ties. The region currently faces some significant challenges, including conflict in Libya and Syria. What results from those conflicts affects us all. There is also a severe economic crisis in Lebanon. These events have a direct impact on the EU. As with the rest of the world, of course, the EU's southern neighbourhood is also suffering the health and economic consequences of Covid-19. We are committed, therefore, to assisting the southern neighbourhood through our neighbourhood policy, which will be bolstered by the launch of the new neighbourhood, development and international co-operation instrument, NDICI, under the new MFF. The aim of the NDICI is to bring greater coherence to EU co-operation.

Moving on to the issues of Turkey and the eastern Mediterranean, at the European Council in December, leaders, including the Taoiseach, will return to discuss EU relations with Turkey and the situation in the eastern Mediterranean, as agreed in October. Since then, statements made by President Erdogan of Turkey during his visit to Northern Cyprus last month, advocating the permanent division of the island, have only added to the tensions in the region. The only viable solution for Cyprus remains reunification based on a bi-zonal and bi-communal federation with political equality, on the basis of relevant UN Security Council resolutions. Similarly, maritime disputes in the eastern Mediterranean Sea must be addressed through dialogue and negotiation.

It is disappointing that Turkey has not taken advantage of the European Council's offer of a positive EU-Turkey political agenda. I note the humanitarian help that some EU member states gave to Turkey during recent difficulties.

We continue to hope that these issues can be resolved through dialogue. If Turkish behaviour does not change, however, the European Council will have to consider further restrictive measures. We in Ireland show our full solidarity with Cyprus and Greece, and we thank them for their extraordinary solidarity, as also shown by all member states, during the Brexit process.

At the meeting next week, leaders may also discuss other current external relations issues. Preparations for the meeting are ongoing and will be finalised by the General Affairs Council on 8 December, which I will attend virtually. Yesterday, I participated in an informal meeting of European affairs ministers, also by videoconference. This meeting included a discussion on our response to Covid. These discussions are very useful to see the work the European Commission is doing to co-ordinate our efforts and to see what other member states are doing in their Covid response. This is all new to governments and administrations all over the European Union. Ireland is doing quite well, and while we are learning lessons from other countries, they too are following some of the approaches we have taken.

It was very important that yesterday's meeting also included a discussion with young leaders from across Europe on the Conference on the Future of Europe, which Deputy Haughey mentioned. We also discussed climate action, EU democracy and digital issues.

The Taoiseach will report to the House in the week following the European Council. We sincerely hope and expect that there will be an agreement on Brexit by then in everybody's interests: in Ireland's interests, in Britain's interests and in the European interests. If it does not happen by 31 December, to answer Deputy Berry's point, there is no mechanism currently for either side to extend the process. This is it. I strongly urge people to look at the *gov.ie* website where there is an extraordinary range of information on Brexit, including points that have been there for a long time, which Deputy O'Donoghue has incorrectly said were discovered on 24 November. The information is there and we all have a responsibility to play our part: Government to impart the information, which we have done, and businesses and those affected to absorb the information and use it. Brexit means change, whether there is a deal or no deal. This is the message we need to hammer home.

### **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 Sean Sherlock, Pat Buckley and Mick Barry - to discuss the retention of service levels at SouthDoc in Cork including Fermoy and Mitchelstown and the north side of Cork city; (2) Deputies Mattie McGrath, Michael Healy-Rae, Seán Canney, Peter Fitzpatrick, Noel Grealish, Carol Nolan, Richard O'Donoghue and Peadar Tóibín - to discuss concerns about provision of late-term abortions as outlined in a recent study from UCC; (3) Deputy Mark Ward - to discuss the increase in reports of domestic, sexual and gender based violence; (4) Deputy Brendan Griffin - to discuss circumstances in a Kerry nursing home (details supplied) where eight Covid deaths have now occurred; (5) Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire - to discuss the sites of former mother and baby homes and consultation with survivors on any potential future use; (6) Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan - to discuss a review of the current criteria for school meals; (7) Deputy Chris Andrews - to discuss an urgent date for scoliosis surgery in light of Government commitments on the issue (details supplied); (8) Deputies Jim O'Callaghan and Matt Carthy - the



failure of the British Government to establish a public inquiry into the murder of Belfast solicitor Pat Finucane; (9) Deputy Jennifer Whitmore - to discuss changes by the Archdiocese of Dublin to the sibling-first school admissions policy and the impact on families in Wicklow; (10) Deputy Neale Richmond - to discuss plans for the roll-out of a Covid-19 vaccine in Ireland; (11) Deputy Gary Gannon - to discuss the issue of food poverty among school-aged children; (12) Deputy Alan Farrell - to discuss the recent spike in air pollution in Dublin which breached WHO guidelines; (13) Deputy Dessie Ellis - to discuss concern that insurance companies are refusing mortgage protection cover for underlying conditions during the Covid-19 pandemic; (14) Deputy Louise O'Reilly - to discuss the difficulties facing the Topman-Arcadia group; (15) Deputy Kieran O'Donnell - to ask the Minister for Transport for an up-to-date progress report on the Coonagh to Knockalisheen distributor road scheme in Limerick; (16) Deputy Joan Collins - to discuss the increase in the number of homeless families and single adults and deaths among those sleeping rough; (17) Deputy Pearse Doherty - to discuss waiting times of operations for children suffering from spina bifida; (18) Deputy Michael Ring - to discuss the relocation of a school in County Mayo (details supplied); (19) Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú - to discuss Louth-Meath mental health services, and the provision made for all aspects of care during the Covid-19 pandemic; (20) Deputy Jackie Cahill - to discuss Central Bank regulations preventing credit unions from holding virtual annual general meetings before the end of the year; (21) Deputy Martin Browne - to discuss enabling digs on land around Sean Ross Abbey, given concerns that unmarked graves may remain at the site; (22) Deputy Fergus O'Dowd - to discuss the provision of a waiver or credit note to the nursing profession in regard to their registration fees with the Nursing and Midwifery Board of Ireland; and (23) Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin - the need for the Minister for Education to address immediately the scarcity of second level places in north Dublin owing to schools reducing their intake to enable social distancing.

The matters raised by Deputies Sean Sherlock, Pat Buckley and Mick Barry; Chris Andrews; Kieran O'Donnell; and Jackie Cahill have been selected for discussion.

*Sitting suspended at 3.44 p.m. and resumed at 4.40 p.m.*

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

### **General Practitioner Services**

**Deputy Sean Sherlock:** I first wish to express my concern at reports that the out-of-hours GP services in the Fermoy and Mitchelstown area will cease shortly. We are being told that a stricture is being put on that service on the basis that if a GP is over the age of 60 or is pregnant, the service may no longer be sustainable. This is very worrying news and if taxpayers' money is being used to fund the SouthDoc service, the matter must be addressed in a way that ensures absolute transparency about the decision-making process. We do not want to see a loss of out-of-hours services in the north Cork area.

Second, the issue of section 39 organisations, which includes SouthDoc, worries us greatly. A strike will be held on Tuesday, 15 December and we express solidarity with the workers in that regard. We want to ensure those workers are paid and get their due rewards but we also

want to ensure that we do not lose services in this area.

**Deputy Pat Buckley:** I also stand in solidarity with the section 39 organisations. We cannot afford to lose SouthDoc services in Fermoy and Mitchelstown. We have discussed the lack of rural transport many times in this House. If we lose these services, people will have to go to Mallow, Cork city or all the way to Midleton and we do not have very much public transport. It is impossible for those without public transport or private cars.

I also wish to raise how the HSE and the board have worked on the AGM. My correspondents said a text message about the AGM was received on 17 September. They had been advised by email on 10 September that it was taking place. No messages were received about motions and no ballot papers were received on the vote on the motions. There has been no explanation whatever to those working in SouthDoc on what has happened. As the previous Deputy noted, the conditions coming from the HSE are that anyone over 60 years or pregnant may not participate in these services. This is public money. It is a vital service being provided by the people who work in the system and want to provide the service but they seem to be stonewalled, blanked and excluded on certain issues. We cannot allow this to happen.

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** I thank the Deputies for raising this important issue, which I am taking on behalf of the Minister for Health, Deputy Stephen Donnelly. The Government is aware of the workforce issues facing general practice in Ireland and that Covid-19 has made accessing GP and GP out-of-hours services more difficult. I acknowledge the continued dedication of GPs towards their patients during this unprecedented time.

I can assure the Deputies that efforts continue to develop and maintain GP capacity throughout the country and that progress is being made. As Deputies noted, GP out-of-hours services for Cork and Kerry are provided by SouthDoc, a private organisation with more than 20 health centres located across the two counties. In March, the board of directors of SouthDoc informed the HSE of their decision to implement plans to deal with the serious challenges being posed by the progression of Covid-19. The measures, which became operational on 14 March 2020, were put in place to protect the patients and staff in the out-of-hours setting.

In accordance with public health guidance, patient in-person contact with GPs surgeries and out-of-hours services has been curtailed as much as possible to help prevent the spread of the virus. Medical advice is provided over the phone where appropriate, and only patients who are clinically assessed as requiring a face-to-face consultation with a doctor are referred for an appointment.

Further to this, the board of directors of SouthDoc made the decision to close a number of health centres. In recognition of the impact of Covid-19 on general practice and to ensure that GPs continue to provide essential services, a package of measures to support general practice was introduced from mid-March. Likewise, a grant payment for GP out-of-hours service providers was also introduced from March, to support the continued provision of out-of-hours services.

The HSE has informed me that in the period following the closure of certain service locations, the board of directors and medical directors of SouthDoc have regularly reviewed their contingency service plans, and the closed health centres have been reopened on a phased basis. All centres in Cork city and county, with the exception of Blackpool for north Cork city, have

now reopened. The centre in Fermoy was reopened on 10 June.

The HSE is in continued discussions with SouthDoc on how its service will be delivered in the weeks and months ahead and has requested that the reopening of the Blackpool centre be prioritised. SouthDoc has assured the HSE that every possible effort has been made and will continue to be made to avoid or minimise any impact on patients, and has informed the HSE that plans are being prepared for the reinstatement of services at the Blackpool centre, the only centre that remains closed.

There are no plans at present to change the provision of SouthDoc out-of-hours services in Fermoy and Mitchelstown. Any changes to the current service provision in any treatment centre would be subject to discussion with and approval by the HSE Cork-Kerry community healthcare chief officer.

**Deputy Sean Sherlock:** I welcome the response insofar as the Minister of State has stated on the Dáil record that, “There are no plans at present to change the provision of SouthDoc out-of-hours services in Fermoy and Mitchelstown.” I welcome the fact that any service provision changes would have to be subject to discussion. It seems the Minister of State’s response acknowledges that this is a private organisation.

The key point is that there must be transparency about any decision-making procedures where they relate to the diminution of services for a massive geographical area from the Blackwater valley, the Kerry border over to the Waterford border, covering the towns of Mitchelstown and Fermoy and any points in between. GPs have told me this is a proposal to cut off a centre by stealth by imposing guidelines about GPs who may be pregnant or over 60 years. Doing that automatically removes one-third of the capacity of the centre in Fermoy. That is unconscionable and something we must push back against. I welcome the Minister of State’s response, but we are holding the Government’s feet to the fire on this because it is important that we do not lose the services. I take the Minister of State to be a decent and honourable person and take her at her word, but we will continue to monitor this situation and to support section 39 employees because we want to ensure that we do not lose our GP out-of-hours services, notwithstanding the reduction in capacity.

**Deputy Pat Buckley:** I also welcome the Minister of State’s response. It referred to out-of-hours services and concluded by saying, “Any changes to the current service provision in any treatment centre would be subject to discussion with and approval by the HSE Cork-Kerry community healthcare chief officer.” That is what I was trying to say - that the communication between the HSE and GPs in SouthDoc does not seem to be there. One person wrote to me to say that if, for example, the other out-of-hours services providers and the HSE adopted such ludicrous measures, the whole system would collapse, but luckily for the people and patients of County Cork, it is only SouthDoc that seems to be doing so.

I welcome the Minister of State telling us that the system will remain open, but the left hand is not seeing what the right hand is doing. The HSE is saying it is implementing things and will cut one-third of the services. It gives the case for why it is not viable. It has a hugely detrimental effect on the whole north Cork area which will spill out to Midleton or to Cork University Hospital or to Mallow. It is not feasible. I will give the Minister of State the information I have and appeal to her to ask the HSE precisely what has happened, where is the breakdown with the board members, and what happened with the board meeting. Why were the GPs not consulted? It is worst for the patients in the area who need the service. They are in fear of what

might happen and all they want is clarity that the service will be protected well into the future. We all know that rural areas are losing GPs all the time. It must be sorted out once and for all.

**Deputy Mary Butler:** I thank both Deputies again for raising this really important issue. I know how important this service is in any community, and out-of-hours is especially important. The Government remains committed to ensuring that patients throughout the country continue to have access to GP services. Both Deputies asked why certain GPs were being excluded from the SouthDoc rota. The HSE is aware of that, including the exclusion of more elderly GPs. I think Deputy Buckley also mentioned a pregnant GP. It is understood that this is an attempt to maintain the health of staff more at-risk from Covid-19-----

**Deputy Sean Sherlock:** I ask for a bit of latitude. I know of no Irish College of General Practitioners guidelines on the exclusion of GPs from delivering front-line healthcare on the basis of being over the age of 60 years or pregnant. I would caution the Minister of State not to use that line with us, please. I would also caution against the use of the word elderly in characterising certain GPs.

**Deputy Mary Butler:** As Minister of State with responsibility for older people, I would never offend any of our older people. If the Deputy gives me a chance to finish, he might not find it necessary to interrupt me.

*5 o'clock*

It is understood that this is an attempt to maintain the health of staff who are more at risk of Covid-19. However, as a private organisation, the rostering of GPs is entirely an operational matter for SouthDoc. Neither I nor the HSE has any role in this regard. I reiterate that the HSE has advised that there are no plans to change the provision of SouthDoc out-of-hours services in Fermoy and Mitchelstown.

## **Hospital Procedures**

**Deputy Chris Andrews:** Scoliosis patients have a certain window in which they can be treated before treatment becomes too physically, mentally and emotionally distressing. Scoliosis is a painful and disabling condition that impacts the child and the family. Sophie Redmond is 11 years old and has scoliosis. She also has issues with her knee ligaments. I was lucky enough to meet Sophie yesterday, along with her little brother, Tyler, her father, Eric, and her mother, Sam. Sophie is like a little unicorn, bringing smiles and colour wherever she goes. Recovery from any operation to straighten the spine will require walking. However, because of Sophie's knee ligament issue she will need to have a knee operation first, which will take time to recover from. It is vital that Sophie's knees are operated on so that she will be ready for the time-sensitive scoliosis operation.

Sophie cannot cross the street unattended because of the fear that her knees might buckle, causing her to fall in the middle of the road. As a result of health system failures her spine is pressing into her lungs and pelvis. She has difficulty breathing as a result. Sophie is an 11 year old in a rapid growth phase. How bad will the Government let Sophie get? Will she be permanently physically and mentally damaged? No one can say that Sophie's condition is not impacting negatively on her mental health. Children with scoliosis cannot thrive while they are in discomfort and pain. This is a time when they are young and developing and should be

thriving. An 11 year old should be physically active and enjoying the outdoors. Sophie does not want to do physical exercise because of her condition and she increasingly lacks confidence. Her confidence is taking a beating and she is constantly afraid of hurting herself.

Sophie is living in fear. She and her family are prisoners of the public health system which has failed her. The surgeries Sophie requires must be carried out in a children's hospital, as she needs specialised paediatric equipment and admittance to a children's intensive care unit, ICU. Sophie will be left crippled. If this happens, it will be on the heads of this Government and this Minister. Covid-19 cannot be used as an excuse. The Minister for Health clearly stated that he was ashamed of the waiting list for scoliosis patients. In 2018, the then Minister for Health said that no child would be on a scoliosis waiting list for more than four months.

Is the Minister of State ashamed that children like Sophie and other scoliosis patients have to wait so long for their surgery? Sophie is not a unique case. There are so many children like her waiting on scoliosis surgery. Care cannot wait and scoliosis waiting lists are unacceptable. Will the Minister of State clearly say what she will do to ensure that scoliosis sufferers like Sophie have the treatment they urgently need?

**Deputy Mary Butler:** I would like to thank Deputy Andrews for raising this issue and for giving me the opportunity to provide the House with an update on scoliosis services for children on behalf of the Minister for Health, Deputy Stephen Donnelly.

I sincerely regret that children can experience a long waiting time for treatment for scoliosis and I am conscious of the burden this places on them and their families. This Government's priority is to improve waiting times for all patients accessing hospital treatment across all specialties, including orthopaedics. In response to the Covid-19 pandemic, Children's Health Ireland, CHI, had to take measures to defer most scheduled care activity between March and May of this year. This decision was in line with the advice issued by the National Public Health Emergency Team, NPHET, in accordance with the advice of the World Health Organization. Since June, CHI has continued to re-establish services, following HSE clinical guidelines and protocols to ensure services are provided in a safe, clinically aligned and prioritised way. CHI has advised my Department that spinal surgery continues to be identified as a service priority.

I note that infection prevention and control requirements such as social distancing of 2 m have a material impact on the physical space available for the delivery of all hospital services, including scoliosis procedures. This has had a significant impact on both available capacity and operational activity levels. Despite these challenges, by the end of October CHI had carried out 255 scoliosis procedures, 123 of which were spinal fusions and 132 of which were other spinal procedures. While this is 20% behind activity levels for the same period last year, CHI is committed to improving activity levels and is examining innovative methods to improve access to all specialties, including orthopaedics. For example, CHI is working with the Cappagh National Orthopaedic Hospital to transfer additional patients who meet the clinical criteria for treatment at Cappagh. CHI is also working with the National Treatment Purchase Fund, NTPF, to source additional theatre space to facilitate both scoliosis and wider orthopaedic demands.

In relation to the individual case referred to by the Deputy, section 6 of the Health Service Executive (Governance) Act 2013 bars the Minister for Health from directing the HSE to provide a treatment or a personal service to any individual or to confer eligibility on any individual. Officials in my Department remain in regular contact with CHI regarding scoliosis services. CHI has advised that all patients with a diagnosis of scoliosis require a pre-operative work-up



prior to spinal surgery, including multiple diagnostic investigations and review by a multidisciplinary team. The plan of care implemented for each patient is tailored to best meet the patient's clinical requirements.

I am aware that parliamentary questions and public representations have been made to the Minister and the Department in respect of the specific patient referred to by the Deputy. CHI has advised my Department that the hospital is in ongoing contact with the family of the patient in relation to their surgery.

**Deputy Chris Andrews:** I thank the Minister of State for her response. Unfortunately I did not hear any notes of hope for scoliosis patients or for Sophie. She is representative of so many children with scoliosis and the frustration that they and their families feel. The State is robbing them of their childhood because of inefficiencies in the health system. That is not something we as a Parliament should be standing over.

Like many other children, Sophie suffers from 22q11.2 deletion syndrome. This is a disorder caused when a small part of chromosome 22 is missing. This deletion results in the poor development of several body systems. The effects on every child are different. This can cause mental health issues for one child and chest or heart issues for another. Many children can have this syndrome without even knowing they have it. This adds to the problem. Many children with scoliosis also suffer from 22q11.2 deletion syndrome. It complicates their condition and adds to the urgency of treating them. It is not just spinal surgery they need; very often they require a whole suite of surgeries, operations and treatments. Like I said at the start, I just feel that the Minister and the Department are not putting in the required resources to ensure that children with scoliosis and children such as Sophie get the treatment they need so urgently.

**Deputy Mary Butler:** I am acutely aware of the distress and inconvenience caused to patients and their families when urgent care is delayed and I thank the Deputy for raising the case of Sophie and the fact that she is waiting for her scoliosis operation. Improving waiting times for hospital appointments and procedures remains a key commitment of the Government. The long-term strategy to develop sustainable scoliosis services remains a priority for the Minister, Deputy Donnelly, and his Department. His officials continue to work closely with Children's Health Ireland and the wider HSE to improve access to treatment for children with scoliosis.

It is acknowledged, however, that the challenges faced by the health system in 2020 are unlike anything we have ever faced before. I am very aware of the impact that Covid-19 has had on our health service and the delivery of scoliosis services. Children's Health Ireland's commitment to prioritise spinal surgery and to find new ways to deliver care exemplifies the work undertaken by the HSE to provide care in a challenging Covid-19 environment.

Officials from my Department continue to engage on an ongoing basis with representatives of CHI and HSE officials to monitor scoliosis services, waiting lists and activity levels. I welcome the work undertaken to date by Children's Health Ireland to improve access to spinal surgery.

I reiterate that the Minister is aware of the parliamentary questions he has been asked and the public representations that have been made to him and his Department in respect of the specific patient referred to by the Deputy. Children's Health Ireland has advised the Department that the hospital is in ongoing contact with the family of the patient regarding the surgery. I hope for Sophie's sake that it happens very soon.

*Dáil Éireann*  
**Road Projects**

**Deputy Kieran O'Donnell:** I should not be here today. I am looking for an update on a project, namely the Coonagh-Knockalisheen distributor road, which would effectively take out the cul-de-sac that Moyross currently is. In 2007 the then Government and the Cabinet committee on social inclusion, as part of a regeneration project, produced a report which became known as the Fitzgerald report. One of its key recommendations was to consider improving accessibility into Moyross. The report specifically identified that the Coonagh-Knockalisheen distributor road should be progressed as a matter of urgency. The people of Moyross are still waiting 13 years later. As of this moment Limerick City and County Council has gone through the tender process and is about to award a contract, but the document is on the Minister's desk for approval. I have discussed this with the Minister at length over recent weeks. I feel we have committed to the project as a Government under the national development plan and the Fitzgerald report.

The project stands on its own merits on a number of levels. It is a €58 million project. To date, €17 million of taxpayers' money has been spent on the project - wisely, in my view, but nevertheless a third of the money has been spent. The breakdown is €9.47 million on advance work contracts, €1.4 million on other works and archaeology, €3.7 million on land and property and €2.7 million on planning and design. If one looks from Coonagh Cross over towards Moyross and at the back of Caherdavin, one will see the works. The physical works have already started on the road. Furthermore, €5 million has already been allocated to the project this year which they have not been able to use. This is about improving access. A road from Coonagh to Knockalisheen would stand on its own merits and take Moyross away from being a cul-de-sac for social, economic and accessibility reasons.

Furthermore, there is a rail network running alongside Moyross which would provide the added advantage of opening that up to provide a railway station. All the lands around it have been procured, so a proper park-and-ride facility could be provided. It would also ensure that the bus network could be made more efficient. At present a bus goes into Moyross, into Pinview Gardens, which is a cul-de-sac, meaning it has to turn back. A separate bus goes into Ballynanty. That should be a streamlined service from Coonagh to Knockalisheen, down the Knockalisheen Road and out by Hassett's Cross. Furthermore, cycling and walking facilities could be provided all along the link, which would aid healthy living.

Everyone in Limerick is in favour of this project: Limerick Chamber, the council, civic leaders and, most particularly, the people of Moyross, on the north side of the city. I would like to hear an update on the project. We need to get it fully delivered. It is a stand-alone project. This is about ensuring we fulfil the commitment given to the people of Moyross under the regeneration programme to ensure that Moyross is no longer a cul-de-sac. The road would provide many other socio-economic and accessibility-related advantages to the area. I hope the news today will be that the Minister will now sign off on the proposal to allow the contractors to conclude this stand-alone project, which is both a socio-economic and an accessibility project for the people of Moyross. I met the Moyross Residents Forum with my fellow Oireachtas Members on Monday night. They cannot understand what the delay is here. They have been waiting for this project since 2007. We need to see it delivered now.

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** I join Deputy O'Donnell in committing absolutely to giving the very best transport system possible to the people of Moyross and, more

widely, the people of Limerick.

The improvement and maintenance of local and regional roads is the statutory responsibility of the relevant local authority in accordance with the provisions of section 13 of the Roads Act 1993. State grants, where applicable, are intended to supplement the funding allocated to the maintenance and improvement of roads by local authorities from their own resources.

The national development plan does provide for the gradual build up in funding for the road network but funding is not yet at the level needed for the adequate maintenance and renewal of regional and local roads. For this reason the primary focus for capital investment continues to be the maintenance and renewal of the network with some limited investment in road improvement schemes. In this context 12 regional and local road improvement schemes were identified for development, subject to necessary approvals, in the NDP, and the construction of the Coonagh-Knockalisheen distributor road is one of those schemes.

I am aware that the origins of this scheme lie, as the Deputy said, in the Limerick regeneration programme. The distributor road was one of a range of measures proposed in a report prepared in 2007 by John Fitzgerald to address social exclusion and deprivation in the Moyross area. The lack of accessibility, including the lack of pedestrian and cycling access, in the Moyross area was seen as a barrier to economic development and as contributing to social exclusion. The masterplan developed subsequently by the Limerick Regeneration Board in 2008 set out detailed action plans for the regeneration of disadvantaged areas in Limerick, including Moyross, with improved transport and access seen as important tools in improving socio-economic conditions. The aim was to attract mixed-use development to the area to promote local employment and services and provide public transport services together with high quality infrastructure for pedestrians and cyclists.

While my Department agreed to support the project some ten years ago, the funding cut-backs associated with the post-2008 recession delayed implementation of the scheme. This meant that while significant advance works were carried in the period 2017 to 2019, the main scheme is only now getting to construction decision stage. Under the public spending code, capital projects are subject to review and approval at a number of stages. As required under the project appraisal procedures, Limerick City and County Council has submitted a recommendation on the award of a contract for the construction of the scheme. I am considering the project carefully at present and plan to visit Limerick shortly, probably early in the new year, to walk the route and engage directly with stakeholders. I will then make a decision on the council's contract award recommendation.

The other point the Deputy mentioned is a vital one in terms of improving the transport system for the people of Moyross and the wider Limerick area. As the Deputy stated, a rail line does go through the area, namely, the Limerick-Ennis-Galway rail line. The reason for my review and the consideration of this project in the wider context is that I believe it may be possible for us to put forward a truly radical proposal for the whole of Limerick city, including the construction of a public transport system on existing rail lines in Limerick which connect the city in a range of ways, with the introduction of a number of stations which would completely transform and lift the city into the future. We are in the middle of a consultation on the Limerick metropolitan area transport strategy and I believe it is absolutely appropriate for me, as Minister, to consider such radical proposals in favour of new public transport systems on existing rail lines which could, and to my mind should, include the provision of a new rail station and a regular commuter service for the people of Moyross. In that context, it is good transport

planning and policy and housing and development policy to consider what implications such a radical change to the whole transport infrastructure in Limerick, and particularly the area of Moyross, would have in terms of what we do in all transport projects in the area.

**Deputy Kieran O'Donnell:** I thank the Minister for his reply but I must take issue with it. He referred to delay of the project. There is €5 million allocated to the project for this year. There is no issue with funding here. This is an issue of sign-off from the Minister to allow this road project to go ahead. He stated it is now getting to construction decision stage. If he walks the route, he will see construction has already taken place from Coonagh Cross to the back of the shopping centre and that major capital works have already taken place to raise the level of the road in the area so that the road can go ahead.

Irish Rail already has an application in to the National Transport Authority and the Department of Transport to provide a rail station in Moyross. I fully agree with the Minister about rolling out rail services, but this road project and the provision of a rail link are not mutually exclusive. In fact, they are complementary. If this road is not put in, it will be impossible to have a proper functioning rail service in terms of being able to access it.

Is the Minister suddenly going to allow Moyross to continue to be a cul-de-sac? One cannot drive into Moyross from the top end. For me, this project stands on its own merits. It is in the national development plan. It was committed to under the Fitzgerald report and by successive Governments. The Minister has been a member of some of those Governments. This project is about honouring our commitment and promise to the people of Moyross and the north side of the city. My view is that it is very simple. This project stands on its own. It has nothing to do with a proper rail network, which I fully accept is needed. In fact, this project will ensure that we can advance a proper rail network in the city and have a proper functioning train situation in Moyross, along with a park and ride system, to serve the people of Moyross but, equally, they should be able to access the top end of Moyross rather than it being a cul-de-sac. It is probably the biggest and longest cul-de-sac in Ireland and that is unacceptable. I hope the Minister commits today to look at the issue and agree to sign off on it and allow the project to proceed. It is not about funding; it is about approval from the Minister. I look forward to working with him overall on rail projects in Limerick city but he should not confuse the matter. These projects are not mutually exclusive. The Coonagh to Knockalisheen road project needs to get the go-ahead now.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** I absolutely commit to working with the Deputy. Moyross cannot and will not be a cul-de-sac. We have to give its residents a world-class quality transport system that lifts the area and the whole of Limerick into the future. The Deputy stated that Irish Rail has submitted an application for a rail station in Moyross but in reality there was no such plan included in the first draft of the Limerick metropolitan area strategy for this suburban rail system for Limerick. I believe it has real merit. It is not just in the interests of the people of Moyross. Much of the advantage of this for Limerick is that there is existing rail system infrastructure, with numerous lines into the city which are under-utilised and which could transform the way the city works.

What I am trying to do as Minister for Transport, with the Government, is to see whether we can promote this new vision for how the whole of Limerick works. In particular, I believe it would have significant benefits for the people of Moyross as well as the people of Shannon. In the review of supports for Shannon Airport we committed to provide a suburban rail service from Shannon, through Moyross and into the centre of Limerick and then look to do something

similar on the Foynes, Ballybrophy and Limerick Junction lines. I believe that when that works together as a whole it would completely change and improve the transport network for Limerick. It would serve the people of Moyross best if we were able to get agreement on that. I believe we may be able to do so in the very near future and I seek the Deputy's support in that regard. That means we have to get it right in Moyross. One has to consider what exactly that would imply in terms of how we then address the opening up of Moyross and the ending of its current cul-de-sac nature. It is good transport planning to get this right as an integrated whole.

As the Deputy stated, one project does not take from the other. However, one has to consider them together and that is what I am committing to do, along with the people in the community, the local councils and civic actors. Let us not miss this opportunity to set a future for transport in Limerick which is sustainable, social, economically beneficial and lifts the city. It would help to prevent development being vested in Dublin. Rather, development would start to be spread out in line with the national planning framework, particularly and most especially with the installation of the very best infrastructure in those areas that have been most left behind. I believe that would best serve the people of Moyross and that regeneration project which, as the Deputy stated, has been in train for 15 or 17 years. We need to get it absolutely right by putting the best transport infrastructure in place and that is what I hope to do.

**Deputy Kieran O'Donnell:** What about the-----

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor):** Sorry, Deputy, we are moving on to the next matter.

**Deputy Kieran O'Donnell:** This is about opening up. The projects are not mutually exclusive. Time is being lost on this project. I hope the Minister will consider it for funding straight away.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor):** I am sure the Deputy will meet the Minister at a later stage to discuss the matter further. I know how important it is. I thank the Deputy and the Minister.

## **Credit Unions**

**Deputy Jackie Cahill:** I thank the Minister of State, Deputy Fleming, for taking this Topical Issue. I received a reply from him in the past hour. This week, my office has been inundated with phone calls regarding credit unions and the regulations governing them. Several credit unions across the country need to hold annual general meetings in order to pay out dividends and interest rebates to their members. The members of those credit unions have included the payments in their Christmas budgets. They know that credit unions charge a fractionally higher interest rate but that at the end of the year there will be a rebate. That rebate is very important to the members.

Clonmel Credit Union in my constituency of Tipperary is one such institution. It has a large membership and is a very strong credit union. Councillors Siobhán Ambrose and Micheál Anglim brought this issue to my attention this week. Clonmel Credit Union has performed exceptionally well even in this difficult year. It is in a position to pay out some €1.8 million in dividends and tax rebates to its members. That is a sizeable sum of money, particularly at the time of year when families and individuals need it most. It has been an exceptionally challeng-



ing year. Members were relying on this money to pay bills, buy grocery shopping for Christmas and cover the other additional costs of Christmas. The credit union traditionally pays out the money in the first week of December. As a result of certain regulations and rules preventing credit unions from holding virtual AGMs, this much-needed payout is being prevented. The credit union needs to approve these dividends and interest rebates at the AGM or they cannot go ahead. I am aware that other organisations, including a farming organisation with 20,000 members, are holding their AGMs on Zoom. It is hard to understand why there are not regulations in place to enable credit unions to hold a virtual AGM.

I wrote to the Minister of State about this issue yesterday and, in fairness, I have received a reply from him. I ask that he and his Department intervene to ensure, as quickly as possible, that regulations are amended to allow virtual AGMs for credit unions to go ahead. We knew that the level 5 Covid restrictions would cause issues in this regard. I see from his reply that the Minister of State is working on the issue. Is there any way, in the three weeks before Christmas, to give an amnesty to credit unions to allow them to hold their AGMs? The amending legislation has gone through the Seanad and there is a very short timeframe to get it passed in this House. Getting this money in January or February will not have the same beneficial effect for credit union members. Traditionally, they knew this cheque would be coming through the letter boxes after the first weekend in December and they could use it to cater for Santa Claus or whatever else. Members knew the money was coming. I have had numerous telephone calls from people expressing huge disappointment that it will not be coming this year.

This issue will affect members of other credit unions. In the case of Thurles credit union, for example, its AGM is also delayed. It does not have the same steadfast tradition as Clonmel in this regard but it would normally pay a dividend to members. Clonmel has a tradition down through the years, as I said, where it always pays a very significant dividend to members. It has a huge membership and the addition of €1.8 million into a provincial town in this particular year is not to be dismissed lightly. I know the Minister is working on the legislation but is there any possibility of allowing virtual AGMs to go ahead before Christmas to enable credit union members to avail of dividends and rebates?

**Minister of State at the Department of Finance (Deputy Sean Fleming):** I thank Deputy Cahill for raising this issue relating to Clonmel credit union. He has been in contact with me about it on a couple of occasions in recent days. Normally, in the run-up to Christmas, as the Deputy outlined, the credit union would have paid out an interest rebate or dividend, having had its AGM and having received authorisation to make those payments.

The Government recognises the important role credit unions play in Irish society as volunteer co-operative financial institutions. In the current environment, credit unions are appropriately focusing on the health and well-being of their volunteers and staff and continuing to serve the needs of their members. Credit unions are important at both a local and national level, given their community presence across the country.

It is important to note that virtual AGMs are not prohibited by Central Bank regulations. Rather, they are not allowed under the Credit Union Act 1997, which sets out that there should be an AGM which members can physically attend. That is the issue we are having to deal with now. It is for this reason that the Government brought forward the Finance (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2020 to allow, among other matters, for the holding of virtual AGMs by credit unions. The Government approved the drafting of the Bill based on the general scheme on 6 October and, once the drafting phase was complete, the Bill was published on 18 November. It

passed all Stages in the Seanad last week and I thank Senators for their co-operation in that regard. It will be introduced to the Dáil next week, subject to the schedule of the House. The Bill is priority legislation for the Government to get enacted before Christmas and we look forward to the co-operation of Deputies to ensure that happens. I am confident that it will happen. Once enacted, the legislation will take immediate effect and credit unions will be able to hold virtual AGMs from that point. The legislation also provides for an interim period which extends the deadline for credit unions completing end-September 2020 AGMs until 30 April 2021.

The principal reason the AGMs are not happening is that the Covid restrictions mean it is not possible to have an indoors gathering for a large AGM such as that of a credit union might be. It is an issue that has arisen solely because of Covid. Given that we do not know when the restrictions will end or the format of those restrictions as we head into the new year, we decided to bring the legislation forward to allow credit unions, if they so wish, to have virtual AGMs from January. It will take time for the boards of directors to set a date for an AGM and put the arrangements in place for a virtual meeting. It is envisaged that the meetings will not require participants to use a laptop. People can take part by telephoning in, for example, or by way of other technology and, depending on Covid restrictions, a blended meeting may be possible. Some people may be able to physically attend while others will participate by telephone or other electronic means. It is a function of the AGM, when it happens, to approve the payment of a dividend or rebate of interest.

Covid has been the particular problem in terms of the delays that have arisen up to now. I hope the directors of the credit unions know that we expect the legislation to be enacted well before Christmas. As such, they should commence arrangements to set a date for their virtual AGM as early as they can manage in the new year. I encourage Clonmel credit union and others to start moving on their initial preparations. Once the legislation is passed, they will be able to set a date promptly for their AGM.

**Deputy Jackie Cahill:** I thank the Minister of State for his comprehensive reply. We all accept that we are in an unprecedented year, but it is a pity that we have got to this impasse. Unfortunately, from what the Minister of State is saying, the credit union members and their families will be the losers and the money they had planned and budgeted for will not be available to them.

Is there any possibility that a statutory instrument could be used to allow the AGMs to go ahead virtually? I accept that the Minister of State has got the legislation through the Seanad in very good time and he will get it through the Dáil as quickly as he can. However, that will not allow the AGMs to take place before Christmas. Can he introduce a statutory instrument, as he is progressing the legislation, to allow the AGMs to proceed? It is deeply disappointing for people in Clonmel not to receive these payments. I am making the case strongly for Clonmel but, as I said, credit unions in other towns will be experiencing the same difficulty. Is there any way to get around this impasse? I fully accept the Minister of State's bona fides in this matter and I acknowledge his efforts in progressing the legislation. In terms of legislative parameters, he has worked extremely quickly. However, the fact remains that, as things stand, this money will not be in circulation before Christmas. A statutory instrument might allow the AGMs to take place and the dividends and rebates to be put in people's pockets and in circulation to cover Christmas expenses.

**Deputy Sean Fleming:** I thank the Deputy for his remarks. As I outlined in my response, the prohibition on a virtual AGM is set out in the Credit Union Act 1997. It is not possible to

change primary legislation by way of a statutory instrument. Much as I might like to be able to say otherwise, it is important to be clear and not to build up any false hopes that this could be an option. Statutory instruments are secondary legislation and one could only be brought into effect if the Act in question made specific provision for that.

The Deputy mentioned that other voluntary organisations are holding virtual AGMs in the coming days. I am a member of the GAA and I am aware that local GAA clubs are doing the same. The difference in this case is that credit unions are covered by legislation and cannot make their own local arrangements. Other voluntary organisations that are not so governed by legislation have the flexibility to make their own rules at local level without restraint of legislative provision. Due to the vast sums that people invest in, and borrow from, credit unions, it is necessary in a democracy to have legislation in place to protect depositors, the credit unions and the communities they serve. They cannot be set aside by a Minister signing a statutory instrument.

I urge the credit unions involved to engage immediately with the Central Bank to get approval, if it is required, for the payment of a small dividend or a refund of interest, so they can have arrangements in place as urgently as possible. However, in practice, that will be early in the new year. I hope their members will understand. Their hands are tied because of the Covid situation and they cannot hold the AGMs at this point. We will do everything that we can as early as possible, but it will take another couple of weeks.

### **Finance Bill 2020: Order for Report Stage**

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I move: “That Report Stage be taken now.”

Question put and agreed to.

### **Finance Bill 2020: Report Stage**

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Amendments Nos. 1 and 2 are out of order.

Amendments Nos. 1 and 2 not moved.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Amendments Nos. 3, 4 and 95 are related and will be discussed together.

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** I move amendment No. 3:

In page 10, between lines 34 and 35, to insert the following:

#### **“Report on economic and distributional impact of the Help to Buy Scheme**

**8.** The Minister shall, within six months of the passing of this Act, prepare and lay before Dáil Éireann a report on the economic and distributional impact of the Help to Buy Scheme.”.

As we begin Report Stage of the Finance Bill 2020, I acknowledge we had a lengthy debate

on many of the sections and, indeed, on the subject matter of many of the amendments that have been tabled on Report Stage for further emphasis. I will not repeat all that was said on Committee Stage. We had a serious engagement over three days with the Minister on many of them, but some of them require further emphasis.

Before going further, I thank the officials from the Department and the Revenue Commissioners for their briefing material and their facilitation of Sinn Féin in preparing for this debate. I also thank the committee secretariat which made Committee Stage go quite smoothly. It was mostly held virtually. I believe it was the first time Committee Stage of a legislative measure was passed after probably more than 90% of the scrutiny being conducted in a virtual manner.

This amendment relates to the help-to-buy scheme. The Minister and I strongly differ on this issue. In my view, the help-to-buy scheme has been a flawed policy that is increasing house prices. It is putting house prices further out of reach of first-time buyers as well as for those who are moving up, perhaps from an apartment to a house. They are unable to benefit from the first-time buyers scheme, but the house prices are increasing. There is anecdotal evidence of house prices increasing as announcements are made. Not only is the Government extending the scheme year on year, it has also turbo boosted the scheme by increasing it by €10,000. The scheme was due to finish at the end of this year, but the Government intends to continue it for another year.

It is worth echoing the sentiments of the Economic and Social Research Institute, ESRI, conference. Dr. Barra Roantree, addressing the conference on the help-to-buy scheme and this version of it, said that it is likely to fuel property price growth and to increase prices. Documentation from the Parliamentary Budget Office states that the scheme is not meeting its objectives. Recently published figures from Banking and Payments Federation Ireland show that mortgage approvals have increased, but for first-time buyers the value of the mortgages being drawn down has increased on average by €10,000 to €245,000 compared to last year, so house prices are increasing. This bears out what has been said by the ESRI and other commentators who have repeatedly issued warnings.

There is also a distributional equity issue with this policy choice. Some 40% of the people who will receive €30,000 of taxpayers' money do not require it to be able to purchase a home. It is important to remember that. There are thousands of people who will be in that bracket. Many people who are listening to this debate know quite well that they could do with a helping hand, not to mind €30,000. This measure will cost an additional €43 million in 2021. For that reason, I put forward this amendment seeking a report on the economic and distributional impacts of the help-to-buy scheme. It is important as the Minister continues to extend the scheme year after year. In addition, this year he increased the value of the scheme from €20,000 to €30,000 and from 5% to 10% of the purchase price of the house. It is essential that a report is carried out on the economic and distributional impact of the help-to-buy scheme.

**Deputy Mick Barry:** I will be brief because we had a lengthy debate on this on Committee Stage. I will repeat some of the key reasons we would support the production of a report examining this issue. We believe the scheme is flawed in a number of respects. First, we have issues with the supply of housing at present. The scheme will increase demand. It is quite obvious what happens in a situation in which there is increased demand and a more or less steady supply. It will push up prices. There is evidence of that already in Cork and I believe the same applies elsewhere, especially in the cities.

The beneficiary of that is the developer who pockets an increased profit, and not a small profit. The banks are beneficiaries as well. While I accept that some first-time buyers will benefit from the scheme, in 40% of cases it is individuals, couples or households who would be buying in any case even if the scheme did not exist. The reverse is the case as well. There are many people on low incomes who do not have significant savings who will not be able to benefit from the scheme. Perhaps those most in need do not benefit and those who are in lesser need do, but the big beneficiaries are the developers.

I would like if the scheme were put to one side now. I do not have the option of bringing a motion on that to the House, so I am supporting the amendment to the effect that we will receive an urgent report on this. This scheme costs a fair few bob. It will be €43 million for next year. Up to the end of June this year the cumulative cost of the scheme to the taxpayer over the years has been €289 million. Those resources would be far more usefully employed if we invested directly in social and affordable housing through the local authorities. I support the amendment.

**Deputy Mairéad Farrell:** I echo the words of my colleague, Deputy Doherty, about all the assistance that was given in the smooth running of the discussion on the Bill on Committee Stage. It was my first Finance Bill. I thought it ran very smoothly because of the great work put in by a lot of people. I also thank them for that.

It has been said that we had a very lengthy debate on the scheme, and I expressed my views on it. I think that this scheme is inflationary and does not benefit the people it is supposed to benefit - the first-time buyers. In reality, its inflationary angle means that it helps the developers and the banks rather than those who are trying to save to buy their first homes. From what previous speakers have said, we know that more than 40% of those who have availed of the scheme were already in a position to buy their homes. Therefore, we know that it is poorly targeted and does not really help the intention of the scheme. That alone should have cast doubt on the scheme in general. I do not see the purpose of continuing it. I hope we get support for having a report. The report would detail all the effects of the scheme. If the Government feels differently and believes the scheme is very beneficial, why not have a report and let it prove what it really does? I support the amendment.

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I also acknowledge all the work done by the officials in facilitating the smooth running of Committee Stage of the Finance Bill. I want to use my seven minutes to clarify a matter that was raised on Committee Stage in an exchange on the employment wage subsidy scheme. A debate took place between Deputy Doherty and me on amendments Nos. 176 to 180 which related to section 61. The issue arose towards the end of the Committee Stage debate and it related to the nature of flexibility that I have, as Minister for Finance, to extend beyond 31 January 2021 the enhanced rates of subsidy available to employers under the scheme that are being legislated for as part of the Finance Bill process. The enhanced rates that apply from 20 October 2020 until 31 January 2021 are due to cease on 31 January. However, the position is that following the enactment of the changes that were introduced on Committee Stage, I have the flexibility to retain the enhanced rates of subsidy without the need for primary legislation. This will form part of the existing authority that I have to amend aspects of the scheme that relate to rates, qualification criteria and the duration of the scheme. The scheme will be kept under review. At this time, I do not have plans to change those criteria before 31 January. I will make a decision at that point. Given that it was the subject of an exchange during Committee Stage of the Finance Bill and is a very important part of the Finance Bill, I wanted to clarify the matter at the start of Report Stage because I did not give the correct answer when the matter was raised with me by Deputy Doherty.



We take a different view on the help-to-buy scheme. I went through many of these arguments on Committee Stage, but I want to emphasise a number of them again now. First, because this scheme is concentrated entirely on new homes and at first-time buyers, I do not believe it has the inflationary effect that the Deputy suggested it has. Second, that view is borne out if one looks at the value of homes that are included and were supported by the help-to-buy scheme. From January to the end of October this year, it stood at €329,000 while across the same period a year ago it was €328,000. Third, I heard many Deputies make the point that we need to have plans in place to support the direct building of houses. Those plans are in place. They are in place through the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage and the work done by the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, and his predecessor as Minister, Deputy Eoghan Murphy. We have capital plans in place that are multiples of the cost of the help-to-buy scheme that are about either directly building homes or putting in place the infrastructure through public money to allow homes to be built elsewhere. Across the Government, we have a variety of different schemes in place where public money is being used to build homes or enable them to be built. The help-to-buy scheme is a low portion of the entirety of schemes that are in place elsewhere. If one looks at the various independent reports that have been done on the help-to-buy scheme, one will see that those reports say that the scheme has had a minor effect on the movement of prices across that period.

To deal with the point raised by the Deputies, I will always keep this scheme under review, as I do with other schemes. I believe the change we have made to the scheme is merited in light of the uncertainty in the housing market and of what we need to do to continue to encourage the building of new homes this year and next year. I can tell it does not have the inflationary effect that is being suggested by the Opposition. I believe it is appropriate that we help first-time buyers through the tax code with the purchase of their first home.

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** I thank the Minister for putting the correct information on the record of the House regarding the power to vary rates, which is the appropriate position in order that we do not have to revisit primary legislation. It is welcome that that is the case and that the position has been clarified.

The help-to-buy scheme is a part of it, but this goes to the core of Government housing policy. The Minister has told us about all the various supports and the funding that is available but the reality is that unlike Deputy Mairéad Farrell, this is not my first finance Bill. I think it is my 11th or 12th finance Bill, if we include an emergency finance Bill. Most of them were under Fine Gael Ministers, and nearly half of them were introduced by the Minister for Finance, Deputy Donohoe. The reality is that when we look at housing, as a result of the initiatives that have been introduced in budget after budget, we have a crisis in housing not over the past 12 months alone but in recent years. Are house prices spiralling out of control? Yes, they are. Is it just the Opposition that is saying this measure is pushing up house prices? No, it is not. The Minister should listen to the ESRI and other independent reports. Do 40% of those who are going to get €30,000 of taxpayers' money need it to buy a house? No, they do not. That is not me saying this. They are indisputable facts. That is why, at the very least, the Minister should be considering an independent report on the economic and distributional impact of the scheme. At the very core of the issue is the flawed housing policy of Fine Gael. At a time of great lack of availability, the party introduced a measure that is only about increasing demand, which is then, unfortunately, going to push up house prices.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** I support the previous speakers. I think the scheme should be reviewed. An independent assessment should be carried out. I too have been here for a number

of finance Bills. We keep pleading for this year in and year out. There was a group outside the Dáil today with 56 black balloons representing the number of homeless people who have lost their lives in this city this year. It is a truly shocking figure. That is replicated up and down the country.

We never used to have homelessness in Tipperary but now we have it with gusto. There are large waiting lists for houses. We are just not building the houses. We are supporting couples and people to build houses who do not need the support because they can build them themselves.

I was on the housing committee for the past four years and we talked and talked about housing. If talk, reports and paper could build houses, there would not be a homeless person in the country.

**Deputy Seán Canney:** I wish to speak to amendment No. 95 and the help-to-buy scheme.

*6 o'clock*

I have continually said we should look at this in the context of expanding the scheme to include first-time buyers of properties that are vacant in our towns and villages. It is something we must examine.

The housing market in this country is dysfunctional. The private sector is not building houses because developers cannot get the required price. People cannot buy houses because they cannot afford the required mortgages that are a function of the costs of building. We all keep talking about how many houses we will build, and year in and year out we set targets on the number of houses we will build.

There are two glaringly obvious issues. The first is that we need an effective and affordable housing scheme. The second is that we must look at the gift we have, which is the amount of existing properties that are vacant in our towns and villages. It is why we ask the Minister to come back with a report to see what can be done with the scheme within 90 days of the budget being passed. I know the Department dealing with community and rural development, in which I have been a Minister of State, was considering pilot schemes. This matter is bigger than just a town or village renewal scheme and it must be much better.

There are three suggestions to consider. The first is to expand the help-to-buy scheme, the second is to look at the Rebuilding Ireland home loan mortgage to include refurbishment, and the third is to introduce a very simple VAT refund scheme for first-time buyers of properties in our towns and villages that are vacant but which could be converted to residential and family homes.

**Deputy Mairéad Farrell:** We are stating very clearly that we do not believe the help-to-buy scheme is doing what it is supposed to do or what it says on the tin, so to speak. It is not helping those who need it most or who are looking to buy a house for the very first time.

It was mentioned earlier that we believe there is a need for proper social or public housing as well as a proper affordable housing plan, which we have yet to see. The reality is that where I am from in Galway city, there was a ten-year period in which not a single unit of public housing was built. The repercussions are that people have now been on the social housing waiting list in Galway city for 15 years and have never been offered a home.

We need to act urgently on this housing crisis. The Government has a scheme that we do not believe is helping people so we are asking for a report on it. The Minister disagrees, which is fair enough, but we are still asking for an investigation into whether we are correct in saying the scheme is not doing what it is supposed to. I urge the Minister to allow that report to go ahead.

**Deputy Denis Naughten:** One of the reasons for tabling this amendment is that we want to try to ensure the vacant housing can be occupied. This is a matter I have taken up with the Minister on numerous occasions with regard to the fair deal scheme, and I hope we can see movement there that could release potentially up to 9,000 vacant homes.

There are many homes across rural Ireland in the middle of villages and premises that could be refurbished and reoccupied while bringing young families back into communities where there is already infrastructure in place. This would not require new schools, footpaths or lighting, for example. As I have said before, I am talking about streets where a football may not have been kicked for a generation.

We are spending in excess of €30,000 providing serviced sites in Dublin for local authorities and private developers to develop. As I have said, if we took half that and gave a grant of €15,000 for families to release rental property in Dublin, come down the country and refurbish an existing vacant house in parts of the country where there has been depopulation, it would be a win-win scenario. It would bring life back to a rural community while at the same time taking pressure off the existing housing stock in Dublin, where we could release a home to the market for a family straight away rather than having to wait for a new house to be built.

**Deputy Paschal Donohoe:** I will deal with the points made by Deputies Canney and Naughten. We must look at how we can ensure that properties which are either derelict or that have been vacant for a very long period can be renovated and returned to use. I am seeing that work taking place now in local authorities through money being made available to them by the Government and the use of grants. It is the appropriate way in which the challenge referred to by Deputies Naughten and Canney can and should be addressed. It should be done by local authorities receiving funding from central government to do that work. It is a targeted way of ensuring that properties which are either derelict or that do not have anybody living in them can be renovated and brought back to life. The tax code would not be an effective way of achieving the aim.

The intention behind the help-to-buy scheme in the first place is to try to put in place or strengthen incentives for the delivery of new homes so as to see our total housing stock increased. It has been carefully calibrated to avoid the inflationary risk that has been highlighted by some Deputies. It is not happening because of the focus in place and the fact that it only applies to first-time purchases and newly built homes. It is why the scheme is avoiding the kind of risk that could be there if the scheme was broader, such as if it applied to second or third purchases or if it applied to existing homes.

This is a scheme that has helped many thousands of people with their first purchase and it is of help in supporting the supply of particular forms of housing. It is very important in how we respond to the existing housing challenges. I do not accept the amendment, but across the year we will study the impact of this policy to ensure it continues to have the positive effect we want it to have.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Is the amendment being pressed?

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** It is. The amendment seeks a report but we are really attempting to get the Government to stop going in this direction of fuelling property prices, which really only benefits developers. This is a transfer of taxpayers' money that ultimately ends up in developers' pockets as house prices are pushed beyond the reach of many. It is symptomatic of a failed Government policy on housing.

The Ceann Comhairle may have seen today 56 black balloons outside the gates of our Parliament. Those 56 balloons represent 56 people who died in homelessness services in Dublin alone this year. Some of those - far too many - died on our streets. It is another symptom of a failed Government housing policy. For those reasons, I will press the amendment.

Amendment put and declared lost.

**Deputy Mick Barry:** I move amendment No. 4:

In page 10, between lines 34 and 35, to insert the following:

**“8.** The Minister shall, by 1 March 2021, prepare and lay before Dáil Éireann a report on the Help-to-Buy scheme which shall cover the following areas:

(a) the impact on overall house prices of the scheme;

(b) the impact on the profits in construction, banking, and other related property sectors;

(c) other measures and interventions that may deliver affordable housing at a lower cost to householders and public funds.”.

Amendment put and declared lost.

**Deputy Denis Naughten:** I move amendment No. 5:

In page 11, after line 34, to insert the following:

**“Report on options for accelerated capital allowances**

**11.** The Minister shall, within 90 days of the passing of this Act, publish a report on options for accelerated capital allowances to assist companies in facilitating employees to work remotely.”.

We had a debate on Committee Stage about putting in place additional supports to encourage remote and blended working. I have made the point to the Minister on a number of occasions that the supports and incentives that are available at the moment, at €3.20 per day, are not sufficient to encourage people to work remotely. Having listened to the contributions from the Minister and from Deputies Doherty and Nash on Committee Stage, I withdrew the amendment that I had tabled. I have now tabled a different one along the lines of what the aforementioned Deputies spoke about on Committee Stage in terms of providing a targeted, accelerated capital allowance for certain businesses to assist them in facilitating remote working for their employees, where it would be prohibitive for them to do so. I am trying to send out a clear message within the tax code that we want employers to be proactive in facilitating remote and blended working. We want them to come up with innovative ways to ensure that people can work remotely and can remain within their own communities, minimising the amount of commuting in and out of the city. The amendment I have tabled which seeks to facilitate this through acceler-

ated capital allowances reflects the views of colleagues expressed on Committee Stage and I hope the Minister can accept it.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** I support Deputy Naughten's amendment and must declare that I am a self-employed person myself. Remote working has come into its own since lockdown but there are difficulties with it for many reasons, including the lack of broadband and other facilities. Workers should be encouraged to work remotely and employers should get some concessions or supports to put in infrastructure for their employees and their families. In families, if husbands, wives or partners are working from home, this represents a drain on services and if there are children in the household as well, depending on the phone lines and the technology, it can be very frustrating. The pittance of an allowance provided, at €3.20 per day, is nothing. Remote working needs tangible and intangible supports. There needs to be a bias towards this to encourage employers to put infrastructure in place for their employees because everyone benefits. Some people are travelling between two and four hours, twice a day, to get to work. Huge amounts of time can be saved and people are fresher in work as they work their eight or nine hours rather than being stuck in their cars, damaging the environment and putting themselves under enormous pressure because the roads are so busy. Commuting causes so much strain and stress. I am supporting this amendment.

**Deputy Seán Canney:** Remote working has been established as a way of life through Covid-19 and it will continue to be thus post Covid. We have been making preparations for this in the last number of years, including through expenditure on the national broadband plan and I acknowledge the Minister's efforts in getting the contract in place. It is important now to look at where we are going into the future and how we are going to deal with it. This amendment seeks to incentivise employers and employees to enable people to work remotely at home or in co-working spaces in order to save on everything, including the environment, by having less traffic on the roads. Accelerated capital allowances would be a great way for the Government to send a message to people that it will support employees and employers and enable remote working.

**Deputy Ged Nash:** I support the principle of what Deputy Naughten is trying to achieve here and acknowledge that he took on board some of the concerns I expressed on Committee Stage with the amendment he proposed then. Fundamentally, it is the responsibility of employers to provide the necessary equipment and facilities that employees require to allow them to work safely from home but it is worth exploring ways in which we can support employers who may not have the necessary resources to provide the supports that vast swathes of workers will require as we move more formally to blended working arrangements over the next period, given the lessons we have learned from the Covid-19 working from home experience. This is certainly something that is worth exploring and I would endorse it on that basis. I look forward to hearing the Minister's views on it and whether it is something his Department will examine in closer detail.

**Deputy Paschal Donohoe:** I wish to make two points before going into the detail of the issues that have been raised by the Deputies. In the debate that is to ensue regarding the right balance between working at home and working in an office that is generally located in a city, we should acknowledge that there is a value in having city centres that are vibrant and busy. There is a value in that and this is not just an argument about Dublin city centre. It is an argument that is important for many cities across our country. In making decisions regarding where work is to be located in the future, it is important that we do not lose sight of the value of having vibrant urban cores in our cities. In the process to which the Deputies refer, there are benefits to the em-



ployer in the decision of people to work from home. There are savings to the employer in terms of rent for offices, the size of offices required and their location and there are efficiencies that employers can enjoy when their employees work from home some of the time. If that benefit is there for employers, then we must ask what the role of the taxpayer is in supporting that decision and making more funding available for it. These are the issues that need to be teased out.

I have frequently said to Deputy Naughten that we may end up with something that is very blended in comparison to where we are at the moment. Right now, very few people are working in offices and most are working from home. It may well be the case that the stable equilibrium we end up is not the opposite of that but is somewhere in the middle. It is an issue that needs to be teased out. We must consider the benefits employers may gain by having more of their staff working from home.

A final point to emphasise in this debate is what this means for our economy overall. There is value in workers, particularly young workers and those who are at the start of their careers, being in an environment in which they are working with other employees. A big pillar of our economy is that we are skills-based. How are those skills developed? They are developed in the workplace. It is not in the long-term interest of those who work for employers all over our country or in the long-term interest of the development of skills to have more and more people not spending any time with their fellow employees in an office environment. These are the issues that we need work on, debate and tease out.

I hope that the availability of one or more vaccines next year will facilitate the return to offices. We then need to look at how this can be managed safely, while remaining mindful of some of the points on which I have just touched. As regards how this will be done, an inter-departmental group on remote working strategy has been established. This is chaired, appropriately, by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment. This group looks at these debates in carrying out its work and I hope this work will form a very important input in resolving some of the issues the Deputies have raised.

The current position is that remote working costs incurred by an employer wholly and exclusively for the purposes of the business may be deducted by that employer in the normal course of calculating the business's tax liability. Depending on the nature of an expense, it may be a revenue expense deductible wholly in the first year or a capital cost qualifying for allowances over an eight-year period. This is in line with the treatment of similar costs incurred for employees working from the employer's place of business.

It is important to recognise that not every employer's business can be undertaken by employees working from home and that not every employee is able to work from home. This may be because of any of a variety of reasons, including the nature of his or her home environment.

From the perspective of the individual employer, there is no specific tax credit available to employees as a result of working from home. I am advised by Revenue, however, that where eworkers incur certain extra expenditure in the performance of their duties of employment remotely or from home, such as additional heating or electricity costs, a Revenue administrative practice is in place that allows an employer to make payments of up to €3.20 per day to such employees, subject to certain conditions, without deducting PAYE, PRSI or USC. Revenue has confirmed that PAYE workers using their primary residence as a workplace during the period of the Covid-19 restrictions qualify as eworkers for the purposes of this practice.

As I have already noted, work is ongoing in my Department with regard to this issue. An interdepartmental group is in place to consider the issue of remote working more generally. I believe that the work of this group will provide a way to debate this matter with the Oireachtas. It is for that reason that I do not propose to accept the amendment.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** The subtext of what the Minister has articulated is very Dublin-centric. It is important to realise that Ireland's development is radically lopsided. In European terms, Ireland is an outlier with regard to the size of its capital city in comparison with the rest of the country. Even in Britain, where London is considered too big for the British economy, London has half as much dominance as Dublin has here. To split up this country, literally a third of the population lives in the overheated capital city. Another third commutes to the capital city from as far away as Cork, Galway and Ulster every day. The other third of the country comprises rural Ireland, which is being depopulated of its young people. There is a massive problem with spatial development in this country and the Government is not attending to it seriously.

There is a number of costs to this. The first is the cost of this commuter hell for the families themselves. There is a massive financial cost associated with travelling to and from Dublin every day in addition to the massive family cost of not getting to see one's kids if one is constantly in traffic. I hope the Minister will listen to the following phenomenal statistic. In my own county of Meath, more than half of people leave the county to go to work every morning. The majority of Meath people leave Meath to work while a minority work in the county. In some towns and villages, one can play football on the main street at midday on a Friday such is the level of imbalance in this society.

This amendment is a very logical step towards a small rebalancing which would allow people to work well, effectively and efficiently while remaining closer to their families and in their own communities. I have no doubt that, if this policy was put in place, an opportunity to grow other businesses and enterprises in those localities would also arise.

**Deputy Seán Canney:** In response to what the Minister said, I too would be seriously concerned if we are talking about the centres of cities only. As I stated earlier, we must also consider the centres of our towns and villages. One must also take into account the lack of balance in this country. The European Commission has written to us to tell this Government that the north west and western region has been downgraded to a region in transition. We need to make sure that we address that and that we positively discriminate in favour of the people living in these areas and the people we want to bring into these areas. One of the tools to achieve this is remote working and co-working in our towns and villages. I agree that there must be a blended working environment but, if we are to concentrate on bringing people back into the cities, we will be doing a huge disservice to the people in the regions and we will get more letters from the European Commission telling us that our regions have been further downgraded. We need to grasp this urgently.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** I too am disappointed with the Minister's response. This is a no-brainer. Things are different at the moment because of Covid, but before the pandemic one could not travel or get accommodation in the cities. We see the homelessness crisis and the other pressures. This is the case in many of our big cities but the capital is completely bogged down. We need supports to allow people to live and work in the country, at least on a blended working basis.

With regard to Project Ireland 2040, the county development plan for Tipperary is being reviewed at the moment. I am shocked to see what is happening in this regard. Dealing with this plan has always been a prerogative of the council but there is now oversight from a new agency which has been set up. The name of it will come to me. This agency can reject what the council decides. We need a recalibration in respect of what is going on in our country. It is totally ham-fisted and unsustainable. The EU is right to be concerned about it because we are worst of all.

There are population explosions in this city and other cities. Additional schools and hospitals are being built, for example, the children's hospital, but we in the country cannot get access. Under our Constitution, country people are entitled to eke out a living as well as those living in the major cities. I see constant encroachment, for example, with regard to the county development plan. We were hoping to have Project Ireland 2040 reviewed. Whatever the elected councillors in Tipperary decide can now be vetoed by this new set-up in Dublin. We are back to the time of Cromwell; to hell or to Connacht. We do not want to go to hell and we do not necessarily want to go to Connacht. We want to stay in Munster-----

**Deputy Denis Naughten:** What is wrong with Connacht?

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** -----and Tipperary. I did not mean to say that. We want to stay in Tipperary.

**Deputy Denis Naughten:** We will show you on Sunday.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** Maybe you will and maybe you will not. We will give as good as we get. Tá súil agam go mbeidh an bua againn. We want to be able to live and the countryside is a better place for that. We are losing businesses, families and people. What do we have? Afforestation. Now we will not even be allowed to cut down forests. It is a case of hell or to Connacht and Famine times again.

**Deputy Denis Naughten:** With regard to my concern, I made a similar argument to the Minister last year. While the narrative might have been different, the position was the same. The Minister was not prepared to support remote working. My fear is that the reason for the current narrative is that we are trying to protect the value of pension fund investments. Such funds have bought a lot of office accommodation here in Dublin. That is my genuine fear. We absolutely need to support city centres, but that is not where the issue lies. Across the globe, investors are coming back to city centres to buy office accommodation. The Minister will know of the investment Salesforce is making. It specifically wants accommodation in city centres rather than in any other locations. That is not the issue here. I am concerned that we are taking an approach that, as far as the taxation code is concerned, involves being completely neutral on where people should work. In reality, that means we are giving an incentive for people to remain in the existing rat run and offices. People will be doing blended working, not working 100% at home. This means whatever equipment is purchased for them to use at home will be utilised for two or three days per week. There will be an additional cost for an employer with a hot-desking facility or if the employee is travelling to the city centre to work for two days per week. That is why the Minister needs to put accelerated capital allowances in place for such employers.

This is supposed to be a green Government. Surely, it makes sense to take commuting cars off the streets of Dublin and all other streets. It should not be only about having vibrant urban cores in our cities. It should be about having vibrant urban cores in our towns and villages

where we have hot-desking facilities as well.

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** I welcome the amendment by Deputy Naughten. He acknowledged that it derived partly from a contribution I made on Committee Stage on the need to explore accelerated capital allowances and associated caveats since not all companies are the same. Capital allowances are relevant for any company that is facilitating remote working. Companies can claim capital allowances on expenditure anyway. They can claim at a rate of 12.5% over a period of eight years. This could offset the full amount of the investment over an eight-year period. Accelerated capital allowances would allow all that to be claimed in one year. It would be a cash flow issue as opposed to a revenue loss issue for the State, but it would be an incentive for companies that may not be in a position to wait eight years to recoup or offset the full amount of expenditure against their taxable profits to support employees who are working from home.

Many issues have been touched on in terms of the benefits of remote working. The Minister has outlined the need for vibrant city centres. That is important and no one disputes it. However, the importance of having vibrant towns, vibrant rural communities and people working from home in those places matters too. Many people, including people from my extended family, commute from west Donegal to Dublin on a weekly basis and there are costs incurred. Being at home and being able to go to the local café as opposed to the café in the city centre is equally important for businesses in those communities. As I said, the issue of accelerated capital allowances involves bringing forward in a timely manner the ability to be able to claim all of them in one year as opposed to spreading them over a period of eight years.

The Minister will acknowledge that there are other more advanced capital allowances that can be claimed at a rate of 15% for other types of expenditure. It does not have to be a case of one or the other. The Deputy is asking for a report. Let us consider this. Before the pandemic ever visited us and brought all the pain and misery that it has brought, remote working was more and more part of our future. That is the reality. We have to find ways to support it so that we can have remote hubs where people can access proper services and so on. People will be availing of this from their homes. The Minister will be aware that several years ago we had a discussion on this on the Finance Bill. If memory serves me right it was three or four years ago. The Minister brought forward changes to the Finance Act and introduced a new category of accelerated capital allowances. The category of accelerated capital allowances was for gym equipment where companies provided gym equipment that could be of use to their employees. The Minister and the Department recognised the importance of workers being able to stay fit and of employers being able to offset in one calendar year the cost of providing gym equipment to their employees. In another case, a higher rate was provided for the building or the extension of a building where gym equipment would be housed.

What is the difference? Is there not a social value in supporting individuals who are remote working, who want to remote work and who may be involved in a hybrid of remote working on a Monday or Friday and travelling to the city or town centre in the middle of the week? Many workers to whom I have talked want a little of both.

We are going to have a situation in future where people are not properly equipped. People are doing this type of work from kitchen tables and chairs. All of this will cause untold problems in future with the health and well-being of workers, because those settings are not designed for a person to sit and work for eight hours at length.

This is a timing issue from a taxation point of view. It is not a revenue gain or loss. The question we have to ask is whether there is a social good in terms of supporting remote working. I believe there is and that it is going in that direction anyway. I recall a briefing in the Department of the Taoiseach, perhaps a year ago, where someone talked about how by 2050 there would be more people remote working than in physical buildings, although I could be corrected on the numbers. The pandemic has accelerated that pathway.

All that is being asked for is a report. This issue should be examined in a timely manner. It should be published well in advance of the Finance Bill next year so that we can have an informed discussion on whether or which way we should try to support this.

As I said in my contribution on Committee Stage and today on Report Stage, I recognise that not all businesses will need this support. However, some businesses will. Most important, workers may need the proper equipment and supports to be able to work from home, if that is where they are working. Moreover, a company may need to be able to equip a satellite unit or hub to facilitate remote working.

**Deputy Paschal Donohoe:** As I said in my earlier contribution on the amendment, we need a balance. It is the case that we will have far more people working from home than we had before the pandemic. We can develop a balance that is good for them and that is, in turn, good for their employers and the Irish economy. I am in favour of finding that balance.

I was in favour of finding the balance before Covid-19 arrived in our country. That is why is I supported the roll-out of the national broadband plan, which is the critical enabler in how we ensure the right kind of connectivity is in place to support more employers being located outside of busy centres and in supporting more work being done at home. Many who were critical of the decision of the last Government to go ahead with the national broadband plan at that point are now calling for an accelerated roll-out of the national broadband plan. That is why it was the right decision.

A process is under way within Government to look at all these matters. This can inform the Oireachtas debate. In conclusion, we already have significant supports in place for employees in respect of the cost of working from home. There are also provisions within the tax code to allow employers to deal with business costs as well. Those supports are in place. They are already of significant help to those incurring more cost in working from home.

As we look at the drawdown of various reliefs in 2020 I imagine we will see more and more expenses being registered against the cost of working from home. The core reason I do not believe this amendment is justified is because this work is already under way within Government. I imagine the report will either be publicly available or a version of it will be publicly available to facilitate the debate that the Deputies are looking for.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Is the amendment being pressed?

**Deputy Denis Naughten:** I will respond briefly to the Minister. The reality is that the approach in future will be probably two days at home, two days from a hot-desking facility and one day in the office. The same capital allowance is being given for an office desk which may be occupied five days a week as for a desk at home which might be occupied for two days a week. I also refer to the additional costs in respect of the hot-desking facilities. We are not comparing like with like here, and that is why there should be accelerated capital allowances.



The interdepartmental group established by the Government is welcome. If the Minister recalls, however, 12 months ago he announced the establishment of a group to look at remote working or hot-desking in respect of civil servants working from provincial locations. We are now 12 months down the road and we have not seen much progress on that endeavour.

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** I want to expand on this point. I ask the Minister to think of a company. It will be possible for that company to buy a treadmill, a set of dumbbells, a rowing machine or a bench press and offset all those costs against its profits in one year. If that company, however, wants to buy a proper chair for a remote worker, so that he or she will not have spinal or back problems, the company will have to offset those costs over eight years. That is where this does not make sense, and that is why this amendment should be accepted. All that is being sought is a report. Seriously, why can the Minister not accept this amendment?

Amendment put and declared lost.

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** I move amendment No. 6:

In page 11, after line 34, to insert the following:

**“Report on operation of income tax relief for cross-border workers**

**11.** The Minister shall, within six months of the passing of this Act, prepare and lay before Dáil Éireann a report on the operation of income tax relief for cross-border workers under section 825A of the Taxes Consolidation Act 1997, including the consideration of options to regularise the temporary relief granted by Revenue under section 825A in response to Covid-19 and further measures to facilitate cross-border workers in the future.”.

This amendment concerns a discussion I had with the Minister on Committee Stage regarding cross-Border workers. I asked the Minister to look at this issue through the prism of Brexit and the Good Friday Agreement, GFA. As the Minister will be aware, there is a relief in our tax code called the trans-border relief. People can claim this if they are working wholly outside the State, that is, the jurisdiction, and commuting to work. Mostly, that will involve people working across the Border. In other cases, however, people resident here could perhaps be flying to Manchester or London and be working five days a week in Britain, or elsewhere.

The problem in this area has again been exposed by the pandemic and, in fairness, the Revenue and the Department were quick to act on it. If people carry out any work, which is more than incidental work, in this jurisdiction, then they will lose this trans-border relief. If, for example, people work from home for one day, or half a day, they would lose this relief. That would be the case as long as it was something deemed more than incidental. As a result of the pandemic, the Revenue waived that requirement because we are obviously trying to encourage people not to travel. That is not the issue.

The issue concerns changing work patterns, and we just had a conversation about working from home. If an employee living in Donegal, for example, and working in a company in Derry is availing of this relief, that will mean that the tax which that person pays is calculated in Derry and there is no tax liability in this State. If that person works one day from home, however, that will all be gone. He or she will have a tax liability here then, and the difference between what would be applicable in Derry and this State would have to be paid to the Revenue here. If we look at the reverse case, where an employee was resident in Derry and working in a company

in Letterkenny, that employee could work from home up to something like 60 days and still be able to gain the relief. I am not suggesting that this should be right across the board. There is, however, a need to carve out space within our Finance Bill regarding these cross-Border workers on the island of Ireland. I mention looking at this issue through the prism of Brexit, but also in respect of the Good Friday Agreement.

I do not believe we should allow those who live on one side of the Border and work on the other to work remotely most of the year. Let us, however, try to bring the situation into line with what happens in the North. Let us allow for several days where people can work from home. That could be for different reasons. It could be a case where two partners are working. One could be a nurse, a teacher or working on the front line. Perhaps a child is sick on a given day, and that worker who was supposed to travel to Derry cannot do so and works from home instead. If that person works from home on any substantive issue, anything more than something incidental, he or she stands to lose this trans-border relief. That is why there should be flexibility built into this scheme to ensure it is possible for people to work in their place of residence for several days and still be able to avail of the relief.

An energetic group has been established in respect of cross-Border workers. The group has been seeking a meeting with the Minister and I encourage him to have that meeting. The Minister spoke about looking at this issue, which I know from the discussion we had on Committee Stage in respect of the finance papers in July. However, this issue needs more urgency and a commitment that this issue will be carved out and looked more speedily is needed, and that is why I have tabled this amendment.

It is an important issue and affects many people. I am not stipulating what the number of days should be. The Minister can decide that. It could start with 12 or 14 days, whatever number of days he chooses. There must be some flexibility, however. It is far too rigid now. The criteria states that the employment duties must be “wholly exercised outside the State”, with none performed in the State, save for duties considered incidental to the foreign employment. That is a situation of a bygone day. Therefore, while we have double taxation arrangements, where there is offsetting of tax from one jurisdiction to the other, trans-border relief is a different matter. We must build into our tax code for workers resident here, but working outside the jurisdiction in the North, the flexibility to not lose this trans-border relief completely if they work from home on a certain number of days in the calendar.

**Deputy Paschal Donohoe:** I am aware of the matters raised by the Deputy and I can advise that my officials have been in touch with their counterparts in Northern Ireland regarding this matter. In that regard, I also note that this relief applies not only to persons with UK-based employment but also in respect of employment in the EU and double taxation arrangement network regions in compliance with Ireland’s treaty obligations. This relief has broader obligations beyond Northern Ireland therefore, and the suggestion regarding facilitating cross-Border workers should be viewed in that context.

In the case of a person living in Ireland but working in another jurisdiction, the general tax position is that, as an Irish resident, he or she is subject to Irish tax on his or her world-wide income from any source, including the employment exercised outside of the State. At the same time, the employment may be subject to tax in the country in which the work is carried out. In accordance with general principles of international tax, where instances of double taxation arise on the same income, relief against Irish tax may be claimed by way of a credit for any foreign tax already paid, subject to the terms of any applicable double taxation agreement.

Unilateral relief may also be available in certain circumstances under domestic Irish legislation. In the case of a person living in this State, but working in Northern Ireland, the terms of the Ireland-UK double taxation agreement provide for relief by allowing the Irish resident to claim a tax credit for the UK tax paid against any Irish tax which may be due on the same income. The trans-border relief referred to by Deputy Doherty is in addition to the relief provided by the double taxation agreement and may apply, subject to certain conditions, where a person lives in Ireland but works wholly outside the State. As set out in section 825A of the Taxes Consolidation Act 1997, in order to qualify for this relief the individual: must be tax resident in Ireland; work in a country that has a double taxation agreement, DTA, with Ireland; be in an employment held for a continuous period of 13 weeks in the year and the employment duties must be wholly exercised outside of the State, with none performed within the State, save for duties considered incidental to the foreign employment; have paid tax in the other country and is not due a refund of the tax; and be present in Ireland for at least one day of every week that he or she works abroad.

Where the trans-border relief applies in the case of an Irish resident who works in the UK, it operates in such a way that only UK tax is charged in the employment income and there is no charge to Irish tax on the same income. Any additional Irish tax that may be due is forgone under domestic Irish legislation.

This tax relief is not normally available for Irish residents who work from home in Ireland. In light of the pandemic, however, Revenue has confirmed that if the employee is required to work from home in the State due to Covid-19, such days spent working at home in the State will not preclude an individual from being entitled to claim this relief providing that all other conditions of the relief are met.

I would like to be clear that the flexibility being shown in the context of the pandemic should not be confused with the overall operation of the measure that requires that a person works outside the State and pays tax in other jurisdictions in order to qualify for the relief.

In the event that the other existing arrangements were to be revisited and done so specifically for Northern Ireland Border workers, a number of issues could arise, including: questions of equitable treatment of Irish residents in respect of employments carried out in Ireland; the competitive position of Irish employers *vis-à-vis* those in other countries; concerns around the potential for double non-taxation of such workers; and questions around compliance with established principles of international tax.

Any such consideration would also need to be examined in the overall context of Ireland's EU membership, noting that it would likely not be possible for Ireland to give preferential treatment to UK-based employments or Northern Ireland-based employments only without giving similar treatment to other EU member states or double taxation agreement jurisdictions.

As is the case with all taxation matters, this position will be kept under review, and especially in the context of Brexit. I assure Deputy Doherty, however, that in circumstances where this relief does not apply, then relief for foreign tax may be applicable in the normal course, as I set out earlier. As I have already indicated to Deputy Doherty, this is a matter that my officials and the Revenue Commissioners are considering and is an issue that I would propose further examination of in the tax strategy group papers that will be published by the summer of next year.

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** The Minister has read out word for word the reply to a parlia-

mentary question that he or his officials had scripted and which was given to me previously. Of course there are issues in relation to changing any tax. The Minister has outlined some of them such as, potentially, the impact of it being selective or if it needs to be across the European Union. The Minister also spoke of competitive issues and so on, as well as non-double taxation. This is why I want to see a report on this. It is not like this has never been done across the Border in Strabane, Derry or Newry, for example. If a person is resident there and working in a company in the South in Dublin, Letterkenny or Dundalk, for example, he or she can get this relief and work from home in the North for 60 days and not lose the relief. Many of the issues the Minister talked about have been looked at and addressed in a different jurisdiction and we have to look at them with fresh eyes here.

I am disappointed that the Minister has not addressed anything I said on flexibility, which is the core issue. We know how the relief applies and how double taxation agreements work, which is different and outside of this relief. We know all of that. We are trying to have a debate on whether the Minister believes there is a need for some relief. I would contest that this is not something we should leave until next year. I have asked the Minister if he will meet with the Cross-Border Workers Coalition to discuss this issue. Will the Minister commit to bringing a piece of research forward that does not have to wait until the summer of next year?

**Deputy Paschal Donohoe:** The flexibility Deputy Doherty refers to was shown by the Revenue Commissioners in dealing with this matter, in terms of how they have dealt with this issue when the pandemic has changed so much in our country. The research Deputy Doherty is looking for will be dealt with in the context of the tax strategy group papers, which will be done as they are normally done, by next summer. This is, as Deputy Doherty is aware, the way in which we examine matters relating to our tax code.

If the answers I give the Deputy are the same as other answers I have given to him, it is because the issues remain the same. I am committing, through the tax strategy group, that we will look at this issue. It has not been possible for me to meet with the cross-Border group as yet, as it has not been possible for me to meet with many other groups, due to the Finance Bill and other issues I have been dealing with. I would be happy to meet this group at a point in the near future, as I have indicated to a number of other colleagues, because I recognise that it is an issue. There are issues that must be looked at and there is a reporting process in the way to do it, which is the tax strategy group, and that is what I am committing to do.

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** I have already acknowledged the flexibility of Revenue. It is only in the context of the pandemic. While it is welcome, the rigid application of this relief will go back to the situation where, as I have said, a parent who must work from home because their sick child has to stay home from school will lose this relief. That is the reality and that is how rigid it is. This is what we want to address. It is a nonsense for the Minister to suggest that the only way he can review a taxation issue is to wait for the tax strategy group to look at it, which will not report for another seven to eight months. It is a complete and utter nonsense to say this is the only way we can do this. Obviously, that can be done at any time there is urgency. We may decide to not change the law, if indeed there is a change in the law, until the Finance Bill is done. There is, however, no need to wait until the Finance Bill is done. Taxation can be reviewed at other times too. Without a doubt, if the Minister was so disposed, he could agree.

I welcome that the Minister said he will meet with the cross-Border group. He could also agree that this is an important piece of work and ask his officials to look at it and to furnish a report that could be laid before the Houses or published. That could be done in three, four or

five months. It absolutely does not necessitate, and there is nothing set down in law to suggest, that it must wait for the tax strategy group to deal with the issue.

On that basis, and on the basis of lack of urgency, I will press this amendment.

Amendment put:

<i>The Dáil divided: Tá, 52; Níl, 80; Staon, 0.</i>		
<i>Tá</i>	<i>Níl</i>	<i>Staon</i>
<i>Andrews, Chris.</i>	<i>Berry, Cathal.</i>	
<i>Barry, Mick.</i>	<i>Brophy, Colm.</i>	
<i>Boyd Barrett, Richard.</i>	<i>Browne, James.</i>	
<i>Brady, John.</i>	<i>Bruton, Richard.</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>Canney, Seán.</i>	<i>Cahill, Jackie.</i>	
<i>Clarke, Sorca.</i>	<i>Calleary, Dara.</i>	
<i>Collins, Joan.</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>Costello, Patrick.</i>	
<i>Daly, Pa.</i>	<i>Coveney, Simon.</i>	
<i>Doherty, Pearse.</i>	<i>Cowen, Barry.</i>	
<i>Donnelly, Paul.</i>	<i>Crowe, Cathal.</i>	
<i>Ellis, Dessie.</i>	<i>Devlin, Cormac.</i>	
<i>Farrell, Mairéad.</i>	<i>Dillon, Alan.</i>	
<i>Fitzmaurice, Michael.</i>	<i>Donohoe, Paschal.</i>	
<i>Gould, Thomas.</i>	<i>Duffy, Francis Noel.</i>	
<i>Guirke, Johnny.</i>	<i>Durkan, Bernard J.</i>	
<i>Harkin, Marian.</i>	<i>English, Damien.</i>	
<i>Healy-Rae, Michael.</i>	<i>Farrell, Alan.</i>	
<i>Kelly, Alan.</i>	<i>Feighan, Frankie.</i>	
<i>Kenny, Martin.</i>	<i>Fitzpatrick, Peter.</i>	
<i>Kerrane, Claire.</i>	<i>Flaherty, Joe.</i>	
<i>Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.</i>	<i>Flanagan, Charles.</i>	
<i>McGrath, Mattie.</i>	<i>Fleming, Sean.</i>	
<i>Mitchell, Denise.</i>	<i>Foley, Norma.</i>	
<i>Murphy, Paul.</i>	<i>Grealish, Noel.</i>	
<i>Mythen, Johnny.</i>	<i>Griffin, Brendan.</i>	
<i>Nash, Ged.</i>	<i>Haughey, Seán.</i>	
<i>Naughten, Denis.</i>	<i>Higgins, Emer.</i>	
<i>Nolan, Carol.</i>	<i>Hourigan, Neasa.</i>	



<i>O'Callaghan, Cian.</i>	<i>Humphreys, Heather.</i>	
<i>O'Reilly, Louise.</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 Laoghaire, Donnchadh.</i>	<i>Leddin, Brian.</i>	
<i>Ó Murchú, Ruairí.</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>	<i>McAuliffe, Paul.</i>	
<i>Shortall, Róisín.</i>	<i>McConalogue, Charlie.</i>	
<i>Smith, Duncan.</i>	<i>McEntee, Helen.</i>	
<i>Tóibín, Peadar.</i>	<i>McGrath, Michael.</i>	
<i>Tully, Pauline.</i>	<i>McGuinness, John.</i>	
<i>Ward, Mark.</i>	<i>McHugh, Joe.</i>	
<i>Wynne, Violet-Anne.</i>	<i>Moynihan, Aindrias.</i>	
	<i>Moynihan, Michael.</i>	
	<i>Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.</i>	
	<i>Murphy, Verona.</i>	
	<i>Naughton, Hildegarde.</i>	
	<i>Noonan, Malcolm.</i>	
	<i>O'Brien, Darragh.</i>	
	<i>O'Brien, Joe.</i>	
	<i>O'Callaghan, Jim.</i>	
	<i>O'Connor, James.</i>	
	<i>O'Dea, Willie.</i>	
	<i>O'Donnell, Kieran.</i>	
	<i>O'Donovan, Patrick.</i>	
	<i>O'Dowd, Fergus.</i>	
	<i>O'Gorman, Roderic.</i>	
	<i>O'Sullivan, Christopher.</i>	
	<i>O'Sullivan, Pádraig.</i>	
	<i>Ó Cathasaigh, Marc.</i>	
	<i>Ó Cuív, Éamon.</i>	
	<i>Rabbitte, Anne.</i>	
	<i>Richmond, Neale.</i>	
	<i>Ring, Michael.</i>	
	<i>Ryan, Eamon.</i>	
	<i>Smith, Brendan.</i>	
	<i>Smyth, Niamh.</i>	
	<i>Smyth, Ossian.</i>	

	<b><i>Stanton, David.</i></b>	
	<b><i>Troy, Robert.</i></b>	
	<b><i>Varadkar, Leo.</i></b>	

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Denise Mitchell and Pádraig Mac Lochlainn; Níl, Deputies Brendan Griffin and Jack Chambers.

Amendment declared lost.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Amendment Nos. 7 and 8 are related and may be discussed together.

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** I move amendment No. 7:

In page 11, after line 34, to insert the following:

**“Report on tapering out of income tax credits**

**11.** The Minister shall, within six months of the passing of this Act, prepare and lay before Dáil Éireann a report on tapering out tax credits for incomes between €100,000 and €140,000 at a rate of 2.5 per cent for each €1,000 earned.”.

Amendments Nos. 7 and 8 call on the Minister to prepare and lay before the Dáil a report on progressive tax measures as we emerge from the Covid-19 crisis. In particular, it calls for the tapering out of personal and income tax credits for individual earners who have individual annual income in excess of €100,000 at a rate of 2.5% for each additional €1,000 over €100,000. Amendment No. 8 calls for an additional solidarity tax for individual incomes above €140,000. A similar measure to that provided for in amendment No. 7 was introduced by Gordon Brown as Chancellor of the Exchequer in Britain under a Labour Government many years ago. This progressive measure would bring in €236 million to the State in 2021.

It is important that as we emerge from the Covid crisis we acknowledge that there will be a sizeable deficit and higher public debt. If we are to be serious about greater access to services, dealing with the housing crisis, and an enhanced role for the State dealing with the climate challenge, we need to have a serious conversation about how all this will be funded. The Government is not being straight with the people about this. In fact, the programme for Government has ruled out any increases in income tax regardless of the level of earnings. Indeed, it suggests that the deficit will be reduced by a combination of carbon, plastic, and sugar taxes. That will be some challenge.

Fine Gael and Deputy Varadkar in particular attacked Sinn Féin during the election because we had the audacity to suggest that we might need to look at PRSI increases. He claimed this would cause huge amounts of job losses. The Tánaiste has taken to Twitter where he is now calling for PRSI increases. Sometimes some lead and others follow, but at least they are starting to talk about how we will deal with this deficit.

We need an honest conversation. Those who have the ability to shoulder an additional burden should do so. Amendment No. 7 proposes that the tax credits individuals get to reduce our tax liabilities should not be available to those at the highest levels of income and they should be tapered out on a progressive basis when individual income reaches €100,000.

I ask the Minister to consider these measures and bring forward a report. He has no problem considering other measures which effect low-income households in the form of carbon tax, which hits lone parents hardest as well as rural dwellers. Will he consider whether we should ask those at the highest ends of society earning in excess of €140,000 individual income if they should pay a little more or if they can go without their full tax credits?

**Deputy Paschal Donohoe:** I have listened to Deputy Doherty. Issues such as the role of income tax credits and the future of our income tax code can be, and I am sure will be, considered by the commission which the Government will put in place on taxation and welfare which will provide an input to the Government and the Oireachtas on decisions we may have to make in future to ensure we can pay for better public services that will be needed and changed public services that might be needed in the aftermath of Covid-19. However, I have no doubt that whatever proposals the Government or I bring forward, they will be opposed by Sinn Féin. I find it extraordinary to hear Sinn Féin talk about the need for tax measures to reduce our deficit when Deputy Doherty calls for the abolition of carbon taxes and the local property tax in discussions on the Finance Bill 2020. Deputy Doherty was very willing to quote the Economic and Social Research Institute, ESRI, earlier in the debate. We will not hear him quote the institutions and experts who argue that broadening the tax base through changes to carbon taxation and property tax plays a valuable role in ensuring we have the money to pay for the public services we need.

Deputy Doherty will no doubt stand up and make a speech saying I am unwilling to raise taxes on those who have more. He will not acknowledge the fact that we already have a very progressive tax code. He may surprise me by acknowledging that those who have more already pay more. I would like to hear him acknowledge that one of the taxes he wants to abolish, local property tax, is a very effective way of ensuring that those who have a higher level of wealth and reside in homes that they own pay a level of tax that reflects that.

The commission on taxation will be able to advise the Government, the Oireachtas and me on what we need to do to ensure a tax base sufficient to pay for the changes we will need to make to public services. When we publish that report and steps need to be taken I will not hold my breath waiting for Sinn Féin's support. The measures that currently allow us to pay for public services are the ones Sinn Féin seeks to repeal. In a few moments we will be debating carbon tax. We will not hear those who oppose it acknowledge the changes made to the social welfare code to ensure the most vulnerable are protected from carbon tax. It is just not credible for Sinn Féin members to talk about their commitment to tackling climate change while telling people we can do that without higher taxes on carbon. It is a difficult argument and for many it is a difficult sell. These are the changes we need to make if we are to decarbonise our economy. We are using the money raised to protect the most vulnerable. These issues can be looked at by the commission on taxation, but one can make a case that a higher marginal rate of tax for those who are earning more can and does affect certain types of jobs we want in our country, which in turn facilitate the creation of other jobs.

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** I am glad the Minister is sitting down so he will not fall down when I say this. Of course we have a tax system under which people who earn more pay more. I am happy to acknowledge that. Maybe the Minister will acknowledge that this is not always

the case. Perhaps he will talk about the special assignee relief programme, SARP, which prevents the highest earners from paying more. It is the result of a nice little measure in the Finance Act 2012 which the Minister has continued. The funds industry lobbied the Minister's former colleague, who is now their chief lobbyist, to extend it in subsequent Finance Acts. It is not always the case that those who earn more pay more. I am interested to hear the Minister's comments. Is he stating that the programme for Government's commitment to introducing no income tax increases is no longer valid? Is that now subject to the report of the commission of taxation?

I have no problem supporting the Minister on many initiatives. The Finance Bill 2020 is quite detailed and there are many sections in it which we support. This is where the Minister's argument falls flat. However, I will not support this Minister in bringing in sweet deals for the vultures and the bankers, or allowing the highest-earning people in this State to reduce their tax liability by hundreds of thousands of euro. By God, I will stand up and call the Minister and Fine Gael out. That is wrong. It is not fair taxation. Yes, I will fight against the introduction of taxes that the ESRI says will place a heavy burden on rural dwellers, lone parents and those on the lowest incomes.

Time and again Sinn Féin has suggested ways to raise revenue by more than we would reduce the burden on the lowest incomes. We would do this by taxing intangible assets. The Minister will not even consider that because he protects those. We would not allow the banks to carry losses forward, but the Minister does not want to deal with banks. Let us help lone parents and rural dwellers by making sure the highest earners cannot avail of the tax exemptions the Minister and his colleagues brought in. The Minister will not go there because he protects those people. I will always stand up and be counted here. I will support the Minister and his finance initiatives when they are worthy of support, but I will call out this Minister and this Government when they need to be called out.

**Deputy Paschal Donohoe:** For my part I will call out the hypocrisy of Sinn Féin members, who say they want to tackle climate change but oppose carbon taxation. I will call out the hypocrisy of a party whose Deputies lambaste measures in our country while standing over weaker and less impactful measures in Northern Ireland. I will not accept claims by Sinn Féin, Deputy Doherty or any Opposition Deputy that I, my party or this Government are motivated by anything other than supporting ordinary workers and families, the ordinary taxpayers of this country and their jobs. That motivates everything that I and this Government do.

Deputy Doherty made several claims a moment ago. He talked about SARP. Perhaps we will discuss that scheme as part of the debate on the Finance Bill 2020. The only reason we have a scheme like that is that we exist in a world which Deputy Doherty either does not understand or does not want to recognise. Other countries want the jobs that we have brought to Ireland. That is why we have this scheme. We have corporation tax schemes because foreign direct investment is valuable. Other countries compete for it. The jobs that are sustained in this country by policies that I and the previous Government have stood over, which Deputy Doherty and Sinn Féin have relentlessly attacked, are one of the engines of our tax take. These policies keep jobs in our country at a time of such need.

We will have a debate about the Finance Bill 2020. In the years to come we will have a debate about the kind of economy we want and the policies we will need. This economy's ability to recover and raise the tax revenue we will need has been created by the very policies Deputy Doherty and Sinn Féin have relentlessly opposed and voted against.

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** More nonsense from the Minister. Can he tell me how his policy of rolling out the red carpet for the vulture funds went? These funds bought hundreds of millions of euro worth of Irish assets and mortgages and do not pay a penny in tax on them. Even today they use charity structures under the Minister's nose. How does that benefit Irish society? What is the benefit of real estate investment trusts, REITs, and other structures, which charge the highest rents in this State, push up house prices and do not pay corporation tax, capital gains tax or tax on their rental income? The Minister tried to divert the argument to corporation tax. Sinn Féin supports the 12.5% corporation tax rate. We disagree with the structures and measures in the Finance Bill 2020 that enable these entities to further reduce their tax liability, in some cases to zero. That is what we stand against.

The Minister asks me to accept his bona fides. I have no problem in doing so, but he must prove them to me. He should close the loopholes for section 110 companies. He should make sure the vulture funds pay their taxes and stop REITs and Irish real estate funds, IREFs, exploiting the Irish property market. He should make sure the highest earners in the State are not able to reduce their tax liability to an effective rate lower than what a hairdresser or butcher in rural Ireland would pay. If the Minister shows it to me, I will support him, but he does not because time and time again littered in these Finance Bills are these types of measures which protect the elite, and that is the problem. Where that happens, I will call it out. That is my job. Where the Minister does something that is worthy of support, he will have my support.

The Minister has concluded his two opportunities to speak on this matter.

**Deputy Paschal Donohoe:** I will not take lectures on any elites on our island from the richest party in our country.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** The proposer has the right to reply and that is it.

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** One can tell the Minister has lost the argument when he does not deal with the substance of the issue.

Amendment put and declared lost.

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** I move amendment No. 8:

In page 11, after line 34, to insert the following:

**“Report on income levy on high incomes**

11. The Minister shall, within six months of the passing of this Act, prepare and lay before Dáil Éireann a report on the introduction of a high-income levy of 5 per cent on high incomes in excess of €140,000.”.

Amendment put and declared lost.

**Deputy Mairéad Farrell:** I move amendment No. 9:

In page 11, after line 34, to the following:

**“Report on income tax relief**

11. The Minister shall, within six months of the passing of this Act, prepare and lay before Dáil Éireann a report on an income tax relief equivalent in value to 8.3 per cent



of annual rent to all private rental tenants not already in receipt of any State subsidy, examining the social and economic impact of this measure in the context of high levels of rent.”.

We know that rents are extortionate and unsustainable for so many ordinary workers and families, as mentioned in a previous contribution. We know there is a huge cohort of people - I am speaking especially of my age group - who have had to move back home. I know many couples who have had to move back in with their respective parents while they struggle to save to try to get a mortgage. The help-to-buy scheme we talked about earlier does not help. We really need to address this. We need to address the whole issue of rents.

This amendment is a proposal to put money back into the pockets of renters and to give that little bit of support to those who have been struggling for so long trying to rent. We have been told it is unsustainable to pay over 30% of one’s income on rent and we know fine rightly that in this State the very unfortunate reality is that that percentage is far higher for most people who are renting. In my home town of Galway city rents are extortionate and people cannot pay them. A huge cohort of people fall outside the criteria to qualify for any kind of financial assistance from the State to pay these rents. They simply cannot afford their rents. We need to do something about this. We need to put money back into these renters’ pockets. I urge the Minister to consider this amendment and to consider providing the report called for in it.

**Deputy Paschal Donohoe:** Tax relief in respect of rent paid was abolished in budget 2011 and is no longer available to those who commenced renting for the first time from 8 December 2010. This followed a recommendation of the 2009 report by the Commission on Taxation that rent relief should be discontinued. The view of this independent commission was that, in the same manner in which mortgage interest relief increased the cost of housing, rent relief increased the cost of private rented accommodation. Accordingly, the result of reintroducing this relief could well be a transfer of Exchequer funding directly to landlords, which would not have the intended effect of reducing the pressure on tenants. In addition, a tax credit of this nature would be of little benefit to lower-income workers, the unemployed and students, who might not receive the relief as they might not be paying sufficient levels of income tax.

We have other measures in place that seek to deal with the great challenge of rising rents that has been described by Deputies Pearse Doherty and Mairéad Farrell. This is why there is legislation in place on rental pressure zones and why, for example, measures have been in place during the pandemic to protect tenants from pressures they could face and are facing from their landlords. It is for these reasons and others that I do not propose to accept this amendment.

**Deputy Mairéad Farrell:** I think this would be an extremely effective way of putting money back into renters’ pockets. We have a huge issue, in particular in our cities, of sky-high rents, and I do not see the measures the Government has introduced having a significant effect on those people who come to my weekly clinics telling me they cannot afford their rents and asking me what they can avail of and what can be done. I say to them there is nothing out there to help them when they are struggling and trying to pay their rent month after month. This measure, in my view, would be an effective way of dealing with this, and I ask the Minister to take another look at it.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** I wish to say a few words in support of this amendment. Today Inner City Helping the Homeless was outside Leinster House to raise awareness of the fact that 56 people who are homeless have died in this city so far this year. That figure is far higher than

last year's or the figure the year before, even though this year is not out and December is a cruel month for people who are homeless. This is happening for a number of reasons. The Minister has stated he will hold an investigation into this. I tabled a parliamentary question just the other day to see what state that investigation is at. It has not been launched yet. One of the reasons for these levels of homelessness and death is the fact that rents are currently far out of kilter with where they should be. In Dublin a yearly rent of €20,000 is not unusual. Rents in this city are currently higher than their Celtic tiger peak. The fact that rents are so high and so unaffordable to such a large section of society should be a flashing neon warning light to the Minister of the ineffectiveness and the failure of Government policy on housing and rents. Something has to be done, more than just putting a 4% rent pressure zone break on rents in particular areas. There needs to be material support to families who are bursting themselves paying perhaps 50% to 60% of their take-home income monthly on rent. I urge the Minister be less theoretical and more practical in people's lives.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** I do not think the tax system is the primary way through which to alleviate our extortionate rents but I would support this or any other measure that would give any relief to people paying an absolutely shocking proportion of their income on keeping a roof over their head. I would be surprised if the Minister could stand over the *status quo*, whether he agrees with this measure or what I think is necessary, that is, real rent controls. By that I mean rent controls whereby a body - it could be a beefed up Residential Tenancies Board or the local authority - just goes in and sets rents at affordable levels and says to landlords: "You cannot charge any more than this." The rough guideline that would be applied is that rents or any other accommodation costs should not be more than about 25% to 30% of an average worker's income, while perhaps looking specifically at the property in question but setting a maximum that any landlord could charge for a property. Of course, even those sorts of rent controls will not solve the problem because the market will not deliver the affordable rents we need for the majority of working people. The State itself has to deliver at scale council housing and affordable rental housing. That said, even if the Minister does not agree with the amendment, surely he must acknowledge we have an absolutely out of control-----

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Thank you, Deputy.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** Is there a limit on my time?

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** There is. The Deputy had two minutes and they are up.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** Sorry. The Minister must acknowledge there is a problem that is out of control and that the current policies are not addressing it.

**Deputy Paschal Donohoe:** Of course I acknowledge there are significant challenges within the rental market. It could be the case that some things in the rental market will be changed by what is happening with Covid-19 or its aftermath, but that does not take away from the great challenges that are there at the moment. That is why, for example, rental pressure zones are in place, as the Deputy is aware, and it is why so much work is under way to try to deliver more homes and apartments. I believe that at the heart of how we will resolve the issues to which the Deputy is referring is building more homes, including more homes available for rent. An increased number of homes being available brings stability to rent levels and I hope it will, over time, also lead to their greater affordability. I genuinely do not believe that bringing in a tax credit would aid that in any way. I think there is a significant risk that the proposed tax credit would be a very expensive relief for taxpayers and would simply result in higher rents. I do not

believe it would help those who need help the most. I believe it would ultimately end up with taxpayers subsidising a higher level of rent. I do not wish to see that happening. I believe the best way of addressing the issue is through the building and provision of more homes to allow more homes to be rented.

**Deputy Mairéad Farrell:** Of course I want to see houses being built. I want to see public houses and affordable houses being built. I want to see an affordable housing plan. As I stated earlier to the Minister, there was a ten-year period during which not one social house was built in Galway city. That is the reality with which we are dealing. The fact of the matter is that a significant number of people are renting because of bad housing policy decisions by Government after Government. That is the reality. We do want to see a big housing build plan, but what will we say to the people who need to pay their rent this month, next month and the month after that? What will we say to those who are struggling, month after month, to pay their rent? This is not something the Opposition has made up. All Members know that many people simply cannot afford to pay their rent.

The amendment asks for a report to be prepared. The Minister stated that he does not agree that a relief such as that suggested in the amendment should be brought in. Let us see the report and discover what impact it would have. I do not see why he is not agreeing to have a report prepared in order to let us take a look at the issue. The reality of the matter is that it is not sustainable to continue putting that significant financial stress on families and young workers. It is wrong. I encourage the Minister to think about that again and to support the preparation of a report to examine this issue.

Amendment put and declared lost.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** I move amendment No. 10:

In page 11, after line 34, to insert the following:

“11. Within three months of the passing of this Act, the Minister shall produce a report on abolishing the USC on all those earning less than €70,000 per year and replacing it with an emergency Covid-19 Solidarity Tax on the incomes of those earning in excess of €100,000 per year and on the profits of companies whose net profits exceed €1 million per year.”.

The amendment proposes the introduction of a Covid solidarity tax, in line with calls that are being made across the world for such taxes. Some jurisdictions are actually implementing Covid solidarity taxes to give real effect to the idea that we are all in it together. People Before Profit and Solidarity have for a very long time argued that there is a significant disparity in the distribution of income and wealth and that the gap between the rich and the poor in terms of income and wealth grows pretty much every year, year on year, has grown to really quite obscene levels in recent years and, even without Covid-19, needs to be addressed.

I know the Minister has read *Capital in the Twenty-first Century* by Thomas Piketty and therefore knows the argument but, in reality, it has not featured in the thinking of any Government since I was elected to the Dáil to think, as it heads into a budget, that one of the things it must do is to narrow the gap between rich and poor. I have never heard that feature as a budget priority. I have never heard a Minister for Finance get up on budget day and say it is a problem that the richest 10% of the population have 58% of the wealth or that the richest 1% have more wealth than the poorest 50%. That is just not deemed a problem. However, if one told any

schoolchild that 1% of the population has more wealth than the poorest half of the population, I think that child would express disgust and say something should be done about it, that it is not fair, and would ask how that could be the case. Yet it is the case and the gap grows again and again, year on year.

However, along came Covid and, suddenly, in order to achieve the collective social action that was necessary to prevent Covid-19 overwhelming society, Governments were forced to come up with what could be a socialist slogan coined by Karl Marx or James Connolly - “We are all in it together”. As people understood the threat of Covid-19, they bought into that slogan and the idea that people had to make sacrifices for the greater good, for the collective good, because we should all be in it together.

As all Members know, some people paid a very harsh price for Covid-19. Some people paid with their lives and others paid with severe illness. Some people paid with being worked to the bone on the front line of the health services. Some of those working to the bone in the health services, such as student nurses and midwives, were not getting paid at all for doing so. Some people lost their jobs and livelihoods because of the public measures they embraced with great commitment even though it meant significant economic sacrifice that continues even now for them and their families. Those working in certain sectors have not had a day’s work since the measures were introduced in March, such as musicians and others in the arts and entertainment industry, those in the events sector and bar workers. Taxi drivers have had their incomes slaughtered and many of them have not worked since March because there is no work out there. All those people have really suffered in the collective effort fuelled by the belief that we are all in it together. Frankly, although the Government will say the supports provided are unprecedented, the lack of supports for many of those people will be felt significantly as we head into Christmas because their incomes are down.

However, some others have seen their incomes continue at a high level and the profits made by some of the wealthiest corporations have actually shot up. In the context of Covid and against the background of us all being in it together, if the Government did not accept before now it was time for a wealth tax in order to redistribute wealth for a greater level of equality, surely it would accept there is a case for doing that now when some people are going to enter into the Christmas period significantly impoverished by what has happened over the past year and is still happening, as well, maybe, if we were to take it a step further, to address the deep, growing and obscene structural inequalities in wealth and income. We have had all the rhetoric about Covid being a milestone and threshold moment where we will go forward to a new type of normality, learn the lessons of the existential threat Covid has presented, identify new priorities around what is important and which workers are essential, and all the rest of it. If all of that is to mean anything and not just be hollow words that were used to elicit a bit of sacrifice from people, surely the time has come for a solidarity tax to be paid by the big and wealthy corporations and the very richest in our society in order to redistribute some of that wealth, income and profits to those who are suffering because of structural inequality and the particular hardships they have endured in the course of the Covid-19 crisis.

**Deputy Paschal Donohoe:** A total of 1% of taxpayers in Ireland pay 23% of the total income tax paid in the country. This reflects the reality that those who have the most are paying the most. The top 20% of earners in the country will pay 77% of the total income tax and USC that is collected in Ireland in 2020. When Deputy Boyd Barrett calls for those who have more to pay more, the reality is that we have a tax code that is already delivering that. The way in which USC is structured and how it interacts with income tax means that those who have a far

higher level of income than others pay a far higher level of tax than others. When the Deputy talks about putting in place a fairer tax system, we should evaluate that call against the fact that we already have a tax code which ensures that those in our country who are very wealthy pay a high level of income tax. That is as it should be and it is what our system delivers.

I note that the Deputy did not specify the level of income tax rates that would apply under his proposal. It is estimated that the removal of the application of USC on all incomes below €70,000, as suggested, would cost approximately €1.6 billion in a single year. Assuming no other policy changes were made to the structure of the charge, it is likely that if a new tax took the form of a new USC rate for those earning more than €100,000, it would need to be as high as 14.6%. That, in turn, would mean that the marginal rates of tax for those who earn more would go up very quickly. The Deputy would probably be comfortable with that and it is probably something he would want to achieve. However, for me, there are two considerations that are important in this debate. The first is having a tax code which ensures that those who have more income pay more tax. The other consideration is having a tax code which ensures that jobs which could be located in other countries are located in Ireland. The tax code we have and that I am defending gets the balance right between being fair and being competitive in ensuring we have certain kinds of work and certain numbers of jobs located within our country.

While I absolutely can understand the attraction of the measure the Deputy is proposing, it would not be in the best interest of ensuring we have a tax code that continues to be competitive and continues to do nearly the most important thing for a tax code to do in an open economy like Ireland, which is to help in keeping jobs in the country. The battle for jobs and foreign direct investment is one that is only going to intensify in the years to come. I believe that what Deputy Boyd Barrett is looking to do would be harmful to Ireland in the contest for those jobs. For that reason, the policies he is advocating would not be good for our country and keeping jobs in our country. I also do not believe that this matter is best dealt with by a report arising out of the Finance Bill. Therefore, I do not accept the Deputy's amendment.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** I will offer the Minister an example of something that was in the news today which indicates the need for some redistribution. Taking one of the tax breaks that currently go to wealthy executives in some of the big multinational corporations the Minister is talking about - the figures are broadly similar for some of these tax breaks - the special assignee relief programme, SARP, will cost approximately €8 million this year. The Minister will tell me if I have got that exactly right. It is not a huge amount but it is a tax relief that goes to people on the very highest salaries. That figure is approximately the amount that would have allowed the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media to give a grant to every single musician who applied for the music industry stimulus package. There was not enough money in that pot - as I said, the amount needed was around €8 million - and 87% of the 1,400 artists who applied to the fund in order to record a single or album this year were denied the support. These are people whose jobs and livelihoods have been impacted by the Covid crisis. Would it not be fairer if some of the tax breaks that are on offer, instead of going to a handful of already rich people, went to the 1,400 musicians who are on their knees because of the pandemic? That is just a small instance but it is a telling one in terms of the inequality to which I referred. The reason the top 1% or 10% pay such a high proportion of tax is that they have approximately 40% of all income and some 58% of all wealth.

**Deputy Paschal Donohoe:** The Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media, Deputy Catherine Martin, put in place the music stimulus fund to which the Deputy referred to support artists at this very difficult time. She has the ability to continue the fund into



2021 and I hope those artists who were unsuccessful in gaining access to it thus far may be able to do so later this year or next year.

The other side of the coin the Deputy is referring to is the question of how we fund the kinds of initiatives he is calling for, such as the music stimulus fund, and many of the public services we have and for which the Deputy wants more funding. Ours is a small country in which there is a big contest under way for the type of investment we currently have and to keep that investment in place. An element of that is having personal tax codes that are competitive. The Deputy referred to the group of people who work in very senior roles in very large companies in this country and are very well paid, some of whom, as he mentioned, participate in SARP. Their location here in Ireland and the work they do are part of the reason we have hundreds of thousands of people working in the companies they run. I assure the Deputy that when it comes to the roles we are discussing, we are surrounded by countries that would be very eager to see that work located elsewhere. In that context, I believe the tax code we have gets the balance right between being competitive and being fair. It delivers the kind of fairness of taxation that I referred to a moment ago.

*8 o'clock*

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** The argument has been made but I will make two brief points. Mr. Brendan Boyle, a Congressman from Pennsylvania, spoke on “Morning Ireland” on the day of Mr. Biden’s victory. He was asked about Ireland’s low corporate tax rate, tax breaks and so forth. He said that is not the main reason they are here. He was questioned quite hard by the “Morning Ireland” team that morning and he said they were not here primarily for that reason but because Irish people are English speaking, there is a skilled and educated workforce and Ireland is part of the European market. Tax is of lesser importance. When he was asked directly whether the multinationals would leave if we increased the tax take from them a little, he said he did not think so. I do not buy the argument that they could not pay a little more than, in some cases, the 1% or 2% they are paying, not the 12.5% they are supposed to be paying.

As important as those executives are, I do not believe they would leave if some of the tax breaks they are getting on their inflated salaries went to the musicians. Musicians have contributed as much culturally, economically and in every other way to the prosperity and richness of our country in the broadest sense as any executive of a multinational company. In fact, they have contributed significantly more.

Amendment put and declared lost.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Amendments Nos. 11 to 22, inclusive, and 24 to 57, inclusive, are related and may be discussed together.

**Deputy Paschal Donohoe:** I move amendment No. 11:

In page 12, line 12, to delete “2020” and substitute “2020)”.

As indicated on Committee Stage, I propose a number of amendments relating to the Covid restrictions support scheme, CRSS. This has been a very challenging period for businesses and it may take some time and additional cost to reopen once the restrictions are lifted. I therefore propose an extra restart week to be paid to businesses, the week after the restrictions are lifted, as an additional support to them in reopening. The additional week is payable if the restrictions are in place for three weeks or more and can be claimed at the end of the restriction period.

It was and is my intention that CRSS would commence on budget day, 13 October. At present, section 74(8) of the Finance Bill, as initiated, provides that: “Except where otherwise expressly provided for in *Part I*, that Part shall come into operation on 1 January 2021”. I propose an amendment that will expressly provide that CRSS will be effective from 15 October 2020. This will ensure that CRSS is given legal effect from the earliest possible opportunity.

The legislation currently provides that a claim for the Covid restrictions support scheme must be made no later than eight weeks from the date on which the claim period to which the claim relates is commenced. To ensure that no business is adversely affected where additional information is required to enable the business to register for CRSS, I am proposing an amendment to allow a claim to be made within three weeks of the registration date, if that date is after the eight weeks. An eight-week limit following the end of the scheme of 31 March 2021 for registrations is also included to ensure that the costs related to the scheme will be incurred within a reasonable period.

On Committee Stage a provision was introduced whereby over-claims would be deducted from future claims. I now propose that where no future claims take place, warehousing provisions similar to those in place for the temporary wage subsidy scheme repayments will apply. If a business has inadvertently been overpaid due to the fact that restrictions were lifted early, the overpayment shall be dealt with as follows. The business may not claim the restart week. Where a balance remains, any further claim will be reduced by that amount. Interest will only start accumulating on these specific overpayments after the specified period ends, which is 13 October 2020 to 31 March 2021, or later if extended. Where an excess balance remains, this will be dealt with on a case-by-case basis after the specified period ends.

New sections are being introduced, with the result that there is a need to re-number subsequent sections and references.

With regard to the employment conditions which Deputies Boyd Barrett, Barry, Gino Kenny, Paul Murphy and Bríd Smith seek to introduce, I accept they are important issues but the scheme is not the appropriate place in which to address them. As we discussed previously, any additional conditionality will make it more difficult for employers to benefit from the CRSS and could have the effect of job losses. That is not the intention of the Deputies, but it could well be an unintended consequence. In addition, the conditions put forward go beyond the remit of the Revenue Commissioners, who operate the Covid scheme, and other bodies, including the Workplace Relations Commission, have responsibilities in this area.

**Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire:** I wish to make a specific point about the CRSS and how it relates to pubs, but I will first make a general point on an issue that has been widely discussed. There is much frustration among the public. Undoubtedly, we all appreciate the situation we are in and the public health advice, but it is vital not only that the tens of thousands of people who are working in the hospitality industry, and particularly in the drinking pubs that cannot reopen at this point, get the support they need now, but also that there are supports and, perhaps, incentives for them in the coming weeks and months when they get to reopen and offer people their services. It is a very large industry and I am thinking mainly of the people who work in it and the families who depend on it.

The particular point I wish to make about the CRSS relates to the pubs that fall in between. I would appreciate the Minister’s attention to this because I want him to understand the point properly. There is a category of pubs that falls between the food pubs, or gastropubs as some

people call them, and the drinking pubs, and they are concerned that they are in a bind with regard to the CRSS. I will give the Minister an example. I spoke to a person, Donnchadh is his name as it happens, who runs Cashmans bar in Cork city. It is in the city centre. It has a kitchen and serves food. It has long served food. It was not an innovation as a result of Covid-19 or the like. I have eaten there on one or two occasions. It serves food between noon and approximately 3 p.m. when there is generally no other custom.

Donnchadh has looked over his books and food represents about 7% of his turnover. The bar is located in the city centre where fewer people are working. It is next to Cork Opera House in the city so, traditionally, at Christmas approximately 40% of his trade came from the pantomimes, plays and other events at that venue. He believes that the vast majority of his trade relates to drinking customers, and much of that trade is down. It does not make sense for him to open the premises. It is not financially viable for him to open. His concern is that because he has a kitchen and, strictly speaking, might be allowed to open, he cannot avail of the CRSS. That would be perverse and grossly unfair. It would not be a real reflection of the business.

That is not the only business in this situation. I can think from the top of my head of businesses that have not been in contact with me but which I presume are in a similar situation. I am sure that is equally true of pubs in cities and towns across the country. As I understand it, this is not the end of the road for the Bill, as it has to go back to the Seanad. This does not just apply to the hospitality sector. There must be circumstances in which a business can theoretically open because the restrictions do not apply in a legal sense, but where it would be economically unviable for it to do so. We must take cognisance of that. I agree that the CRSS is necessary and valuable. Its purpose is to support businesses that are affected by restrictions due to Covid, but there must also be a recognition that given the place we are in at this moment in time, it is not viable for businesses to open and it would be perverse to treat them as if they could open. A pub that gets 7% of its trade from food is expected to open to serve food but, in reality, it would lose far more money than it would make. However, it cannot stay closed even though that would be the sensible thing to do because it cannot avail of the CRSS. That seems to be perverse. I appeal to the Minister's judgment and ask him to speak to his officials and bring forward an amendment to take account of the very particular set of circumstances in the hospitality trade and more broadly.

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** I wish to speak on this issue as well. I appreciate the amendment the Minister is bringing forward to the CRSS scheme. We also dealt with a large number of amendments on Committee Stage. The original version of the Bill has been amended 80 or 90 times. I accept that most of the amendments are technical and we support them.

The issue here is of one substance. I appreciate the challenges when one is designing a scheme and that there will be people or businesses on either side of the lines that must be drawn when the criteria are being created. The large number of amendments that have been brought forward on Committee and Report Stages speak to the fact that the measure has had to be continually tweaked. Rightly so, as there is an issue here. I have been contacted by a key activist in Donegal, Brian Carr from Glenties, who spoke with members of the Licensed Vintners Association in Donegal today and relayed their concerns to me, which are similar to those outlined by Deputy Ó Laoghaire. Pubs that are considered gastropubs, that were serving food this time last year, are technically no longer restricted from opening because they have a kitchen and the ability to serve food. However, because food is a minor part of the overall business, the owners believe it is important for them to remain closed but by not opening, they cannot avail of the CRSS scheme. In some cases, the pub next door, which is closed, can avail of the CRSS

scheme. That is the challenge here. I ask the Minister to take this issue on board.

I appreciate that when one draws lines, there will always be cases on either side of them. This is an important issue. One could argue that it forces a pub to open, serve food and allow people to access the premises. I am also mindful, for example, that if a public house that serves food can maintain a distance of 2 m or greater between tables, the time limit does not apply. However, it would be far more desirable to have a time limit. The changes to the regulations, which prevented pubs with a chipper outside the back door or the front door calling themselves gastropubs, were to ensure there was no exploitation of the measure. However, the other side of the coin is that some pubs fall into the category of gastropub because they have the ability to cook food, but food is only a very small part of the business. Such premises are able to open, but if they do not open they cannot avail of the CRSS because of the restriction. I am not sure how the issue can be addressed but it is one that needs to be considered and addressed.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** Covid is a real illness and we must do our best to try to reduce its incidence in the State. I do not envy the task the Minister and Cabinet have at times in trying to work out where the balance and proportion lie with regard to restrictions. I am of the view that the country has been overly aggressive when it comes to restrictions. We have the second lowest level of Covid in the European Union. That is partially because we have had the sixth strictest regime on the planet in recent months. That would be fine if there was not a massive cost to those restrictions. They have an incredible cost when it comes to physical health, mental health, society and people's ability to socialise and do business. So many businesses have been completely wiped out, many of which will not return to existence. The Companies Registration Office indicated to me that some 3,500 businesses have already gone completely bust, despite the fact that it will not know the total number of businesses that have gone bust until the end of the tax year next year when that becomes abundantly clear. We know that tens of thousands of businesses are likely to have been totalled in recent months, despite the supports the Government has provided. They have been totalled in many ways because Ireland has been an outlier regarding the severity of the restrictions it has imposed.

At the start of this process, the Government was invested in the idea of regional lockdowns, so we had a situation where the focus was on Laois and Kildare. That decision was lauded for having achieved what was desired at the time in reducing the incidence in those counties. Ireland generally has a low incidence of Covid but certain counties have a very low incidence rate. Several have a rate below 50 cases per 100,000 in the past 14 days. Counties Wexford, Westmeath, Galway and Kerry have a very low incidence. Logic would dictate that to be proportionate and balanced the Government should seek to be less forceful in restrictions in those four counties, especially when it comes to wet pubs. The idea that the presence of a chef in a pub could magically delete any incidence of Covid in the pub is nonsense. We also know that pubs typically tend to be a little more of a controlled environment than homes, where the biggest number of cases arise. In the run-up to Christmas, is it possible for the Government to refocus on having a degree of regional difference in how it applies the restrictions?

I add my voice to the calls for the CRSS to be more flexible. No matter what way one cuts this up, there will always be people on the wrong side of any regulations. The necessity for flexibility in the regulations is to make sure people who have missed out on the support for whatever reason are no longer left out. I call on the Minister to ensure that flexibility is in place.

**Deputy Mick Barry:** I wish to make some points about the CRSS scheme and the conditions attached to it. Amendment No. 22 proposes that four conditions be attached. In order to

be eligible to get the CRSS an employer would need to demonstrate that he or she pays a living wage to employees. If an employee wishes to join a trade union, he or she must have the facility to have the union recognised in the workplace. The employer must operate a sick leave scheme for employees and must also make contributions to a pension scheme for employees. The Minister is not opposed, in principle, to the idea of conditions being attached because there is already one condition, which is that the employer in question be tax-compliant. I propose that these four conditions be added.

The essence of the matter is this. Does the CRSS arrangement effectively have no conditions attached, or just one? Could we use this as a lever to improve the rights of workers in the workplace? In other countries, a similar type of scheme has been used as a lever with those types of conditions attached. I am arguing the same should be done with this. The scheme uses taxpayers' money and we should see the maintenance of businesses and jobs but also the improvement of workers' rights in those conditions of employment.

I do not accept the argument that the Minister makes about this being a threat to businesses and jobs. The achievement of basic, standard and decent workers' rights in a place of employment should not be an issue when it comes to the future of a job or the place of employment.

The CRSS is available to a business that has a premises. Taxi drivers comprise a category that should be able to apply for the CRSS as their standard of living and incomes have been decimated by Covid-19. The measures taken in the budget to counteract this have not gone nearly far enough to compensate the taxi drivers in any measure. It seems unfair that if a business has a premises, the owner can apply for CRSS but taxi drivers cannot do it. The cab should be counted as a premises and the taxi drivers should be included in this scheme. I am sure Deputy Boyd Barrett will have something to say on this matter as well.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Has Deputy Boyd Barrett indicated a wish to contribute?

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** I have. I will return to the example I gave earlier as it underlines the point we made on Committee Stage on the CRSS. It is that various Covid-related income supports have been made available but very significant groups have been left out. I acknowledge that many of these are important interventions to support the incomes of people who have been significantly affected in that they are either not able to work at all or earn a viable income.

Taxi drivers have been left out, which is not fair. Their premises are, in effect, their cars. Like a premises, they must pay insurance on a car, maintain it and pay for fuel when driving around looking for work. These are costs of work for a taxi driver. For certain sizes of businesses that happen to have premises, the Government has indicated it will contribute to covering those costs because it knows that people either cannot work now due to restrictions or their ability to generate income is significantly affected by restrictions. It is helping to cover those ongoing costs but the Government is still excluding a cohort of people who have those costs but do not have a premises.

This is not fair and I do not know how anybody could say with a straight face that it is. The percentage of income being lost by taxi drivers is considerably more than that of many of the recipients of this scheme. Many taxi drivers are simply not going back on the ranks because the work is not there. They know if they all went back to work, a driver would be lucky to get one job per week. That may improve a little over the next few weeks but on a rank at St. Stephen's



Green or anywhere else over the past six or seven weeks, we could see them sitting in their taxis. It is depressing to look at them waiting for hours on a fare. When they finish with a fare, they might be back at the rank for another two hours. They may literally jump for joy if they get one fare but often the cost of going to work on the day would be greater than the amount of income earned. In every other sense, the taxi drivers tick the boxes for the CRSS but they are excluded because they do not have a premises, which is not fair.

There is also the case of musicians and people whose jobs are related to the industry, including sound and light engineers, etc. These people may not have a premises but they must travel for work and carry costs if doing a recording in a studio, for example. They carry those costs in order to sustain their art but they are also excluded from the scheme. After this there is the insult of applying for an award from the Department dealing with arts which is refusing 87% of applications. Imagine how demoralising and insulting that is for talented people who cannot get the CRSS either. It is just not fair.

We have said this repeatedly to the Minister and I am genuinely appealing to him. I know he thinks about such matters so please think about what we are saying here. There is an unjust exclusion of a number of categories of workers who have been worst hit by the Covid restrictions imposed by the Government. They are being unfairly excluded when others, who in some cases have been less harshly hit, get access to the scheme. People have access who might have more ability to absorb a hit because they may have made more money in the past. Meanwhile, the people in the most difficult position are being excluded. This cannot be justified.

Please do not reply by saying these people get the pandemic unemployment payment, which has been cut and is just not enough to cover costs. These are people who were able to earn a half-decent income and could pay their costs and so on. They have mortgages and car repayments that need to be made and they cannot do it on the PUP. They are clocking up debt all the time because of the pandemic. It is a complete abandonment of the “all in it together” principle at the most basic level not to recognise that these people are in trouble and they need targeted, additional, justified and legitimate support.

I really believe the Minister should consider this. Our amendment only calls for a review, which is minimal action, but I want not just a review but for the Government to acknowledge that it is unfair to leave out these people and do something urgently about it. It is very demoralising for these decent people. They want to work and do not want to depend on the State. They have been put in this position through no fault of their own and they need a hand now. It is the appeal I am making and I really hope the Minister responds to it.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** I too make what is a badly needed appeal. I do not know how the Minister does not get this. As Deputy Boyd Barrett has said, surely he knows about this from the taxi drivers, musicians and artists. He might not know from the countryside the plight of self-employed Readymix truck owners, the self-employed drivers of flatbed and tipper trucks. He might not know about the minibuses driven by their owners. There is a plethora of groups that do not have a rateable premises and they do not qualify for the scheme as a result.

There is also the case of musicians, sound and light engineers, whose vehicles and equipment could be worth €100,000. At least that is how much they cost. In many cases they used their homes as collateral to buy their equipment. They did not mind doing that; they were brave and proud. They loved their talent and loved their business. They were self-employed and maybe they employed other people at times as well and it is dreadful to think they cannot get

anything. The Minister removed the moratorium as well, allowing the banks to go after them and some of those people cannot sleep now. They are ill now because they are so worried and frightened. They have wives and families to support and bills to pay.

Taxi drivers have also been badly impacted. Nobody in the last several months needed a taxi and I feel so sorry for them. We also have the man in the bread van. There are lots of self-employed people who pay their taxes and who are registered. They want to work. They do not mind working and they work long and arduous hours in arduous jobs, providing a service to the public. The public reciprocates by working with them, hiring or engaging them and that is the way it works. That is what makes them tick.

Musicians love to impart their talent, culture, teanga and everything in song and the people love it and are missing it. There is so much sadness and people are down about it because they love it. They would travel anywhere to hear it. They will get it on Zoom if they can but many people cannot and do not get it. We need to think of these people. There are large cohorts of people affected. Many artists applied for grants but only a small minority got them. I have nothing against the Arts Council but it got huge funding and some of the bigger companies got huge funding. Some of them got multiple funding from different schemes but the ordinary daoine beaga, the man in the van, the taxi or the truck, were not able to get anything. They will be needed again if we are going to have a recovering economy. They will be needed to supply goods, to balance supply and demand and kick-start our economy. Above all, they have wives or partners and families and they need to be supported and helped. Their children have to be educated, college fees have to be paid and everything else. It is very short sighted. They cannot get supports just because they do not have a rateable premises. What happened to “Ní neart go cur le chéile”? What happened to “We are all in this together”? We are not in it together. The banks are knocking on doors. Revenue is also knocking on doors in some cases, or writing to these people and they are so fearful, especially in these dark, long days. They are seeing lockdowns continuing and they are not allowed to make a living. They must be entitled to get some supports from the State because they would be working if they were allowed to work and to work safely.

I came over here in a taxi this evening. The driver had spent money converting his taxi and it was quite safe. I asked him how he was getting on. “Don’t even ask” he said. I believe he was driving just to get out of the house and to do a few runs. I thought the traffic this evening was busy enough but he said it would die after 6 p.m. He is self-employed with a newish car. It costs money for insurance, tax and so on. He has to pay those bills the same as everybody else. It is so sad that those cohorts of people - and there are many others that I did not mention - did not get the support that they deserve. Pensioners have been totally neglected because anybody over 66 did not get a penny from anywhere. All they wanted was the balance between the payment and what they had on the pension. It is heartless. We have been beating this drums for months and I do not know why the Minister cannot listen. Why can there not be some bit of equity and fairness for those groups of people who so badly need it?

**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:** I want to follow up on what Deputy Mattie McGrath has said. There are people out there who feel like the forgotten people in all of this. These are people who have worked very hard, including musicians, taxi drivers, people involved in the haulage industry, people who are on the road and who never wanted anything for nothing. They never wanted anything other than to be given the opportunity to work in a very fair way. They feel that they are being hit in an extraordinary way. They feel that what is being discussed here and the implications of this budget and this year’s Finance Bill, as well as next year’s and that

of every year for the next ten years will have an extraordinary effect on them and their livelihoods. What worries me greatly is that an awful lot of people in Ireland do not realise the full implications of what this Government is doing. It is tying the hands of future Governments to increases in a way that never happened before. The Government is unique in what it is doing to future generations and future politicians, who are having their hands tied now. I have great concerns about it and am speaking on behalf of those hard-working people who are going to have to pay the price for what is contained in this Bill. I want to speak up for them and for the people in County Kerry whom I am very glad to represent. I think of the taxi ranks in Tralee, Killarney, Listowel and other places like Kenmare, late at night with drivers waiting to collect fares. I think of those people who have to wait and wait for a fare in order to make a few euro only to give back an awful amount of it in excise duty and tax, every time they roll the wheels of their vehicles, the same as the people in the haulage industry. These are people who are revenue collectors for the State, the Department of Finance and ultimately, for the Minister for Finance. They are out there, working hard, collecting money to give to the Minister to run the country. The only trouble is that in the future, the Minister is going to be looking for an extraordinary amount of money from them on top of what they are already paying and I am standing up to speak on behalf of those people tonight.

**Deputy Fergus O'Dowd:** This Finance Bill is about the measures introduced in the budget and the sections we are discussing now deal with help and support for businesses. There have been very significant investments made by the Government and the taxpayer to make sure that businesses that have been affected by Covid-19 will continue to operate, notwithstanding the fact that there are very serious trading conditions for a significant number of them. It is all very well to have a go at employers and say they are not being fair to their workers, do not care about their quality of life or the burden carried by people whose jobs have been significantly affected by the reduction in business costs. In fact, the budget and this Finance Bill includes the employment wage subsidy scheme, the Covid restrictions support scheme, the restart grant scheme, the rates waiver scheme and other tax measures to support businesses, cash flow support for businesses, help for specific industries, training and mentoring and helping people who have been laid off or who are working on reduced hours, as well as social welfare support for employees.

The Government cannot do everything but it has used its leverage to borrow at very low interest rates on the international markets to pay for all of the aforementioned supports for businesses. This Government wants to support enterprise and keep workers at work. The businesses and people that have been most affected are in tourism and many are not on the east coast. There is seasonal work involved and many businesses have been affected because of the travel restrictions. People would love to go to places like County Kerry and the west of Ireland. It is important that all of the affected companies can face into the current difficulties with the supports that form part of this year's budget.

I agree that taxi drivers, for example, have had a very difficult time. However, they can continue to get the PUP and can earn up to €480 per month after some expenses are deducted without affecting their payment. I know that is nothing like the income they had previously and I know they work extremely hard. I acknowledge they work very long hours in what is a very difficult job but to say that they are not being supported is not true. Obviously we would like to give them more.

The other point about taxis is that drivers' biggest expense is the purchase of a new car. Taxi drivers are required to purchase new cars when their old ones are ten years old. As I understand it, although the Minister can confirm, taxi drivers may now continue to drive their cars for an

additional year provided they meet all safety and other regulations and requirements. I understand serious consideration is being given to extending this period for a further year, provided the car is in good mechanical order.

This budget aims to deal as well as possible with all parts of our society. Why should businesses not be supported? Why should they not be able to benefit from the Covid restrictions support scheme? Many businesses, and small businesses in particular, would most certainly have gone to the wall if they did not have these supports and their workers would be a lot worse off. When the vaccine comes - please God it will come sooner rather than later - people will be able to go back to work and these businesses will still be there. Many of these are small or family businesses. They have kept small communities going for generations. I laud the support they have been given. It is the least we can do for them.

Businesses are not getting money for jam. They are getting it because their incomes have been very significantly reduced. Their incomes must have fallen to 25% of what they had been or even less. Let us be frank and clear. I do not know what sort of country those who argue against business supports think they are living in but this is a modern democratic society that supports enterprise and jobs, that keeps family businesses going, that looks after people whose incomes are seasonal and that looks after people in the tourism industry. Nobody on the Opposition benches said anything about the reduction in VAT, which is very important. People ring me who were *in extremis* when Covid hit. Their businesses had collapsed and the wolf was at the door but at least the local authority rates had been set aside and all of these supports were there to help and assist them in these most difficult times.

Many of these restrictions apply from level 3 upwards. These businesses have been significantly and adversely affected. My strong view is that it is right and proper that these supports are in place. I ask people to think twice before denigrating the enterprise, commitment and value of businesses, and not just their value in the context of profit and sustained growth but also how they care for their employees. That is very clear and obvious to me. Notwithstanding the points people have made, these amendments are just pie in the sky. People are refusing to see the reality of a democratic society supporting businesses in the time of their greatest need.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** The approach of Dublin City Council in dealing with the provision of restart grants for barristers is creating great difficulties. Some 497 barristers received approval only to subsequently get letters stating that this approval had been cancelled. This means that the money they had factored into their budgets for the year has been withdrawn. This is a big mistake in anyone's book and a massive imposition on anybody who is dependent on this funding. I do not know how Dublin City Council can justify this. Will the Minister comment on this matter? How can we ensure that barristers are entitled to the restart grant or support under the CRSS in the same way as everybody else?

**Deputy Paschal Donohoe:** Since this dreadful disease arrived in our country, the Government has: brought in the temporary wage subsidy scheme, which we then replaced with the employment wage subsidy scheme; reduced the standard rate of VAT to support retailers; reduced the VAT rate for the hospitality sector in order to support it; brought in a Covid restrictions support scheme to support businesses that are closed due to public health guidance; launched restart grants to support businesses that need help to reopen; warehoused tax liabilities through the Revenue Commissioners; reduced the rate of interest taxpayers will have to pay on outstanding debt; increased capital spending in our economy at exactly the time when the economy needed demand to be stimulated; and brought in the pandemic unemployment payment to en-

sure that those who most needed help were able to get it when they lost their jobs due to the arrival of the pandemic and the change in public health guidance. That is the track record of the Government in supporting employers, enterprise and jobs at a time when our country most needed help. We were able to do these things because of actions taken by the European Central Bank combined with the national finances having been in good condition coming into this crisis. No Government in the history of this country has ever rolled out a set of supports at a time of challenge such as that which this Government and the one that preceded it have rolled out.

I will return to the substantive point raised by Deputy Ó Laoghaire. He referred to a specific pub, which Deputy Doherty also touched on. The challenge I face in developing schemes to support employers is that there will always be employers and businesses that fall just outside the criteria. There will always be businesses that are just a bit different from the kind of business that falls inside a scheme such as the Covid restrictions support scheme. For example, the criteria for access to the Covid scheme include a requirement that the business is closed due to public health guidance. If we changed that requirement and allowed businesses that could open but decided to stay closed to access the CRSS, the next question I would face would be: what about all the businesses that opened and lost access to the scheme?

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

**Deputy Paschal Donohoe:** I ask the Ceann Comhairle to bear with me. I have only been given two minutes in this round. My understanding is that I get seven minutes.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The Minister gets seven minutes to respond to the first round.

**Deputy Paschal Donohoe:** This is the first round on this group of amendments.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Is it? I apologise. I have just taken the Chair.

**Deputy Paschal Donohoe:** I am responding to the first round of interventions. The challenge I would then face is that businesses that are allowed to reopen and have done so would then ask why they cannot access funding under the Covid restrictions support scheme if businesses that can open but remain closed can. Pubs would take this view and restaurants and hotels would quickly follow. It goes back to the point I made, which is that any time criteria are set for access to a scheme that has already paid out tens of millions to employers, there will always be some employers who fall just outside those criteria. I accept that this is difficult and I will look at the operation of the scheme and see whether it has been set up in a way that gives support to those who need it most. The challenge one always faces in putting together a scheme such as this, however, is that there will always be businesses that fall just outside the criteria.

I listened to what Deputy Ó Laoghaire said regarding the particular business he mentioned. I return to a point I made earlier. This pub and other businesses that decide to reopen will face a lower VAT rate. In addition, while I will not comment on the particular business in question because I am not aware of its circumstances, such businesses will, in general, still be able to avail of the employment wage subsidy scheme and a deferral or, for many business, a waiver of commercial rates. They will also be able to access the variety of other supports that are available. Such businesses will, in general, still be able to access the deferral or, in the case of many businesses, will not have to pay commercial rates. They will be able to access a variety of other supports available. Even if this support is not available, a range of other supports are available precisely for the reason set out by Deputy O'Dowd.



These businesses are crucial in the generation and retention of jobs within our country. When businesses run into a challenge such as a pandemic, we have a duty to help them. Even if this particular form of help, in the form of the CRSS, is not available to some businesses, a range of other supports are available. These are in place because we value them. We are trying to keep them going until the point where public health improves and we are able to go back to something that is closer to the normal that we left.

Deputy Barry made another point regarding criteria for accessing the scheme and why other criteria are not available. All the issues Deputy Barry raises are important but they are not issues to be dealt with through our tax code. They are not issues to be dealt with through a scheme that is trying to keep employers going and jobs maintained. They are best dealt with through an industrial relations mechanism like the Workplace Relations Commission or the engagement that should and does take place between employers and employees. The only role of these schemes is to try to keep jobs in place. At the moment, that is the most critical challenge I face as someone charged with overseeing our economy overall and trying to keep it safe. That is the most important job we face.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae made the point about my actions burdening future generations. I assume he was referring to the levels of national debt that will exist in future. If I did not take the actions that I am taking that will cause the debt to rise and if the Government did not do the same, then we would face charges and criticism for not doing enough. It will be the case that our national debt will go up. It is also the case that hundreds of thousands of jobs would not have the chance to come back if it was not for the actions I have described.

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** In my contribution I acknowledged the difficulty and challenge of designing the scheme and the fact that we will always find people marginally outside. I believe there is possibly a way if we ask Revenue to look at this in terms of the criteria. We will always find grey areas. If a beautician is going to open, it is likely that it is the business of a beautician and there is no other part of the business that is restricted. The same applies to a hairdresser or retail store. However, there is a unique situation with pubs because of gastropubs and wet pubs, as we are calling them. We have split the business into two. I imagine there is a willingness to address this because the intention behind the scheme is to help businesses through this period; that is why we support it. I imagine there is some way Revenue and the Minister and his officials can come up with criteria. For example, let us imagine a business is still under restrictions and the wet pub accounts for 75% of the turnover. Then if it remains closed, it may be deemed to be under restrictions. There are ways to do that. These cases are not great in number. I imagine most people are trying to stay open. As we discussed, some people try to find elaborate ways to be deemed a gastropub. This is the opposite, in that in these cases they want to remain closed. They may believe they are restricted from opening as wet pubs. Is the Minister willing to talk to his officials in Revenue to look at something like this? Deputy Ó Laoghaire has given an example where 93% of the turnover comes from the wet pub, which is deemed to be closed under the restrictions. That business would be, for all intents and purposes, still a restricted business and therefore able to access the CRSS. The scenario that my colleague, Brian Carr, has relayed to me is similar and involves several pubs in Donegal. I would appreciate if the Minister would give a commitment to re-look at this. In my view, this does not require further legislative change because we know this is under the management of the Revenue Commissioners and they have the latitude to bring in guidance of this nature if they deem it necessary.

**Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire:** I defer to the better knowledge of my colleague, Deputy Doherty, on the ability of the Revenue to govern this in terms of whether legislative change

is required. If such change is not required, that would be a positive thing.

The point has been well made. This is a particular category of business. I accept 100% that everything in respect of the CRSS is being done in the interests of supporting business. I accept there is no bad faith and that there is a genuine desire to help businesses. I accept of course that it is complex to design a scheme. It is a little like designing constituencies in that no matter where we put the line, it will always fall somewhere such that someone is not totally happy with it. Having said that, there is no other category of business I can think of where the largest part of the business is restricted while a small minority of the trade is not. The point has been well made that there is a division in this regard. I believe an ability was shown, at the time of the restrictions, to distinguish between businesses that could not open, even though a minority of such business could be allowed, but the majority of it could not be.

While the Minister said he would look at it, I am unsure whether the tone of what he was saying exactly implied that he would pursue it enthusiastically or vigorously or that he was optimistic resolution could be found. I hope the Minister can do so. This is a particular category and the number of businesses is not great. I believe it can be done in such a way that does not create further anomalies or precedents or anything like that. The idea is to treat a business as a restricted business because the largest part of the business cannot function. Perhaps the scope for a resolution exists within the Revenue Commissioners. In keeping with the spirit of the scheme, we should try to support these particular businesses that are affected and with a little creativity and imagination we can come up with a solution.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** I too am disappointed with the tone of what the Minister has said. To listen to Deputy O'Dowd, one would think we were all criticising. We have welcomed this approach. We have worked to help our constituents and businesses. We have helped and encouraged them to draw down from the scheme. We appreciate what is being given but there are businesses marginally outside the limit. I am appealing for flexibility from the Revenue and everyone else. There must be some latitude.

People had no desire to be in this situation. They were forced into the situation by draconian regulations passed in the House. They give the Minister for Health far too much power to make any and whichever regulations he likes. This is where we are now.

Last night and today we saw the vintners trying to get clarification about pubs. There will be bedlam with the so-called dry pubs. That is a horrible name, as is the reference to wet and dry. It is as though there should be wellingtons in one while one could sunbathe in the other. It is a disgusting acronym. Today, I asked Fáilte Ireland, which gets blamed for many things, who came up with this. It is shocking. People from pubs that are big enough have contacted me today. Every pub within 15 miles of either side is closed. They are afraid to open. They have to protect their staff; health and safety is important. These people would have vast crowds coming to the pub because all the others are closed. What is going on has to be discriminatory and unconstitutional. The Constitution seems to be the last thing the present Government is thinking of now. These people are not going to open. Now, we are being told if they do not open, they will be penalised and they will lose and not get payments again. They have to consider their safety and the safety of their staff. One publican told me that two of his staff are pregnant mothers-to-be. They are afraid of the crowds that will come. It is not a question of serving food; they will be trying to keep people away. We never heard the likes of it. This is only happening in Ireland. It is stupid, illogical and is downright blackguarding of those people. They are afraid to open now because all the others are closed. If they were all opened, people would

be cautious, would come in small numbers and would be well looked after. All these publicans have licences. They are proud people and they get their licences renewed every year. They do not break the law. They are law-abiding people who want to make a living.

**Deputy Paschal Donohoe:** Their interests are poorly served by Deputy Mattie McGrath and the kind of argument he puts forward. He talks about tone. Each time Deputy McGrath makes an argument like that, the only people to whom he does a disservice are the good people who are trying to earn a living. They have not had their lives changed by a capricious Government, as Deputy McGrath sneeringly infers.

*9 o'clock*

It was because of an awful disease that arrived in this country, and any decisions made by this Government are about how we try to keep people safe and look after their well-being and health. That is all that is motivating the decisions which have been made.

Deputy Doherty made a point about drawing a comparison between a beautician and a hairdresser. I remember the debate we had on Committee Stage. I was asked on that occasion why beauticians could not access the lower VAT rate available to hairdressers. This is the point. When we are putting together a scheme such as this, the only way that I and the Revenue Commissioners can deal with the huge complexity we are facing, as Deputy Ó Laoghaire mentioned, is by having criteria that are clear and understood, and can be understood and implemented by the Revenue Commissioners. That is what the CRSS does. It is providing valuable support to businesses which have to stay closed.

Deputy Ó Laoghaire referred to how I will approach this matter. I spent hours and days poring over these schemes trying to ensure they are effective, while also trying to ensure that we can afford them for as long as they are needed. I will look at any matter raised by a Deputy, particularly when he or she is raising an issue concerning a business that fought hard to keep going during difficult times and which is now closed through no fault of its own. I will of course look at such cases. I must be honest with the Deputy in outlining the sequence of events for which I am also always accountable. Any change made to a scheme such as this inevitably gives rise to issues, which are then raised with me by other Members of the House. Getting the balance right between having effective schemes and being able to afford them is what we are trying to do with this and other schemes.

**Deputy Michael Collins:** Regarding wet and gastropubs, many publicans have contacted me in recent days. This issue, or something close to the mark regarding what I am explaining, has been brought up already and perhaps it is one the Department could look at. I refer to publicans who had kitchens as such, but these are not deemed kitchens now in respect of allowing them to reopen. They are not entitled to avail of the CRSS because they served food previously. These publicans may not have a major kitchen in their bars but they were serving food, such as soup and sandwiches and little bits and pieces, from whatever facilities they had. Now, however, such businesses will be deemed ineligible for the payment for that reason.

Publicans who spoke to me said they would have no problem opening their bars, but they will not be allowed to do so because their kitchens are not up to the full standard required for a kitchen to be open and they do not have a chef in the bar. Apparently, it is necessary to have both. These businesses are caught in a catch-22 situation. It is terribly unfair because they are quite happy to open but they are not able to because of the new and additional that were put in

place. Some of these people have mortgages to pay and they do not have a clue where they are going to get a payment from. They are in a desperate position. I ask the Minister to make a slight change in this area.

As was said earlier, it is impossible to tick every box initially but this is certainly a grey area and these pubs are in dire danger. These publicans are in danger of losing their business and they are asking me if a change is possible. They are asking me if this issue can be raised in the House and whether changes can be made by the Minister. I would appreciate it if the Minister could look deeper into this matter. These are basically bars which were serving food - they were not bringing it in from a chipper or any other location outside the bar - but have been deemed not to have full kitchens or a full-time chef and are not allowed to open now. They are also not allowed access to the funding that is available. They are caught in an unfair catch-22. They are willing to open but not allowed to do so. They have no choice but to accept this situation but they are also not able to get the payment that is in place. I would appreciate if the Minister could look into this.

**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:** I would love to have a verbal engagement with the person who dreamt up the term “wet pubs”. It should be banned from our language completely because it is an insult. There is no such thing in Ireland, or anywhere else in the world, as a wet pub. It is a stupid statement dreamt up by a stupid person. A pub is a pub, end of story. A pub is run by a person called a licensed vintner, who is respectable and must go before the courts every September to get a licence to trade. It is a highly regulated business. Having this terminology of “wet pub” is stupid beyond belief and it should not be used in this House any more.

We had publicans up yesterday. They came up in a respectable way. Two people had travelled from Kerry, the county I represent, for example. We had the same kind of representation from around the country. It was not that people came or moved *en masse* or anything like that. They were representing public houses which are being told they will not be allowed to open. We honestly think that is wrong. These are dependable people and if they were allowed to open, they certainly would not have anything to do with the spread of the pandemic or anything like it.

There is also another group of people about whom I want to speak. I refer to people who own public houses, are of pension age and have worked very hard but have not been able to receive any supports. Those people were not looking for the €350 pandemic unemployment payment. They were being reasonable and understanding. What they were saying to me was that they wanted what they were getting in their pension to be subtracted from the €350 and for the balance to be given to them. If such people were getting €220 or €230 on a pension, they were just looking for that amount to be made up to €350. I think that is a plausible and sensible request for any person to make. These people have been working hard and serving their communities well over the years. If the number of people from County Kerry who raised this with me is reflective of the rest of the country, there are an awful lot of people in that position. I would dearly love to see those older people - they are not that old - get a little bit of a leg up. I would have thought the Minister would have been able to cater for that very important group of people.

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** On keeping rural pubs closed, to give the Minister an idea of this situation, places like Gneevgullia, Scartaglin, Fieries, Curra, Headfort, Barraduff and Rathmore have no pubs that can open. A number of pubs can open in Killarney. On a Saturday night, about half the pubs in Killarney will be open. What is going to happen then? As sure as day follows night, there will be a bigger crowd in Killarney than ever before. The town is

usually well able to cater for crowds, but now half the pubs will not be open. A combination of people will be coming into the town from Kilgarvan and even from parts of south Kerry where the pubs will not be able to open. They are all going to arrive into Killarney. For those who do not, shebeens will open up and, as I said earlier, the Garda will have to have very good jeeps and other vehicles to find them. It was easier to monitor and work with the regulated pubs. The Government is making a massive mistake in not allowing all pubs to open and spread people out.

This is very wrong for the customers. We must talk about mental health because many customers in rural places will not be able to travel to places like Killarney, Tralee and other places with bigger pubs that able to cater for and serve food. They will not be able to travel those distances and no consideration has been given to this issue. From Mallow all the way to Killarney, there will not be a pub open in that vast countryside. It is absolutely ridiculous. I cannot understand it. I appeal to the Minister. I acknowledge his ability and his understanding but I ask him to get a hold of the rest of the members of the Cabinet and thrash this out. It is not making sense. I asked the Taoiseach today for the scientific evidence that suggests that rural pubs caused or spread the virus, or would spread the virus. Where is that scientific evidence? If we have it, or if the Minister has it somewhere, perhaps he would give it out to us. He has not listed it out to us yet. It is very wrong to penalise and not trust people. I trust the people who have a licensed premises. I trust the licensees. The vast majority, or 99% of them, are honest and hardworking people. It is a cry to God that the leaders of the country are not trusting these kinds of people. The question is "Why?" As my brother, Deputy Michael Healy-Rae, has said, when the pandemic payment was given out all we asked for was that the people who were slightly over the age limit would get the extra bit to bring them up to the €350. They have outstanding costs, insurance costs and other services that they have to pay. When they pay for these they do not have enough to feed themselves. That has been happening all the year. It is very wrong that the Minister is not trusting our licensees in these rural places. This is not hurting Dublin at all because two thirds of the pubs in Dublin will be open because they are serving food. One third will remain closed but it is the other way down around our way where not even one third of our pubs will be able to reopen in all of Kerry. It is wrong. It is coming up to Christmas. It is hurting customers and it is hurting publicans. It is hurting each of them as much as the other. I ask the Minister to please look at it again because he is not being fair to honest, hardworking people. I ask the Minister to take another look at it and to take more consideration of what they do.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The Minister can make another contribution if he wishes. Can the Minister get hold of his colleagues for Deputy Healy-Rae?

**Deputy Paschal Donohoe:** I am afraid that I am going to disappoint Deputy Healy-Rae and tell him that I agree with all of my colleagues in the decision that has been made. I absolutely understand how difficult it is for those pubs that are not in a position to be open. I absolutely understand how hard vintners and publicans work in running businesses, and the hugely important role they play in societies and in the lives of the people as represented by Deputy Healy-Rae just now. The evidence that was presented to the Government did show that there are risks involved in the congregation of people when it does not involve food. If we are trying to open up parts of our economy, if we are trying to reopen the restaurants, as referred to by Deputy Healy-Rae, and if we are trying to open up hotels again, then we have to make choices to allow other and more businesses to open up. I absolutely understand that this is very hard, and very tough and demanding for those businesses that remain closed. The reason we brought in the Covid restric-



tion support scheme was so these very businesses would be able to get up to 10% of their turn-over back per week they are closed. The scheme is in place because we recognise the difficulty that has been referred to by Deputies who represent closed businesses. We recognise that by those businesses being closed it hopefully creates an environment in which we can keep other businesses open for longer. In recognition of this, the Covid restriction support scheme is in the Finance Bill 2020 to support those businesses.

Amendment agreed to.

**Deputy Paschal Donohoe:** I move amendment No. 12:

In page 13, line 13, to delete “(20)” and substitute “(21)”.

Amendment agreed to.

**Deputy Paschal Donohoe:** I move amendment No. 13:

In page 13, line 41, to delete “(v)” and substitute “(vi)”.

Amendment agreed to.

**Deputy Paschal Donohoe:** I move amendment No. 14:

In page 14, line 3, to delete “(v)” and substitute “(vi)”.

Amendment agreed to.

**Deputy Paschal Donohoe:** I move amendment No. 15:

In page 15, to delete lines 20 and 21, and substitute the following:

“(vi) make an order either that subsection (8) of section 485 shall cease to be in operation on and from such day, or that the election referred to in paragraph (b) of that subsection, which that subsection enables a qualifying person to make, shall not be exercisable save in such circumstances, as the Minister for Finance—

(I) considers necessary to—

(A) fulfil, better, the objectives specified in subsection (1)(a), or

(B) facilitate the furtherance of any of the purposes specified in subsection (1)(c),

and

(II) specifies in the order,

and any matter that is provided for in the preceding subparagraphs is referred to in section 485(3) as a ‘modification’.”.

Amendment agreed to.

**Deputy Paschal Donohoe:** I move amendment No. 16:

In page 15, line 22, to delete “(iv) or (v)” and substitute “(iv), (v) or (vi)”.

Amendment agreed to.

**Deputy Paschal Donohoe:** I move amendment No. 17:

In page 17, line 18, to delete “(3)” and substitute “(4)”.

Amendment agreed to.

**Deputy Paschal Donohoe:** I move amendment No. 18:

In page 17, line 26, to delete “Where,” and substitute “Subject to subsection (8), where,”.

Amendment agreed to.

**Deputy Paschal Donohoe:** I move amendment No. 19:

In page 18, line 40, to delete “(ii)(II),” and substitute “(ii)(II);”.

Amendment agreed to.

**Deputy Paschal Donohoe:** I move amendment No. 20:

In page 18, between lines 40 and 41, to insert the following:

“(f)subsection (8) and the election referred to in paragraph (b) of it which a qualifying person is, by virtue of that subsection, enabled to make,”.

Amendment agreed to.

**Deputy Paschal Donohoe:** I move amendment No. 21:

In page 20, line 4, to delete “(21)” and substitute “(22)”.

Amendment agreed to.

**Deputy Mick Barry:** I move amendment No. 22:

In page 20, between lines 18 and 19, to insert the following:

- “(a) the person can demonstrate that they pay a ‘living wage’ to their employees,
- (b) the person can demonstrate that they facilitate their employees to join a trade union that has been or will be recognised by them as a body to deal in collective bargaining with employees concerning pay, health and safety, terms and conditions of employment and other employment related matters,
- (c) the person operates a sick leave scheme for employees,
- (d) the person makes contributions to a pension scheme for employees,”.

Amendment put and declared lost.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Amendment No. 23 is out of order.

Amendment No. 23 not moved.

**Deputy Paschal Donohoe:** I move amendment No. 24:

In page 20, line 25, to delete “(13)” and substitute “(14)”.

Amendment agreed to.

**Deputy Paschal Donohoe:** I move amendment No. 25:

In page 20, line 30, to delete “(13)” and substitute “(14)”.

Amendment agreed to.

**Deputy Paschal Donohoe:** I move amendment No. 26:

In page 21, line 14, to delete “(9) and (10)” and substitute “(10) and (11)”.

Amendment agreed to.

**Deputy Paschal Donohoe:** I move amendment No. 27:

In page 21, between lines 38 and 39, to insert the following:

“(8) (a) Where, in relation to a relevant business activity carried on by a person—

(i) applicable business restrictions provisions were in operation such that a qualifying person made a claim under this section in respect of a claim period and that claim, taken together with any claims made by the person immediately preceding that claim, is in respect of a continuous period of not less than three weeks, and

(ii) those applicable business restrictions provisions cease to be in operation,

then, where that qualifying person, within a reasonable period of time from the date on which the applicable business restrictions provisions cease to be in operation, resumes or continues, as the case may be, supplying goods or services to customers from the business premises in which the qualifying person’s relevant business activity is carried on, that qualifying person may make an election under paragraph (b).

(b) Where no part of the week immediately following the date on which the applicable business restrictions provisions ceased to be in operation in respect of a relevant business activity would otherwise form part of a Covid restrictions period or a Covid restrictions extension period, a qualifying person to whom paragraph (a) applies may elect to treat that week as a Covid restrictions extension period and may make a claim under this section in respect of that period.”.

Amendment agreed to.

**Deputy Paschal Donohoe:** I move amendment No. 28:

In page 21, to delete lines 39 to 41 and substitute the following:

“(9) A claim made under this section in respect of an advance credit for trading expenses shall be made—

(a) subject to paragraph (b), no later than—

(i) eight weeks from the date on which the claim period, to which the claim relates, commences, or

(ii) if the date on which the qualifying person is registered as a person to whom this section applies (following an application which is made in accordance with subsection (5)(a) and within the period of eight weeks specified in subparagraph (i)) falls on a date subsequent to the expiry of the period of eight weeks so specified, three weeks from the date on which the person is so registered,

and

(b) in the case of a claim made under this section that is referred to in subsection (8), no later than eight weeks from the date on which the applicable business restrictions provisions concerned cease to be in operation.”.

Amendment agreed to.

**Deputy Paschal Donohoe:** I move amendment No. 29:

In page 21, line 42, to delete “(9)” and substitute “(10)”.

Amendment agreed to.

**Deputy Paschal Donohoe:** I move amendment No. 30:

In page 22, line 9, to delete “(10)” and substitute “(11)”.

Amendment agreed to.

**Deputy Paschal Donohoe:** I move amendment No. 31:

In page 22, line 23, to delete “(14) and (15)” and substitute “(15) and (16)”.

Amendment agreed to.

**Deputy Paschal Donohoe:** I move amendment No. 32:

In page 23, line 5, to delete “(16) and (17)” and substitute “(17) and (18)”.

Amendment agreed to.

**Deputy Paschal Donohoe:** I move amendment No. 33:

In page 23, line 9, to delete “(18)” and substitute “(19)”.

Amendment agreed to.

**Deputy Paschal Donohoe:** I move amendment No. 34:

In page 23, line 13, to delete “(11)” and substitute “(12)”.

Amendment agreed to.

**Deputy Paschal Donohoe:** I move amendment No. 35:

In page 23, line 18, to delete “(12)” and substitute “(13)”.

Amendment agreed to.

**Deputy Paschal Donohoe:** I move amendment No. 36:

In page 23, line 28, to delete “(13)” and substitute “(14)”.

Amendment agreed to.

**Deputy Paschal Donohoe:** I move amendment No. 37:

In page 24, line 37, to delete “(14)” and substitute “(15)”.

Amendment agreed to.

**Deputy Paschal Donohoe:** I move amendment No. 38:

In page 24, line 40, to delete “(16)” and substitute “(17)”

Amendment agreed to.

**Deputy Paschal Donohoe:** I move amendment No. 39:

In page 25, line 6, to delete “(15)” and substitute “(16)”

Amendment agreed to.

**Deputy Paschal Donohoe:** I move amendment No. 40:

In page 25, line 9, to delete “(16)” and substitute “(17)”.

Amendment agreed to.

**Deputy Paschal Donohoe:** I move amendment No. 41:

In page 25, line 35, to delete “(16)” and substitute “(17)”.

Amendment agreed to.

**Deputy Paschal Donohoe:** I move amendment No. 42:

In page 26, line 33, to delete “(14) and (15)” and substitute “(15) and (16)”.

Amendment agreed to.

**Deputy Paschal Donohoe:** I move amendment No. 43:

In page 26, line 35, to delete “(17)” and substitute “(18)”.

Amendment agreed to.

**Deputy Paschal Donohoe:** I move amendment No. 44:

In page 27, line 25, to delete “(7)” and substitute “(7) or (8)”.

Amendment agreed to.



**Deputy Paschal Donohoe:** I move amendment No. 45:

In page 27, line 26, to delete “where” and substitute “where, after the end of the specified period,”.

Amendment agreed to.

**Deputy Paschal Donohoe:** I move amendment No. 46:

In page 27, line 31, to delete “time,” and substitute “time from the end of the specified period,”.

Amendment agreed to.

**Deputy Paschal Donohoe:** I move amendment No. 47:

In page 27, line 33, to delete “(14) or (15)” and substitute “(15) or (16)”.

Amendment agreed to.

**Deputy Paschal Donohoe:** I move amendment No. 48:

In page 27, between lines 33 and 34, to insert the following:

“(f) Where the conditions referred to in paragraph (c) are met, the excess amount shall carry interest as determined in accordance with section 1080(2)(c) as if the reference to the date when the tax became due and payable were a reference to the day after the day on which the specified period ends.”.

Amendment agreed to.

**Deputy Paschal Donohoe:** I move amendment No. 49:

In page 27, line 34, to delete “(18)” and substitute “(19)”.

Amendment agreed to.

**Deputy Paschal Donohoe:** I move amendment No. 50:

In page 27, line 41, to delete “(19)” and substitute “(20)”.

Amendment agreed to.

**Deputy Paschal Donohoe:** I move amendment No. 51:

In page 28, line 16, to delete “(20)” and substitute “(21)”.

Amendment agreed to.

**Deputy Paschal Donohoe:** I move amendment No. 52:

In page 28, line 20, to delete “(21)” and substitute “(22)”.

Amendment agreed to.

**Deputy Paschal Donohoe:** I move amendment No. 53:

In page 28, line 33, to delete “(22)” and substitute “(23)”.

Amendment agreed to.

**Deputy Paschal Donohoe:** I move amendment No. 54:

In page 28, line 37, to delete “(13)” and substitute “(14)”.

Amendment agreed to.

**Deputy Paschal Donohoe:** I move amendment No. 55:

In page 28, line 41, to delete “(23)” and substitute “(24)”.

Amendment agreed to.

**Deputy Paschal Donohoe:** I move amendment No. 56:

In page 29, line 6, to delete “(8)” and substitute “(9)”.

Amendment agreed to.

**Deputy Paschal Donohoe:** I move amendment No. 57:

In page 29, between lines 12 and 13, to insert the following:

“(2) Subsection (1) shall be deemed to have come into operation on 13 October 2020.”.

Amendment agreed to.

Amendment No. 58 not moved.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Amendments Nos. 59 and 60 are related and will be discussed together.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** I move amendment No. 59:

In page 29, between lines 12 and 13, to insert the following:

“**12.** Within four weeks of the passing of this Act, the Minister shall produce a report on whether the Covid Restriction Support Scheme is accessible to and has provided meaningful financial support for self-employed/lone traders in sectors such as the taxi industry, music, arts, live entertainment and other similarly affected sectors.”.

The Ceann Comhairle was on a roll there. I thought I might get this through on the back of all those other amendments. If only it was that easy.

The contribution I made earlier related, to a large extent, to this amendment. That is why I did not come in on the second round of the earlier discussion and I assume it is why the Minister did not respond to the points I made. I will briefly summarise them and give him an opportunity to respond. The CRSS is supposed to support people whose businesses are impacted as a result of Covid restrictions. We support that and businesses that have been genuinely impacted and whose revenues beyond a certain threshold have been significantly reduced, or eliminated completely, should get that support. We support the Government on that. What we cannot un-

derstand is why, as I noted earlier, people are excluded from the scheme on the basis that they do not have a rateable premises, even though they carry all the same sorts of costs as businesses that have premises. It is just not fair. They have to make repayments on equipment and cars and they have to pay fuel and insurance costs. They have all the other overheads and things that are the reasons the CRSS is in place, yet just because their premises is a taxi, a van or a studio space for musicians, they are excluded. It is not fair. I would like to hear the Minister tell me it is fair but I do not see how he could possibly do so. Thousands of musicians, sound engineers and light engineers in the music industry have been devastated. The industries of other artists and performers have also been devastated and shut down since the beginning. Their art and music have helped sustain us through the pandemic and they are excluded. It is not fair.

It is not fair on the taxi drivers either. The revenue threshold for the CRSS is 25% and their incomes are down 70%. They might go up a bit with Christmas but they will still be way down. How are they supposed to pay their insurance costs or the repayments on their cars? What if their cars reach the ten-year limit and they have to replace them next year? How are they supposed to replace them? It is just not fair. This scheme should apply to them.

The Minister heard the debate about musicians erupt on the radio this morning. It is very unfair and demoralising for those musicians, many of whom are household names, to be denied that funding. Fair play to the ones who got it but 87% of those who applied did not because the fund was less than €1 million. If the Government is not going to give them that award, it should give them some other supports to carry them through. That is what our amendment is asking the Government to do. We do not, in truth, just want a review. We would like to just do it. We must extend this scheme to small businesses and lone traders like musicians, artists and taxi drivers, who need it.

**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:** I thank Deputy Boyd Barrett for tabling this very important amendment. Musicians and people who create entertainment are a very special group of people in that they cause merriment, whether in an old folks' home on a Sunday evening, inside in a public house or at a wedding. They entertain people the evening of a funeral, when they are at their lowest. They are a very special group of people. I am, of course, modest about this but we have the finest musicians that have ever graced this land in County Kerry and coming from County Kerry, in both the present and the past. Many of my own friends and relations are musicians. One could say I have a conflict in this but if I do, it is a good conflict to have because it is great to have these people who are so important in our communities. I am saying this directly to the people, to the musicians in County Kerry especially, such as the likes of Ger Healy, the singing jarvey, and all the great bands and families who are steeped in the tradition of music and entertainment. They have young people coming up after them who will be there for many years when we will not be there at all.

I want the Minister to ensure those people will be able to continue entertaining people because it is such an important job. These people's incomes were taken away from them last March, virtually in their entirety, and their way of work and way of life has been taken from them. Some of them who provided entertainment at night might have had other jobs during the day and so both their jobs are gone. Their two sources of income are gone from them. They are grateful for the PUP, if they were able to get it, but it is very difficult for those people to carry on and I just want that to be acknowledged. That is why it is good that we are having this debate, to acknowledge the place of Irish people, Irish musicians and Irish dancers in our society. Places like the Irwin School of Irish Dancing in Killarney have trained decades and generations of people into the merriment of Irish dancing. Indeed, not many people would realise that the

leader of our own group, Deputy Mattie McGrath, is an all-Ireland medal holder in dancing. We have talent among our own group.

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** I want to highlight a section of our society that has been badly affected and has not benefited from the CRSS, that is, fish suppliers and suppliers of all kinds to the hospitality sector. These businesses were not officially closed down at all but because the places to which they were supplying their wares had been closed down, they have suffered immensely. Even though the incomes and businesses of fish suppliers, meat suppliers and vegetable suppliers that were supplying the hospitality sector have been washed up for the past number of weeks, Revenue has said they do not qualify because they were not officially closed down. I ask the Minister to look into this. These people should have qualified. The Minister and the Department said that they would but Revenue said they did not. I ask him to address that.

Debate adjourned.

### **State Pension Age: Motion (Resumed) [Private Members]**

The following motion was moved by Deputy Louise O'Reilly on Tuesday, 1 December 2020:

“That Dáil Éireann:

notes that:

— in five weeks' time the pension age is due to increase to 67 years of age on 1st January, 2021;

— legislation needed to stop the pension age increasing to 67 in January has not been published or introduced to the House;

— every worker in the State makes a considerable tax contribution throughout their working life and should have the right to retire at 65;

— some workers want to retire at 65, while others want to remain at work, where they are able and willing to do so;

— numerous employment contracts stipulate an end of employment date in line with when an employee turns 65;

— since the abolition of the State Pension Transition payment, thousands of 65-year olds have had to sign on for a Jobseeker's payment;

— there are now over 4,000 65-year olds in receipt of either Jobseeker's Allowance or Jobseeker's Benefit;

— there is a difference of €45.30 between the Jobseeker payments and the State Pension leading to an annual loss of €2,355.60; and

— the pension age is scheduled in legislation to increase to 67 years in 2021, and

68 years in 2028; and

calls on the Government to:

- restore the State Pension Transition payment for those retiring at 65 years of age;
- abolish mandatory retirement (with exceptions for security-related employment) to give workers the choice to work or retire so long as they are fit to do so;
- make provision for those who remain at work beyond 65 to have their Pay Related Social Insurance (PRSI) contributions counted towards their State Pension; and
- immediately introduce legislation to remove the pension age increase to 67 years and the further increases.”

Debate resumed on amendment No. 1:

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

“notes that:

- the Programme for Government ‘Our Shared Future’ has committed to maintaining the State Pension as the bedrock of the Irish pension system;
- this includes a commitment to establish a Commission on Pensions and pending the report of that Commission to maintain the State Pension age at 66;
- the Government has already established this Commission on Pensions;
- the Commission on Pensions has already conducted its first meeting, its second is scheduled for tomorrow the 2nd December, its third is scheduled for later this month and it will meet approximately every fortnight in the new year until it concludes its work;
- the Government has approved the Social Welfare Bill 2020, which in addition to giving legislative effect to a range of social welfare measures announced in Budget 2021 on 13th October, 2020, includes specific provisions to repeal increases in the State Pension age ensuring that it will remain at 66 pending the report of the Commission on Pensions and consideration of that report by Government;
- the Social Welfare Bill 2020 was published on 24th November, 2020;
- as set out in that Bill the Government is also repealing the planned increase from 67 to 68 which is scheduled to happen on 1st January, 2028, thus ensuring that the Commission on Pensions can consider matters in relation to the State Pension age unfettered by any prospective changes;
- the Government has noted the Minister for Social Protection’s proposal to sign regulations to formally remove the requirement for 65-year olds to be actively seeking work and to ‘sign on’, formalising an administrative arrangement which has already been in place for some time;
- persons aged 65 or over who retire and qualify for a Jobseeker’s Benefit payment may retain that payment in full until they reach the State Pension age of 66 assuming



they don't return to work;

— the payment rate of €203 is in fact higher than the rate available for the full State Pension in other jurisdictions such as Northern Ireland where the state pension age has been increased from 65 to 66;

— the Terms of Reference of the Commission on Pensions includes consideration of a range of pensions matters including sustainability, eligibility and cross generational equity issues, and consideration of options for the Government to address issues including qualifying age, contribution rates, total contributions and eligibility requirements;

— in addition, the Commission on Pensions will consider the issue of retirement ages specified in employment contracts that are below the State Pension age, including where contracts stipulate a retirement age of 65;

— section 34(4) of the Employment Equality Act 1998 (as amended) already provides that an employer has to prove a contractual retirement age that is objectively justified by a legitimate aim and the means of achieving that aim are appropriate and necessary, with recourse for employees to the Workplace Relations Commission in the event of breaches;

— to assist employers and employees in this regard and in respect of retirement ages, the Workplace Relations Commission has produced a Code of Practice on Longer Working, and the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission has published guidance material for employers on the use of fixed-term contracts beyond normal retirement age; and

— the rate for the State Pension (Contributory) in Ireland compares very favourably with neighbouring jurisdictions where pension rates are significantly lower.”

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I must now deal with a postponed division relating to the motion regarding the pension age. Yesterday, on the question, “That the amendment to the motion be agreed to”, a division was claimed and in accordance with Standing Order 80(2), that division must be taken now.

Amendment put:

<i>The Dáil divided: Tá, 86; Níl, 66; 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>Connolly, Catherine.</i>	
<i>Carey, Joe.</i>	<i>Conway-Walsh, Rose.</i>	
<i>Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.</i>	<i>Cronin, Réada.</i>	
<i>Chambers, Jack.</i>	<i>Crowe, Seán.</i>	
<i>Collins, Niall.</i>	<i>Cullinane, David.</i>	
<i>Costello, Patrick.</i>	<i>Daly, Pa.</i>	
<i>Coveney, Simon.</i>	<i>Doherty, Pearse.</i>	
<i>Cowen, Barry.</i>	<i>Donnelly, Paul.</i>	
<i>Crowe, Cathal.</i>	<i>Ellis, Dessie.</i>	
<i>Devlin, Cormac.</i>	<i>Farrell, Mairéad.</i>	
<i>Dillon, Alan.</i>	<i>Fitzmaurice, Michael.</i>	
<i>Donnelly, Stephen.</i>	<i>Gannon, Gary.</i>	
<i>Donohoe, Paschal.</i>	<i>Gould, Thomas.</i>	
<i>Duffy, Francis Noel.</i>	<i>Guirke, Johnny.</i>	
<i>Durkan, Bernard J.</i>	<i>Harkin, Marian.</i>	
<i>English, Damien.</i>	<i>Healy-Rae, Danny.</i>	
<i>Farrell, Alan.</i>	<i>Healy-Rae, Michael.</i>	
<i>Feighan, Frankie.</i>	<i>Howlin, Brendan.</i>	
<i>Fitzpatrick, Peter.</i>	<i>Kelly, Alan.</i>	
<i>Flaherty, Joe.</i>	<i>Kenny, Gino.</i>	
<i>Flanagan, Charles.</i>	<i>Kenny, Martin.</i>	
<i>Fleming, Sean.</i>	<i>Kerrane, Claire.</i>	
<i>Foley, Norma.</i>	<i>Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.</i>	
<i>Griffin, Brendan.</i>	<i>McDonald, Mary Lou.</i>	
<i>Harris, Simon.</i>	<i>McGrath, Mattie.</i>	
<i>Haughey, Seán.</i>	<i>McNamara, Michael.</i>	
<i>Higgins, Emer.</i>	<i>Mitchell, Denise.</i>	
<i>Hourigan, Neasa.</i>	<i>Munster, Imelda.</i>	
<i>Humphreys, Heather.</i>	<i>Murphy, Catherine.</i>	
<i>Kehoe, Paul.</i>	<i>Murphy, Paul.</i>	
<i>Lahart, John.</i>	<i>Mythen, Johnny.</i>	
<i>Lawless, James.</i>	<i>Nash, Ged.</i>	
<i>Leddin, Brian.</i>	<i>Nolan, Carol.</i>	
<i>Lowry, Michael.</i>	<i>O'Callaghan, Cian.</i>	
<i>MacSharry, Marc.</i>	<i>O'Donoghue, Richard.</i>	
<i>Madigan, Josepha.</i>	<i>O'Reilly, Louise.</i>	
<i>Martin, Catherine.</i>	<i>O'Rourke, Darren.</i>	
<i>Matthews, Steven.</i>	<i>Ó Broin, Eoin.</i>	
<i>McAuliffe, Paul.</i>	<i>Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.</i>	
<i>McConalogue, Charlie.</i>	<i>Ó Murchú, Ruairí.</i>	
<i>McEntee, Helen.</i>	<i>Ó Ríordáin, Aodhán.</i>	
<i>McGrath, Michael.</i>	<i>Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.</i>	

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<i>McGuinness, John.</i>	<i>Pringle, Thomas.</i>	
<i>McHugh, Joe.</i>	<i>Quinlivan, Maurice.</i>	
<i>Moynihan, Aindrias.</i>	<i>Ryan, Patricia.</i>	
<i>Moynihan, Michael.</i>	<i>Sherlock, Sean.</i>	
<i>Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.</i>	<i>Shortall, Róisín.</i>	
<i>Murphy, Verona.</i>	<i>Smith, Bríd.</i>	
<i>Naughten, Denis.</i>	<i>Smith, Duncan.</i>	
<i>Naughton, Hildegarde.</i>	<i>Stanley, Brian.</i>	
<i>Noonan, Malcolm.</i>	<i>Tóibín, Peadar.</i>	
<i>O'Brien, Darragh.</i>	<i>Tully, Pauline.</i>	
<i>O'Brien, Joe.</i>	<i>Ward, Mark.</i>	
<i>O'Callaghan, Jim.</i>	<i>Whitmore, Jennifer.</i>	
<i>O'Connor, James.</i>	<i>Wynne, Violet-Anne.</i>	
<i>O'Dea, Willie.</i>		
<i>O'Donnell, Kieran.</i>		
<i>O'Donovan, Patrick.</i>		
<i>O'Dowd, Fergus.</i>		
<i>O'Gorman, Roderic.</i>		
<i>O'Sullivan, Christopher.</i>		
<i>O'Sullivan, Pádraig.</i>		
<i>Ó Cathasaigh, Marc.</i>		
<i>Ó Cuív, Éamon.</i>		
<i>Rabbitte, Anne.</i>		
<i>Richmond, Neale.</i>		
<i>Ring, Michael.</i>		
<i>Ryan, Eamon.</i>		
<i>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.

Amendment declared carried.

**Pay for Student Nurses and Midwives: Motion (Resumed) [Private Members]**

The following motion was moved by Deputy Mick Barry:

“That Dáil Éireann:

notes that:

— 4,000 student nurses and midwives have been working on the frontline in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic;

— these students are carrying out essential work and are compensating for the long-term understaffing of our health service as well as covering for Covid-19-related absences of qualified staff;

— 11,369 health care workers have been infected with Covid-19, 16.6 per cent of all cases in Ireland, 59 of whom were admitted to Intensive Care Units;

— the chronic understaffing of our health service was a problem before the Covid-19 pandemic, and that the necessary measures to address this understaffing have not been addressed by successive Governments;

— these students were briefly paid the Health Care Assistant (HCA) rate in Spring in recognition of the essential nature of the work, but this payment has since ceased, and they now receive no payment for their work;

— the financial cost to the students of carrying out this essential work is sizeable, with many students paying well over and above their travel and accommodation allowances to simply be able to attend the workplace;

— the personal and mental health cost to student nurses and midwives working in such high stress and high-pressure jobs are enormous, as well as the obvious risks to their health and the health of their family and/or those they live with;

— even before the Covid-19 crisis, the role these students were playing in their placements was more essential work than training;

— these students are actually paying for the ‘privilege’ of doing unpaid work in their placements, with fees of between €3,000 and €7,500;

— the vast majority of these students are women and their exploitation is also a reflection of gender inequality;

— these students utterly refute the recent claim by the Minister for Health that his refusal to pay them for their placement work is in order to ‘protect their education’;

— student nurses and midwives assert their education has never been protected while on placement because of the burden of essential nursing and care work, alongside academic work, while simultaneously needing to do other jobs to survive financially;

— during the Covid-19 pandemic, the opportunity to work in other jobs to earn income and generally survive has been largely cut off because of the risk of bringing Covid-19 infection in or out of their hospital placement;

- the health services across the country have faced huge difficulties in recruiting and retaining staff for many years, due to the chaos and under-resourcing across the health service, the low pay and the long hours of work;

- many nurses, midwives and doctors emigrate to Australia and other countries, where the pay is higher, and conditions are more favourable; and

- a survey in 2018 showed that, 71 per cent of 4th year student nurses and midwives were considering leaving the country, 79 per cent of them identified increases in pay and improvements in staffing and working conditions as the required incentives to retain nurses and midwives in the public services, and 76 per cent of them found that staffing levels are not adequate to support the learning of student nurses and midwives in the clinical setting; and

calls on the Government to:

- immediately reinstate the payment of student nurses and midwives who are in placements during the Covid-19 pandemic at the HCA rate;

- urgently engage with student nurses and midwives and their union representatives to establish a bursary or payment system that will fully acknowledge the work they do in our health service and will cover the costs of travel and accommodation for the length of their placements;

- abolish all fees for students who are training to work on the frontline of the health service in order to stem the ‘brain drain’, and allow the Health Service Executive to recruit a sufficient number of staff to run our health service at safe and adequately staffed levels; and

- ensure parity of pay, conditions and esteem for nurses and midwives with all other paramedical graduates, including the 37-hour week.”

Debate resumed on amendment No. 1:

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

“notes:

- the exceptional contribution that nurses and midwives, including students, have made to the Covid-19 pandemic response;

- that this was particularly important during the first wave of Covid-19 due to the high number of hospitalisations and workforce pressures;

- the associated move to temporarily suspend clinical placements with students becoming healthcare assistants and paid accordingly;

- the difference at the present time with lower hospitalisations coupled with a larger workforce allowing for the protection of educational clinical placements;

- recent positive developments for the nursing and midwifery professions, including:



- safe staffing framework;
- enhanced nurse/midwife role;
- review of placement allowances and stakeholder engagement;
- specialist practice roles;
- advanced practice;
- Expert Review Body of Nursing and Midwifery; and
- national foundation education programmes for graduates;
- the importance of continuing to protect undergraduate clinical placements;
- the existing supports for student nurses and midwives on clinical placements, including:
  - clinical placement allowance for accommodation of €50.79 per week of placement;
  - reimbursement of additional travel costs for placements;
  - Clinical Placement Coordinators at Clinical Nurse Manager 2 level (senior grade) with ratios of 1:30 in respect of student nurses and 1:15 in respect of student midwives;
  - student allocations officers in all clinical sites;
  - trained preceptors on all clinical placements (one per student);
  - a 36-week paid internship placement in 4th year, paid at the approved rate, that is €22,229 on an annual basis for psychiatric nursing specialism and €21,749 for all other nursing disciplines and midwifery; and
  - four hours per week protected for reflection on practice; and
- the progress for student nurses and midwives on additional supports due to Covid-19, including:
  - payment of the Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment for those working in the health sector who may have lost their employment as a result of Covid-19, including students in these circumstances;
  - occupational health supports equal to those for employees/qualified staff;
  - weekly oversight, at senior multi-stakeholder level, of clinical placements and any challenges arising;
  - a review of placement allowances, inclusive of independent appraisal and stakeholder engagement;
  - commitment to early agreement on any potential changes to allowances; and

— new opportunities for students to achieve learning outcomes across a variety of settings, including remote environments and telehealth.”

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I must now deal with a postponed division relating to the motion regarding pay for student nurses and midwives. This morning, on the question, “That the amendment to the motion be agreed to”, a division was claimed and in accordance with Standing Order 80(2), that division must be taken now.

Amendment put.

The Dáil divided by electronic means.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** The vote was very close, with a very narrow majority supporting the Government amendment not to pay our student nurses and midwives - a disgraceful decision. Since the margin is so close, under Standing Order 83(3)(b), we call for a vote other than by electronic means in order to give all the Government Deputies from Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Green Party a moment to reflect on whether their decision not to pay our student nurses and midwives for their work on the front line was, in fact, the decision they really wanted to make.

*10 o'clock*

**An Ceann Comhairle:** We will have to do that as a roll call vote as we are not equipped to walk through the lobbies.

Amendment again put:

<i>The Dáil divided: Tá, 79; Níl, 72; Staon, 0.</i>		
<i>Tá</i>	<i>Níl</i>	<i>Staon</i>
<i>Brophy, Colm.</i>	<i>Andrews, Chris.</i>	
<i>Browne, James.</i>	<i>Barry, Mick.</i>	
<i>Bruton, Richard.</i>	<i>Berry, Cathal.</i>	
<i>Burke, Colm.</i>	<i>Boyd Barrett, Richard.</i>	
<i>Burke, Peter.</i>	<i>Brady, John.</i>	
<i>Butler, Mary.</i>	<i>Browne, Martin.</i>	
<i>Byrne, Thomas.</i>	<i>Buckley, Pat.</i>	
<i>Cahill, Jackie.</i>	<i>Cairns, Holly.</i>	
<i>Calleary, Dara.</i>	<i>Canney, Seán.</i>	
<i>Cannon, Ciarán.</i>	<i>Carthy, Matt.</i>	
<i>Carey, Joe.</i>	<i>Clarke, Sorca.</i>	
<i>Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.</i>	<i>Collins, Joan.</i>	
<i>Chambers, Jack.</i>	<i>Collins, Michael.</i>	
<i>Collins, Niall.</i>	<i>Connolly, Catherine.</i>	
<i>Costello, Patrick.</i>	<i>Conway-Walsh, Rose.</i>	
<i>Coveney, Simon.</i>	<i>Cronin, Réada.</i>	
<i>Cowen, Barry.</i>	<i>Crowe, Seán.</i>	
<i>Crowe, Cathal.</i>	<i>Cullinane, David.</i>	
<i>Devlin, Cormac.</i>	<i>Daly, Pa.</i>	

<i>Dillon, Alan.</i>	<i>Doherty, Pearse.</i>	
<i>Donnelly, Stephen.</i>	<i>Donnelly, Paul.</i>	
<i>Donohoe, Paschal.</i>	<i>Ellis, Dessie.</i>	
<i>Duffy, Francis Noel.</i>	<i>Farrell, Mairéad.</i>	
<i>Durkan, Bernard J.</i>	<i>Fitzmaurice, Michael.</i>	
<i>English, Damien.</i>	<i>Fitzpatrick, Peter.</i>	
<i>Farrell, Alan.</i>	<i>Gannon, Gary.</i>	
<i>Feighan, Frankie.</i>	<i>Gould, Thomas.</i>	
<i>Flaherty, Joe.</i>	<i>Guirke, Johnny.</i>	
<i>Flanagan, Charles.</i>	<i>Harkin, Marian.</i>	
<i>Fleming, Sean.</i>	<i>Healy-Rae, Danny.</i>	
<i>Foley, Norma.</i>	<i>Howlin, Brendan.</i>	
<i>Griffin, Brendan.</i>	<i>Kelly, Alan.</i>	
<i>Harris, Simon.</i>	<i>Kenny, Gino.</i>	
<i>Haughey, Seán.</i>	<i>Kenny, Martin.</i>	
<i>Higgins, Emer.</i>	<i>Kerrane, Claire.</i>	
<i>Hourigan, Neasa.</i>	<i>Lowry, Michael.</i>	
<i>Humphreys, Heather.</i>	<i>Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.</i>	
<i>Kehoe, Paul.</i>	<i>McDonald, Mary Lou.</i>	
<i>Lahart, John.</i>	<i>McGrath, Mattie.</i>	
<i>Lawless, James.</i>	<i>McNamara, Michael.</i>	
<i>Leddin, Brian.</i>	<i>Mitchell, Denise.</i>	
<i>MacSharry, Marc.</i>	<i>Munster, Imelda.</i>	
<i>Madigan, Josepha.</i>	<i>Murphy, Catherine.</i>	
<i>Martin, Catherine.</i>	<i>Murphy, Paul.</i>	
<i>Matthews, Steven.</i>	<i>Murphy, Verona.</i>	
<i>McAuliffe, Paul.</i>	<i>Mythen, Johnny.</i>	
<i>McConalogue, Charlie.</i>	<i>Nash, Ged.</i>	
<i>McEntee, Helen.</i>	<i>Naughten, Denis.</i>	
<i>McGrath, Michael.</i>	<i>Nolan, Carol.</i>	
<i>McGuinness, John.</i>	<i>O'Callaghan, Cian.</i>	
<i>McHugh, Joe.</i>	<i>O'Donoghue, Richard.</i>	
<i>Moynihan, Aindrias.</i>	<i>O'Reilly, Louise.</i>	
<i>Moynihan, Michael.</i>	<i>O'Rourke, Darren.</i>	
<i>Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.</i>	<i>Ó Broin, Eoin.</i>	
<i>Naughton, Hildegard.</i>	<i>Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.</i>	
<i>Noonan, Malcolm.</i>	<i>Ó Murchú, Ruairí.</i>	
<i>O'Brien, Darragh.</i>	<i>Ó Ríordáin, Aodhán.</i>	
<i>O'Brien, Joe.</i>	<i>Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.</i>	
<i>O'Callaghan, Jim.</i>	<i>Pringle, Thomas.</i>	
<i>O'Connor, James.</i>	<i>Quinlivan, Maurice.</i>	
<i>O'Dea, Willie.</i>	<i>Ryan, Patricia.</i>	

<i>O'Donnell, Kieran.</i>	<i>Shanahan, Matt.</i>	
<i>O'Donovan, Patrick.</i>	<i>Sherlock, Sean.</i>	
<i>O'Dowd, Fergus.</i>	<i>Shortall, Róisín.</i>	
<i>O'Gorman, Roderic.</i>	<i>Smith, Bríd.</i>	
<i>O'Sullivan, Christopher.</i>	<i>Smith, Duncan.</i>	
<i>O'Sullivan, Pádraig.</i>	<i>Stanley, Brian.</i>	
<i>Ó Cathasaigh, Marc.</i>	<i>Tóibín, Peadar.</i>	
<i>Ó Cuív, Éamon.</i>	<i>Tully, Pauline.</i>	
<i>Rabbitte, Anne.</i>	<i>Ward, Mark.</i>	
<i>Richmond, Neale.</i>	<i>Whitmore, Jennifer.</i>	
<i>Ring, Michael.</i>	<i>Wynne, Violet-Anne.</i>	
<i>Ryan, Eamon.</i>		
<i>Smith, Brendan.</i>		
<i>Smyth, Niamh.</i>		
<i>Smyth, Ossian.</i>		
<i>Stanton, David.</i>		
<i>Troy, Robert.</i>		
<i>Varadkar, Leo.</i>		

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Brendan Griffin and Jack Chambers; Níl, Deputies Mick Barry and Richard Boyd Barrett.

Amendment declared carried.

Question put: "That the motion, as amended, be agreed to."

<i>The Dáil divided: Tá, 79; Níl, 72; Staon, 0.</i>		
<i>Tá</i>	<i>Níl</i>	<i>Staon</i>
<i>Brophy, Colm.</i>	<i>Andrews, Chris.</i>	
<i>Browne, James.</i>	<i>Barry, Mick.</i>	
<i>Bruton, Richard.</i>	<i>Berry, Cathal.</i>	
<i>Burke, Colm.</i>	<i>Boyd Barrett, Richard.</i>	
<i>Burke, Peter.</i>	<i>Brady, John.</i>	
<i>Butler, Mary.</i>	<i>Browne, Martin.</i>	
<i>Byrne, Thomas.</i>	<i>Buckley, Pat.</i>	
<i>Cahill, Jackie.</i>	<i>Cairns, Holly.</i>	
<i>Calleary, Dara.</i>	<i>Canney, Seán.</i>	
<i>Cannon, Ciarán.</i>	<i>Carthy, Matt.</i>	
<i>Carey, Joe.</i>	<i>Clarke, Sorca.</i>	
<i>Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.</i>	<i>Collins, Joan.</i>	

<i>Chambers, Jack.</i>	<i>Collins, Michael.</i>	
<i>Collins, Niall.</i>	<i>Connolly, Catherine.</i>	
<i>Costello, Patrick.</i>	<i>Conway-Walsh, Rose.</i>	
<i>Coveney, Simon.</i>	<i>Cronin, Réada.</i>	
<i>Cowen, Barry.</i>	<i>Crowe, Seán.</i>	
<i>Crowe, Cathal.</i>	<i>Cullinane, David.</i>	
<i>Devlin, Cormac.</i>	<i>Daly, Pa.</i>	
<i>Dillon, Alan.</i>	<i>Doherty, Pearse.</i>	
<i>Donnelly, Stephen.</i>	<i>Donnelly, Paul.</i>	
<i>Donohoe, Paschal.</i>	<i>Ellis, Dessie.</i>	
<i>Duffy, Francis Noel.</i>	<i>Farrell, Mairéad.</i>	
<i>Durkan, Bernard J.</i>	<i>Fitzmaurice, Michael.</i>	
<i>English, Damien.</i>	<i>Fitzpatrick, Peter.</i>	
<i>Farrell, Alan.</i>	<i>Gannon, Gary.</i>	
<i>Feighan, Frankie.</i>	<i>Gould, Thomas.</i>	
<i>Flaherty, Joe.</i>	<i>Guirke, Johnny.</i>	
<i>Flanagan, Charles.</i>	<i>Harkin, Marian.</i>	
<i>Fleming, Sean.</i>	<i>Healy-Rae, Danny.</i>	
<i>Foley, Norma.</i>	<i>Howlin, Brendan.</i>	
<i>Griffin, Brendan.</i>	<i>Kelly, Alan.</i>	
<i>Harris, Simon.</i>	<i>Kenny, Gino.</i>	
<i>Haughey, Seán.</i>	<i>Kenny, Martin.</i>	
<i>Higgins, Emer.</i>	<i>Kerrane, Claire.</i>	
<i>Hourigan, Neasa.</i>	<i>Lowry, Michael.</i>	
<i>Humphreys, Heather.</i>	<i>Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.</i>	
<i>Kehoe, Paul.</i>	<i>McDonald, Mary Lou.</i>	
<i>Lahart, John.</i>	<i>McGrath, Mattie.</i>	
<i>Lawless, James.</i>	<i>McNamara, Michael.</i>	
<i>Leddin, Brian.</i>	<i>Mitchell, Denise.</i>	
<i>MacSharry, Marc.</i>	<i>Munster, Imelda.</i>	
<i>Madigan, Josepha.</i>	<i>Murphy, Catherine.</i>	
<i>Martin, Catherine.</i>	<i>Murphy, Paul.</i>	
<i>Matthews, Steven.</i>	<i>Murphy, Verona.</i>	
<i>McAuliffe, Paul.</i>	<i>Mythen, Johnny.</i>	
<i>McConalogue, Charlie.</i>	<i>Nash, Ged.</i>	
<i>McEntee, Helen.</i>	<i>Naughten, Denis.</i>	
<i>McGrath, Michael.</i>	<i>Nolan, Carol.</i>	
<i>McGuinness, John.</i>	<i>O'Callaghan, Cian.</i>	
<i>McHugh, Joe.</i>	<i>O'Donoghue, Richard.</i>	
<i>Moynihan, Aindrias.</i>	<i>O'Reilly, Louise.</i>	
<i>Moynihan, Michael.</i>	<i>O'Rourke, Darren.</i>	
<i>Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.</i>	<i>Ó Broin, Eoin.</i>	



<i>Naughton, Hildegard.</i>	<i>Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.</i>	
<i>Noonan, Malcolm.</i>	<i>Ó Murchú, Ruairí.</i>	
<i>O'Brien, Darragh.</i>	<i>Ó Ríordáin, Aodhán.</i>	
<i>O'Brien, Joe.</i>	<i>Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.</i>	
<i>O'Callaghan, Jim.</i>	<i>Pringle, Thomas.</i>	
<i>O'Connor, James.</i>	<i>Quinlivan, Maurice.</i>	
<i>O'Dea, Willie.</i>	<i>Ryan, Patricia.</i>	
<i>O'Donnell, Kieran.</i>	<i>Shanahan, Matt.</i>	
<i>O'Donovan, Patrick.</i>	<i>Sherlock, Sean.</i>	
<i>O'Dowd, Fergus.</i>	<i>Shortall, Róisín.</i>	
<i>O'Gorman, Roderic.</i>	<i>Smith, Bríd.</i>	
<i>O'Sullivan, Christopher.</i>	<i>Smith, Duncan.</i>	
<i>O'Sullivan, Pádraig.</i>	<i>Stanley, Brian.</i>	
<i>Ó Cathasaigh, Marc.</i>	<i>Tóibín, Peadar.</i>	
<i>Ó Cuív, Éamon.</i>	<i>Tully, Pauline.</i>	
<i>Rabbitte, Anne.</i>	<i>Ward, Mark.</i>	
<i>Richmond, Neale.</i>	<i>Whitmore, Jennifer.</i>	
<i>Ring, Michael.</i>	<i>Wynne, Violet-Anne.</i>	
<i>Ryan, Eamon.</i>		
<i>Smith, Brendan.</i>		
<i>Smyth, Niamh.</i>		
<i>Smyth, Ossian.</i>		
<i>Stanton, David.</i>		
<i>Troy, Robert.</i>		
<i>Varadkar, Leo.</i>		

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Brendan Griffin and Jack Chambers; Níl, Deputies Mick Barry and Richard Boyd Barrett.

Question declared carried.

### **Investment Limited Partnerships (Amendment) Bill 2020: Message from Select Committee**

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The Select Committee on Finance, Public Expenditure and Reform, and Taoiseach has concluded its consideration of the Investment Limited Partnerships (Amendment) Bill 2020, and has made no amendments thereto.

### **Estimates for Public Services 2020: Message from Select Committee**

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The Select Committee on Health has completed its consideration of the following Supplementary Estimate for public services for the year ending 31 December 2020: Vote 38.

**Message from Business Committee**

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The Standing Business Committee has completed its consideration under Standing Order 30 of the request from the Minister of State with responsibility for mental health and older people to waive the requirement to give the general scheme draft heads of the Central Mental Hospital Bill 2020 to the relevant committee under Standing Order 173, and has agreed thereto.

The Dáil adjourned at 10.25 p.m. until 9 a.m. on Thursday, 3 December 2020.