



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

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

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Déardaoin, 14 Eanáir 2021

Thursday, 14 January 2021

Chuaigh an Leas-Cheann Comhairle i gceannas ar 12 p.m.

Paidir.

Prayer.

Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Ba mhaith liom ceist na n-ospidéal a phlé leis an Tánaiste, go háirithe ó thaobh na leapacha in ICU. Tá a fhios againn ón eolas a tháinig chun solais inné go bhfuil 13 dár n-ospidéal ar fud an Stáit nach bhfuil leaba ar bith ICU ar fáil iontu, agus i seacht gcinn eile níl ach leaba amháin le fáil. Tá an fhoireann atá ag obair sna hospidéal faoi bhrú millteanach. Ag an am céanna, tá a fhios againn ó Be On Call for Ireland go bhfuil níos mó ná 1,500 duine, dochtúir agus altra atá sásta dul ag obair inár n-ospidéal ach níl conradh faighte acu. Fosta, tá cúpla céad altra ann atá sásta theacht chun an tír seo ach níl an Roinn Dlí agus Cirt ag ceadú a gcuid visas in am. Tá sé ag glacadh trí mhí. Caithfear níos mó a dhéanamh, gan dabht, ar an ábhar seo.

In the past number of days, the situation in our hospitals has continued to deteriorate due to the number of Covid-19 patients requiring hospitalisation. The daily operations update on the situation in our acute hospitals is one that makes for very grim reading. The latest report available, from yesterday, states that there are now 13 hospitals without any ICU capacity, seven other hospitals that just have one ICU bed left and that a sizeable majority of patients in ICU beds throughout the State are now there due to Covid-19. ICU capacity, we are told, is expected to be used up by the weekend, as reported in the media. I want, first, to express my solidarity with the staff in all of our hospitals and, indeed, the patients. Our staff are experiencing at the moment something that is unimaginable. It is a very worrying time. They are overworked, exhausted and anxious about the period ahead and many of them are angry that they have been left in this situation. The least we can do here is thank them for their work and express our support for them at this extremely difficult time.

Over the summer, as the Tánaiste will be aware, Sinn Féin warned that capacity needed to be ramped up. This did not happen in sufficient ways. The IMO warned the Government, upon publication of the winter plan, that it was insufficient and that more needed to be done. The failure to build in the necessary capacity has left us again relying on surge capacity and the option of using private hospitals. These remain the only options at the Government's disposal at

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the minute to alleviate the situation. My own local hospital in Letterkenny has just a handful of acute beds left throughout the hospital at this time and no available ICU beds. I know from speaking to staff at the front line that they are very anxious about the coming weeks and they are very worried. They know that we cannot conjure up capacity in a couple of days and there is a huge job of work to ensure our medium-term and long-term capacity is expanded.

However, there are a number of things we can do to help to alleviate the situation in the short term. The deal with the private hospitals is one of them, a deal which provides one third capacity. Does the Tánaiste believe this is a sufficient amount of capacity? Does he believe it should be increased and have discussions begun to increase that capacity? There remains available, through the Be on Call for Ireland initiative, a pool of approximately 1,500 healthcare workers. Many of these are job-ready, including nurses, doctors and other staff willing to take up work in our hospitals but who have not been deployed. Why have they not been deployed and when will all the nurses and doctors who are making themselves available be deployed in our public services?

In addition, there are currently serious delays in processing atypical working visas, which is preventing the recruitment of healthcare staff. We are told that it is currently taking ten to 12 weeks to process the applications for these visas. The Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland, RCSI, had to cancel 200 examinations for nurses due to the delays in processing the applications in January alone. Last March, the Department was taking 48 hours to process these applications; now it is taking up to three months. The reality is that if it were not for the Department dragging its heels, we could have 200 additional nurses in Ireland by the end of the month. These nurses are willing to leave their own home country to come to Ireland to work in our public health system at a time when the virus is at its worst. We need to do a lot better. Why is the Department dragging its heels on this issue?

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy. First, the situation in our hospitals remains very precarious and, unfortunately, it is continuing to deteriorate. The very best way we can support the staff working in our acute hospitals is to continue to abide by the restrictions, to social distance and to do all the things that are being asked of us. That is what we need to do to decrease the number of people getting Covid and going into hospital. That is the best way that we can turn the corner on the current situation. As the Deputy will know, the situation in Northern Ireland is similar, if not worse, so I do not think today is a day when Sinn Féin, which is in government in Northern Ireland, should be scoring political points on an issue like this. The job that party has done in Northern Ireland is not one to be proud of, in my view.

In regard to the hospitals, at the moment there are 1,838 patients with Covid in our hospitals and 176 in ICUs. What is somewhat encouraging is that the number of admissions to hospital yesterday was 149 but the number of discharges was 128, so the net increase, at least in the past day, was much smaller than on previous days. There is a glimmer of hope. Cases have been falling now for a number of days. We may see the total number of people being hospitalised starting to fall in about a week's time and ICU numbers starting to fall in maybe two weeks' time, but it will be a very difficult, precarious and dangerous situation for the next two weeks, at the very least, in our hospitals. In total, across the hospital system - I appreciate it varies from place to place - there are 510 acute beds and 29 ICU adult beds free today. There are also paediatric beds. It is possible, and not unusual, for people to be transferred from one hospital to another where there is capacity. There are 29 ICU beds and 510 acute beds available today across the system.

In regard to solutions, which the Deputy touched on, and what we can do to alleviate the situation to make sure our hospitals do not become overwhelmed over the next couple of weeks, there is the deal with the private hospitals. That allows us to use up to 60% of their capacity, not 30%. Those discussions are under way with hospitals at the moment. The 30% is secured and a further 30% can be sought and has been sought. We are going to try to access that. It is also possible to create surge ICU capacity within our hospitals. We have increased ICU capacity since this time last year but, as people appreciate, an ICU bed is not a bed. It is an entire care system and it requires trained and qualified staff. We have the kit. We have 1,800 ventilators and we probably only have 100 or so people on ventilators at the moment. We have 1,800 ventilators and we have the kit, but having the staff trained up and ready to go is a different matter. Some are out sick, some are close contacts and cannot come to work and lots are really exhausted after a very difficult year, which the Deputy will appreciate. We can provide extra ICU capacity, which is the surge capacity, by turning ordinary wards, theatres and recovery areas into additional ICU beds.

In terms of the Be on Call for Ireland issue, I will ask the Minister for Health, Deputy Stephen Donnelly, about that and come back to the Deputy on it. My understanding is that when we ran that programme some months ago it ran into real difficulties because a large number of people who signed up were not qualified. Many were already working, for example, in nursing homes and were seeking to transfer to hospitals. That is not something we wanted to happen because nursing homes are under pressure as well. I will certainly seek an update from the Minister, Deputy Stephen Donnelly, on that and come back to the Deputy.

The Deputy asked about working visas. I was not aware that was the situation with regard to working visas in my Department. There can be delays but the turnaround times given by the Deputy now versus then are new to me. I will take that up with my Secretary General to see if there is something we can do.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The issue is very serious. My local hospital in Letterkenny had seven ambulances parked outside on Sunday night. Patients were being treated in the forecourt of Letterkenny University Hospital in ambulances because there was no capacity. A total of 11 beds were closed within the hospital because of staffing shortages. As the Tánaiste says, many are out sick. Up to 180 are either close contacts or Covid-19 positive themselves.

We have the statistics. What concerns me is that hundreds of nurses who are qualified and job-ready with completed clearance under the Be On Call for Ireland programme have not been deployed. There are currently 268 in the pool of doctors. There are 1,491 in total in the pool. More than half of these are job-ready but they have not been deployed. Some 200 examinations had to be cancelled for nurses who were willing to come to this country. Applications made as far back as November still have not been processed. These people are supposed to be taking up positions in community settings and different hospitals throughout the State but the visa application system is preventing them.

I will finish on this point. We all absolutely recognise the work of front-line workers but when people are willing to step forward, we have a responsibility to take some of the pressure off those in the system and ensure all the red tape is taken away. Will the Tánaiste answer those questions?

The Tánaiste: The Deputy asked about Be On Call for Ireland. As I mentioned earlier, that was something we launched last March. I launched it as Taoiseach with the Minister for Health

at the time, Deputy Harris. We had a significant level of interest in it but it did not turn out to be what we thought it would be because we found that a significant number of people were not available. Some were not resident in the State. Some were already working within the health service and we did not want to redeploy them from areas where they were already working. Others did not have the appropriate qualifications. I will seek an update on that from the Minister, Deputy Stephen Donnelly, as things may have changed since I last looked into that issue.

I will do the same in respect of work visas. That matter has not yet been brought to my attention in person. Neither the HSE nor the Minister for Health have said to me that it is an issue. It may well have arisen in written questions but no one has raised it with me in person until now. I will certainly look into that to see if there is something we can do. It is important to point out that working visas need to be processed properly. Ultimately, we have an obligation and duty to the public to ensure people are safe and that those who receive work visas and permits are who they say they are and have the qualifications they say they have. It cannot simply be done overnight although perhaps it can be done more quickly.

Deputy Cathal Berry: I wish to focus my questions on the vaccine roll-out. From the get-go I am one of the first to admit that there has been at least some progress from a vaccine point of view over the past three or four weeks. For example, we now have two fully approved vaccines in the country. I hope that from tomorrow fortnight there will be approval of a third vaccine candidate, and that is a good thing. For all its imperfections, at least the vaccine roll-out is under way now. Approximately 50,000 people have been vaccinated every week. That is also to be welcomed.

Vaccine hesitancy was a big issue prior to Christmas but it seems to have completely disappeared now. It has probably been replaced with something like vaccine mania - people are so keen to get the vaccine as soon as possible. From a vaccine perspective it can only be a good thing that there is rising confidence in the side effect profile and the efficacy of these vaccines.

Having said that, the roll-out is regarded as being quite sluggish. I have some practical knowledge of what is happening and I have three questions, suggestions or observations that might nudge things along somewhat. The first thing I wish to comment on is the information technology system. Many people present may not be aware but the IT system does not work at all. If a person goes to a nursing home and opens his or her laptop, he or she cannot input any data from a vaccine perspective at all, which is a major problem. In effect, we are combining 21st century cutting-edge vaccine medicine with a 13th century means of recording it, which is simply a pencil and paper. That has significant downstream effects for data presentation and situation awareness for both decision makers and members of the public.

The second suggestion I wish to make relates to healthcare workers. It is a good thing that front-line healthcare workers in acute hospitals in big cities are being vaccinated. That is actually happening. However, as a member of the Regional Group, I wish to highlight that there are front-line healthcare workers in the community throughout regional and rural Ireland who need to be remembered as well. They work in dental surgeries and GP clinics. They work as physiotherapists and in home care and have a full plethora of skills. Can the Tánaiste offer reassurance that these people will not be forgotten about?

The most important point is on the AstraZeneca vaccine. I hope we will get approval from the European Medicines Agency tomorrow fortnight that this third vaccine candidate can be used. Has the Tánaiste given any thought to pre-positioning? By this I mean acquiring these

vaccines in advance of the announcement if and when it comes. It could mean that if and when the announcement is made later this month, we actually will have the vaccines in the GP clinics ready to go. Then, within hours, we can start vaccinating. It is important that we move these vaccines from the shelf into people's shoulders, where they belong. I would be grateful for the thoughts of the Tánaiste.

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Berry - Dr. Berry - for his contribution and for the work I know he has been doing on the front line in respect of the vaccination programme.

The programme is well under way. We are doing better than people think. There are approximately 200 countries in the world but only 40 have started a vaccination programme and we are among those. We are now in the top ten or 12 in terms of vaccines given per day and we are above the EU average. Of course, we aspire to climb in the rankings and to be in the top tier of EU countries.

It will be offered to everyone. It is free. It is not compulsory. It is safe and effective. People will need two doses, approximately three to six weeks apart.

People have been prioritised, as Members are aware, into 15 groups. We are focusing now on groups 1 and 2, which include nursing home residents and staff, those over 65 years in residential care and front-line healthcare workers. I think people understand the reasons why.

An information technology system has been developed that was delivered to the HSE at the end of December. Additional functionality is being added but it is not needed yet. As the Deputy pointed out, we are vaccinating in nursing homes and in healthcare settings and it is a pen and paper exercise at the moment. We will, however, very much need the IT system when we go out to the GPs and pharmacies. I am told that we will be ready for when it is required, which most likely will be some time next month.

The Deputy also raised the issue of healthcare workers in the community not being vaccinated yet. I appreciate this issue needs to be resolved. I know many GPs have been on to me - dentists as well - and it is essential that they should be included within that group - group 2 - of healthcare workers. I mean not only the GPs but also the other staff in practices who deal with the public because they are at risk too. The same applies in dentists' surgeries given the close-contact nature of the service they provide. That is something I will be taking up with the vaccine task force. I will be seeking the assurance that GPs and practice staff, as well as dentists and their staff will be vaccinated as part of group 2, as we have committed to.

Finally, we are advised that the European Medicines Agency will meet on 29 January in respect of AstraZeneca. All things going to plan, the agency will approve the vaccine and the Commission will meet that evening and approve the vaccine. That is significant because that will allow us to ramp up the number of vaccines that we are doing every week from approximately 50,000 this week to well over 100,000 in February once that vaccine becomes available.

We are part of an EU system of procurement, as the Deputy will know, so I am unsure whether it is possible to get the vaccines delivered before they are approved. Anyway, I see the point the Deputy is making. If that is possible, we could gain a few days if we could get the vaccines into fridges in GP surgeries by 29 January, but not use them until approved. I do not know if that can be done, but it is a good idea and I will check it out.

Deputy Cathal Berry: I thank the Tánaiste for those clarifications.

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My final question concerns the army of volunteers who have been working flat out in Covid testing hubs all over the country. Some of these people are members of the GAA or retired members of the Defence Forces. I even met Aer Lingus workers who are currently on leaves of absence. They are working unpaid and they epitomise the volunteer spirit in Ireland at the moment. I know that the Tánaiste and every other Member of the House fully appreciates and recognises the wonderful work they do. My question is this: is there anything more tangible we could do for these people to demonstrate the value of the work they are doing and our appreciation for it? For instance, it was mentioned to me when I visited some of them that they could be provided with perhaps One4all vouchers, fuel cards, social welfare stamps or something else more tangible. These people signed up for a couple of weeks' work last March, but a couple of weeks has turned into almost a year, with another few months to run. I would be grateful for the Tánaiste's thoughts. Has any consideration been given to providing something more meaningful, more tangible, to demonstrate our appreciation for the work these people do?

The Tánaiste: I am really glad the Deputy brought this up because it has been on my mind as well. I am conscious that a large number of volunteers are helping out in the testing centres and swabbing centres. Not only are these people giving up their time, they are also willing to put themselves at a certain degree of risk of contracting the virus. That needs to be recognised properly, so we are giving consideration to recognising their contribution in some way, perhaps through some form of honorarium. I have not worked that out exactly yet, but it would be right and appropriate that we do so.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: I wish to start by wishing the Tánaiste and his family and all my colleagues in the Houses of the Oireachtas a happy and safe new year. That goes for all the people around Ireland. The time since Christmas has been difficult, with Covid-19 resulting in 172 people in intensive care and 17,000 hospitalised over Christmas. Before moving on to my questions to the Tánaiste, I wish to acknowledge and express my deep shame about what happened to the mothers, babies and children in the mother and baby homes. This wrong can never been undone. Recognising and acknowledging the shame, stigma and neglect in what happened to these mothers and their babies is the first step towards the healing of and the progress on the hurt and the humiliation. The abuse of power by the State, the Church and local authorities is totally unacceptable. I thank Deputy Connolly. She put it very well last night when she stated that it was the powerful against the powerless.

My question is this: is it okay in this country to ask a question? Is it okay in this country to be scared? Six weeks ago I was asked whether I would take the vaccine. On that same day I answered truthfully that I would have to speak to my doctors. Why? Because they were dealing with something relating to an underlying condition that I was dealing with. My doctors have told me that when the vaccine becomes available, they will advise me to take it - and I will take it. However, people have put out a stigma that it is not okay to ask a question. Vicky Phelan, who was on "The Late Late Show" last week, said she has the highest respect, as I myself do, for front-line workers and the care they provide but she also said that it is okay to question things to get the answers. My job, as a politician and as an elected representative for Limerick, is to ask the questions and look after everyone, whether or not they are in favour of taking a vaccine. My job is to encourage them. My job is to help them in whatever way I can. My advice to anyone who has concerns about the vaccine is to consult his or her GP. Who knows us best but our own GPs?

The Tánaiste: To answer the Deputy's question, it is okay to ask questions and, yes, it is okay to have doubts and to seek reassurance and information. That is entirely reasonable. Dur-

ing my time practising as a doctor - as a GP - I worked in vaccine clinics. People had questions and concerns and it was my job to answer their questions, give them accurate information and assuage their concerns. The Deputy and I are both on the same page in that regard. We have a very good record in Ireland when it comes to take-up of vaccines. When it comes to the childhood vaccination programme, we have take-up in the region of 95% or more, much better than many other countries, and our healthcare professionals do a good job in that regard. Our philosophy has always been to engage, explain and reassure and to give people all the facts and not to browbeat people into submission or to patronise them. It is important we are all in that space when we talk about the vaccine. That is not to say for a second that I condone or think we should tolerate the kinds of conspiracies theories, lies and misinformation we see spread, particularly online. They are wrong and should stop, but that should not be conflated with individuals, citizens and patients who have concerns and questions and who want to know about the side-effects, efficacy and safety. It is entirely right that they should ask those questions. Our job as the Government, as politicians and as healthcare professionals is to provide the information and to engage, inform and reassure. That would be the best approach as we go forward.

As things stand, far from vaccine hesitancy being a problem, the problem at the moment is supply. There are many more people who want the vaccine now than we have vaccines. I think we will achieve that 70% or 80% we need for herd immunity. As I said earlier, this vaccine will be offered to everyone. It will be free of charge. It will not be compulsory. It is safe and effective. It may be the case that this vaccine was developed more quickly than any other vaccine in the past, but no corners were cut in terms of the trials or the clinical data. People will need two doses of the vaccine to get full protection. Those two doses will be given three to six weeks apart.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: I agree with every sentiment the Tánaiste has expressed. Would I be right in saying that it is not okay for one of his Ministers of State to come out and call people who were seeking medical advice and asking questions cowardly? His Minister of State representing Limerick came out and stated in a newspaper that people who ask questions are cowardly. That is completely wrong. I am asked questions every day and I give advice to the best of my ability. Then I direct and encourage people to go and get the proper advice. That is what we are here to do. I have people ringing me from University Hospital Limerick, UHL, who say they have not yet been vaccinated, but there are individuals who are not working within the hospital system and who are out on leave who have been called in for their vaccinations. Yesterday, I heard from people who have been called twice to get their vaccinations only to be told they are out of the hospital system. They were called twice to get it and now they are being told to come back in a few days' time, that the hospital might have it then. I have never questioned front-line staff - I commend them wholeheartedly - but I do question the management of certain hospitals in how they are managing this pandemic and their staff. People should not be called for vaccination if the vaccine is not available.

The Tánaiste: It is always okay to ask questions, particularly if the purpose of asking the question is to seek information. It is different when people ask questions for rhetorical reasons, namely, when they are trying to make a point rather than seeking information. We all recognise that.

As to what is happening in terms of our hospitals, there have been issues from time to time in individual hospitals and on individual days of vaccines running out and so on. By and large, however, the people who are providing our vaccines in our hospitals and healthcare settings are doing a very good job. Sometimes, in some places and on some days, things will go awry but

generally they are doing a very good job. We now expect, certainly before the end of the month, that is, by the weekend after this, that everybody in and working in a nursing home will have been offered their first dose. They also will have had their second dose by the middle of February. It must be borne in mind that over 60% of deaths occurred to people who were residents in nursing homes and one should think of the different space we could be in within a few weeks' time when we have achieved that. We intend that all healthcare workers will have received their first and second dose by the end of February. We can then move on to the over-70s, who are the next group, and that will be done generally through GPs and pharmacies.

Deputy Michael McNamara: On the point on which the Tánaiste has concluded, I raised with the Minister, Deputy Stephen Donnelly, yesterday the specific vulnerability of people who are in receipt of home care. They need to be specifically prioritised because they may have two to three different carers coming in every day and those carers are going into several houses every day, of necessity.

As someone who has repeatedly called for testing at airports, which I first raised with the Tánaiste and the then Minister for Health, Deputy Harris, last April, I welcome the introduction of an airport testing regime. I worry, however, that this particular testing regime may not achieve what it has set out to achieve and may in fact have some unintended consequences.

What is happening at our ports? Is there a similar testing regime at our ports and, in particular, in airports in Northern Ireland? I am aware that Belfast International Airport is offering testing for outgoing passengers but I am not aware of a similar requirement for incoming passengers. If there is not a similar regime for ports and airports in Northern Ireland, and indeed ports here, we are then effectively closing the windows to keep the cold out while leaving the front door open. We have an open border with Northern Ireland and there has to be a degree of co-ordination in that regard.

As the Tánaiste will be aware, it is generally accepted and was explained by Dr. Colm Henry to the Covid-19 committee that polymerase chain reaction, PCR, testing will identify as positive someone who has had Covid-19 recently but is no longer infectious. This specific query comes from a constituent but I am sure it is a common issue right across the country. One employee of my constituent went back to England for Christmas, developed Covid-19 and, like the majority albeit not everybody, recovered and is no longer infected by it. However, if this person does a PCR test now, it will be positive and will still detect Covid-19 for some time, even though the person is not infectious right now. Science would suggest that this person has the least chance of redeveloping it or becoming infectious, hence the suggestion that people not be vaccinated perhaps for six months because there is a period when the risk is relatively low. In those circumstances, are these people precluded from coming to Ireland even though they are essential workers and are needed for essential work? Can the test be modified in those specific circumstances for someone who has been positive and will therefore test positive, even though that person clearly is not infectious?

The Tánaiste: Under the new rules, any person entering the State through our ports or airports will have to have had a PCR test with a negative result within 72 hours of their arrival. The only exception that is being made is for people who are transport workers in that supply chain, such as hauliers, cabin crew and pilots, for obvious reasons. Some exceptions are made on compassionate grounds where someone needs to get back to the country very quickly because they may have a dying parent or child or something on those lines. Those are the only exceptions being considered at the moment.

PCR testing is not 100% and will miss some positives and there will be false negatives but it is the most accurate test that we have. Having had the PCR test does not mean that the person does not have to quarantine. The green, amber and red rules still apply as to restrictive movements and so on, once one arrives in the country. The objective in doing this is, first of all, to reduce the amount of international travel in order that only those who genuinely need to travel are doing so for essential reasons. The second objective is that by requiring the test one is reducing the risk. We have seen 97% to 98% compliance now with people flying in from Great Britain and it considerably reduces the risk.

People often ask why this was not done before. There are many reasons, not least of which was the availability of PCR testing months ago. The biggest problem with it is Northern Ireland and the fact that one can fly into Belfast, for example, from Britain, and perhaps even other parts of the world through Britain, without having a negative PCR test. This is something that we are engaging with the Northern Ireland Executive on but it is an area in which Sinn Féin, in particular, can be helpful. I often hear Deputy Doherty or Deputy McDonald on the TV and radio speaking as though Sinn Féin is not in government anywhere on this island. It is in Northern Ireland, it co-chairs the Executive there and has a responsibility to do the one useful thing it could do to help us battle the pandemic, which is to convince its coalition partners and the Northern Ireland Executive to bring in the same rules for people entering Northern Ireland from Britain and elsewhere. If we just do this here in the Republic, it will not be enough as it needs to be done in Northern Ireland as well. Constantly calling for an all-Ireland strategy is not good enough, as one has to do everything one can to achieve it. There is a particular responsibility now on the Sinn Féin Party, which co-chairs the Executive in Northern Ireland, to convince the other parties to do exactly that.

Deputy Michael McNamara: My specific question was whether the Government will look at exempting people who will test positive because they have had Covid-19, have gone through the symptoms and recovered, although they are not infectious and are essential workers.

The other thing that I have repeatedly called for is that NPHET and the Department of Health look at vitamin D supplements. We know that we cannot give the vaccine to everybody who requires it now but we can give vitamin D to everybody. I am not suggesting that it is as efficacious as a vaccine but the overwhelming evidence is that it is beneficial both in terms of preventing people getting Covid-19 and in reducing the impact of Covid-19 if they do get it. The risk of toxicity is very low so there is little to lose and much to gain. I asked the Department of Health this question and received a parliamentary reply saying that it would continue to look at the matter. There is more and more evidence being published in *The Lancet* and the *British Medical Journal*, that is, in reputable scientific journals, to suggest that benefits accrue from this while people are waiting for a vaccine.

The Tánaiste: For now, the only exceptions to having to have a negative PCR test result on coming into the country are if one is under six years of age, if one is part of the transport supply chain such as the pilot, cabin crew or haulier or for compassionate grounds where someone needs to race back to the country in an emergency. We can consider further exceptions into the future and I will take up what the Deputy has mentioned with our medical people and scientists. We want to see first how this works before we start adding new exceptions, which I believe the Deputy will understand. Thus far, at least with people coming from Britain, it is working very well. More than 97% of people arriving in Ireland from Britain through our airports have had the negative test. As to the other 3%, that is a matter for the Garda and the Director of Public Prosecutions, DPP.

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The jury is still out on vitamin D supplementation. There is some evidence suggesting that it could be beneficial. I am not going to do a Donald Trump here and recommend remdesivir, chloroquine or anything else until we are in a position that we have more conclusive evidence as to whether it is beneficial. Again that is something I will take up with our medical people.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I thank the Tánaiste.

Ceisteanna ar Reachtaíocht a Gealladh - Questions on Promised Legislation

Deputy Pearse Doherty: It is regrettable that the Tánaiste has used the pandemic to score cheap political points. The Tánaiste knows more than most that Sinn Féin actually proposed a travel ban to the Executive and that the DUP, UUP and the Alliance Party voted that down. This is regrettable given the sacrifices and the suffering that so many people are going through at this point in time, not to mention the loss of life that we have seen increase in the last number of days.

The issue I wish to raise with the Tánaiste today is that yesterday, the Central Bank found that the average interest rate on mortgages here is almost 2.8%. This is the highest in the EU and over twice the European average. First-time mortgage buyers are now paying €2,000 on average more in interest each year than the European mortgage holder. They pay €60,000 more back to the bank over the lifetime of the loan. That is the scale of the rip-off. I will ask the Tánaiste three questions. First, what policy actions will the Government take to respond to this outrage? Second, the withdrawal of Ulster Bank from the market risks raising these interest rates even further, as the deputy governor of the Central Bank confirmed to me in correspondence last month. What steps is the Government taking with regard to Ulster Bank? Third, on 2 December the European regulator reactivated guidelines-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Deputy is way over time.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: -----for Covid payment breaks. The Government has not even asked the banks to bring forward these payment breaks. Can the Tánaiste explain to hard-pressed customers why the Government will not ask the banks to instigate these payment breaks?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: A Theachta, ní mór dúinn a bheith féaráilte do gach duine. Mar sin, cloí leis an srian ama más é do thoil é.

The Tánaiste: I am surprised at how quickly the Deputy becomes sanctimonious. He is forever using Covid to score political points. He did exactly that in his contribution only half an hour ago and made no mention of the sad deaths of at least 50 people yesterday. Sinn Féin beats the band when it comes to using Covid to score political points, but it will not do the two things it should do to help. The first is to convince the Northern Ireland Executive to introduce the same rules as ours in respect of international travel. If its efforts in that regard fail, fair enough, but Sinn Féin should continue to try. There is no point demanding an all-Ireland strategy if the party does not do the one thing it could do to make it happen. Second, Sinn Féin must fully co-operate with the inquiry into Bobby Storey's funeral. The First Minister has said that the latter undermined confidence in public health in Northern Ireland and, indeed, the deputy First Minister, Ms O'Neill, has said the same. We have yet to hear from Deputy Doherty, who attended that event, whether he has been interviewed by the Police Service of Northern Ireland, PSNI, or how that investigation is going.

Regarding the issues the Deputy raised about the banks, I will let the Minister for Finance reply to him on them.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The Tánaiste is the Minister with responsibility.

The Tánaiste: I am not. The Minister for Finance has responsibility.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The Tánaiste has responsibility.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Almost four minutes have been taken up with the first question. This is not acceptable. I am moving on. There is a minute for each Deputy. If questions can be posed and answered, that would be helpful.

Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin: I speak for many people when I say that the point-scoring between Sinn Féin and Fine Gael is getting quite tedious.

I have a question about the Beacon Hospital. It is reported in the *Irish Independent* today that the staff in the privately-owned Beacon Hospital were vaccinated yesterday. This is the same hospital that refused to sign up to the deal with the HSE to make even 30% of its beds available to the public health system. Dr. Jack Lambert said the following this morning:

Mater has vaccinated less than 50% of those who need it because we have not been given enough vaccine; who made those decisions? No transparency in who made these decisions. Poor communication. COVID vaccine roll out is critical; we need transparency, a very detailed plan.

Why are the vaccinations happening in a private hospital that will not row in behind the national effort, meagre and all as it is? Why are people in the Mater hospital not getting the vaccine, as outlined by Dr. Lambert?

The Tánaiste: I do not have any information on the vaccine programme, either in the Mater or in Beacon Hospital. I will ask the Minister for Health, Deputy Stephen Donnelly, to reply to the Deputy, if he can.

Deputy Gary Gannon: Given the events that took place in the Chamber yesterday, today might be a good day to highlight promises in previous State apologies that are as yet unfulfilled. I refer in particular to the apology to survivors of Magdalen laundries in 2013 and the recommendations from Mr. Justice Quirke's commission that have yet to be implemented. Previously, I raised recommendation 6 relating to memorialisation, but today I wish to highlight recommendation 1, which relates to full medical cards under the Health (Amendment) Act 1996 - HAA cards - that have yet to be delivered to the survivors of Magdalen laundries. I and many other activists, who have worked on this for longer than I have, suggest that the HAA medical card should be given to all survivors of Ireland's institutional past. What is the Tánaiste's opinion on that? Elizabeth Coppin has taken a case to the UN Committee Against Torture, such is the gravity of the situation. I will be interested to hear the Tánaiste's thoughts.

The Tánaiste: First, with regard to memorialisation, the Government has taken a decision to develop a national repository for all archives relating to institutions, and I know the Deputy welcomes that. There are different suggestions as to where it should be located but we intend to press ahead with it, not just so people can have access to records but also in order that the records can be studied. We and other countries can learn from that.

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With regard to survivors of the Magdalen institutions, they have received an enhanced medical card from the Government. It is not the standard medical card, it is a better one. It is true it is not the same as the HAA card, but there were certain issues with that. One is particularly related to hepatitis. Hepatitis obviously gives rise to a set of needs that are different from the health needs former Magdalen residents would have. Sadly, there were a number of instances where that card was misused and abused in the context of treatments that are not recognised. There were certain issues with that, and the Department of Health can give the Deputy more information on it, but there are good reasons that we did not go ahead with that.

Deputy Bríd Smith: Yesterday, the Government circulated a list of priority legislation for the spring session. There is not a single Bill in that list to deal with workers' rights, despite the massive challenges faced by workers throughout the country. Notable by its absence was any attempt to deal with the Duffy Cahill report. In addition, yesterday the Debenhams workers voted by 91% to reject the proposal from Mr. Kevin Foley to put €3 million into a retraining fund. They are asking the Government and all bodies involved in this, including the trade unions, to press for that €3 million to be put into cash as part payment for a just settlement where their redundancy entitlements have been denied to them.

There is great concern among the Debenhams workers about KPMG's attempts to remove the stock during the pandemic restrictions. It is unacceptable that non-essential work such as stock removal should be carried out. Can the Tánaiste give a guarantee that the Government will transfer that €3 million fund into cash and that KPMG will not be allowed to move the stock?

The Tánaiste: I obviously cannot make any commitments on behalf of KPMG. It is a court-sponsored liquidation process and the Deputy will appreciate why I cannot intervene.

There will be workers' rights legislation, including legislation on sick pay. We might not have it in this session, but I anticipate we will have it in the first half of the year. I hope I will have the co-operation of the House in getting that legislation passed before the summer recess so we can implement it before the end of the year.

I am aware of the decision of the former Debenhams workers to reject the proposals made by the chairman of the Labour Court. It is their right to do so. The Government has been engaged in this matter for many months. I have met the unions and spoken to the liquidator and Debenhams UK. I have brought in the Workplace Relations Commission and the chairman of the Labour Court. What is on offer is €13 million from the Social Insurance Fund so the former workers get their legal entitlements to redundancy and a further €3 million in training grants. It would be difficult to turn that €3 million in training grants into cash and then tell all the other workers who received statutory redundancy in the past year that they would not get it too.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: More than half of the 2,460 people who have died with Covid-19 in the State died in nursing homes. In December, two thirds of the deaths that occurred were due to outbreaks in nursing home and hospital settings. Outbreaks in nursing homes doubled to 52 just last week, while cases of Covid-19 in nursing homes increased by 500%. The latter gave rise to 24 deaths in the past week alone. God rest each of those individuals. Currently, there are 800 staff missing from nursing homes across the sector. The issue is so critical that some nursing homes are texting family members of residents and asking them to come in and help. The people who are most vulnerable to Covid-19 have been the most exposed.

At the start of the pandemic, the then Minister, Deputy Harris, launched the Be On Call for Ireland campaign. Some 70,000 people responded, but only 200 were employed. I have taken dozens of calls from medical professionals who applied but who were never employed. There are many newspaper reports about people who applied but were not employed.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Deputy is over time.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: The Tánaiste touched on this matter earlier, but he did not answer the question. Why has this critical human resource not been used?

The Tánaiste: The Deputy is absolutely right to raise the issue of nursing homes. In the first and second waves of the infection the majority of deaths that occurred in Ireland as a consequence of Covid-19 involved people who were residents of nursing homes. There has been a similar pattern across the developed world. It is mainly due to fact that the people who are living in nursing homes tend to be elderly and frail in health terms. That is why we have prioritised vaccinating nursing home residents and staff, all of whom will have had or been offered their first dose by next weekend and will have been offered their second dose by the middle of February. We are putting them first in this regard.

I did not mean to gloss over the question on Be On Call for Ireland, if that is what I did. I am just not up to date on the situation in that regard. I will check it out with the Minister for Health. When I was up to date on it a few months ago, we ran into real issues with it, in that a large number of people volunteered to be available but they were not necessarily qualified or resident in the State.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I thank the Tánaiste.

The Tánaiste: A lot of them were already working in other parts of the health service, including in nursing homes, and wanted to move to hospitals. I will get the Deputy a better update on it.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: The Tánaiste might be playing little games with Sinn Féin, but I want to go back to the banks. When is this Government going to deal with the banks? The Government removed the moratorium and thousands of small businesses and homeowners are now being threatened and intimidated. Many of them are trying to engage with the banks but they can get no clarity on what is going to happen going forward. Some of those who are able to pay want to pay a lesser amount now because of the lack of income.

European interest rates are way lower and the mortgage rates are twice as high here. When is the Government going to deal with the banks? We bailed them out. It is time that they respected the pandemic and the fact that we are all in it together. The banks are in it as well. They have to deal with people sensitively and appropriately and not terrorise them, which is what they are doing. In the middle of a pandemic, they are driving them over the brink with letters, demands for money and a lack of engagement with customers.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: It is time that the banks played their part and that the Government showed some interest in making that happen.

The Tánaiste: The Government is engaging with the banks all the time. Sometimes the engagement is very robust. I can tell the Deputy that for certain, having been present at some of

the meetings. In circumstances where people cannot pay a business loan or a mortgage because of the effect of Covid on their income, mortgage breaks and loan breaks will be available. Other solutions such as interest-only repayments or reduced payments might also be made available. That commitment is there from the banks. It is not a blanket approach but it does apply where somebody genuinely cannot pay as a consequence of his or her income being affected by Covid.

Mortgage rates being higher in Ireland is a separate issue. It is the case that mortgage rates in Ireland are substantially higher than they are in the rest of the EU. They are coming down and they should come down further. We must appreciate that there are two significant differences between Ireland and the rest of the European Union. Bank charges are different. For example, when one sees very low rates in Denmark or Germany, what one does not see is the fact that people are charged in a different way.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We are over time. I thank the Tánaiste.

The Tánaiste: The higher charge results in a lower interest rate. The second difference is the fact that we in Ireland, for very good reason, make it very hard for a bank to repossess a house and that has an impact on mortgage rates.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We are way over time.

The Tánaiste: Even the European banks that provide mortgages here add on a premium for that reason.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I ask for the Tánaiste's co-operation. I know it is difficult, but a number of Deputies are waiting to get in, so I urge Members to be brief.

Deputy Michael McNamara: In view of the Tánaiste's earlier comments about responsible comment, I suggest that comparing vitamin D supplements with remdesivir or hydroxychloroquine, in terms of either the generally accepted benefits or potential negative side effects, is irresponsible.

The question I want to ask about promised legislation relates to Eir and complaints to ComReg more generally. When I asked this question before Christmas, the Tánaiste suggested that he hoped to bring legislation to the Cabinet before Christmas and to the floor of the Dáil in February. That legislation is necessary, in particular as Eir's difficulties with mobile telephone coverage continue across west Clare from Inagh to Miltown Malbay. Has the legislation been brought to Cabinet to give the power to ComReg to levy administrative sanctions on telco companies that repeatedly flout their contractual obligations.

The Tánaiste: On the first point, yes, the heads of the Bill have been brought to Cabinet. That will be provided for in legislation that the Minister of State, Deputy Troy, and I will bring through to increase the powers of the Competition and Consumer Protection Commission, CCPC. We are going to include in that Bill giving ComReg the power to levy administrative sanctions. We expect the Bill to be published and to go through the Houses in this session. We intend to do that because of a European deadline we have to meet as well.

If I could rephrase my earlier comments, the point I was making was a different one. I am not dismissing the possibility that vitamin D may be beneficial in terms of Covid; what I am saying is that the jury is out. The president of America made recommendations about what medicines people should and should not take, including remdesivir, which by the way, is a

recognised licensed medicine for Covid, but it did not turn out to meet its promise.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I thank the Tánaiste.

The Tánaiste: I do not want to be in that space for giving advice on what medicines people should take.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Tá mé ag bogadh ar aghaidh. I am going back to yesterday's list. The second name on that list is Deputy O'Donnell.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: I wish to raise two issues. Could the Tánaiste give an update on the discussions that have taken place between the Ministers, the Department of the Education, the unions and the schools on special needs schools and classes recommencing? It is a major issue on the ground for parents in Limerick and it is something on which he might provide an update.

I note the Government's commitment on the vaccine being prioritised for those other than front-line workers. I refer to GPs and their staff, dentists and their staff and pharmacists as well. Could the Tánaiste raise that with the vaccination task force? In Limerick, there is significant inconsistency in the delivery of the vaccine to GPs, dentists and pharmacists, relative to other areas of the country.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: GPs in Cork have been given their vaccinations but not in Limerick. Dentists in other areas such as Sligo have been given the vaccine. I ask the Tánaiste for a commitment to prioritising those areas.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Fitzpatrick can come in on this topic.

Deputy Peter Fitzpatrick: I am delighted to hear that a fourth vaccine could be available to this country very soon.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Deputy can speak on the same topic.

Deputy Peter Fitzpatrick: A 97-year-old woman in Dundalk is being looked after by her six daughters. The family has contacted the GP and I have contacted the HSE. I have her details. She is no burden to the State. Is that the reason she is not entitled to get the vaccine? At 97 years of age, she is entitled to get it.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I cannot hear when Deputies are shouting from the back. What Deputy Fitzpatrick said does not relate to the question. He is further down the list. I call on the Tánaiste to respond.

The Tánaiste: In response to Deputy O'Donnell, the commitment I can give is that community healthcare workers, GPs, dentists and pharmacists will be included in group 2. I will take it up with the task force next week to make sure that happens. I appreciate that there are going to be differences from one part of the country to the other and from one community healthcare organisation, CHO, to another, but they will be managed in the best possible way.

In response to the question on special educational needs, SEN, the Minister of State, Deputy Madigan, is present and she will take it.

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Minister of State at the Department of Education (Deputy Josepha Madigan): I thank Deputy O'Donnell very much for his question. He must have his finger on the pulse, as there is very good news following our discussions with the unions this morning in that there is a shared commitment to reopen all special classes in primary schools, special schools, and classes for children with SEN in mainstream classes from next Thursday, 21 January. This is a positive development. We have logistical issues that we need to sort out, but I thank the education partners and the Minister for Education, Deputy Foley, for all the work that has been done to date.

Deputy Michael Collins: In 2020, more than 7,000 people either going blind or in pain and in need of an operation availed of the cross-Border scheme. On 31 December, this scheme ended, leaving thousands in the Republic who require urgent surgery in the North stranded. Three cross-Border health initiatives were in place prior to 31 December. Cancer patients travelled from Donegal to Derry. Children requiring heart surgery went from Belfast to Dublin. The third group involved cataract patients and others. Legislation was correctly put in place for the survival of the first two initiatives. Why was no legislation put in place to continue the cross-Border scheme for the thousands of people going blind, who are in need of cataract surgery or those in need of hip or knee surgery? The Fine Gael Senator in west Cork said I was scaremongering when I raised concerns that we would not have a cross-Border scheme in place by 1 January. He said there would be. Is there a new cross-Border scheme in place?

I o'clock

There are many people like me ringing the cross-Border section in Kilkenny and being told it is no longer in place.

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy. The cross-Border scheme derived from European law, the cross-border directive. Northern Ireland is no longer in the European Union, unfortunately; that was beyond our control. Therefore, the cross-Border directive no longer applies. People may still travel to other EU countries under the cross-border directive.

The Minister for Health has approval from the Cabinet to introduce an administrative scheme, not on a legislative basis, that would be analogous to what was there before, thus allowing people, particularly in Border areas, to continue to avail of healthcare in Northern Ireland and we will reimburse their costs. Particularly at this time, with Covid-19 levels so high, elective procedures have been paused for good reason.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: I am really concerned by the number of people who are having their medical cards taken away as we speak. We are at the height of a pandemic and people are being contacted by the HSE, which is taking away those medical cards. Can the Tánaiste please stop this practice?

I know last year there was a moratorium while extensions were given. This year, that has not happened to date. The practice must stop. We know already that medical card thresholds are way too low. People are being hounded out of medical cards and people are being hounded by banks because we will not protect them. If the Tánaiste stopped his obsession with Sinn Féin, perhaps he and his Government could deal with some of these matters.

The Tánaiste: I am no more obsessed with Sinn Féin than the Deputy is obsessed with berating the Government at every opportunity rather than being constructive. I will certainly take up the matter she raises with the Minister for Health, Deputy Donnelly. Medical cards need to be reviewed from time to time to confirm that people are still eligible. Special arrangements

were brought in during the course of the pandemic and I will certainly inform the Minister, Deputy Donnelly, that the Deputy raised concerns in the Dáil and I will ask him to reply to her directly.

Deputy Emer Higgins: This Government has made a commitment to increase social housing stock. Last month, Sinn Féin councillors voted to delay 19 new-build social homes in Clondalkin by a month. The party's national housing spokesperson said this was because 19 homes were not enough. Locally, however, Sinn Féin was saying the opposite. This week, Sinn Féin councillors proposed to reduce that same plan further from 19 homes to 14. The original plan for this site was 28 social homes, so Sinn Féin wanted a 50% reduction. Sinn Féin's housing strategy locally is very different to what it is saying nationally. Maybe it is not a housing strategy at all but a political strategy. Maybe the Sinn Féin approach to housing is simply to keep the housing crisis on the political agenda. Now we are in level 5, will the Tánaiste confirm that social housing projects across the country will continue during this lockdown?

The Tánaiste: I can confirm that in level 5 social housing construction can continue because it is necessary. It is among the exceptions made for construction. On the question of Sinn Féin's housing policy, one could probably say Sinn Féin is in favour of housing in theory but not in practice. It consistently votes against it when it has the opportunity. This Government and the previous Government, at least for the past couple of years, has produced more social housing per head than was the case in Northern Ireland. The party is for social housing as a concept but it is against building houses when the opportunity arises.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The question has been put and answered.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I do not know if Deputy Higgins struggles with addition but if she is good enough to take a look at what happened, she would see that Sinn Féin was proposing more social housing, as we do. We make no apologies for that and we will continue to do it. Our housing strategy is to ensure people get housed, unlike the policies of this Government, which ensure that homelessness increases day on day.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Could we have a question?

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I have a question on the vaccine roll-out. We all know that vaccines do not save lives: getting vaccinated saves lives. What matters is getting the vaccine where it needs to be. I have been contacted by front-line healthcare workers over the weekend who have seen staff within our hospital system and communities getting prioritised who do not have patient-facing roles. They have said it is simply not a case of what a person does but who you know. That must stop. We must ensure the vaccine gets to the front line, where it is needed.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The time is up.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: Will the Tánaiste make a statement on this today? Will the Government issue guidance to hospitals to ensure the vaccine gets to the front line where it is needed first?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Deputy's time is up. I am not addressing anyone in particular but this is not fair to other Deputies. Will the Tánaiste just reply to the question?

The Tánaiste: Under the protocol for prioritising people for the vaccine, the first group comprises nursing home residents and staff, as the Deputy knows. The second group comprises

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healthcare workers who have patient-facing roles and who either work with Covid-19 patients or other patients, such as in emergency departments. They are most at risk and they are supposed to be prioritised over healthcare staff who do not have patient-facing roles. We must allow a certain level of flexibility in hospitals but the Government policy and National Immunisation Advisory Committee, NIAC, recommendations are very clear. Healthcare workers with patient-facing roles should be prioritised over healthcare workers who do not have such roles, but all healthcare workers will be vaccinated.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: My request is to ascertain the current position of the scheduling of the Garda compensation Bill, which has been on the list for some considerable time and would affect a large number of gardaí

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for raising this matter and I know he has raised it many times in the past. It is on the priority list of the legislative programme published the other day.

Deputy Claire Kerrane: After being closed on a temporary basis in 2017, Castlerea fire station in my constituency was permanently closed last July. I raised the matter here at the time. In parliamentary question replies and correspondence to me since, the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, consistently stated the fire station was closed due to internal staffing matters. He is either being misled or misinformed because I attended the council meeting at which the announcement was made and it was done following a review of the fire ground in Castlerea, which apparently indicated we no longer need a fire service.

Castlerea is the second-largest town in County Roscommon and it also has one of the largest prisons in the State. There is now no prison in the State further away from a fire station than the prison in Castlerea. Will the Tánaiste ask the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, at least to read the report that led to the closure of the fire station and consider reviewing the decision?

The Tánaiste: I am aware of the concerns about Castlerea fire station and Senator Aisling Dolan has raised the matter as well. I do not personally know the details but I will certainly speak to the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, and let him know this was raised by the Deputy in the Chamber and ask him to engage with her directly on it.

Deputy Steven Matthews: Our programme for Government states a commission on housing will be established to review various aspects of housing provision concerning tenure and standards. There is an urgent need to address security of tenure and long-term tenancy rights for renters. We also seek high standards but are often let down by investigation and enforcement. Will the Tánaiste update us on progress for the commission for housing? Will the commission look at the programme for Government commitment on a referendum on housing?

The Tánaiste: I will have to double-check but my understanding is we plan to establish that commission this year. One of the matters we will ask the commission to consider is the possibility of a referendum enshrining the right to housing in our Constitution.

Gnó na Dála - Business of Dáil

Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Jack Chambers): It is proposed that, notwithstanding anything in Standing Orders or in the order of the Dáil of 16 December 2020 that the Dáil, on its rising today shall adjourn until 10 a.m. on Wednesday, 20

January 2021, when the Dáil shall meet in the Convention Centre Dublin on North Wall Quay, Dublin 1, to take Private Members' business.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Is that agreed? Agreed.

Insurance (Restriction on Differential Pricing and Profiling) Bill 2021: First Stage

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to prohibit the discriminatory pricing of certain insurance premiums payable by certain persons to the extent that such pricing is on the basis that any such person is a pre-existing customer of an insurance provider, to prohibit the use of profiling techniques in the calculation of such insurance premiums to determine whether or not such customer or class of customers are likely, or the extent to which any such customer is likely, to renew the policy concerned, to restrict the use of such profiling techniques by insurance providers in respect of new or potential customers and to provide for related matters.

Dual pricing is used by insurance companies to identify customers who are less price sensitive and less likely to shop around in order to target them with artificially high prices. Companies do this by using opaque and complex pricing models and big data, without the knowledge of the consumer. Dual pricing is known to have a disproportionate impact on older and vulnerable customers. Its explicit purpose is to overcharge and price-gouge customers. It is now time to ban it and that is what my legislation will do.

In September 2019, I wrote to the Governor of the Central Bank requesting an investigation into the practice of dual pricing. In October 2019, I submitted a complaint to the Central Bank regarding the practice of dual pricing in the insurance market. I argued that dual pricing was deeply embedded in the market, citing research done by the Financial Conduct Authority, FCA, in the UK, regulations enacted in the US and analysis done by leading insurance consultants in the Irish market, including consumer samples that I gathered myself. The Central Bank agreed to launch an investigation on foot of my complaint. Its interim report published last December confirmed that dual pricing is endemic in the industry, with more than 70% of customers paying more than the true cost of their policies as a result. It is estimated that 2.5 million policy holders paid a combined total of €187 million more than the actual cost of their policies in a single year.

Insurance companies are using dual pricing to discriminate against, and rip off, their customers. Between 2014 and 2017, 20 US states banned the practice of dual pricing, recognising that its use is discriminatory. These bans were recommended by the National Association of Insurance Commissioners, NAIC, a body governed by the 50 state insurance regulators. In 2015, the association recommended that any two insurance customers with the same risk profile should be charged the same premium for the same coverage and that is what is at the core of this legislation. It will apply to all motor and home insurance contracts, as provided for in section 2. Section 3 will ban dual pricing by requiring insurance providers to use only rating factors directly linked to risk to be insured, prohibiting the use of different rating factors for new and renewing customers. Section 4 will require insurance providers to inform customers of the rating factors used in the calculation of the premium offered. No longer will insurance providers be able to offer extortionate premiums without providing the basis on which they are calculated. Section 5 requires the Central Bank to draw up regulations for the proper and effective regula-

tion of the provisions in sections 3 and 4.

Some people may have concerns that the Central Bank rather than the Dáil is best positioned to determine how dual pricing is removed from the insurance market but this legislation answers those concerns. It gives power to the Central Bank to make the regulations that will ban this practice. Section 5 requires the Central Bank to produce a code of practice that will assist the courts and the Financial Services and Pensions Ombudsman where an insurance company has broken these laws. Section 6 requires the Central Bank to publish an annual report assessing the industry's compliance with the provisions of the legislation and the code of practice referred to in section 5, with a copy of same to be laid before the Oireachtas. Section 7 will amend Part 1 of Schedule 2 of the Central Bank Act 1942 so that the Central Bank can sanction insurance companies that practice dual pricing and breach sections 3 and 4 of the Bill. Section 8 provides that the provisions of this legislation will come into operation no later than four months after its passage.

This legislation will ban dual pricing, end discrimination and bring transparency to the setting of prices. It will radically shake up the insurance market for the better. In Britain, the FCA found that a ban on dual pricing would result in savings of between €4 billion and €12 billion over a decade, increase competition and reduce the time customers spend switching providers. The practice will be banned in the UK no later than October this year. Irish consumers deserve no less. This legislation will require the industry to do what should be a given, namely to price fairly and transparently. This legislation has been in the making for many months. I commend staff of the Office of Parliamentary Legal Advisers who assisted me in drafting this legislation. I also wish to thank stakeholders for their continued engagement, including the Alliance for Insurance Reform. Finally, I wish to mention my own staff, Mr. Paul McIlvenny and Mr. Simon Gillespie, who were instrumental in assisting me in the production of this legislation. In the coming weeks I hope, and expect, to enjoy cross-party support for this Bill.

Acting Chairman (Deputy John Lahart): Is the Bill opposed?

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar): No.

Question put and agreed to.

Acting Chairman (Deputy John Lahart): Since this is a Private Members' Bill, Second Stage must, under Standing Orders, be taken in Private Members' time.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I move: "That the Bill be taken in Private Members' time."

Question put and agreed to.

Covid-19 (Education): Statements

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): I am pleased to be before the House to set out the work that myself and the Minister of State, Deputy Madigan, as well as our officials and indeed, the partners in education, have been engaged in over recent weeks to ensure the continued provision of education to our students throughout the Covid-19 pandemic. While schools are providing remote education at present, the resumption of in-person teaching and learning is a priority for Government and intensive engagement continues with the partners in

education to do so as soon as possible. Just this morning, I convened a meeting of stakeholders from the primary and special schools sector. We are working together towards a staggered return for children in special schools and a return to school for those in special classes in primary schools and children who access special educational needs, SEN, supports in mainstream primary classes beginning on 21 January next. Schools will also have discretion to accommodate their most vulnerable students. I wish to acknowledge the engagement and work of all of the partners in education so that we are in a position to move forward in this direction from 21 January for the benefit of all of our children with additional needs. We also continue to work together to set out a pathway for the return of all children at all levels of schooling, subject to Government and public health consideration of what constitutes the safe movement of people. My officials continue to engage closely with senior public health specialists in this respect and direct communications in the coming days through webinars, videos for parents and written FAQs will supplement the significant levels of information and guidance available.

Since taking office, this Government has made the provision of education its priority. School, and education more broadly, is a hugely powerful and positive force in our young people's lives and it is vital that this is preserved for our students in these most challenging times and circumstances. International organisations, including the World Health Organization, WHO, and the United Nations Children's Fund, UNICEF, have outlined the negative impact of school closure on children's health and well-being, as has the Economic and Social Research Institute, ESRI. For many children, school is not only a place of learning but also provides opportunities for social and personal development, healthy eating and physical activity. As the research of New Zealand education expert, Mr. John Hattie, has shown, school can be a hub of response and recovery, a place to support emotional recovery and promote social togetherness and this is as important as any academic gains.

It is for all of these reasons that Government and the Department of Education have invested heavily in schools to support them throughout this pandemic. In total, a package in excess of €437 million has been provided to schools to support their continued operation. Funding has been provided for the employment of replacement teaching staff, special needs assistants, SNAs, and administrative staff, as well as for an additional 1,080 teaching posts at post-primary level. This includes 120 guidance posts, which have been provided to support student well-being. Provision has also been made to provide primary schools with additional substitute staff. In addition, significant additional measures are being adopted to increase the supply of teachers at both primary and post-primary level.

There has been a €75 million capital allocation to support schools to prepare their buildings and classrooms for reopening, including an uplift for schools with pupils with special educational needs, and €4.2 million to enable schools to employ aides to implement measures to deal with the logistical challenges schools face at this time, such as moving furniture, changing classroom layouts, setting up hand sanitiser stations and signage and everything else that is involved in schools' preparations with regard to the Covid-19 pandemic. An additional €52 million has also been provided to schools to put in place enhanced cleaning and hygiene measures to reduce the risk of Covid-19 transmission in schools.

The package also made additional provision for special schools and special classes in recognition of the particular challenges these schools and classes face in dealing with children with complex medical and care needs.

From a public health perspective, national data on the Covid-19 positivity of close contacts

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since schools reopened in September are reassuring. Schools have not been identified as amplification settings for the infection, meaning that transmission rates within our schools are low. In his letter on 5 January, the Chief Medical Officer, Dr. Tony Holohan, noted that the majority of cases of Covid-19 infection in children and adolescents occurred outside the school setting during September and through to December. This is in spite of the significant proportion of their time that children and young people spent in schools during this time period. All of the evidence shows that, through the hard work and dedication of school communities, supported by the Government, and through the resources provided to schools by the Department of Education, schools can and do operate safely.

We are all aware of the importance to children of keeping schools open. Nonetheless, last Thursday, the Government took the difficult decision to close schools to all students, pending further discussion with our partners in education. This followed a week of engagement between the education stakeholders, my Department and me. Last Monday, my officials and I met education stakeholders to discuss the planned reopening of schools on 11 January and to seek their views. My officials updated education partners on the latest public health advice available from NPHE and on their own engagement with public health experts earlier that day, both of which advised that a full reopening of schools on 11 January was safe from a public health perspective. At this briefing, a number of stakeholders shared their view that in the event of any school closures, specific accommodation should be made for certain cohorts of students, most notably students with additional needs and leaving certificate students. Interestingly, this was reiterated by many of the spokespersons on education at my meeting with them on the evening of Monday, 4 January.

The following day, the Chief Medical Officer, CMO, Dr. Tony Holohan, wrote to the Minister, Deputy Stephen Donnelly. In his letter to the Minister for Health on 5 January, the CMO advised that it was his view that while the experience in schools to date had clearly demonstrated that schools are, in themselves, a safe environment, the epidemiological situation had deteriorated to a point at which the significant levels of mobility and linked activity that the full reopening of schools would generate might pose an additional risk. In his letter, the CMO stated categorically that this advice was not based on a changed assessment of the risks in relation to transmission levels in schools. Rather, it was a reflection of the overall epidemiological situation and the absolute need to reduce mobility and movement within the community.

On foot of this advice, on Wednesday, 6 January, the Government made the difficult decision to close all schools with limited exceptions for children attending special schools and special classes and to facilitate partial attendance for leaving certificate students. Given what we know regarding the impacts of school closures on children and young people, this was not a decision that Government took lightly. It was clear, however, that the public health situation required a strong response which minimised movement to the greatest extent possible. Under usual circumstances, the daily school run involves nearly 1 million students, 100,000 members of staff and, of course, a significant number of parents and guardians.

Two limited and targeted exceptions were made, namely, for students with special education needs and for students in their final year of school. Students with special education needs were prioritised to receive in-person education as many students with special educational needs struggled immensely during the last period of school closure, experiencing considerable distress and loss of learning. This was also a challenging time for the parents, guardians and families of children with special educational needs. Furthermore, students in their final year of the leaving certificate cycle were prioritised for in-person teaching and learning to provide

them with valuable confidence in the lead-up to their final examinations. These two limited accommodations were made while remaining mindful of the need to reduce movement within the wider community.

On Thursday, Dr. Kevin Kelleher, assistant national director of the HSE and member of NPHET, and Dr. Abigail Collins, public health specialist, facilitated a briefing for education stakeholders on the Government decision to reopen schools on a limited basis for children with special educational needs and leaving certificate students. In a meeting lasting over two hours, Dr. Kelleher and Dr. Collins reiterated their belief that schools are safe environments and that it was safe for both students with special educational needs and leaving certificate students and staff to operate schools at this time, utilising the preventative measures that are in place. Nonetheless, shortly after this briefing on Thursday, a number of stakeholders expressed their clear opposition to this plan and the Government took the decision to pause the limited reopening of schools pending further engagement with all partners in education.

Our renewed engagement with partners began the very next day and on Friday, my officials and I met with parents, students, unions, management bodies and principal networks. On Monday, 11 January, together with the Minister of State, Deputy Madigan, I met representatives of Down Syndrome Ireland, Family Carers Ireland, Inclusion Ireland and AslAm. These representatives brought with them the lived experience of students with special educational needs and their families and they were united in their view that remote provision simply does not work for many children with special educational needs. For these families, school is not just a building but a place to belong and to be accepted and a safe environment in which to thrive. All of these representatives expressed their very clear concerns regarding the impact of school closures on their children and young people. I share their concerns and my Department and I have continued intensive engagement with representatives of students, parents, teachers, SNAs, principals, and management bodies to discuss the best path forward for our children with special educational needs and for those in greatest need.

As I mentioned earlier, I am pleased to have made significant progress towards our goal in this regard. Following near-daily engagement with key stakeholders in the primary and special school sectors, we are working together towards a staggered return for children in special schools and a return to school for those in special classes in primary schools and children who access special educational need supports in mainstream primary classes, beginning on 21 January. We continue to engage with primary and post-primary stakeholders to work toward our ultimate goal of a return to school for all students.

I am pleased to note that the Minister for Social Protection has continued funding for the school meals programme at this time to enable school meals provision to continue. This mirrors the arrangements that were in place during the school closures in 2020, when the vast majority of schools in the school meals programme put arrangements in place to ensure that pupils most in need continued to receive food parcels. I am very grateful for the efforts of school principals, staff and all who work to make this possible. Schools are being asked, where feasible, to make arrangements to continue with the provision of the school meals programme through a delivery model that suits their individual needs best. Community and voluntary support is also available to schools through the local authority community support network programmes to assist with deliveries. Contact information for these supports has been provided to all schools.

Significant work is also being carried out by school communities during this period of closure to ensure the learning of all students is supported at this time. As a contingency measure

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for the possibility of partial or full school closures, the Department has provided a suite of guidance materials to help schools to support pupils and students learning remotely.

Guidance has already been provided to all schools and agreed with the education partners advising all schools of the requirement to provide for the continuity of teaching and learning in the event of school closures. This guidance was first circulated to schools in the initial period of school closure, and was subsequently reviewed and agreed with the partners in education. Final guidance in respect of primary and special schools was published in October 2020 and final guidance in respect of post-primary schools was published in December 2020.

In accordance with this guidance, schools should seek to provide regular engagement with pupils and students. In a primary setting this should, ideally, be on a daily basis; in a post-primary context, teachers should, as far as possible, engage with students as per the normal timetable. There should be a blend of guided and independent learning tasks and experiences. Remote teaching should involve both direct teaching by the teacher and the assignment of independent learning tasks for completion by the students. There should be appropriate and engaging learning opportunities. Teachers should ensure that the chosen learning tasks give pupils and students an opportunity to demonstrate their learning in a clear and concise way. Regular opportunities for feedback should be given to students.

Schools should ensure that two-way feedback between teachers and parents and guardians is encouraged and supported. Schools should provide manageable and accessible opportunities for all pupils to regularly share samples of their work with the teachers throughout each week. Teachers should ensure that work received is corrected and relevant feedback is provided.

Support for SEN pupils involves special education teachers continuing to engage with the pupils on their caseloads. Class or subject teachers should differentiate teaching and learning in line with their pupils' needs to minimise disruption to their learning and progression. Further guidance to schools in respect of children with special educational needs and students experiencing educational disadvantage has also issued.

Planning for leaving certificate examinations in 2021 and consideration of all the issues arising is under way by the State Examinations Commission, SEC, and my Department. This work is being assisted by an advisory group of key stakeholders, which includes representatives of students, parents, teachers, school leadership and management bodies, the SEC, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, the Higher Education Authority and the Department of Education, including the National Educational Psychological Service.

The advisory group meets regularly, and I am committed to continuing to meet, consult and engage with this stakeholder group on all matters relating to examinations. The advisory group is considering all the various issues regarding the holding of the 2021 examinations, including the issues emerging relating to public health, and will continue to do so. All partners are committed to acting in the interests and well-being of students, who are at the heart of this process.

A number of adjustments to assessment arrangements have already been made at leaving certificate and junior certificate level, taking account of the disrupted learning experienced by students during the 2019-20 school year and further possible loss of learning time in the 2020-21 school year as a contingency measure. The adjustments play to students' strengths by leaving intact the familiar overall structure of the examinations, while incorporating additional

choice. There will be no change to the length of the written examinations.

I am aware that some from the student cohort have called for the examinations to be curtailed, delayed or perhaps even cancelled with others suggesting that alternatives should again be used in 2021. Let me be clear on this point; my Department and I are listening to the students on this and to the other stakeholders involved.

The advisory group has met several times already and a further meeting is planned shortly. My Department is continuing to engage in direct bilateral consultation with stakeholders this week, including student representatives. The Department engaged directly with the Irish Second-Level Students' Union, ISSU, on Tuesday evening, and I spoke briefly with Reuban Murray, the president of ISSU, yesterday evening. In addition, a meeting with ISSU is scheduled for tomorrow morning.

The Government has also prioritised continued operation of school-related construction sites, as this is critical to enable the State to sustain the operation of schools in the current academic year and to deliver additional school accommodation requirements that arise in September 2021 to meet mainstream and SEN school places requirements.

These are very difficult times and difficult decisions and choices needed to be made. I am very grateful for the co-operation and leadership that the entire school community has shown in working together to enable education provision to continue safely and effectively during the September to December term. We hope to see the virus coming back under control and being more manageable as we move into spring and summer. My focus is on working to get schools open and to sustain this opening through until the end of term, working with our partners and with public health.

When I met Opposition spokespeople last week, several Deputies indicated that they wished to work collaboratively as we face the challenges currently before us. I thank them for that. As public representatives, we can ensure that how we face the challenges is informed by the broadest range of views and perspectives and I look forward to hearing the contributions of Deputies.

I again express my thanks to all in the education sector, including the Opposition spokespersons, for their ongoing work and support for all the children and young people we serve in the education sector.

Deputy Pauline Tully: The lack of forethought shown by the Minister and her Department over whether schools needed to close was very disappointing. There should always have been a plan B in place if schools needed to close. The Minister had nine months to organise this. Instead, we had half-baked plans cobbled together over the course of 24 hours, which collapsed just as quickly. In such a context, a letter sent to parents yesterday in which the Minister played the blame game for schools not reopening was an inappropriate use of communication with schoolchildren and their parents to make political statements.

School staff have been working extremely hard to provide remote learning at such short notice and there has been a lack of clear guidance and supports for teachers. I hope the Minister has learned from recent weeks and is now urgently planning on how schools can reopen safely as soon as possible.

The top priority must be children with special educational needs. I welcome that the Minister has just announced that special schools and special classes in primary schools will reopen

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on 21 January. Last week when the announcement was made that special schools and special classes were to open on 11 January for SEN students, the students concerned and their families were delighted that for once their needs were being taken into account and prioritised without their having to fight tooth and nail for that to happen. We all know how badly they were affected by last year's closures with many of them receiving little or no support for the three months of school closure. Children experienced academic, social and emotional regression and took weeks to settle back to school in September. When the announcement came that schools were not to reopen, they were absolutely devastated. I welcome that they will now open, but I ask the Minister to provide clarity on it.

There are 30,000 students with additional needs in our schools. One third or slightly more are in mainstream classes in mainstream schools. Will autistic spectrum disorder, ASD, units be open? What supports are being provided for the children in mainstream schools? Mainstream schools in other jurisdictions are open to cater for students with special educational needs. This is happening in the North, Britain and across Europe, and it needs to happen here.

It is also vital for the Minister to engage with the HSE and the national immunisation advisory committee, NIAC, to see if school staff can be placed higher on the priority list for the Covid-19 vaccine. Staff in special education urgently need clarity on when they will receive the vaccine given the importance of their role.

The Minister and her Department have left leaving certificate students in limbo for far too long. It has been an extremely difficult 12 months for sixth year students. They lost an enormous amount of learning time in fifth year and now have to contend with the chaos of the Government U-turns of the past week. For months my colleague, Deputy Ó Laoghaire, has asked the Minister to lay out the contingency plans in place for the leaving certificate class of 2021. It is disgraceful that the Minister has yet to do so and that sixth-year students across the country have been let down so badly by her and her Department. They have been given no clarity and they have not been listened to. I urge the Minister to listen to the students and to take their concerns seriously. The mock examinations are coming up in the next few weeks and the deadlines for some projects are this week and next, while oral and practical examinations are set to take place soon. Students need clarity on if, when and how these aspects of the process will go ahead. Any project deadlines due this month must be extended. That is the least that can be done to ease the pressure on the leaving certificate classes.

If the Minister had spoken to students, she would know that the changes made to the leaving certificate papers this year go nowhere near far enough. Much more radical changes are required, at the minimum. Perhaps even more than that aspect of the situation, the Minister needs to take seriously the level of learning loss experienced by current sixth-year students. They lost three months last year, and now this month as well. From speaking with students, I know that it has been profoundly difficult for them to catch up.

The Minister must be transparent and honest with students. She must accept at this stage that there is a question over the provision of traditional leaving certificate examinations this year. It has not been a traditional 12 months for sixth-year students. This is not an issue which can be allowed to drift into the spring. Students are calling out for clarity on this issue now. I hope, therefore, that the Minister's Department is exploring all the options, including those put forward by the students themselves. This is an urgent situation and the Minister must communicate with students in a clear and considered way her contingency plan for this year's leaving certificate examinations. That is the least these students deserve.

I have several questions. As many children struggling badly now will not benefit from the special schools, I ask the Minister to provide clarity on special units and students in mainstream schools. Will all SNAs and staff who must be in close proximity to children get surgical grade masks? Will it also be ensured that staff at high risk are given the option to work remotely and are matched with children whose families want them to learn remotely?

Deputy Norma Foley: I thank the Deputy for the issues she highlighted. I must differ with her, however, regarding many of the points she made. The Deputy referred to a lack of planning. That is absolutely and utterly untrue. I hope the Deputy is aware of the efforts being made by schools to ensure children are catered for in these current circumstances with remote and online learning. They are in a position to do that because of the extensive planning and engagement which has taken place to provide clarity and guidelines to schools concerning those elements. Moreover, in respect of guidance on remote and distance learning, guidelines for the continuity of learning were issued to schools earlier in the school term and then procedures agreed by all the partners in education were issued to schools.

There has, therefore, been intense discussion and negotiation with everybody in the education system concerning providing consistent planning and guidelines for the situation in which we find ourselves. Schools adapted flexibly and resiliently during any short-term closures experienced between September and December and they are doing likewise now. There is also agreement where there is considerable oversight from the Department regarding how schools are faring in this respect. I reject out of hand, therefore, what the Deputy has said on this point. She is doing a disservice to the partners in education, including the teaching unions, the managerial bodies, the parents and students when she rejects the amount of time and effort they have put into planning for the closures we face now. Their work has been exemplary and I acknowledge their co-operation.

Turning to the issue of special schools, we have made the announcement regarding those schools. The Deputy raised the specific issue of special classes and children in mainstream classes. Children in special classes and in mainstream schools are to be facilitated under this plan. I again acknowledge the incredible engagement of all the partners in education to achieve the shared objective of facilitating, on 21 January, the opening of the special schools, the special classes and children in mainstream schools. Provision has also been made for vulnerable students.

On the leaving certificate aspect, I again take issue with the Deputy's comment on what I would have learned if I had spoken to students. I deal with students on an ongoing basis. Students are very much anchored in all the discussions we have in the Department regarding any planning we do, whether that concerns schools reopening or examinations. The Irish Second-Level Students Union, ISSU, is represented at all those engagements. I have spoken with representatives from that organisation several times personally and in the context of stakeholder arrangements. I also spoke with the president of ISSU, Reuben Murray, yesterday. I am very well placed to deal with students. I have taught all my life in the education sector, I deal with students on a daily basis and am familiar with their needs and I absolutely reject the suggestion that students are not involved as part of the partners in the education process. They most certainly are.

The Deputy also referred to projects and related matters. Guidance has issued on extended deadlines for projects and the extension now available is available because of the extensive planning, work and engagement with all the partners in education to ensure that leeway would

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be given regarding dates for the completion of projects. That leeway was given as students returned to school in September, and we are availing of that leeway now, again as a consequence of considerable planning.

Reference was then made by the Deputy to industrial relations issues concerning teachers and SNAs in respect of public health and guidance etc.. Measures regarding the conditions for those who work in the school community and for those students attending classes are all guided by public health advice. Whenever the public health authorities asked us to change our procedures or processes, we have done that, whether that concerned masks, schools transport etc.. We will continue to do that consistently. All measures which need to be in place to facilitate any aspect of the running of schools for any members of our staff will continue to be in place and will continue to be flexibly added to, changed or amended as required by the direction of public health authorities.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: The Minister seems to be absolutely oblivious to the stress she has caused, not just to the families of the children in our education system but also to the workers in that education system. I urge the Minister to reflect on that aspect. Now is not the time for the trademark arrogance that we tend to expect from the Government. It is a time for engagement and perhaps a modicum of humility would also not go amiss. It might be alien to the Minister but I urge her to engage, open her ears and to listen to people who are trying to be constructive.

The views of many pupils, their teachers and school communities were ignored. That is what they told us. They told us that they felt that they were ignored and left until the last minute. We only have to look at the series of announcements, U-turns and repeat announcements to know that what was required was engagement. I note the Minister stated she met representatives of Down Syndrome Ireland, AsIAM and other advocacy groups. I note also the timing in that regard, which came after all the announcements, the resulting outcry and parents being forced onto the public media, where they do not want to be. Perhaps next time, planning and engagement is what the Minister needs to do and what needs to happen, not when the Minister is forced to do it but as a matter of course.

Many outstanding issues must be addressed, not the least of which is a contingency plan for the leaving certificate examinations. We all know it has been an extremely difficult time for leaving certificate students. I made a media appearance with one of the Minister's colleagues last week and he advised that if there was a need for a contingency plan, there would be one. That fundamentally misunderstands what a contingency plan is and what such a plan is for. Now is the time to put a contingency plan in place to ensure that choices are going to be available for those students in sixth year. Now is also the time for the Minister to provide leadership and reassurance to people, because that is what she should be doing.

Many opportunities in the education area have been missed. In my constituency in north County Dublin, we have many shovel-ready projects, including an Educate Together school in the Malahide and Portmarnock area. In Swords, for example, there is a chronic shortage of school places at primary and secondary level. It is the same in Skerries, Balbriggan, Malahide and Portmarnock. Siblings are being sent to schools miles apart because of the lack of places. Other children go to feeder schools and are then denied access to the secondary schools of their choice because of the lack of places. There are projects that are ready to be started, classrooms that can be built and new schools to be delivered. Not only would this deliver necessary school places, it would also bring employment to north county Dublin. I implore the Minister to en-

sure these projects are funded. I also speak directly to the Ministers from my constituency to ensure these projects are delivered as a matter of priority.

I absolutely welcome the announcement the Minister has made on the reopening of special schools. It is very timely because we have heard from the parents, families and advocates of children with special educational and additional needs, and we rarely hear from them.

Will she confirm, as I have asked for, that there is a contingency plan, or a plan B, for the leaving certificate examination and will she publish that? One parent told me that although she was devastated at the U-turn by the Government on the reopening of special schools, it was good that “they are actually talking about our children”. She said that the parents feel their children are finally on the agenda. Lines of communication have been opened. Will the Minister confirm that those lines of communication will remain open and that advocates for SEN children will have access to the Department and to her office?

With regard to the vaccine roll out, will the Minister ask the NIAC if it will prioritise people who have no option but to have close contact? There are people who have no option but to have close contact in the course of their work with the students and children they care for. Perhaps she will ask if those people will be prioritised with vaccinations.

I ask that she would publish the NPHET advice on working in a school environment for all the people who work in schools. It is not good enough to just say “They are safe”. People want to see the advice and any risk assessments that are done.

Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin: The Labour Party has tried to be as reasonable and as constructive as possible in these most trying of times, particularly in the education space. We know there is no easy decision for the Minister to make. We appreciate that she was faced with a difficult scenario last week. We appreciate the efforts she has made to listen to education spokespersons who spoke to her on Monday with concerns we all have about a cohort of students who will be severely and profoundly affected by school closures. We appreciated that she gave us an opportunity to share our views with her, otherwise the only opportunity to speak to her would have been today.

The Minister made an effort to open schools for those with additional needs and for those sitting the leaving certificate. For particular reasons this did not work out and she reversed that decision, which I felt was the right thing to do because there was no way we could open schools until the schools were ready to open. A number of things have happened, however, over the past days that have made it really difficult for the likes of myself to maintain that goodwill. The Minister’s letter, sent to each school in the State to be passed on to students, was ill-advised. It has been described to me as “political” and “divisive”. The Minister’s Cabinet colleagues decided to descend on the media over the weekend to try to make liars out of the trade unions regarding consultation. While it is welcome that today there seems to be a move toward the reopening of schools and special schools for those with additional needs, it is unfortunate that the announcement was released within minutes of us having this debate. It would have been better for us to have a little bit more detail. If the Minister is earnest about her wish to engage with Opposition spokespeople, it would have been worthy of her to have a discussion with us so that we could show leadership to make these difficult decisions happen. On additional needs, is she advocating for those staff, teachers and SNAs who work with young people who have additional needs, to be prioritised for the next round of vaccination?

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I will turn to the leaving certificate. The Minister is quite right that there is a huge amount of stress and anxiety among the student body. The Labour Party was the only party not to call for the cancellation of last year's examination because we were unconvinced that a replacement system would be fair. We have more time now, however, and a lot of the issues that were rolled out last year were reversed by the Minister, and we are supportive of this, especially the school profiling element. We would suggest to her that an early decision on this is necessary, which we suggest should be February. Notwithstanding what she is saying, and what various voices are saying, the level of uncertainty is intolerable for junior certificate or sixth year students having lost 11 weeks of tuition in the past academic year, and for the month of January this year. If we are honest with ourselves, the Minister knows that it is much easier to close schools than it is to reopen them. With the numbers circulating around and the death count rising, it is unlikely schools will reopen before the mid-term break or St. Patrick's Day or beyond. We all mention disadvantage. In my submission to her I raised the issue of 16 year old students who have no legal requirement to be in school and the fact that they may be lost to the system, and many have been lost to the system.

We need to begin talking about post-Covid education in Ireland and what that vision will be. Are preparations being made to repair the profound damage being done by school closures, which are not the Minister's fault or the Government's fault notwithstanding the fact they did not take NPHEA advice in December? Can we speak to or focus on young people in disadvantaged backgrounds, in poverty, and with additional needs? Can we have an investment or a post-Covid vision of radical investment in individual tuition, reduced class sizes, resources for schools or for individuals in mainstream schools who are profoundly disadvantaged, who have been damaged and who will be damaged by the continuing school closure?

I will reiterate my three points for the Minister. On the announcement made today on additional educational needs, the detail of which I have not read, I hope it will be worked out and successful. I am sincere in that but I want her to speak to vaccinations. On the leaving certificate, will she make her intention absolutely clear in February? It is very hard to find the Government convincing that the junior and leaving certificate examinations will continue as she has said. My third point was on disadvantage. Can we have a conversation about a radical package to redress the damage that has been done by school closures, and that when the schools are reopened we do not pretend this damage does not exist?

Acting Chairman (Deputy John Lahart): An tAire has 40 seconds, which I will hold her to, if she wants to respond to some of that.

Deputy Norma Foley: I am responding to both. I will take the opportunity to respond to Deputy Ó Ríordáin first. I acknowledge the engagement that has been forthcoming from the Opposition spokespersons on education, which I appreciate.

On the specific point of consultation with the unions, I want to be very clear that I most definitely engaged with the unions on Monday of last week. I engaged with all the partners in education on their concerns and issues around the reopening of schools. Engagement with all the partners in education has been ongoing since I took up my ministerial post on 27 June. Had that engagement not been possible, we would never have achieved the reopening of our schools. The reopening of our schools was on the back of very considerable engagement, agreement and support within the partners in education for the processes that were being undertaken by the Department.

On the issue of staff, teachers, SNAs and vaccinations, the Deputy will be aware that I initially raised this with regard to the need for the school community to be included on the priority list. I was very pleased when that actually happened. We have re-engaged with the task force in seeking consideration of the need for the school community, as front-line workers, to be accommodated as quickly and as urgently as possible. Those discussions will continue.

On disadvantage, I acknowledge the Deputy's specific interest in the area and the many proposals he has brought forward in that regard.

2 o'clock

I think the Deputy will acknowledge that there has been considerable investment by the Department in terms of disadvantage-----

Acting Chairman (Deputy John Lahart): I will stop the Minister there.

Deputy Norma Foley: -----and that is ongoing.

Acting Chairman (Deputy John Lahart): Deputy Ó Ríordáin ran out of time and I cannot be unfair to other Deputies who will come in later. If Members want answers to their questions, they will have to leave the Minister sufficient time to respond. I call the Minister of State.

Minister of State at the Department of Education (Deputy Josepha Madigan): I welcome the opportunity to speak on the important matter of special education during the current restrictions. We are all conscious of the importance of abiding by the public health guidance and limiting our movements as part of the efforts to tackle Covid-19. The current period of restrictions comes at a very grave time for our country and is designed to reduce transmission while also allowing our essential workers to do necessary work to support our vulnerable communities. We are profoundly grateful for everything they do. It is important to recognise the essential services and supports that continue to be required.

As the first dedicated Minister of State with responsibility for special education, I remain committed to ensuring that students with special educational needs receive the supports they need at this time. I am pleased that there is a commitment to work towards a return to school for students in special schools, those in primary school special classes and those with special educational needs in mainstream primary classes from 21 January. I have always been determined to ensure that the educational and personal development of students with special educational needs are fully supported as we continue to combat the spread of Covid-19. I was very happy that the calls for in-person educational provision for students with special educational needs by me and others were recognised and accepted by the Government. That commitment to achieving agreement to bring this about never wavered. It is now vital that we continue to work with all stakeholders in education, including post-primary education, to ensure the remaining concerns are addressed in order that a partial return to school may begin from 21 January. The driving concern is, and must continue to be, the well-being, in the fullest sense, of the children who rely on specialist provision to receive their education and to progress. I am pleased that today we can provide them and their families with some certainty of a return to routine, with a staggered return for children in special classes and schools and provision for children with identified needs in mainstream classes.

My Department is very conscious of the fact that closing schools has hugely adverse consequences at individual, family, and societal level and that the effect on children with special

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educational needs can be even greater. School closures last year created huge difficulties for students with special educational needs in terms of their personal and educational development. I have heard this countless times from the many organisations and families I have met since the summer. For many students with special educational needs and their families, school provides important daily routines and supports. Prolonged periods without this support can lead to regression and the loss of learning and skills, and families' capacity to cope can be challenged. We know from the evidence up to now that schools can function safely during this period of the pandemic and students can have access to the necessary in-school specialist supports. As a result of this, the Department sought to prioritise in-person teaching and learning for pupils attending special schools and special classes and to allow these facilities to reopen.

There has been continuous engagement with education partners on this matter since Christmas, building on weekly engagements between partners and public health throughout the school year. There has also been regular engagement with unions and management bodies on a weekly basis since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic. The Department values this close collaboration with stakeholders. In my capacity as Minister of State with responsibility for special education and inclusion, I have met regularly with a wide range of organisations advocating for students with special educational needs, including AsIAM, Down Syndrome Ireland, Inclusion Ireland, the Disability Federation of Ireland, parents' groups and the management bodies of our special schools. This engagement is invaluable in ensuring that all views and voices are heard in the area of special education, and it will continue.

There are 18,552 children enrolled in specialised settings in Ireland, including 10,382 in special classes and 8,224 in special schools. These settings operate in much smaller class groups than mainstream schools, with pupil-teacher ratios ranging from 6:1 to 11:1. The Department is continuing to engage intensively with education partners, including parental representative bodies, on this matter. We recognise that in-school learning for students with special educational needs is by far the best approach to support these students in their education and we are very eager for an agreement that moves this forward. There is a willingness to engage positively from all the partners in education and I am pleased that we now have a resolution on the table.

In the interim, it is crucial to ensure that education for students with special educational needs is fully supported. This includes students with special educational needs who are in mainstream classes across the country. Their needs also have to be fully recognised and supported at this time. A number of additional supports have been put in place, reflecting the engagement with partners and unions over a number of months. I will outline some of these supports, but it is important to say that no plan B will ever be as effective as in-school, in-person education for students with complex special educational needs. This is what we want to return to and that has been recognised by all.

The Department's guidance to schools includes provision to support the continuity of teaching and learning in response to the Covid-19 restrictions for those learners unable to engage with online learning. These documents first issued to schools in spring 2020 and were subsequently updated and agreed with stakeholders later last year to reflect the experience and input of staff and students. The guidance we issued last week reflects these updates and they have now been brought together into one dedicated guidance document for schools and families supporting students with special educational needs. Key themes of the guidance include: the role of schools and teachers in engaging with pupils with special educational needs; teachers and school leaders working to support pupils with special educational needs; keeping in touch

with parents and guardians; keeping pupils with special educational needs safe in the distance learning environment; and resources for teachers. The guidance also provides information on the role of the class teacher, special education teacher and SNAs.

For special classes at primary level, the guidance indicates that class teachers should phone parents three times per week and have daily phone engagement with pupils. SNAs should have twice daily engagement with parents to support them developing and maintaining the child's schedule. For special classes at post-primary level, the guidance indicates that the special educational needs co-ordinators are in daily contact with special class students so that programmes of work, individual timetables and structures are planned in collaboration with parents. For students with special educational needs in mainstream classes, guidance advises that at primary level, the special education teacher is the nominated school liaison who will engage with the parents by phone twice per week. There are currently over 13,550 special education teachers allocated to mainstream schools, supporting the additional learning needs of pupils. Teachers will also have prepared at-home support plans and every Friday will host a familiar social skills board game using online technology. This support is in addition to the support of mainstream class teachers who are providing for all pupils in their classes.

At post-primary level, the subject teacher will continue to have overall responsibility for differentiating tasks to match the learning needs of students with special educational needs. The output will be reviewed and regular feedback provided to parents at agreed times. Special educational needs co-ordinators will also have regular communication and engagement with students on their caseload. SNAs will engage with parents and students as a liaison between home and school, as well as supporting the delivery of education to the students. Class teachers will also work with special educational needs co-ordinators and the pastoral care teams to support a co-ordinated whole-school approach to students with special educational needs.

The Department's inspectorate has confirmed that it is engaging closely with schools catering to students with special educational needs to ensure that the full supports are being provided effectively. The inspectorate confirms that since Monday it has already engaged with nine special schools. All have a plan in place for remote learning and all have distributed digital devices to parents. There is daily contact with parents and students which forms part of their planning, mostly by phone, email, or any dedicated school platform. Extensive support and advice for schools regarding the provision of distance learning is available through the Department's support services and agencies, including for pupils with special educational needs.

The National Council for Special Education, NCSE, also provides support and assistance to parents and schools. It is providing helplines to support them. These helplines are operated daily and offer advice, support and contact with local SENOs to ensure that all possible support is being provided. The council has also developed a brand new suite of short videos for teachers on how to best support children and young people with special educational needs. The NCSE also has a visiting teacher service to provide direct support to children who are blind, visually impaired, deaf or hard of hearing and their teachers. Visiting teachers continue to be available to provide advice and support.

Schools which established their first ASD special class for 2020 or 2021 were assigned a link adviser during the four-day training course held in September and October. These advisers remain assigned to these classes and are available to provide support and advice to special class teachers.

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I understand the frustration and fears of the parents and families of children with additional needs. They want their children to be in school with their teachers, SNAs and friends. When they are back in school, they will be in their regular routine and be happier and healthier in a holistic way.

I was very pleased to see an expanded summer provision programme last summer which was open to 24,000 children with special educational needs, including, for the first time ever, preschool and secondary school children who have Down's syndrome. We had a very good budget of €2 billion. The resources are there.

I assure the House that every effort has been made to resolve matters in a collaborative way. I want to thank the stakeholders for their ongoing commitment and willingness to find a resolution. It is good news that special classes in special schools and SEN classes in mainstream primary schools will return next Thursday once we get the logistics sorted out.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: I want to raise with the Minister the issue of children with severe to profound intellectual disabilities who attend Rosedale School. The children in question have lost everything. They have nothing. Their worlds have shrunk. One mother described to me how her daughter's world has shrunk to a bubble in her head. While I welcome the announcement by the Minister, parents have told me that children with severe to profound intellectual disabilities deserve better. Currently, there is no appropriate education plan in place for these children. Children with these needs are the only ones who do not have such a plan at the moment, which is, as far as their parents are concerned, discrimination once again.

Parents have described Rosedale School as their lifeline. It is their children's world. It provides their children with so much happiness. All of the children's needs are incorporated into the education plan within the school setting. Parents are deeply concerned about the effect this closure and the previous closure have had on their children. The children of Rosedale had been out of school and have had their critical specialised services withheld. The reality of this is no education, physiotherapy, speech and language therapy, psychological support, friends, hope or light at the end of the tunnel.

These children have no comprehension of what is happening and their parents have no way of explaining it to them. The children have no way of putting their frustration across. This frustration stems directly from confusion, uncertainty and change in routine. I raised the issue of these children with the Minister's predecessor in June. I stated that the parents were deeply concerned that if a second wave hit Ireland, these schools would be closed again. I asked whether the service could be reclassified as an essential service in light of the fact that the children's needs are more complex and their conditions are far more profound than those of children in other schools.

The parents' greatest fear became a reality last week when they were told that their children's school would not reopen. We cannot allow this situation to happen again. They deserve better. These children understand routine and boundaries. Learning is painstaking and arduous work for them. It has to be consistent and include repetition every single day. Rosedale parents' association needs clarity on whether the school will reopen and what its opening hours will be.

There is clearly a knowledge gap about what people perceive the daily lives of a child with a severe to profound disability to be and what the lived experience actually is. For that reason, I will outline a description of the daily reality and let it be on the Dáil record.

One mother told me how, before the first school closure, her son, who has autism and a severe to profound intellectual disability, had learned to regulate himself very well. His levels of aggression had significantly decreased. He was starting to interact with his brother more. The incidence of his sobbing bouts had decreased dramatically. Since the closure, each of these achievements has been the subject of a massive step backwards. His levels of aggression have significantly increased. He is vibrating to the point of shaking trying to regulate himself, to the point where he cannot sit with people for more than five to ten seconds. His mother described this as being like an electric current running through his body because his levels of anxiety are out of control. He is no longer interacting with his brother. He finds it hard to be in a room with the family for any length of time. His nanny, who is 65 years of age and without whom this mother would be unable to work, is his childminder. If he cannot hurt either of them, he hurts himself using walls or any surface he can find. His sobbing bouts have increased dramatically, which is the most heartbreaking part. He cannot tolerate his mother being in the room or giving him a hug to comfort him. He sobs in his room while his mother sobs outside the door.

This is the reality for the families of children with severe and profound learning difficulties. I ask the Minister to meet with the parents' association of Rosedale and hear their lived experiences, and ensure that these children are never left behind again. I ask the Minister to clarify whether Rosedale School will reopen next Thursday, the number of hours for which it will be open and if she is willing to meet with the parents' association.

Deputy Norma Foley: I will make a brief comment and the Minister of State will then contribute. On the case outlined by the Deputy, it is for all those reasons and more that specific provision for the cohort of children with additional needs and profound and severe difficulties is being made so they are facilitated in terms of lockdown. I am personally aware of the difficulties and complexities faced by these children and, in addition, by their families and guardians during the last lockdown. It is for all those reasons and more that the Government has been 100% committed to making particular accommodation for children with additional needs.

Deputy Josepha Madigan: I am very aware of Rosedale School. I spoke with Angelina Hynes last week and I understand the difficulties the school faces. I echo the comments of the Minister. The school will open next Thursday. There will be one-to-one remote support in the interim to help. I am particularly aware of the issues facing special schools.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: I would like to acknowledge the work the Minister and Minister of State have done over the past few weeks to ensure that children with special educational and complex needs can return to school shortly. I welcome the Minister's statement that all parties are working together towards a safe return by 21 January. This is welcome, considering that some of the children in these cases have profound needs and the impact of Covid on their education and socialisation is most profound.

I welcome that the Minister and Minister of State have engaged extensively with all stakeholders, having recently met Inclusion Ireland, Family Carers Ireland, Down Syndrome Ireland and AsIAM about the prospects of reopening schools. The families and students represented by these groups clearly communicated the importance of returning to education for some of our most vulnerable students and are best placed to speak about how detachment from a school or care setting negatively impacts on these students the most. From listening to the parents of the students affected, we have heard that remote learning can never replace on-site education and care.

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On special education, I ask the Minister to elaborate or comment on what additional support measures are being examined in the interim to facilitate a safe return for the students. I would also like to acknowledge the role played by the trade union Fórsa in ensuring that the resumption of special education can proceed on a phased basis. The announcement regarding a return for primary school pupils is to be welcomed but what is the arrangement for second level students? Are similar talks progressing with all stakeholders at second level in regard to special education provision? As the Minister and Minister of State know, there are nearly 2,000 special classes throughout the country in nearly 1,000 schools. Many second level students attend ASD units. What does a phased return to school mean for those students?

Second, I want to refer to the leaving certificate examination. As teachers, the Minister and I know the importance of the examination and how it ideally should proceed. Questions surrounding the leaving certificate need to be answered sooner rather than later. The debate must be concluded instead of being allowed to trundle on. As we have seen again today, some Opposition Deputies prefer to speak out of both sides of their mouth and add to the pressures already being experienced by students and their families. I note that the Minister's advisory group is to meet again shortly. While we need to look at a blended, hybrid option, perhaps offering both a traditional leaving certificate accompanied by a refined predictive grading model, I note that the Irish Second-Level Students Union has written to members of the Oireachtas education committee detailing the pressures experienced by students in the vacuum in which they currently find themselves. If a traditional leaving certificate accompanied by predictive grading is the chosen route, akin to last year, we will need to look at stripping back the content and number of modules in certain syllabi or providing an increased number of questions or options on the leaving certificate papers.

My third question relates to repeat students. If we find ourselves in a predicament where predictive grading is deemed the optimum model, we will need to be able to facilitate students who may have to repeat examinations this year. I would appreciate answers to those three questions.

Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan: I very much welcome the news that has been delivered here today by the Minister, Deputy Foley, and the Minister of State, Deputy Madigan, that schoolchildren in special classes in primary schools and children with significant additional needs in mainstream schools will return to school on 21 January, or that is, at least, the date towards which the Department is working. This news will come as a huge relief to parents, guardians and students themselves throughout the country. It is a job well done by the Minister, the Minister of State, Deputy Madigan, and the Minister of State with responsibility for disability, Deputy Rabbitte. It is what they wanted from day one but circumstances had not allowed it. Fair play to them for the work they have done in getting to this point. It is very welcome news.

The reasons that these arrangements are necessary is clear. Children with special needs are losing out on education, gaining skills and having quality time with their peers. Routine is very important to these children, a point made by many of the parents and guardians who have contacted me. Their children's behavioural issues are increasing because of the lack of routine. Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan touched on that point. We now need to work hard towards getting children who avail of ASD units and special classes in secondary schools back to school. I am confident that these provisions will work.

I want to refer briefly to the leaving certificate examination. I just ran a quick poll on the subject on my Instagram page. I do not have that many Instagram followers but they provide a

reasonable sample of what leaving certificate students and their parents think. I put the option to them of a blended model that would include predicted grades along with the choice to sit the leaving certificate examination if a student is not happy with his or her predicted grades. A resounding 74% of respondents were in favour of that option. I also ran the option of proceeding with the traditional leaving certificate process, which got 49% for and 51% against. My point is that we need to be guided by the students on this issue. They are saying to me that they want the option of predicted grades and the option to sit the examination. More than anything else, we need clarity and certainty and we need them as soon as possible.

I conclude with a brief comment on the difficulties with remote learning. There are pockets in my constituency where broadband is not up to scratch and students are having difficulty availing of remote learning. I want to make the Minister aware of that. I have no specific questions but wanted to get those points across.

Deputy Emer Higgins: In many homes throughout the country right now, children with special educational needs, sadly, are regressing. For them, education is not just about learning a curriculum. It is about learning at their own rate, practising coping mechanisms and having a routine. For their parents, it is not just about school; it is also about respite. Caring for children with additional needs 24-7 is extremely tough. Doing so while juggling working from home or working on the front line and homeschooling other children is, for many, utterly impossible. Despite the best efforts of the Minister, Deputy Foley, and the Minister of State, Deputy Madigan, those parents are still in that utterly impossible situation.

We are the only First World country in the entire globe in which special schools are closed at this time. Ireland is the only country whose special needs children were caught up in a stalemate with unions. It has been utterly heartbreaking listening to parents of special needs children this week. I spoke to the father of a child with profound special needs who told me that all he was being offered was ten minutes of online schooling for his child. I spoke to a nurse who is working 12-hour shifts on our front line, homeschooling her son and struggling to homeschool her daughter with autism. I know many SNAs and teachers in special schools who are, naturally, worried about going back to work but who wish to do so because they want to be there to support their pupils. For them, their role is not just a job but a vocation. They want to be there to help their special needs students through this really challenging time.

Those teachers and SNAs, and families throughout the country, are very glad that the Minister and Minister of State have worked so hard, well and collaboratively to figure out a plan that safely returns staff to special schools and children to their special classrooms next week. For many of those children and their families, school is their lifeline. I am pleased the Minister and Minister of State are not leaving it until 1 February to allow them to return, because every day spent negotiating and every day spent at home is a day lost for the children. I thank the Minister and Minister of State for making these children their priority. Will they now look at how we can support children with additional educational needs in mainstream and ASD units, particularly where the parents are front-line workers who need to be able to send their children to special education?

I would like to tell the Minister about a family in my community. Both parents work on the front line in our health service. Their seven-year-old son has autism and is in mainstream school. Despite today's announcements, they still are not be sure how they will be catered for under this plan. They work alternative shifts, passing the parenting and homeschooling baton to each other at the end of long days working in overcrowded hospitals and tending to people in

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their time of need. They snatch an hour or two of sleep when they can. While their resilience, determination and courage are commendable, such parents are not indestructible. They cannot go on like this forever. The progress the Minister and Minister of State are making in helping children with special needs to access classroom-based education is very welcome and we all thank them for that. Families like the one to which I referred will be waiting with bated breath to learn how they will be catered for under the plan.

Deputy Josepha Madigan: Special schools will reopen on Thursday, 21 January. I appreciate the stories Deputy Higgins outlined and how incredibly difficult it has been for children with special educational needs over the recent period. We had a very constructive engagement with our education partners, which was done in a very collaborative way, as the Deputy said, and it is of benefit that the schools will reopen next Thursday. There are interim supports for children in special schools. In particular, the reduced pupil-teacher ratio means there is scope to provide a one-to-one online resource, which will be hugely important even if the reopening of schools is now just a week away. In the meantime, that online engagement will be crucial in allowing children to keep their connection not just with the teacher in the special school but also with their SNAs. Clear guidance has been put out and the National Council for Special Education is providing resources to children with special educational needs across the spectrum, whether they are in special schools, special classes or mainstream classes. I know Deputy Higgins mentioned it in her statement but none of us can underestimate the extraordinary body and volume of work that has been undertaken by the Minister for Education, Deputy Foley, the Department of Education and myself, as well as all stakeholders, including education partners, unions, advocacy groups, representative groups, parents associations and everyone. It is fair to say that everyone has a common goal, at the end of the day, which is to actually get in-person teaching. We all know that even for normal children remote teaching is difficult but for children who have additional needs it is particularly difficult.

A plan B was never going to be sufficient. Covid-19 and the pandemic, to a certain extent, tore up many of our best laid plans. Anyway, it is a positive development today because we will see special schools - they are the schools with the children who have the most severe and complex needs - reopen next Thursday. There are ongoing discussions in terms of the logistics and practicalities that need to be worked out. All the resources will be given to special classes, to children in mainstream as well, and in special schools in order that they can reopen successfully and continue their essential work.

Deputy Gary Gannon: The fact that I was not called for my allocated slot gives me an opportunity to challenge some of the revisionism and scapegoating that I have heard in the past 11 minutes. I hope to take the opportunity to do that, a Leas-Cheann Comhairle. I will use my time to ask questions and, hopefully, to receive short answers. I will defend my time against any attempts at evasion in that regard.

In the week from 20 to 26 December, 412 cases of Covid-19 were detected among children or students between the ages of 13 and 18 years. In the week from 3 to 9 January, the week just past, 2,827 cases of Covid-19 were detected among the age cohort between 13 and 18 years. Let us keep those figures in mind.

The Minister reiterated on many occasions in her media engagements and in the letter she sent to schools yesterday to be sent out to parents that schools were safe. Given the current situation, what scientific data are guiding the Minister to state unequivocally that schools are safe environments at this particular moment with the virus surging and a new variant in our midst?

Deputy Norma Foley: A specific issue has been raised by Deputy Gannon in terms of numbers prior to December. Deputy Gannon has said that I consistently articulate that school is a safe environment. I articulate it because that is the evidence, wisdom and expertise of public health. It is those in public health who are confirming this to us. Deputy Gannon will be aware that Dr. Holohan references low transmission within our schools and he refers to schools being safe places. It is supported by Professor Philip Nolan, also a member of the National Public Health Emergency Team.

Deputy Gannon will also be aware of the ongoing engagement with the expert professionals in terms of public health who we deal with in the schools. The deputy national director of public health, Dr. Kevin Kelleher, and the consultant in public health, Dr. Abigail Collins, have had personal experience of the surveying of our schools.

Deputy Gary Gannon: I have the point. If I can finish, the Minister can come back in.

Deputy Norma Foley: I will finish this point. As public health professionals they have consistently confirmed that, in their expert opinion and experience, schools are safe environments. I defer to their expert treatment of the matter.

Deputy Gary Gannon: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. I appreciate the engagement. The letter referred to by the Minister from the Chief Medical Officer, Dr. Tony Holohan, from 5 January states, “While the experience from September to December 2020 has clearly demonstrated that schools are in themselves a safe environment, the current epidemiological situation has deteriorated to a point where the significant levels of mobility and linked activity that the full reopening of schools would generate, constitutes a very significant additional risk”. The CMO’s letter was dated 5 January. The best health advice the Minister had from the CMO before then was from 30 December.

The Minister also will be aware that international evidence has changed. I raised this with the Minister in our meeting last Monday. Advice from the UK Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies, SAGE, on 19 December clearly demonstrated that the new variant of Covid-19 has a greater risk of transmissibility by and from children in schools. That was clearly demonstrated in evidence. Public Health England has also released figures to show that children are at greater risk from the new variant. I note that this week, evidence from Montreal has demonstrated that one in five children had caught Covid-19 during that particular period.

I will ask the Minister again. The new variant and the current epidemiological situation represent a greater danger than that existing up until the point when we had this evidence. What evidence is the Minister relying on now to reassert, once again, that schools are safe? Or, is it the evidence that was previously given? I do not believe we can use the older evidence. It is too dangerous to the point of criminal negligence to do so.

I want to talk once again about the engagements with some of the stakeholders last week. It is welcome that today we have an announcement that schools for special educational needs students will be reopening next week. During this session I have listened to some of the Minister’s party colleagues suggesting that this was the Minister’s intention all along. I dispute that.

Last week, the Minister’s intention was to reopen schools for 61,000 leaving certificate students between the ages of 17 and 19 years and for students with special educational needs. I will reference the current rate of infection among that particular cohort. The Minister will be aware that cases are surging among those aged 19 to 24 years. Given the number of students

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we have who are currently a little under that age bracket, why did the Minister believe that we could bring them back? Why did the Minister not engage with the unions at that level?

We have already reached the point where, having had engagement with the unions and the other stakeholders this week, we have come to a satisfactory conclusion, but that was not what happened last week. Last week, the Minister unilaterally announced that 61,000 students were going back in addition to the special educational needs students. Does the Minister believe that if we had the engagement last week, we would have come to this satisfactory outcome sooner?

Deputy Norma Foley: The Deputy asked about public health advice and the new variant. At all stages, public health advice officials offer their expertise. They do it mindful of all that is happening from an epidemiological point of view in terms of what we would call the virus as we knew it and the new variants, whether the UK variant or the South African variant. All of that is taken into consideration when they issue their advice.

Mindful of that, on Monday, 4 January, prior to my meeting with all the partners in education, the public health officials made their advice available. They said they still regarded schools as safe places. Indeed, the Deputy has helpfully pointed out himself that Dr. Holohan made reference only to mobility in society. The Deputy has the letter to hand. Dr. Holohan specifically stated in that letter that at no stage did he revise his view that transmission was low in schools and that schools were safe places. He raised a question around large mobility. For that reason, it was on the basis of a mobility issue for all of society that the decision was taken to reduce the numbers and stand down a little over 900,000 people in the education sector.

The public health advice we received on Monday, 4 January and what we have received again this week confirm to us that in the expert knowledge of public health officials in the context of all variants and otherwise, schools remain safe places. Consideration has been taken of all the various variants. I will point also to remarks I heard personally made by Dr. Cillian De Gascun in respect of the transmissibility of the variant. He suggested at that stage of the weekend that in his view, the transmissibility at that point - that is what was said - in terms of the new variant was not over-extensive or new in terms of young people.

In terms of engagement-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: One moment please, Minister. We have run out of time. I know you are still standing, Deputy Gannon, but I am afraid you will not be coming back in. We have run out of time. I am sorry to cut you short, Minister, but that is the set-up. We have gone a little over. I am going to move on to Sinn Féin. Deputy Matt Carthy has five minutes in total.

Deputy Matt Carthy: I will put my questions in the first two minutes and ask the Minister to reply in two minutes and then use the last minute for a follow-up comment.

There is widespread loss of confidence in the Minister's ability to address the challenges that will face education in the coming weeks and months. Like many Deputies, I have been speaking to leaving certificate students, other students, families of children with special needs, school management, teachers and other workers in education, including SNAs. The overwhelming view is that the Minister has not engaged with any of them sufficiently until after a crisis has emerged and that the Minister has failed to understand their concerns with her approach for myriad reasons. A large part of the reason for this lack of confidence is the Minister's failure to even start to address problems that have been identified to her since last summer.

I have two questions to put to the Minister. I have raised in the House on several occasions the absolute mess that has been made of school transport for many families, particularly those in rural communities. I have brought to the Minister's attention a number of instances of children who have been deemed eligible for school transport but who have been denied a place on their local school bus because their parents or guardians submitted their payment after the arbitrary 4 August deadline. Families missed that deadline for an array of reasons, including in instances I know of in which parents simply did not have the funds in place at that stage, and they have been treated disgracefully for that. Bus Éireann has just stopped engaging with them at all. It has stopped engaging with elected representatives on this in many instances and the Minister has appeared to wash her hands of the matter.

My first question is this: what will the Minister now do to ensure that all schoolchildren who have been deemed eligible for school transport will get a seat on their school bus before the schools return after these current restrictions? Second, I have been inundated this week with communications from parents and families unable to facilitate remote learning because either they do not have access to broadband or they cannot afford laptops. What is the Minister doing to address their needs?

Deputy Norma Foley: Regarding the Deputy's remarks on lack of engagement, which I utterly reject out of hand, it has been the hallmark of my Ministry that substantial engagement right from the very beginning has been attested by the reopening of our schools and ongoing engagement with all the partners in education. This includes parents, teachers, students and managerial bodies right across the weave of education. I therefore reject out of hand the Deputy's remarks in that regard.

Regarding school transport specifically, it is very clear that all those who were eligible and who paid on time have been facilitated. Deputy Carthy may or may not be aware of the reality of the Covid-19 situation, which has led to public health issuing advice on school transport. I reiterate, as I highlighted earlier, that everything we in the Department of Education have been asked to adhere to, including flexibility in terms of public health, we have done so. In adherence to public health, we have accepted the recommendation that we accommodate 50% on our school transport, and we are rolling that out. Where there is extra capacity, accommodation will be made, but we are abiding by public health in that regard.

In the context of parents and families, again, I acknowledge that there has been ongoing representation and engagement. There is a parent voice, a parent representative, in all my engagements. I have facilitated that regularly and will continue to do so. It is hugely important. In the Department of Education and in the education sector we work as a collaborative, and I acknowledge the willingness of all the various partners in education to contribute positively.

Deputy Matt Carthy: The Minister is essentially saying that all the people who have been contacting Deputies across the House are liars. On Thursday last, her suggestion was that the schools would operate this week for leaving certificate students and children with special educational needs. That did not happen precisely because the engagement had not taken place beforehand with all those leaving certificate students who have been contacting us this week to say they have had no engagement from the Minister or her Department, all the teachers who were absolutely flabbergasted by the Minister's position only a week ago and all those parents who are still wondering what exactly will happen.

The Minister asked whether I understood the reality of school transport. I will tell her the

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reality of one family in my constituency. The father passed away in the most tragic circumstances a couple of years ago and the mother has been doing everything in her power to hold her family together under the most difficult circumstances. As a result of financial constraints and all the other issues in that house, it was 10 August when the mother paid her school transport fees. The school bus passes her front door every single morning and she has to get into a car with two of her children and follow it. That is the lived reality. I understand that when the schools were reopening in September, lots of issues needed to be dealt with. The Minister had September, October, November and December to sort out issues for these families and she has not engaged at all. The problem is that those families are sitting at home now and are unaware whether or not the children will have seats on their school bus. It is crucially important they do.

In my county almost half the households do not have access to broadband. The Minister has not answered, her Department has not answered and the Government has not answered how in the hell these families are supposed to facilitate remote learning for their children. It is simply not good enough.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Deputy gained a minute or two because of the clock so, unfortunately, the Minister-----

Deputy Norma Foley: It is very disappointing that Deputy Carthy-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We will move on. For the benefit of the Minister and Deputies, there is a set and agreed format here. I am simply imposing it. That is all I am doing, to be fair to everybody. I am moving on now. The next slot is a six-and-a-half-minute one. It is practically impossible, but that is the way it is. Two Deputies are offering. They may ask questions or make statements or do both, but if they do not leave time for the Minister, she will not be able to answer.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: It is important to say that the huge and detrimental impact Covid-19 is having on education at the moment is to do with the disastrous strategy this Government has pursued. We argued that it should listen to public health advice in advance of Christmas and that if it did not, we would be in a disastrous situation in January. Tragically, we now are. Now our young people and some of those most vulnerable with special needs are suffering the consequences of the Government's dire strategy, the so-called Plan for Living with Covid, the yo-yo in and out of surge and lockdown. It is important to stress that point.

Having said that, on the issue of special needs, the Minister should just own up. There is a suggestion in the statement she has just sprung on us that she has got agreement on reopening on 21 January when she has not actually got agreement. Of course we need special needs provision and it is a priority, but it also has to be in compliance with public health. It must be ensured that teachers and children and their families are in a safe situation. Here is a suggestion. If I were the Minister, rather than making big announcements without having got agreement, I would have an urgent forensic audit carried out as to which parents want their children to go into school and which teachers are willing to go in and teach them and I would try to match those two things.

I am, as I am sure all of us are, inundated with communications from leaving certificate students who are stressed to bits about not knowing what is happening. They need certainty and the Minister cannot give it to them. She is giving them fake certainty to the effect that, come hell or high water, there will be a leaving certificate, essentially. She cannot say that on

epidemiological grounds. The Government could not predict in December that we would be in the situation we are in now, in January; how on earth can it predict what will happen in June? The truth is that it cannot. It is therefore absolutely wrong to force students to do a leaving certificate when the Minister cannot provide them with that certainty. She should give them choice, alternatives and the certainty that those choices and alternatives will be available now.

Deputy Mick Barry: An extraordinary report appeared in *The Business Post* last weekend to the effect that the Government is considering vaccinating 61,000 students in order to allow them to sit the leaving certificate. I wonder which vulnerable group in society would be pushed down the vaccine queue in order to allow for such an extraordinary measure. I wish to ask the Minister about reports regarding the widespread medication of leaving certificate students in order that they can last the course and sit the exams. Last Sunday, primary school principal Siobhán Fitzgerald wrote to the Minister an open letter. The letter told the story of Ms Fitzgerald's daughter, a leaving certificate student, whom she described as bright, intelligent, sporty, empathetic and very creative. Her daughter does, however, suffer from acute anxiety and this anxiety has seemingly been well and truly activated in the course of her leaving certificate cycle. Ms Fitzgerald goes on to say that she brought her daughter to the doctor who offered to prescribe medication to help get her through the build-up to the exams and the exams themselves. The doctor said that he had prescribed such medication to many other leaving certificate students. Since Sunday, I have told this story to doctors and students. Individuals from both groups confirmed that this is a widespread practice, with one doctor telling me that leaving certificate anxiety is particularly acute this year. Why would it not be? Students have had greater disruption to their leaving certificate cycle than any other cohort in the history of this State. There has been not one major disruption, there have been two.

Let students' voices be heard. One student wrote to me:

I have been so worried. I keep crying whenever I think about it all. It is so difficult at the moment and my mental health has just gone down the drain.

Another said, "This government would rather me suffer more frequent and intense panic attacks than cancel an outdated exam." The Minister should cancel the examinations. She should not only do that, she should also guarantee an increase in investment in third level education so that each student in the leaving certificate class of 2021 will have the offer of a place in college next year.

My first question is: has there been a discussion between the Minister and her Cabinet colleagues, formal or informal, about mass vaccination of leaving certificate students to facilitate exams? Second, will she write to the National Educational Psychological Service to ask for expert opinion on the mental health implications of carrying on now with leaving certificate 2021? I also ask the Minister to please comment on the point I raised about the mass medication of leaving certificate students, which is a very serious issue.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Deputy has left the Minister with 50 seconds to answer all of those questions.

Deputy Norma Foley: I thank the Leas-Cheann Comhairle. In the first instance, I will refer specifically to points that were raised by Deputy Boyd Barrett. I assure the Deputy, and I have articulated this previously, that every measure we have introduced into our schools is backed by public health advice and that we react immediately, taking account of the public health advice,

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in respect of any measures that schools ask us to change or to be flexible on. I ask the Deputy to be under no illusions in this regard.

On the specific points raised by Deputy Barry, I have no knowledge whatsoever of the sources of the story that he referred to in a Sunday newspaper. I can categorically state that there was no engagement with me or my Department on any such stories. There is no veracity to this.

I know of the challenges, difficulties and anxieties to which the Deputy refers and which leaving certificate students are facing. I know these very well. I have spent all of my professional life teaching students of all different levels, especially those in senior cycle. I know that the most difficult year for every student is that when he or she sits the leaving certificate. This is intensely even more the case now in the midst of the pandemic. We are listening very closely to all student voices. Students are well represented at all of our stakeholder engagements.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I reiterate that we are in a difficult situation because we are due to move on to a debate with the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science later. We are under time pressure. I agree that how we are proceeding is not satisfactory but that is what was agreed to, namely, a question-and-answer session. If the Deputies want answers, they must leave enough time for them because, otherwise, they will just be making statements. That is fine too because that is what they are entitled to do.

I am moving on to the next group. The three speakers in the group, Deputies Cathal Crowe, Devlin and MacSharry, will have 11 minutes between them.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: I thank the Leas-Cheann Comhairle. I will be taking four minutes of that speaking time.

Every sinew of effort in our country at the moment is being ploughed into the physical health of the nation. As a result of engaging with young people in my constituency at the weekend and last week, I have become extremely concerned about their mental health. I have been talking to them on Facebook and Instagram and via email. They are extremely concerned about the uncertainty that lies ahead for them in the context of the State examinations. Like the Minister, I am a teacher. I know that she understands the stress these students are experiencing. If the election had gone differently for both of us last year, I would be in a classroom and she would be preparing yet another class for the leaving certificate. We need to put an end to the uncertainty and to tell the State examination classes of 2021, in the quickest possible time, what lies ahead for them this summer. My suggestion to the Minister - I have spoken to her about it - is that there should be a blended model. Predicted grades would be a good option to offer people along with the more traditional leaving certificate, which proved possible to organise last autumn. The two options need to coexist and students must be given a choice. Some certainty needs to be brought to all of this.

Many junior certificate students and their parents have also been in contact with me. All of the national discourse is about the leaving certificate but junior certificate students also need certainty and to be unburdened of the immense stress they are experiencing at this time. There is a cohort of students in this country, it is not sizeable, but many will apply to the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service in order to try to gain third level places in England and they too need certainty.

I welcome the announcement that things will open next week in respect of special educa-

tion. We also need to see services like child and adolescent mental health services, CAMHS, move online. If our teachers can do it, so can others. I joined in a lesson this morning in my local school in Parteen. It was a fabulous lesson delivered via Zoom. If that school and others throughout the country can do this, so can CAMHS and the other early intervention services that support young people. I ask for the Minister's views on this matter and on a blended model for leaving certificate. I would also like to hear how she anticipates engaging those other youth services in order to ensure that special education will be a success in the coming weeks.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Minister has two minutes to reply.

Deputy Norma Foley: I thank the Deputy and acknowledge his engagement with me on an ongoing basis in respect of education issues. As already stated, I understand the anxiety and difficulties of our leaving certificate students in particular. I acknowledge that their representatives are very much part of our advisory committee that is preparing for our leaving certificate, which has met on two occasions and which will meet again in the coming days. The committee is looking at all of the different measures that need to be put in place for the leaving certificate, including all of the contingencies involved, and at many of the issues raised by the Deputy. The approach taken will be collaborative. The Deputy must remember that there are many partners in the education sector, such as the teacher unions, parents, managerial bodies, and, very importantly, students. All of their views must be taken on board. I appreciate that there is not unanimity and that there is a variety of views.

In the context of those with special educational needs, I acknowledge the tremendous work taking place in the special education sector. I also acknowledge that remote learning is not appropriate to all. For that reason, I welcome the very positive engagement with the partners in education to find a pathway forward in the next number of days towards 21 January and a resumption of face-to-face contact for students with additional needs.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: I thank the Minister. In the few seconds left, I wish to refer to broadband, which is still an issue for schools such as Doora National School in County Clare. There is a significant push to reignite the discussion relating to ASD units. These units cannot just be imposed on schools. They need to be bespoke units and I ask the Minister to have her Department continue to look at that matter.

Deputy Cormac Devlin: Before I begin, I take this opportunity to wish the Leas-Cheann Comhairle and other colleagues a happy new year. I also wish to thank the staff for their work and efforts during this pandemic to keep the Oireachtas operational.

I welcome the opportunity to examine the impact the pandemic is having on the education sector. Like many colleagues, I have been contacted by students, parents and teachers over the past couple of weeks. Reopening schools last September was a great national achievement. I pay tribute to the teachers, SNAs, school principals, caretakers and all other stakeholders who helped reopen our schools and keep our children safe up until Christmas. Their efforts have ensured that schools are safe places, which was acknowledged in the NPHET letter to Government on 5 January, particularly in the context of the fact that 75% of schools had no engagement with public health authorities in the period up to Christmas. Given the recent surge in Covid-19 numbers and the advent of the B117 variant, however, the Government was right in moving to online learning for the month of January in order to limit the number of people moving around the country.

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Like all parents, I acknowledge the challenges that online learning presents. Despite the best efforts of teachers, online learning is no substitute for classroom time. Many children do not or cannot engage well in an online environment. It is difficult for pupils and parents alike. Online learning also results in fewer hours for students when compared with the in-class environment. The latest lockdown and the move to online learning has presented many challenges for parents of, in particular, younger children and those who are trying to juggle online learning and working from home. It is not easy for them, not to mention those homes with limited or no access to either ICT equipment or broadband.

This has been an especially worrying time for sixth-year students. These students have been badly impacted.

3 o'clock

They lost a number of months in fifth year - three months of class time in 2020 - and will lose yet another month this year. Many of them have been in contact with me and they are all extremely anxious about the situation. Many want the opportunity to sit the traditional leaving certificate examination, but others prefer the option of predicted grades.

I acknowledge the tremendous effort made by the Minister to allow them some classroom time this month. It is unfortunate that it could not proceed. We should do everything possible to support these students. I hope that by June the vaccine roll-out and the public health situation will be such that it will be possible to sit examinations, but the loss of classroom time must be considered. I ask the Minister to examine the possibility of introducing the predicted grades option and to consult with students, parents and teachers in advance of making any early decisions on the matter. Students need to know as soon as possible.

I welcome the news from the Minister, working with the education partners, about reopening the special schools and special primary classes from next Thursday. This will come as a great relief to the many parents who have been in contact with me. I thank the Minister, teachers, SNAs, principals and everyone involved for their efforts. While schools are safe, it should be recognised that staff with underlying conditions and those who care for elderly or vulnerable relatives at home have legitimate concerns about Covid-19. I hope local arrangements can be agreed to facilitate them. The vaccine must be rolled out to at-risk teachers and SNAs as soon as possible, and I ask the Minister to raise this with the Minister for Health.

Deputy Marc MacSharry: Like the previous speaker, I will use my time to put a few matters on record. I can liaise with the Minister at a later date. She knows better than me that young people have suffered disproportionately throughout the Covid crisis. Everybody has suffered and it is difficult for everybody, but I believe young people, both primary and secondary school pupils, have suffered a great deal and have often been wrongly fingered for a proportion of blame when there were outbreaks of the coronavirus. Other speakers have alluded to the level of stress. The Minister appreciates better than me that in any household that has a child in an examination year, be it the junior or leaving certificate, it affects the entire family. The family is invested in the effort to ensure the environment is correct to support the child in his or her studies as he or she prepares for the role he or she will play in the future.

With that in mind, I have one request today. I do not have the expertise that is held by the Minister and her advisers in liaising with pupil representative groups, the teaching unions, principals and so forth as to what is the best approach to take for the examination years, both junior

certificate and particularly leaving certificate, but my appeal, and as Deputy Cathal Crowe, who is also a teacher, rightly pointed out, is that whatever we do, we should decide it immediately, which means in the next few weeks. I had the opportunity last evening to point out some of the failings so far in the vaccination programme and the improvements that must be made. That is a variable the Minister's Department cannot control unilaterally. With all the stress these pupils and their teachers have had to go through over the past year, we owe them, at least, to inform them of whatever decision we take with regard to examination years and to take that decision in the next fortnight to three weeks, at the latest. I am told by many of the Minister's former colleagues in the teaching profession that if it gets near what would have been the February mid-term break, it will be too late. Sadly, I do not believe we can depend on the vaccination programme to be as far progressed as we would like to facilitate a full return to school and normal junior certificate and leaving certificate examinations. For that reason, I ask the Minister to move immediately to ensure a decision is taken, and preferably in the next fortnight.

I welcome that she is seeking, with consultation, to secure the return of special needs education and special classes in mainstream schools. That is a relief for many and, hopefully, it can be done safely. I thank her for this opportunity and I hope she will take my points on board.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: I have a number of questions for the Minister and I hope she will respond to some of them. I also wish to make a number of points. It is clear that occasionally there have been mixed messages and a breakdown in communication with parents, pupils, teachers and trade unions. Engaging with all stakeholders is extremely important and necessary. I acknowledge the Minister's announcement that special needs schools and pupils will be able to return to some form of normality on 21 January next. This brings us in line with best international practices, whereby they have remained open in other countries. It is a pity it took so long, but it is welcome that the Minister has done this.

It is generally agreed that transmission in schools is low. NPHET has also pointed this out. The public health advice was more worried about movement and more mobility, but it agreed transmissions were generally low. Are there any plans to provide Covid-19 vaccinations to administrative staff such as SNAs? The Minister mentioned this earlier, but she did not outline whether it has been discussed with her colleagues in advance of the reopening. The deadline is very tight, but if it could be done it would be an important decision. What engagement with transport services, such as taxi services and rural transport providers, has taken place with regard to getting people to and from schools? What facilities have been put in place to enable remote learning for people in direct provision? Baleskin is near my area and direct provision centres do not have proper facilities. In some cases, they do not even have broadband.

Teachers are clearly struggling to provide a sufficient number of classes online and to give extra help to pupils who are falling behind in a subject or who find the course particularly difficult. Teachers cannot provide the one-to-one teaching they can provide in a classroom. Under the current circumstances, this type of teaching cannot be done. The Department must provide the proper guidance, resources and funding that will be required to ensure that students, especially vulnerable students, can continue their education. Many people in my constituency already face great social and economic barriers. Many are on low incomes and are economically disadvantaged. Even in the best times they face great obstacles in accessing and continuing education. This pandemic has raised even greater obstacles for those who were already struggling in education. We must provide the funding and resources to ensure we do not have a lost generation in education.

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There are a number of DEIS schools in my constituency of Dublin North-West. Many of the pupils who attend those schools can only access education through the resources of community groups, libraries and other facilities. However, many of these are closed and are effectively shut off from those trying to access them. Pupils who have a computer at home often have a number of siblings who are trying to access online learning. This can prove difficult if it is a family of five or six, with all trying to share a single point. The Department must also facilitate paid leave for parents who must stay at home to look after their children and homeschool them, which will be challenging for many people in my constituency. Does the Minister have any plans to consider paid leave for parents?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: There are 20 seconds left for the Minister to comment.

Deputy Norma Foley: Regarding specific provision for children who are in danger of disadvantage, there is a programme in place and all the guidelines and provisions have been worked out with the partners in education. For example, schools have identified individuals who make direct contact with students. There is the Check and Connect programme and a variety of other programmes. The home school community liaison officers are working in these areas. The school meals programme continues for children. For children who might not have the technology, schools have purchased the technology to make it available to students.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I thank the Minister. I am really sorry. Not enough time was left for her response. That is the nature of things: if time is not left then the question cannot be answered. I understand both sides. That is the way it is. We are going to move on to the Regional Group.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Tógfaidh mé ceithre nóiméad agus fágfaidh mé ceithre nóiméad go leith do mo chomhghleacaí. The political management of leaving certificate 2020 was a lesson in chaos. Last year, decisions were made and reversed on a weekly basis. It feels like we are back to square one. Currently, students around the country are having their stress levels ratcheted up, in large part due to the political chaos around this particular issue. I know of students who lost months last year in school and who will lose a month this year. I know of a student who was sitting in the cold in his back garden every day because it was the only place he could get the necessary Internet connection to participate in lessons.

There has been some debate on whether exams should take place this year. The key point is that students are being left in the dark. The Government needs to make a decision on it as soon as possible.

I wish to put on record my opposition to the closure of special schools. This was an absolute disgrace. Joanne Murphy, an Aontú colleague of mine in County Cork, made the headlines in recent days when she spoke of her own experience. She has a 15-year old son who has autism. She did not know how to tell her son that the schools were not going to reopen because she knew that if she did tell him, his heart would be broken. She said: “The last lockdown his anxiety levels shot through the roof. He went from being happy and easy going to flapping and hitting and repetitive talking.” Thousands of parents in recent weeks have had the experience of watching their children regress before their eyes on a daily basis.

The other sector I wish to speak about briefly is children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Education offers them a lifeline. I also worry about children who are at risk of abuse. Last year, the number of referrals to Tusla during the lockdown fell significantly. That is because teachers

are best placed to note the warning signs with regard to children at risk. Domestic violence, mental health and drug and alcohol abuse are on the rise in families around the country. Many children are being left in difficult situations in the middle of that.

The questions I have for the Minister are very simple. First, when making decisions, will she do so in complete partnership with the stakeholders - the teachers, the unions, the parents and the students? When she does not do that, it leads to the crisis that we saw last week.

Why were special education and education for children from disadvantaged areas closed? Will the Minister commit on the floor of the Dáil to making a declaration on the future of this year's leaving certificate in the next fortnight so that the anxiety levels of students around the country can be punctured?

Deputy Norma Foley: I agree with the Deputy that the provision of special education remains an absolute priority to ensure that children with additional needs are catered for in the midst of a lockdown and otherwise. It was for all of those reasons the Government and I made the decision that in the midst of the current lockdown children with additional needs would be catered for, but this proved difficult for the partners in education. We are in a better position now and I am happy with the announcement that has been made today.

In terms of operating in complete partnership with the parents, students and teachers, that has always been the hallmark of everything that we have done in education. The Deputy specifically raised the leaving certificate. The advisory committee is constituted to include parents, teachers, students, managerial bodies, principals, deputy principals and all of those engaged in the sector. The Deputy should be under no illusions about that. The advisory committee continues to meet. Accommodations that were necessary for the leaving certificate were put in place last year. The advisory committee will continue to look at all contingencies and measures as regards leaving certificate 2021.

Deputy Peter Fitzpatrick: I wish to raise three issues with the Minister. Covid is rampant within our community and it is spreading quicker than ever before. As reported this week, Ireland has the highest rate of infection in the world in recent weeks. This is a truly frightening time for everyone. With this in mind, the first issue I wish to raise is the safety of students and staff in schools once they return. I have spoken to many parents and staff who are genuinely worried about the safety, not only of their schoolgoing children but also the staff. The Minister has constantly stated that schools are the safest place for children and while I believe she may be correct in some regard, we need to take another look at this, in particular due to the new UK strain of Covid, which appears to be more easily spread. Could she confirm if her Department has received advice on this and what the current status is with regard to this new strain of Covid? The new strain is extremely contagious and as a result has the ability to spread rapidly if it gets a foothold in schools.

Children with special needs have been particularly affected by the lockdowns. They have been forced to stay at home, with no or very little interaction with their friends or schools. I know from speaking to parents of children with special needs that the one thing on which they are all agreed is that the children have all gone back into themselves and that any progress they have made is all but lost. These parents and their children need our support. Words are no good to them. What they need is real support. By real support I mean the reopening of special units in schools. This must be done as a matter of urgency. I welcome the Minister's commitment to the reopening of special schools on 21 January. Clarity was required so that the parents and

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children know exactly when life can go back to some sort of normality for them.

The final issue I wish to raise is the leaving certificate. Exactly one year ago the headline in *The Irish Times* was about leaving certificate marking being rushed and unfair. This headline was before there was any talk of schools closing as a result of Covid. Today we have 6th year students who do not know if the leaving certificate is going to go ahead at all. This is completely unfair not only to them but also to the teaching staff. There is no point in saying something one day and then something completely different a few days later. The bottom line is that a firm decision needs to be made now. There is no point in dragging this on for weeks on end and creating uncertainty among students and staff. The very latest date for a firm decision is the end of January as to whether the leaving certificate is going to go ahead or not. From her comments, I know the Minister is of the opinion that the leaving certificate must go ahead at all costs. This is the wrong message to send out. If it is not safe to hold the leaving certificate, then alternatives must be provided. There is no point in waiting until the last minute to decide. I urge the Minister to give clarity to students and staff by the end of January at the very latest.

I have been inundated with emails from students, parents and staff outlining their worries on this year's leaving certificate exam. The following is from a very worried parent of a leaving certificate student who is also a teacher.

I am writing to you as a parent of a leaving cert student and also as a second level teacher to ask you to use your good office to appeal to the Government, Minister Foley and the Department of Education to make a speedy decision as to how the Leaving Certificate will be assessed in 2021.

My daughter is already extremely stressed, trying to cope with online, remote learning and trying to stay motivated in the face of so much uncertainty and adversity. The leaving cert exam is such a difficult trial at the best of times and so much of a student's future depends on it. To have the additional stress of not knowing when-if practicals will happen, whether the leaving cert will happen or whether it will be predicted grades again, (which was a disaster in my view). There are also rumours floating around that the leaving cert exam might be delayed.

That is only a small example of some of the correspondence I have received. Could the Minister confirm a definite date on when a decision will be made on the 2021 leaving certificate and the advice she received regarding the UK strain of Covid and its effect on the safety of students and staff? In fairness to her, she has already answered the question on special needs.

Deputy Norma Foley: The safety of students and staff has been the primary concern that has been addressed at all stages of the reopening of schools. It continues to be the primary motivation. The direction is given according to the public health advice, taking on board the UK strain and all other aspects from a public health point of view that need to be taken into account. It has been confirmed consistently, as recently as today, that schools remain safe places.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I thank the Minister. I will move on. If Members want answers, they must leave time for them.

Deputy James Lawless: I commend the Minister on her approach to date and congratulate her on what she has achieved. I single out the admirable and essential decision last week to try to prioritise two cohorts of students, which are those with special needs and leaving certificate students. It was the right call, for the right reasons, and it is regrettable that it did not prove pos-

sible. It does worry me that we have a situation where the system was unable to manage 5% of students returning to 100% of the space in a scenario where 100% of students were due to return a few days prior to that. I am not sure where that fell apart. There has been much speculation and theories but in any event, there is significant concern as to how we get back at all if 5% of students could not go back because the system was not able to deal with that.

Many sectors have continued throughout the pandemic. Retail workers have been going through thick and thin. We have seen gardaí, emergency service workers and healthcare personnel, including doctors and nurses, on the front line. Others, including public transport workers, have also continued, with teachers and school workers continuing up until December. This was for the same reasons, as the provision of school and education, particularly to leaving certificate and final year students, is an essential service. This is similar to how we have other cohorts of essential services. I really hope a way can be found to provide this because it is so important to all the students' needs.

There are many thousands of teachers across the country who made Trojan efforts both before Christmas in physical classrooms and now in remote classrooms. I saw them working as recently as this morning in my household, where teaching continues remotely. We all know this is no substitute for real-time and physical engagement. Many matters have been raised in the Chamber today and on other days in the media and pretty much all of those can be addressed by returning to schools as soon as it can be done safely. I urge that this be done as soon as safely possible. This would address myriad issues and although I will not repeat all of them, I will briefly touch on a few.

The social and economic issues are well known and that divide is only exacerbated with physical distance from school and not having social, economic and parental supports in place. I listened to Ms Tanya Ward of the Children's Rights Alliance speak last week on a radio programme, saying it would be tragic if schools could not return as soon as possible for those reasons.

The digital divide is real and broadband connections vary from person to person and house to house. That does not just scupper students as it affects teachers. I have heard stories of teachers having to drive and teach from their cars in places where they could get better connections. They were not able to teach classes from home due to problems with Internet access.

I do not come to this from an abstract position on policy. I am married to a teacher, the son of a teacher and a parent to a leaving certificate student. I see it from all sides and every single day. In my kitchen at home there is a calendar on the wall with a number of dates on it, including the return to school after Christmas, mock and oral exams, as well as for the leaving certificate. These are on the calendar and the household has run to that schedule since September. There are some people in this Chamber and elsewhere who say we should tear up the calendar and start again. Actually, I am not quite sure what they advocate as an alternative. I do not share those views.

There are real and meaningful concerns about the mental health of students in many cases but the answer to this - the expected panacea - is not to cancel everything and abandon ship. The answer is to acknowledge that many students have mental health issues exacerbated by such suggestions; for every student calling for this to be cancelled, others are calling for the process to continue. We must all be mindful in the debate that there are many views on this, both from the student population, parents, families and educators. Whatever answer is found,

it must reflect those views.

My own view is that we should provide a structure. Perhaps mocks or oral exams could be conducted online to some extent. We need to give these students motivation and a path forward to follow. As the Minister indicates, the traditional leaving certificate examination provides a way to do that. I have no issue with predicted grades being used as a parallel process but I suggest that neither process should be a poor relation. They should work in tandem rather than one being an afterthought.

I yield to my colleagues as I know a number of them wish to contribute.

Deputy John Lahart: I will use my time for very specific questions. When will a decision be made on the leaving certificate?

Deputy Norma Foley: The advisory group on the leaving certificate has met on a number of occasions to look at the broadest matters relating to the exam. Accommodations have already been made in terms of dates for practical exams, projects and all of that. Equally, the engagement with the advisory group on further accommodation and contingencies that may need to be put in place will continue. In the interests of balance, previous speakers have alluded to the fact there are myriad voices on the approach to be taken. Therefore, it is in the spirit of partnership and collaboration that all those voices will be heard at the advisory group on the path forward.

Deputy John Lahart: Is it possible to give us a date?

Deputy Norma Foley: The advisory group is continuing to meet and taking on board all the evolving situation, including the myriad voices on proceeding to the leaving certificate for 2021. I also point out that we very successfully ran the leaving certificate in November, just a short number of weeks ago. It was a full leaving certificate exam and all that learning, experience and public health advice relating to learning and the running of exams is also being taken on board.

Deputy John Lahart: I will not take up a huge amount of time. I made a long contribution to our parliamentary party meeting last night and the Minister is aware of the issues. The key issue is certainty and a decision around deadlines for the practicals and oral exams, for example. I have to come back around to it and ask if there is any general window of opportunity for students listening to this regarding certainty on when they might know for sure about this? This applies to junior certificate students as well.

Deputy Norma Foley: All the information on additional time for practicals, projects and all of that has been disseminated to the schools. They are aware of it and it was part of the contingency planning worked through with the advisory group that allowed sufficient time and space to make that additional time available if we were to find ourselves in what is now the current position. I reiterate that the advisory group will continue to meet and work through all the options, taking on board the public health advice available to us.

Deputy John Lahart: I thank the Minister.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: I have a question for the Minister, Deputy Foley. The concern with the leaving certificate is certainty for students, who are the most important of all. What is the Minister's personal view, as she ultimately makes the decision? Does she want a written leaving certificate - the normal leaving cert - or is she looking at predicted grades or a hybrid

model? Students are entitled to and need certainty. The leaving certificate is potentially the most important exam in a person's life. What is the Minister's personal view and which leaving certificate does she favour?

What is the process by which she will decide to re-open schools? Students do better when attending school and being taught by teachers in a classroom. What process will be used and what benchmarks will be used for the reopening of schools? When does the Minister expect schools to be reopened?

Deputy Norma Foley: I thank the Deputy. I can give my view and everybody else has a view. The Deputy spoke about certainty. When it was proposed to hold the leaving certificate exams last November in the middle of a period of level 5 restrictions, some doubt was cast as to whether we could deliver that. Yet again, taking on board the public health advice made available, a full leaving certificate written exam was very successfully offered and achieved in November. The advisory group is taking cognisance of that and of all we learned in the running of the exams in November. It is listening to all the other voices that are part of the stakeholder engagement as we move forward. Those deliberations will continue, always underpinned by public health advice.

I absolutely and categorically agree with the Deputy that students do better in school. That has always been my view. Throughout level 5 and difficult circumstances from September to December, when many businesses and other places were closing, we managed very successfully to keep schools open for that reason. The schools have closed due to significant mobility in the education sector and it has been necessary to stand down more than 900,000 people in the education sector to benefit wider society.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: I have very little time.

Deputy Norma Foley: The Deputy asked about reopening and the judgment on that. There will be a review of that at the end of January, including a review concerning mobility in the education sector. I hope we are moving towards 1 February.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: I have a very quick question for the Minister of State, Deputy Madigan. I very much welcome the decision made today on special needs schools and special classes opening on 21 January, which is next Thursday. Have parents been informed? If not, when will they be informed? Have the schools been informed? What is the process by which parents will learn, in terms of communication with schools, that their child with special needs is going back to school next Thursday?

Deputy Josepha Madigan: Obviously, even though we have a shared commitment and ambition to reopen next Thursday, there are still some ongoing discussions on logistics and other issues that need to be ironed out. Concurrent communication is something that is being discussed by all of the groups, including the parents representatives and our education partners and is something of which we are very conscious. The intention now is to move forward on 21 January.

Deputy Michael Collins: I have a lot of questions but I accept that the Minister will not be able to answer all of them now. I ask that she reply in writing to those questions she does not cover. My office has been inundated with calls, messages and emails from leaving certificate 2021 students, as I am sure is true of every Deputy. The main message from the students is that the Department should put a predicted grades system in place and any students who are

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unhappy with that should be give the option of sitting the leaving certificate exam. Does the Minister and her Department have any plans to do so? If so, I urge her to share those plans with students because they need clarity. Junior certificate students have also been in contact with me. They know that they are down the line *vis-à-vis* their leaving certificate peers but their worries are no less important. They need to know if the junior certificate exam will go ahead this year. They feel that they have not had the opportunities to study that previous junior certificate students had, having missed a lot of school last year and now studying remotely again. Does the Department have any plans in place for the junior certificate? What are the plans, if any, for the classroom-based assessments, CBAs, and the oral exams?

I come from Cork South-West which has a genuinely shocking broadband service, from Adrigole to Drimoleague, Kilmacsimon to Kinsale and elsewhere. Leaving certificate students in these areas cannot access school remotely. One family cannot even get mobile phone coverage in their house so the students cannot even use their own data allowance. Can a plan be put in place to enable such disadvantaged students to go into school to access the school's Wi-Fi network in order to learn? I had a mother on the phone yesterday who told me that she had to pick and choose which of her five children could use the Wi-Fi in the house because it is too slow for all of them to use at once. This is the case for so many families. It is all very well to say that children can learn remotely but in practice, those in rural Ireland are far more disadvantaged.

I have a question about books. Surely bookshops should be deemed essential. I submitted a parliamentary question to the Department of Education on this issue but the answer I received this morning was the usual generic response regarding level 5 restrictions. Surely a click and collect facility could be made available so that exam students could buy extra books and exam papers. I ask that the Department looks into this.

Children's mental health is suffering and I fear the effects of this will only be known in years to come. I ask the Minister to explain the situation with regard to the roll-out of the vaccine to SNAs, teachers and other school staff. Is any deadline set in that regard?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Minister has an impossible task. She has 20 seconds to answer all of those questions.

Deputy Norma Foley: In terms of books, I would point out to the Deputy that click and collect and delivery are still in operation. On vaccinations, as I have mentioned, it is not within my gift, as he will appreciate. We have made representations to the Department of Health and discussions will continue on vaccinations for the school community. We will continue to engage on that issue.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I know the Minister is doing her best but last week I left Government Buildings at 6.20 p.m., having been there from 4 p.m. meeting the Taoiseach. By the time I reached Bray, the Government's decision had been overturned. We were assured that special schools were going to reopen and that leaving certificate students were going to be brought back. However, within 20 minutes, that decision was pulled and there was utter confusion. I am delighted to hear that the Fórsa trade union will advise SNAs to co-operate with the phased resumption of in-school services to children, pending a number of safety measures being undertaken. This is very important because the mixed messages have been very disconcerting. There are legitimate concerns among teachers and staff in special schools who have their own health concerns and childcare issues. I know it is not simple but I welcome the decision announced today that special schools will reopen on 21 January. The most vulnerable children who attend

special schools cannot engage in remote learning and are being left behind again. We should learn from the mistakes we made earlier in the pandemic, including last summer. Children regressed because of the lack of routine and an inability to access the therapies delivered to them through school. Many lost skills, could not sleep, became irritable and were self-harming due to frustration. I am sure the Minister is well aware of that, having been a múinteoir herself. Now children have to stay indoors because the weather is so bad. Parents are becoming increasingly upset and many are contacting our offices out of pure frustration. Children with special needs are suffering so much and cannot understand what has happened to their school routine. Their social activities have all been cancelled because of Covid-19 and therapies provided by the HSE, which were already limited, have all been cancelled as well. We do not have much time now so I ask the Minister to reply to my questions in writing. Solutions have to be found. Schools should be provided with additional PPE, testing should be available to staff and to families and supports in the community should also be offered. I know that the issue is not simple but it should be resolved.

In terms of leaving certificate students, huge efforts were made to bring them back but the decision was pulled ultimately. There must be more co-operation with the schools. I was contacted by the principal of Coláiste Dún Iascaigh on foot of a letter the Minister wrote and sent to all principals in recent days, asking them to forward it to all parents. They are very concerned, annoyed and are hugely frustrated and angered by the content and tone of that letter, which is a pity. I am only relating what I have been told but it is very important that the Minister would engage with school staff meaningfully and properly. Those kinds of letters should not be sent out. Anger and annoyance has been expressed by teachers about the content of that letter and I ask the Minister to review it.

The CAO points have gone up this year which will cause difficulties for leaving certificate students. We must have a broader look at the leaving certificate anyway and maybe now is the time to do that. Some question the wisdom of cramming five years' work into two hour or one and a half hour exams. Maybe we should review the entire thing. I wish the Minister well and offer her the support of the Rural Independent Group. We must look after our special children because they so badly need our support.

Deputy Thomas Pringle: I am glad that my wains are young adults and done with school because the U-turns this Government has taken over the reopening of schools has had me spinning around. The utter disregard for students, parents, teachers, principals and all of the ancillary school staff has been shocking. I am not usually shocked at this Government's incompetence and arrogance; I expect it, unfortunately.

People are being told to stay at home, to work from home and to learn from home. The Government forged ahead with plans to reopen schools this week despite our highest daily numbers of positive Covid cases. Those plans were scrapped and then the Minister talked about just bringing in leaving certificate students for three days per week, without prior consultation with affected groups. Thankfully, students and unions rallied and a significant campaign took place and forced yet another U-turn. One thing this Government has been great for is demonstrating to everyone the power of the public and the power of standing together. Each U-turn of this Government has been because of public outcry and pressure. The people have the power and it would serve the Government well to remember that. Furthermore, we are all far more connected these days through social media, which is how we can so quickly prove the Government's own contradictions.

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At this week's meeting of the Oireachtas disability group, we heard from advocates supporting parents of children with additional needs. They told us of major regression for some of the children following their time out of school and away from their routine. Regressions were reported relating to behavioural issues, with some children having seizures, losing vocabulary, losing the ability to speak and regressing in their toilet-training. Some children were being medicated because of their anxiety levels. Advocacy organisations are calling for the roll-out of the summer programme that ran last year, previously known as the July programme. The precedent is there for running these classes for children with additional needs. The Minister said that children with special needs are going back to school next week and it will be interesting to see how that goes.

I wish to speak briefly about universities because I will not be here for that discussion later. There are reports that some universities are already planning to be online again from the first semester later this year, while others still have not decided or communicated their plans for the rest of the current semester. The Minister should let people plan. With all of the uncertainty around this pandemic, new strains, rates of vaccinations, and so on, the least service providers and employers can do is to carry out some forward planning. Realistically, we should probably be looking at online learning and an increased level of working from home for the rest of this year. The Government should let people organise for this in order that it can be done properly.

Deputy Marian Harkin: I am delighted that the Minister expects students with special needs to return to school on a staggered basis next week. It is the best news I have heard all week. Like many others, I have received many emails from parents of children with special needs who are beyond devastated as they see their children regress before their eyes. Equally, I have received many emails from teachers who are frightened and petrified by the prospect of returning to the classroom.

While I am delighted about what is happening, what has changed? How is next week or today different from last Monday? Is the Minister looking at offering vaccination to teachers who are prepared to go back into classrooms at the height of the third wave? I have written to the Minister for Health on this same question.

Time and time again, we have been told that schools are safe. Would it perhaps be more accurate to say that schools are safer than other environments? Given that mobility is part and parcel of attending school, one cannot be separated from the other. That has to be factored into any statements we make about schooling. Have any efforts been made to factor in the possibility that many young people may be asymptomatic though infected and, therefore, do not appear in school statistics? It is when students go home, where they spend 75% of their time, that they have a greater chance of spreading the virus. Has that been studied?

With regard to the leaving certificate examination itself, as a former maths teacher, I understand the importance of the objectivity of the examination. I am, therefore, instinctively hesitant with regard to predicted grades. Covid has, however, upended everything. How can students prepare adequately without sitting mock examinations? Some have inadequate broadband. What about students with difficult home situations? Current leaving certificate students have also already lost a lot of time.

Will the Minister at least look at some kind of hybrid model in which students might receive predicted grades for oral and practical examinations and project work? Should the Minister not, at the very least, tell schools to prepare for predicted grades? Above all else, we need a

Department policy with regard to consistency in predicted grades. This could include, for example, metrics such as the number of assignments carried out, the level of online participation and the results of classroom tests in addition to collaboration with subject teachers and national guidelines. I fully understand that this is not the Minister's plan A, but Covid has taught us that we always need a plan B.

Deputy Norma Foley: Deputy Pringle mentioned public health advice and the decision to stand down our schools. I want to make it very clear that we have followed public health advice at every point. The public health advice suggested that there was a need to reduce mobility. We respected that and acted accordingly. I am very disappointed that the Deputy does not agree that it is important to give priority to children with additional needs in those circumstances. They deserve that priority. I thought that then and I think it now.

I thank Deputy Harkin for her comments. It is very positive that we are working towards the resumption of education for children with additional needs on 21 January. There are still logistics to be worked out and so on but our partners in education have confirmed that they share our objective for these children to return to education on 21 January. In terms of-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Minister will have to write to the Deputy; we have run out of time again. I thank her for her co-operation. I apologise for interrupting but I have to abide by the time limits.

Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I wish to advise the House of the following matters in respect of which notice has been given under Standing Order 37 and the name of the Member in each case: (1) Deputy Bernard J. Durkan - to discuss providing schoolchildren access to Maynooth Boys' National School via the adjoining Maynooth Post Primary School for safety reasons; (2) Deputy Denis Naughten - to discuss emergency action to address flooding at Lough Funshinagh, County Roscommon, which is threatening homes and farm buildings; (3) Deputy Neale Richmond - to discuss the relocation of Leave.EU to Waterford from the UK and the regulation of its activities as per Irish electoral law; (4) Deputy Fergus O'Dowd - to discuss plans to develop Drogheda and its surrounding areas in line with Project Ireland 2040; (5) Deputy Neasa Hourigan - to discuss the provision of neonatal intensive care unit services and best practices at the Rotunda Hospital, Dublin; (6) Deputies Thomas Pringle and Catherine Connolly - to discuss the fallout for the Irish fishing industry in the context of the Brexit agreement with the UK; (7) Deputies Paul Murphy, Richard Boyd Barrett, Gino Kenny and Brid Smith - to discuss the killing of George Nkencho on 30 December 2020; (8) Deputy Mick Barry - to discuss developments in the Debenhams industrial dispute which have seen the rejection of the latest proposal; (9) Deputy Jackie Cahill - to discuss the financial implications on the national hunt industry as a result of the recent decision to cancel all point-to-point races; and (10) Deputy Kieran O'Donnell - to discuss an update on the roll-out of the national broadband plan.

The matters raised by Deputies Naughten, O'Donnell, Hourigan and Richmond have been selected for discussion.

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Covid-19 (Higher Education): Statements

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): With the agreement of the House, I will share my time with the Minister of State, Deputy Niall Collins. I welcome the opportunity to update the House on the impact of Covid-19 on the further and higher education sector. I was a little disappointed that, for the first time in my political career, some Members of the Dáil actually voted not to have me here today for questions and answers. I find that a little bit regrettable, as almost half a million people in this country are in further or higher education. Many of these are first-time entrants to third level and, as a result of this awful virus, some have never had an opportunity to set foot on their campuses or to attend a lecture in person. The airwaves are full of discussion about the impact of Covid-19 on our schoolchildren. It is right and proper that this issue is being discussed but we also need to discuss and consider the impact this pandemic is having on young people more broadly, including young people in third level education.

I want to talk about that this afternoon because Covid-19 has robbed many of our young people of important milestones, which they understandably thought they could expect. It has robbed them of the opportunity to experience a life beyond secondary school. These first-year students last set foot in a school last March and now find themselves experiencing college life in a box room or at the corner of a kitchen table, looking at a laptop or a Zoom camera. They may have missed out on the opportunity to leave their home towns, to become independent, to meet new people or to be creative. Their college experience has been greatly curtailed. We know this is absolutely the right thing to do from the perspective of public health. It is a matter of saving lives and keeping people safe. We do, however, need to consider how best to support these young people and we must move mountains to help them. My message to young people and first-year students today, which I hope all will echo loudly and clearly, is that this will not be their college life forever. It is a difficult moment in time but it will pass.

Third level is, of course, not just about young people. It is also about mature students, that is, people who had the guts and the courage to go back to college and learning, to avail of lifelong learning, to start a new career, to reskill or to upskill. It is about the student from the Traveller community who may be the first in his or her family to attend a third level course and who now wants to find a quiet space to do his or her work. It is about young people, like those I met yesterday, who left school early for any of a variety of reasons - because school sometimes does not work out for people - and who are now back in Youthreach, trying to get their lives back on track and to fulfil their ambitions. We have to discuss the impact this is having on them and we have to ensure that when we open our doors - which we all hope will be soon - they will be in a position to continue their journey in education.

This country is talking an awful lot about economic recovery, which is really important but we are not talking nearly enough about how we are going to repair society and societal well-being after this period. From the engagements I have had, I can tell the House that people are finding this time really tough. People are fragile and consequently, when we talk about recovery, can we talk about social recovery, as well as about economic recovery?

There is absolutely no doubt that Covid-19 has resulted in significant disruption for students and learners, as well as staff. I acknowledge the enormous efforts that have gone into ensuring that continuity has, for the most part, been maintained throughout the pandemic. Despite learning having to happen in a new and different format, it has continued. I thank the unions and all

of our stakeholders who have stepped up to the plate and worked very hard. In the early phase, when on-site activities were suddenly suspended, there was a very rapid shift to emergency remote learning. Over time, a blended model of learning has become the dominant mode with varying levels of on-site and online delivery aligned to public health advice at different times. Our institutions in the sector are very diverse and have a strong degree of autonomy. This diversity and flexibility have been key in driving responsive and adaptable approaches to the challenges created by the pandemic.

Over the summer of 2020, people worked hard to put in place plans for a more comprehensive return to on-site provision for the academic year 2020-21 but we all know what the virus did to those plans.

At present, the level 5 measures designate higher and further education as essential insofar as on-site presence is required for education activities that cannot be held remotely. We need to be honest with the students and staff of further and higher education. As long as we remain at level 3, level 4 or level 5 of our Covid plan, the majority of learning will remain online. In overall terms, the sectors have adjusted speedily to a more restrictive environment again, with all further and higher education institutions conducting most of their provision online. The balance between on-site and online provision will be subject to continual change in order to safeguard students, staff and the communities in which institutions are located. There is a discretion for things that must take place in person and it is important for that discretion to remain in place.

SOLAS and our education and training boards, ETBs, have issued guidance to providers on the delivery of further education and training, FET, and craft apprenticeship programmes during January. FET programmes, including Youthreach provision, and apprenticeships are being delivered almost entirely online during this period. The Minister of State, Deputy Niall Collins, has been working hard on this and will provide further detail on the arrangements for apprenticeship in his contribution.

Ongoing engagement with relevant institutions and stakeholders continues. Every Friday I meet all the relevant partners as we continue to monitor this very closely.

I am pleased to be putting in place a range of supports for students and the sector during these challenges. I am always open to engaging on how we can do more to ensure that educational opportunities remain and are made more accessible to everyone, particularly the most vulnerable in our society.

There is a commitment to support those in the research community, who may have been somewhat unsung in the past but who have come very much to the fore during this pandemic. They are crucial to tackling the social and scientific problems posed by Covid-19 now and as we move forward.

A once-off funding package of €168 million was created to support publicly funded further and higher education providers and to support students. It included a doubling of the student assistance fund from €8 million to €16 million, additional funding of €10 million for access measures in higher education, €15 million to buy laptops and other devices and equipment to assist students in accessing third level education online, a €3 million increase in focused mental health and well-being funding and an increase in the level of funding for the 1916 Bursary Fund to €5 million per annum, which will provide an additional 200 bursaries, bringing the total number for this year to 1,000 bursaries for the most disadvantaged students in the college system. It

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also includes an additional €20 million in funding for Student Universal Support Ireland, SUSI, next year, an allocation of €6 million to increase SUSI support for postgraduates and, for the first time ever, a ring-fenced fund for mitigating educational disadvantage of €8 million to allow SOLAS to look at how we support community education and the learners in our community who may be at the greatest risk of disconnection from our education and training system. As colleagues will be aware, we have created a €50 million fund to provide financial assistance to full-time third level students in recognition of the particular impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and I am pleased to see colleges now attaching that €250 credit to students' accounts. We have ring-fenced funding of €300,000 for targeted supports to address the implications of Covid-19 for Traveller progression within higher education and funding has also been secured for 2021. Moreover, there is an allocation of €25 million for capital works and equipment in higher education, which represents a significant increase on the €10 million provided in recent years.

We are working as hard as we can to put in place as many measures as we can. We have provided €47 million to provide support for contract researchers and research students whose work has been seriously disrupted by the pandemic and we need to ensure that work can continue.

My Department is not just a Department for colleges and universities. It is also a Department of skills to help people get back to work and to get the skills they may need to obtain a job. Unfortunately, Covid has resulted in many people losing their jobs. It may also have resulted in some people taking stock of life and asking what they want to do with life and where they want to get to. Many people have decided to take a leap of faith in many ways, go back to the education system, retrain and start a new career.

In an average year we train about 245,000 people in further education. We are increasing further education and training places this year by 50,000. This will mean that almost 300,000 people will avail of places on training courses this year. Some 8,000 people have enrolled on the ETB-led Skills to Compete initiative. More than 1,200 companies are on board to provide places under the Skillnet Ireland Skills Connect initiative in a wide variety of sectors such as medtech, financial services and the sustainable economy.

We have started some good work on apprenticeships, although we have more to do. For the first time ever, we are providing a financial incentive to any business that takes on an apprentice. As a result, we have seen a real stabilisation and recovery on our apprenticeship registration numbers following its introduction. This scheme is continuing in 2021.

Retrofit training is being rolled out. We can be as ambitious as we want on climate action but without the people to do the retrofitting, it is just talk. We need to ensure we can provide people with the skills to give them the opportunity to get jobs in retrofitting. I am delighted that this year, we will open four centres of excellence in retrofitting training, giving people in communities throughout the country a chance to get a new job and giving communities a chance to avail of retrofitting.

We have launched a range of focused measures in higher education through Springboard, postgraduate courses and modular skills.

There are many opportunities available but we need to get much better at helping people to navigate through the information and to find what works for them. Next week, I will launch a new portal, which is aimed at delivering better central, customer-focused information via a dedicated campaign page on *gov.ie* and with an associated communications plan. We want to

get the message out there. We need to help people navigate their way through the courses available to find the course that works for them. We will launch that new site next week.

As we move through this year, our approach, which has been very much a collaboration between the Department and stakeholders in the sector, has been underpinned by a set of key principles: prioritising the immediate needs of the health system; prioritising learners' interests; the importance of maintaining continuity in educational services; ensuring the integrity and quality of solutions; ensuring that, at a minimum, disadvantage is not exacerbated by the crisis and that we look at opportunities to narrow disadvantage; and sharing best practice, solutions and leveraging.

As the full academic year in pandemic circumstances advances, we are focused on sustaining that continuity. I want to ensure there is a common-sense and compassionate approach to examinations and an understanding across our system for students this year as well.

Improvements to connectivity will continue to be required and I was pleased to recently announce the roll-out of Wi-Fi roaming to further and higher education students in over 90 new locations across the country. I thank HEAnet for its work in leading this project, which will result in the eduroam Wi-Fi service being extended to libraries in Longford and Galway, as well as other places.

I acknowledge what an extraordinarily difficult time this has been for students, learners and staff, with an enormous impact on their well-being. Every night we hear the figures and every night we hear of that sense of crisis on our country. Many students, educational staff and others throughout the country are enormously stressed. I am keenly aware of the challenges they have been facing in our sector. As we move forward in our overall response, I will establish a new working group in my Department, led and chaired by the Union of Students in Ireland, USI, dedicated to identifying, refining and implementing strategies to enhance learner engagement and well-being. We need to hear the voice of students and do everything we can to help them.

I once again wish to plug a number that we should make famous. We have a 24-hour-a-day, seven-day-a-week mental health text line. The number is 50808, which is available for anyone who feels at any moment they have an issue, big or small, that is getting them down. They should never feel they are alone.

I want learners right across third level education to know that this is will not be the way forever. We will get back to a more normal, more interactive experience. In the meantime, those who are finding it difficult should reach out and seek assistance. I know I will have the support of everybody in this House in saying that we will continue to ensure we put the supports in place and do everything we can to assist. At the moment, the priority must be getting people through this pandemic, minding their well-being and keeping our education services going. Then we will build back our services as the public health situation allows us.

I am grateful for the opportunity to update the House and I look forward to answering questions and keeping colleagues informed.

Minister of State at the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Niall Collins): I am grateful for the opportunity to provide Deputies with an update on further education and training during this level 5 phase of the Covid-19 pandemic and I look forward to taking any questions colleagues may have.

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As the Minister, Deputy Harris, said, further education and training providers are responding to the recent deterioration in the Covid-19 situation. They are adapting and using their discretion to restrict on-site attendance further, only allowing the most essential work to take place on-site.

4 o'clock

I am pleased that SOLAS and Education and Training Boards Ireland, ETBI, have issued specific guidance to providers regarding the delivery of further education and training and craft apprenticeship programmes for January. Programmes and apprenticeships will be delivered almost entirely online during this time.

Statutory safety training in the construction sector, delivered under the construction skills certification scheme and the Safe Pass programme, has been paused during January. It is important, however, to state that regulations enabling the period of expiring cards to be extended continue to apply. For apprentices, the impacts experienced have depended on the sector, with significant impact being experienced by apprentices in the hospitality and aviation sectors. Training has largely continued for those apprentices employed in office-based roles, such as in finance and ICT, with off-the-job training moving mostly online.

Off-the-job training for apprentices stopped between March and September. Assessments, however, were completed remotely for this group as much as was possible. In light of the current difficult and worrying public health situation, all apprentice training moved online on 11 January. This is being achieved by the theory aspects of craft apprenticeships being front-loaded for delivery in January. I acknowledge, of course, that the ability of individual apprenticeships to facilitate remote delivery is dependent on their particular characteristics, with programmes such as brick- and stone-laying facing particular difficulties.

Off-the-job training has moved online where possible and more than 2,000 craft apprentices were assessed remotely for the first time during the summer. Some €12 million has been provided in the budget to support additional places. That will mitigate the effect of smaller apprenticeship class sizes and allow the loss of provision in 2020 to be made up. Long-term funding and support measures will be considered in the context of the new action plan for apprenticeships, which will be completed shortly. SOLAS is continuing to work with education and training providers to identify areas where craft apprenticeship programmes can be delivered through blended learning and to address the impact of the move to remote delivery for January. This will support the continuation of off-the-job training delivery during public health restrictions in the future, as well as potentially ameliorating the impact of Covid-19 on waiting lists for access to off-the-job training.

I turn now to the apprenticeship incentivisation scheme, which is financed under the July stimulus jobs package. It provides a €3,000 grant to the employer which is payable over two years for each apprentice registered between 1 March 2020 and 31 December 2020. By the end of last month, some 1,358 employers had submitted claims in respect of 2,350 apprentices. Budget 2021 extended the scheme to include apprentices registered up to the end of June 2021. This is expected to promote the registration of approximately 4,000 apprentices in the first six months of 2021. The incentive has helped to maintain activity in the sector during this period of difficulty, and provides a good basis for meeting the ambitious targets set in the programme for Government for the upcoming action plan.

Some 2,511 apprentices were registered between September and the end of November, which comprised 52% of total registrations for the year. The action plan will set out to place apprenticeships at the centre of the education and training system, increase the attractiveness of the programme to employers and learners of all ages and ensure that the apprentice population is reflective of the general workforce in respect of diversity as well. I know we will have the support of the House in advancing these plans and I look forward to keeping my Oireachtas colleagues updated and answering any questions which Deputies may have.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: I thank the Minister and the Minister of State for those contributions. I sat here for the last three hours during the discussions with the Minister for Education, Deputy Foley. I apologise if I must go back over some of the same material, because of the connection between third-level education and the leaving certificate. All I wanted the Minister for Education to do was answer my questions. Several of her party and Government colleagues also asked her when a decision will be made concerning the leaving certificate examinations and what will happen in that regard.

What I would like to know from the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science is whether he has looked at the impact of calculated grades versus having the leaving certificate examinations on CAO points and college places next year. I ask that question because the Government's performance in respect of last year's leaving certificate examinations has left much to be desired. Approximately 12,000 cases were appealed last year and some cases are still going through the courts system in that regard. I hope we have learned lessons from that experience, but I fear we have not. We are already seeing leaving certificate students being messed around. All they want is fairness and clarity.

They are in the process of doing their leaving certificate year now. They will do the examinations when they come or they will receive calculated grades. They are, however, going through the leaving certificate process and they have missed out on months of learning. The leaving certificate results for these students cannot be a measure of how ill they have been, how ill their families have been or how much time they have had to spend in isolation. However, that is what we are ending up with now. The further we go through this process and the longer the Minister for Education keeps her head in the sand, the more difficulties we will run into. It is just not acceptable.

Reference was made in the contributions just now to the problems around mental health and stress and anxiety. I, our party president, Deputy Mary Lou McDonald, and Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire heard from hundreds of students last week. They referred to this nonsense of such terms as "partners in education" and "advisory" groups. The Ministers need to stop hiding behind this *blasé* talk and get down to brass tacks with these students. I am really concerned about the impact that this situation is having on them.

I refer as well to the inequality associated with this situation. One of the students to whom I spoke told me that 18 classes were intended to be online, but it was only possible to have three of them because of broadband issues and teachers not turning up etc.. There is, therefore, a massive degree of inequality regarding what is being delivered to these students, who will be starting at third level or in apprenticeships in the months to come. Those students need to know now whether there are going to be written examinations, a process of predicted grades or whether it will be a combination of both of those processes. I also need to know the impact that process will have on third-level places.

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Has the Minister examined the impact of the calculated grades? What increased numbers of third level places are needed to meet current demographic demand? How many places above that figure is the Minister's Department adding for the 2021-22 academic year to ease the pressure on students competing for those places? When did the Minister's Department begin engaging with colleges regarding those additional places? Can the Minister provide us with a breakdown of the places and in which disciplines they will be available?

We have seen inadequate numbers of doctors being trained in the last decade, for example. How many of these additional places, therefore, will be in medicine? We also need more nurses and therefore we need more student nurses. What is the target for the total number of places in nursing and midwifery courses for the next academic year? Regarding student nurses, does the Minister consider that the 4,500 student nurses do real work, or does he agree with the Taoiseach that to pay student nurses would somehow undermine the quality of their degrees or education? I am trying to get through these questions as quickly as possible and I would really appreciate if the Minister would do what the Minister for Education did not do, and that is answer them directly.

Regarding the €250 support for students, some students have still not received that money. How many students have received it and how many are still waiting? Are some students being told that they will have to wait until September to benefit from that support, even though they are under real financial pressure now? I refer specifically to those students who do not receive the SUSI grant in their final year. If students in their final year can get a refund, why are other students being asked for it? I have a real problem with students in their final year, who have already paid their fees and everything else and who are waiting for this €250.

I turn again to the question of accommodation. Students have lost the opportunity to work and they are being asked to pay extortionate rents. The Minister, Deputy Harris, has all the time told me that on-campus accommodation is being sorted. At one point, I believe it was 20 October, the Minister told me that refunds would be made for five of seven of the institutions. The Minister made clear the Government's position on that. I have to hand an email dated 29 October from the Minister's office to a University of Limerick student who has not yet received a refund. The University of Limerick was supposedly one of the universities from which the Minister had received assurances. The email states that refund or cancellation policies in student accommodation should be set out in the licence agreement signed at the beginning of the academic year and that if the student is not happy, he or she should take it up with the Residential Tenancies Board. That is a long way of saying there is no refund and that one is on one's own. The email is completely at odds with the statement the Minister made in the Dáil just nine days before that. Will the Minister please clarify whether, on 20 October, he had assurances from the University of Limerick that refunds would be paid? What happened between that and 29 October? How many others have been put off from pursuing a refund from the office? Can students expect refunds for unused accommodation at public colleges?

On the Erasmus programme, the Minister has also repeatedly assured me that students from the North will not face international fees. When my office contacted colleges asking for information on such fees for any student coming from the North, at least one university told my office that as things currently stand, students from the North will face international fees. Will the Minister clarify if this is a mistake and is he aware that this information is being given out? The deadline of the CAO application is at the end of January. What immediate actions will the Minister take to ensure all universities are providing standard fees for students in the North and how is the Minister communicating this to students?

Reference was made to adult learners. I completely agree with the Minister about mature learners going back to college but what the Minister has said is completely at odds with the number of mature students who have contacted me. One student from a private college had paid €6,000 in fees. The college juggled around the timetable because of Covid but the student has a family and cannot take the place up. The college will not give him a cent back. This is wrong. What the Minister is telling me here does not correlate with what is happening on the ground. I want to give the Minister the remainder of my time so he can answer those questions specifically.

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank Deputy Conway-Walsh for her time and her work ethic; she has been here for a significant length of time and I am sorry that more Members have not joined us with regard to this higher education discussion. I am not the Minister for Education and I will not go back on that but the questions asked by the Deputy in respect of my own brief are fair and I am more than happy to answer them.

I doubt the Deputy meant it like this, but she commented that Ministers should not hide behind partners in education. When the Minister refers to partners in education she is talking about teachers, SNAs, parents' associations and student groups. The Deputy would probably be the first up on her feet, and rightly so, if the Minister did not engage with the partners in education. The Deputy is worried about the welfare of teachers, SNAs and students, and the views of parents. We do need certainty around this. I heard the Minister, Deputy Foley, today say that it is absolutely her intention to hold the leaving certificate examinations. I also heard the Minister state that we need to detail exactly how that is going to happen. From the perspective of my Department I would very much welcome that detail. I know it will be forthcoming in the coming weeks. The Minister for Education has established an advisory group and my Department sits on that advisory group. This is the exchange of information that the Deputy has, rightly, been getting at in her questions.

I accept there were difficulties, stresses and errors around the calculated grades but from my Department's perspective, even with all the difficulties we had with calculated grades, we did manage to provide every single student who had an error with their first-choice place. Many doubted that we would. I thank my sector, the Department and all the stakeholders for the work they did. I use this as an indication of the can-do attitude that we will apply to try to help students as they prepare for the transition from secondary school to third level.

The Deputy asked about extra places this year. The Deputy is concerned that all of the extra places that we secured last year were a one-off. She was right to say that but we have secured them again for this year. We put a lot of extra places into the system last year. That was not just a blip and they are now in the system this year. I have also received funding in the budget for more than 2,000 additional higher education places this year to deal with the demographic pressures.

As for the student nurses, the Deputy will be aware of the situation that arose when I was the Minister for Health whereby clinical placements could not go ahead. We offered student nurses an opportunity to take up a contract as healthcare assistants. They did an absolutely Trojan job and we would have been absolutely lost without them. I understand that my colleague, the Minister for Health, has received a report he commissioned on the issue of supports for student nurses. It is for the Minister and the HSE to act on that and make recommendations on it.

On the €250 credit I would be very happy to provide the Deputy with a breakdown, institu-

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tion by institution and I commit to doing that. From the information I have the SUSI students got the additional fund in December. In real time today, while coming in here, I see that Trinity College Dublin and UCD are announcing the dates they will credit students' accounts. I am satisfied that this is rolling out well. The Deputy referred to a student having to wait until September but I do not see it as that. I see that in the first instance, this €250 can be offset against the registration fee. If the student has paid the registration fee in part then it will be knocked off the remainder of the registration fee that has to be paid this year. If the student had paid the registration in full and is going back to college for another year in September, then he or she can chose to knock it off the fee payable then. It is a real reduction in real terms for students and their registration fee. Of course, if the student is not in one of those categories he or she will not miss out and will receive a cash payment.

On the issue of student accommodation, I will take up that case from the University of Limerick and I am very disappointed to hear that. My view on student accommodation is very clear; if it is college owned or campus owned the college should refund it, unless the student is using the accommodation. We should bear in mind that quite a few thousand students have taken up that option, as is their choice.

I acknowledge the Deputy's support for the issue of the Erasmus programme. I am really pleased that we have been able to put in place measures to make sure that students of all ages in Northern Ireland do not get left behind by the extremely regrettable decision of the British Government for the UK and Northern Ireland not to participate in the Erasmus programme. They talk of developing a new and better programme and I wish them well. I believe Erasmus is an excellent programme. Any student in Northern Ireland can avail of that by registering, on a temporary basis, in a Republic of Ireland higher education institution. Even as I am in here, my management board is meeting virtually with the management board in the Department for the Economy in Northern Ireland, which has responsibility for higher education. I am very clear with regard to Northern Ireland students and their rights under the Good Friday Agreement quite properly to be Irish citizens, and therefore to benefit from the same rules and fees that Irish citizens benefit from in the Republic.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: On the leaving certificate, we do not know how this virus will go, so will there be clarity around the predicted grades or a combination of both? Can the Minister reassure students that the algorithm that would be used for determining places in colleges will be fair? Will there be some transparency around it? I go back again to the clarity and the information that students need right at this moment on the oral and practical examinations, which is what happens around now. This is their lead in and we cannot just cut them adrift until they come into third level.

I welcome the Minister's comments on Erasmus but we also need clarity there. I ask the Minister to communicate this with the third level institutions because that is not the information they are giving out. Where students in the North want to register for courses right now, if this is not absolutely clarified for them and if they are being told by an institute where they want to study that they may be charged international fees, it will prohibit the student from doing that course, or at least dissuade the student from doing it.

Deputy Marc MacSharry: I am aware that everything is very much underpinned by Covid at the moment but I did have an opportunity twice yesterday on that matter and earlier on secondary education. It is not that I am neglecting that as a most important matter but as this is statements on higher education, I want to focus specifically on the higher education area and on

our plans as a State for the north west. Both the Minister, Deputy Harris, and the Minister of State, Deputy Niall Collins, as well as all Deputies in the House and particularly those from that region, have ambitious plans for the development of third level education in the north west. Indeed, over the past ten years we as a nation, across parties and across the House, have affirmed our commitment to the development of technological universities around the country through the amalgamation of institutes of technology. That is something we all support. In parallel, we also support the ongoing investment in our national universities, such as NUIG, UCD and others, to the extent that we provide funding to them and to our other third level institutions throughout the whole country.

As the Minister and the Minister of State will be aware from private meetings we have had on the matter, approximately 12 years ago on the back of the Salzburg report, there was some movement in St. Angela's College in County Sligo, which is a centre of excellence for home economics teacher training and has a reputation for that throughout the world. It is also a centre for nursing and other pursuits. The Ursuline Order set up the college way back and has provided sterling service to the education of people over many decades. On the back of the Salzburg report, a process started in which St. Angela's College and the Ursuline Order were considering their future. That led into initial negotiations with the National University of Ireland Galway, NUIG, about the potential for a merger. Since then, things have dragged along. Approximately six years ago, agreement was reached in principle by both NUIG and St. Angela's College and very little has happened since to advance it. To call a spade a spade, the reality is that NUIG was holding out for an absolute commitment from the Government of €50 million in capital supports. Staff and students in the college, as well as those in the wider education infrastructure community in the north west, were waiting each September for this agreement to be finalised and moved forward. In parallel, however, the landscape has substantially changed.

As I said at the outset, our outlook for the region, as a State, is to develop the technological university concept. We are very much progressing that in the north west with the Connacht-Ulster alliance, which would incorporate Sligo and Letterkenny ITs and others. With the procrastination by NUIG, the situation between it and St. Angela's College about their collective future has changed. The amalgamation of St. Angela's College with NUIG is not consistent with Project Ireland 2040, the Salzburg and Hunt reports, or our collective vision in these Houses for third level education in the north west of the country by way of the development of the Connacht-Ulster alliance or the technological university for that area. There are a number of reasons for that. First, €50 million is a colossal amount of money for the Government to invest in third level education. To do that for a satellite of NUIG in Sligo, on a site adjacent to Sligo Institute of Technology, would divide our purpose to the extent that we would not achieve our goal of critical mass in the area. That would not support Sligo as the selected growth centre for the region or the vision that has been pursued by the various institutes of technology that will make up the technological university.

Throughout the last six years in particular, there has been some expenditure by the Higher Education Authority and the Department in scoping out and facilitating the negotiations between NUIG and St. Angela's College, Sligo on their merger. As a member of the Committee of Public Accounts, I can understand why Department officials may feel they cannot justify changing tack, having spent up to €4 million in this process so far. However, much of the work that has been done, on which that expenditure was used, is equally valid and useable for a merger between St. Angela's College and Sligo Institute of Technology, and the evidence is there to prove that. It would be a red herring to stick by a plan that had great intentions when it

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was first conceived between eight and 12 years ago but as things have progressed, it would be counterproductive to our mutual purpose in these Houses of creating critical mass, as envisaged under the Salzburg report, and consolidating the smaller colleges like St. Angela's.

I want to impress upon the Minister, as well as the Minister of State, Deputy Niall Collins, the need to be intelligent about how we move forward. We should not be afraid to lead Government policy in proposing and supporting the change of tack in order to build critical mass and momentum for the technological university, with Sligo and Letterkenny institutes of technology and others merging with St. Angela's College. They have dual campuses that are very close to one another. Doing so would add a critical mass and enhance what are already world-renowned facilities and reputations for home economics teacher training. As regards nursing and research capability, we have nursing courses in Letterkenny Institute of Technology, in Castlebar and in Sligo, in St. Angela's College. If we put all of these together, the capital expenditure required would be nowhere near €50 million. There would be a shared services capability, a shared campus capability and the student and staff experience would be enhanced, not least because the staff of these colleges, whether catering staff or professors, would have career prospects into the future where we have critical mass established. While ordinarily as a Sligo person I would love the idea of the NUIG approach, as we have committed to the technological university development it is the right thing to do. To try to do both would scupper both and we would be at a loss.

I fully appreciate that there are nerves in the Department and the Higher Education Authority, as there has been an expenditure of about €4 million, to which I alluded earlier, over the last eight years in facilitating the envisaged merger with NUIG. However, that is not lost if we switch focus to a merger which makes better sense and is underpinned by quite a number of Government policies, not least our higher education policy of building critical mass. It would also have other benefits in ensuring economies of scale and increased cost efficiencies can be achieved as there would be more capacity for shared services. Capital investment by the Government would be less and the student experience, which is critically important, would be improved. For example, St. Angela's College on the shores of Lough Gill did not have many of the student facilities that are part of the normal college experience, like the various clubs, societies, sporting activities and all of the rest that go with college life. Indeed, a merger with NUIG would not provide those either because NUIG is in Galway. Even if St. Angela's was to become a satellite of NUIG in Sligo, thus undermining the capability of the technological university as I outlined already, it still would not have those things, whereas a merger with Sligo Institute of Technology would support the technological university application, which is almost ready to be made and which the Government is anxious to receive and support. It all makes better sense.

As I said, St. Angela's College has a very strong reputation in programmes, which are professionally accredited by the Nursing and Midwifery Board of Ireland and the Teaching Council and its home economics school is world renowned. There is potential to grow a large research-led school of education in a technological university, thus providing excellent progression routes to teacher education for all students in the technological university and across the region. There is the potential to develop a research-led school of nursing, as I said, because there are small schools in GMIT and LYIT which, along with St. Angela's, can provide the critical mass that we yearn for, again, under some of the recommendations of the Hunt and Salzburg reports. While we in the north west are anxious that the technological university application will not be delayed, given that it is just about ready, we very much hope the merger of St. Angela's College with Sligo Institute of Technology will be acknowledged by Government and the Department as something that makes perfect sense economically and educationally and is in line with other

core programmes in the programme for Government, such as Ireland 2040 and so on. I ask that the Minister and Minister of State facilitate a meeting over the next fortnight in order that we can discuss and progress these matters further.

Deputy Johnny Guirke: I want to bring to the attention of the Minister a number of things I came across in the past couple of months that he could, perhaps, take on board. I am the father of two children who attend third level education. I know from experience what it takes for people to put their children through education. Many families across the country struggled before the Covid-19 virus arrived to put their children through college, particularly as there are bills for accommodation, food, travel, expenses and college fees. All of these impose a major burden on stressed-out parents and guardians. Students have had to endure more stress and anxiety during Covid times than in normal college years, with having to attend college classes online instead of in person. For some, that will be okay because they may have good broadband access. In rural Ireland, however, I am afraid that the pandemic hit us before the national broadband plan was commenced. I have spoken to many students who fear that they are falling behind in their classes due to not having adequate Internet services available to them. They have expressed their fears of not having any or having bad Internet coverage in their areas, which leaves them with two options, namely, to stay at home and miss classes or break restrictions by travelling to another home or premises so they can attend college online.

Another problem for students was identified by Deputy Conway-Walsh. I refer to the fact that students paid for accommodation but could not use it because restrictions did not allow them to travel or stay on campus. This led to students seeking refunds which were not given. As a result, many families were left out of pocket. Some students had to pay for accommodation in the hope that college courses would return to campus but, unfortunately, this did not happen, which meant they were also left out of pocket. Students also had to pay full fees for courses. In some cases, this cost over €3,000. There were no reductions in costs even though courses have now moved online. A voucher of €250 will be issued to students soon – some have already received it – to help with the upheaval they are going through. This does not go anywhere near meeting the full cost involved in paying for college.

Some students are worried that if they fail exams they may incur repeat fees, which can be very costly. It is to be hoped these fees can be waived in order to relieve any undue stress.

Many families have had one or both parents laid off work, leaving 400,000 people in receipt of the pandemic unemployment payment. This has caused undue stress for families with mounting debts. The loss of work for some of these families will not just affect their children who are attending college this year; it will have a major knock-on effect over the next few years as many families will struggle.

I hope the Government will take this into account and allow for additional grants and supports for struggling families over the coming years which will allow their children to be in a position to be able to attend college. A student explained to me that she has struggled through college this year and feels she has fallen further and further behind because online learning is not the same as being in a classroom. When one is in a classroom and does not understand something, one can ask a professor a question and he or she can help. If that is not good enough, a fellow classmate can be asked a question and help a student who feels he or she is falling behind.

Students are missing out on interaction in classes. Colleges assist our children with social

and practical skills and life outside of the family or community bubble we live in. Another student told me that he feels like dropping out of his course in his very first year of college because he does not know anyone in his class. He went on to say that he feels lonely and isolated and does not have anyone to ask for help because he is the first of his family to attend college.

Other students have said that online teaching leads to classes overlapping, meaning that when a class running from noon to 2 p.m. runs over they are then late for a class at 2 p.m. This is a problem that is not just happening in third level; I am afraid it is happening across all levels of education.

A student told me he feels like he is teaching himself. This is on top of studying at home in a busy household where siblings play, unaware of the stresses their older brother is going through. He explained how he is starting to feel the pressure on his shoulders because he cannot travel to college for practical work, and is unable to work part-time due to the restrictions and is not entitled to the pandemic unemployment or any other payment. We need to put a mental health strategy in place to help students cope with online classes and studying. We need to make sure that our children come out of this pandemic smiling and happy.

Deputy Gary Gannon: I thank the Minister and welcome the opportunity to interact with him today. I have said several times that although the leaving certificate examination is important and that all of those facing State examinations deserve clarity, one set of examinations should not dominate and overshadow all other aspects of education. Many students in further and higher education are facing similar difficulties relating to the digital divide, appropriate study spaces and well-being issues as they endure one of the hardest academic years in our history. It is also worth remembering that for many students of the class of 2020, the pandemic marked the end of their secondary school education. The experience of the classes of 2020 and 2021 is stark and different from that of any other cohort.

I am very conscious that at this point there would be a drop off in all university settings of students in first year who leave education for a variety of reasons. Can the Department capture those data in that regard? It would be interesting in terms of discovering what has been their experience in that regard.

A matter I will discuss further with the Minister is the potential of a no-detriment policy. I am very conscious of students in receipt of SUSI grants who, like everybody else, have four years of free education. This particular year is different from any other. Therefore, we might explore the idea of having a no-detriment policy in the future. I am happy to take this matter up with the Minister at a later date.

Any clarity and assurance the Minister can give to students would make a big difference. They need more information on what the next academic year will look like so that students and parents know whether to invest in accommodation. I understand how difficult that would be. If we knew the virus would be at a particular level meaning the colleges would not be able to go back, students would know what September would look like when they are budgeting for the rest of the year.

While acknowledging the autonomy of higher education institutions, some uniformity, consistency and consensus across the sector with regard to services, exam policies and what is deemed essential work on campus would be greatly welcomed at this time. I wish to inquire into the additional support for students this year, particularly mature students, students with chil-

dren, students who are caring for a loved one and students from non-traditional backgrounds. They should be permitted to repeat modules or examinations without financial penalties.

I am also very conscious of the very welcome €250 the Minister has given to students for their educational needs this year. One particular cohort will not benefit from that, namely, foundation course and access students. I was on a call with the Minister when he discussed college for early years students recently. It was a fantastic engagement. We cannot leave this cohort behind in the €250 payment for education. We need to be creative in how we provide that payment.

I greatly welcome the announcement of the eduroam network, but this process needs to be accelerated to address digital divides. For example, students in study spaces at home or those in rural areas need access to this network for online and blended learning. I submitted a parliamentary question to the Minister regarding whether the extended network could support secondary school students and those in further and higher education. My work in higher education access has shown me the great willingness and need for further and higher level institutions to support those at second level so that they might transition to further or higher education. We have spoken previously about the digital divide. I would have raised it earlier with the Minister for Education if the opportunity had presented. The work being done across the university sector on pathways to third level overlaps with the issue of confronting that digital divide, albeit some of the voices are probably more realistic than others in terms of access to broadband. Progress in this regard would be hugely welcome. The Minister made reference to the fact that such a task would require significant investment in identity management and other improvements. I ask that he work with the Department of Education and the Minister, Deputy Foley, as the issue does not separate itself from third level students.

I welcome the review of the SUSI payment and I hope it will be swift and will account for inflation. I urge the Minister to look, in particular, at the issue of the binary labelling of students as either dependent or independent and the restrictions on changing that label. It is common for students to enter higher education as dependent students but their circumstances may change, sometimes dramatically. In some instances, students may become financially dependent over time. I have spoken to people who experienced both and were unable to access the financial support of SUSI as dependent students. They were required to submit financial information from parents or guardians with whom they no longer had a relationship. This is an issue every year in terms of access to the university sector. I wanted to highlight it in the limited time available and would welcome an opportunity to discuss it with the Minister at the next available opportunity.

I have raised a lot of points and would be grateful for whatever answers he can give.

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank the Deputy. I will do my best to get through as many of his questions as possible. I could not agree more with his point about well-being and that the leaving certificate class of 2020 and the first-year college class of 2021 are like no other in terms of all they have been through. I said in my opening statement that I am establishing a new group to monitor well-being and I have asked the USI to chair that group. We will work out further details of this tomorrow. While I am satisfied that we have done a lot to try to help students this year in terms of mental health supports, student assistance and the once-off €250 payment, we cannot do enough. We must continue to listen to the voice of the student and I certainly will feed that into our consideration.

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On the dropout rate, I have asked the same question of the HEA. I hope to be able to capture those data and will be more than happy to share the information with the Deputy in writing. I am told that there has not been a significant change so far, from what the authority has seen. I would like to see that in writing, get the data and share them with the Deputy.

In terms of SUSI and the no detriment policy, USI called on me last week to make sure, in the first instance, that we restore the measures that were in place in March. We will do that. Second, although I cannot give a guarantee today on the floor of the House, we are going to look at how we can show that type of flexibility around SUSI. Getting students through this period alive and well mentally and physically has to be our first priority in keeping them connected with education. I certainly will look at what the Deputy referenced regarding the €250 payment and access to university courses and foundation courses.

As to what the next academic year will look like, I hope it will be a lot different from this year. However, to be clear, under levels 3, 4 and 5, the bulk of learning remains online. We hope the vaccines roll-out will change the risk profiles of the options we have available. We need the meetings every Friday with the stakeholders to continue to review the situation.

Deputy James Lawless: I am sharing time with Deputy Pádraig O’Sullivan.

We had a similar debate to this in March last year. It seems incredible that the pandemic has been with us for almost a year. The previous debate took place during the initial lockdown when the Dáil was on a similarly reduced footing, with fewer Deputies in attendance, etc. On that occasion, there was a discussion on the impacts of the Covid crisis on education, full stop, because, at that time, there was no Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science. I recall that debate because the Leas-Cheann Comhairle, Deputy Connolly, and I were the only two speakers to raise issues relating to higher education and third level. It was probably a question of timing because the focus then, as it is today, was on the leaving certificate examination. It is significant in itself that we now have a separate debate, a separate Ministry and a separate Department, none of which we had this time last year. That is one of the credits and pluses that have come out of the formation of the new Government. As the Minister knows, I advocated strongly for his Department to be created. It is really positive for the third level, research institutions and the further education sector that it is now established and that we have this opportunity to discuss issues that pertain to them.

Some of the feedback I have had in recent months relates to one of the issues I raised almost a year ago regarding the impact of the Covid crisis. Researchers were very concerned about projects being put on hold, grant funding being time-blocked and their ability to draw it down after the pandemic. If the funding expired, how would they resume their research? I have to credit the Minister and his Department for the fact that the HEA, Science Foundation Ireland and others have stepped up to the plate and given many of those projects the ancillary funding to allow them to continue and to get them over the line. That was a real worry a year ago. I must conclude that this is, in some regard, down to the existence of the Department and its stewardship. That is really positive and we must acknowledge it. This is not to say that the sector is without its own financial challenges. In fact, those challenges remain huge and include the loss of international students, accommodation revenue and all the other ancillary revenues. The funding issues that were identified in the Cassells report still prevail and have only been exacerbated by the pandemic. There is some good news for researchers and the new Department is really helpful in that regard, but those systematic, fundamental issues around funding of the sector still exist.

I have two questions for the Minister. As I said, this is a debate specifically on issues relating to third level. I do not plan to go into the leaving certificate issue again, even though some speakers have done so. However, I will ask one question that joins the two dots in terms of second level education and higher education. We heard the Minister for Education speak earlier about the plans being made for the leaving certificate examination. I am a supporter of the traditional examination for reasons I outlined during that debate. I asked her and I am now asking the Minister, Deputy Harris, whether a commitment will be given, if a situation arises where the traditional examination does not take place this year and a predicted grades process or some other solution is found, that any physical sitting that takes place as an alternative or follow-on, as happened last year, will be done in such a way that there will be time for admissions to flow from it. I am asking that we ensure students are not sitting the examination in November to try to get a place in college for September or October. If that path is followed, the alternative physical examinations should take place on time, maybe in August. My view is that we should not take that path but, if we have to, the timing is something we should consider.

My second question is on a broader point but, again, it is related to the current situation. It concerns the curriculum at third level. I recall as a student in Trinity College that we had many debates in the students union about the idea of a broad curriculum whereby rather than people going in to do a course in physiotherapy, computer science or graphic design, for example, students would start off in a very broad first year, perhaps studying a collection of humanities, sciences and commerce courses. It would be a very broad curriculum in first year, which could then be refined in second year into more specific subjects and more structured courses. That would be useful in normal times because it would allow students who are not quite sure of where to put their first steps to explore wider subject choices and options. It would be particularly useful at this time, in a situation where we may have issues coming out of the leaving certificate process with students crossing the bridge from second to third level. It may be something to look at. I do not know if it is practical or possible coming into the new academic year but it certainly could be part of the discussion if we are again in a situation where there is pressure on places and admissions. That kind of refinement could take place going from first to second year in college rather than from leaving certificate into third level. I will stop there to allow the Minister to respond to those points and questions.

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank the Deputy for his work in advocating the establishment of my Department. I acknowledge the significant work he put into the policy development side of it. I hope we are beginning to see the merits and benefits of the Department. I thank him also for his kind words in regard to the researchers and the work my Department and the HEA are doing in that regard. When we get to the review of the national development plan and, indeed, when we are talking about every capital plan in this country, we need to realise that capital projects are not just about concrete; they are about human capital. I know the Deputy knows that and I look forward to working with him to try to win that argument across the various debates.

In regard to the leaving certificate examination, the Minister for Education has very kindly invited representatives from my Department to sit on the advisory group she has established. My Department is working hand in glove with her officials to try to tease out some of the issues. I very much share her ambition to hold the traditional leaving certificate examination this year. I look forward to her being able to put more details in that regard into the public domain shortly. I take the Deputy's point about the need for an earlier physical sitting should a contingency plan be put in place.

Finally, we can have a proper discussion on this at a later debate but on the whole issue of

CAO reform and broader choices, I had a very good meeting with guidance counsellors last week. This is one of the exciting projects I want my Department to drive. We are narrowing the choices of young people in this country far too early and narrowing the conversation they are having. I would be delighted to work with the Deputy on that issue.

Deputy Pádraig O’Sullivan: I welcome the Minister and the Minister of State to the House. I will first address some topics for discussion to the Minister. Many third level students have not received an authentic college experience. That is to be expected given the pandemic we are experiencing and the spiralling numbers of transmissions, particularly in the past few months. That said, will the Minister comment on the well-being of our third level student population? The demand for additional mental health supports is well-documented in newspaper articles or studies undertaken at third level and the strain placed on existing services is obvious. It is estimated that the demand for mental health supports have more than doubled during the pandemic. Isolation and online learning have taken their toll in that respect but I understand why this is necessary. That said, can the Minister detail what additional supports have been made available for third level institutions throughout the pandemic in terms of additional counsellors, mental health supports, etc.?

The Minister mentioned earlier that the 50808 helpline, a HSE 24-7 service, is available for people suffering with mental health difficulties. Are other additional resources allocated to third level institutions?

My second question leads on from the first. I suppose the Minister might say I am being a little optimistic but I will ask all the same. It relates to return to on-campus activities in a staged manner, like what we heard today from the Minister for Education and the Minister of State with responsibility for special education. Is any section in the Department drawing up a plan or blueprint for the return to campuses throughout the country by the end of this academic year or to prepare for September?

My third question relates to dropouts numbers from college courses. Does the Minister have any details about whether this might suggest that the impact of Covid-19 or being off campus has led to an increase in the number of students dropping out from college?

My fourth question is for the Minister of State, Deputy Niall Collins. Earlier he referred to apprenticeships and upskilling, especially as we try to recover after Covid-19 in terms of strengthening and diversifying our economy. I welcome the Government’s apprenticeship initiative and its extension to the summer of 2021 to provide for allowances for employers in taking on apprentices. That said, does he have any detail regarding how many apprentices have been taken on in 2020 and how this compares with previous years? Has there been an increase or decrease in that regard? I wish to emphasise the need for investment and prioritisation of apprenticeships in the leisure, food and hospitality sector post Covid-19. As we all know in this Chamber, these sectors of the economy have been worst hit and impacted. It would hearten many in those industries to hear what the Government’s intentions are in that regard.

Deputy Simon Harris: My thanks to the Deputy. I assure him that I am following up on the point he made about bursaries in Cork in this significant year for Cork.

The Deputy asked about well-being. In addition to the helpline referenced by him, we have increased mental health funding by €3 million. I appreciate his support in that regard. We have also doubled the student assistance fund. There is usually €8 million in that fund and now there

is €16 million. Sometimes well-being can be tied to economic well-being. As I said earlier in my opening statement, I am now establishing a group specifically to look at the well-being of students and to continue to monitor that. Rather than it being chaired by a departmental official, I want it to be chaired by students and the USI. That is important.

The Deputy referred to the return to campus. We have published a framework for what can be done at each of the levels of the plan to try to provide as much certainty as possible. We meet every Friday at 11 a.m. with our stakeholders, including students, university leaders, college leaders and those from the further education and training sectors. The first priority is to try to resume things that cannot be done online, including practicals, apprenticeship and supports for vulnerable learners. I hope we will be in a rather different academic year by the new academic year.

The Deputy also asked about dropouts. The HEA tells me that it has not seen a significant increase in dropouts. The number is similar to last year. The authority is due to provide me with a report which I would be happy to share with the Deputy.

Deputy Niall Collins: The Deputy asked about the numbers who took up the various apprenticeships. I do not have that detail to hand at the moment. Suffice to say, during 2020 there was naturally a drop-off due to Covid-19 and the impact of the pandemic in terms of the number of people who took up apprenticeships and applied for apprenticeships. That was part of the reason we introduced the incentivisation scheme to which I alluded in my earlier remarks. I will respond to the Deputy and we will get him an exact breakdown on the numbers who entered each of the various apprenticeships across the range of apprenticeships during 2020 *vis-à-vis* 2019.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: Le bliain anuas, is minic go raibh mic léinn ó Ollscoil na hÉireann, Gaillimh, agus Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology, GMIT, i dteagmháil liom agus iad trína chéile mar gheall ar bhrú airgid, ar fhadhbanna lóistín agus ar an mbrú meabhairshláinte atá orthu de bharr na paindéime seo. Tá a fhios againn ar fad gur buille uafásach a bhí sa phaindéim seo orainn ar fad ach ba bhuille ar leith í ar dhaoine óga. Chaill an t-uafás acu a gcuid phost agus, ar ndóigh, stop a saoil shóisialta. The past year has been difficult for all of us but it has most certainly been a difficult year for young people. I have lost count of the number of students from NUI Galway and Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology who have been in contact with me about the extraordinary pressure they are under. They have told me of the real economic hardship they face and of the real impact it has had on their mental health. Many have lost their jobs as a result of the pandemic and the social life that comes with going on to third level education is non-existent. The NUI Galway Students' Union has told me the feeling of isolation has become a major problem for many students. Of course, that is the antithesis of the experience of most of us at university.

I have raised with the Minister previously the issue of the repeat fee at NUI Galway. It still has not been rectified. In the middle of a pandemic when youth unemployment is at a height of 19.4%, students are being asked to cough up €295 for an examination that is free almost everywhere else. That is a considerable amount for students and it is not the kind of disposable income that most of them have. I call on the Minister to intervene urgently in this matter now, before we are in a crisis for so many students again.

This is not the only disadvantage facing students of NUI Galway. While other universities have made repeat examinations free, they have also extended time for deferrals and made it

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possible for students to resit examinations even if they have already passed. If a student needs a higher grade, the student can resit for free. This is the case in some universities but not others. The length of examination time has also been increased in some colleges but not others. There should be a unified approach. No one should be academically disadvantaged during this pandemic. When students graduate and join the workforce, they should be on a level playing field. It is unfair that policies at some universities are more favourable while other universities are not made to follow suit. I urge the Minister to consider this and what action may be taken.

Of course the cost of accommodation is bad and crippling in Galway city at the best of times. However, during the pandemic this has been exacerbated. One student wrote to me and said that for the summers between college she worked two jobs and saved 80% plus of the money she earned each summer to pay for going through college. She was also in receipt of the SUSI grant. Each time the college year ended she was in debt as the cost of accommodation crippled her year on year. There are plenty of other students in the same circumstances. Of course in Galway, there is an added stress on students since private providers of student accommodation have not returned money that they have been paid, amounting to up to €5,500 for unused accommodation. Again, we need action on this urgently.

I received another shocking account from a student nurse who was not being paid as a student nurse. She was unable to work a part-time job. Any money she received from SUSI, which was not much, went straight on rent. Then, when the pandemic hit, she had increased difficulty finding accommodation as people were concerned, naturally, about sharing with a student nurse. She ended up relying on the hardship fund. That is no solution when it comes to students in the private rented sector. A student hardship fund should not be going directly to landlords or on repeat examinations and college fees. We have another issue relating to the €224 levy being paid. Part of it is supposed to be going toward on-site services. It has to be paid. Will the Minister advise on whether he intends to meet private accommodation providers about refunding up to €5,500 to students? What is his view on whether some universities have more lenient policies regarding examinations while others do not? Will he contact NUI Galway regarding the €295 repeat fee?

Deputy Simon Harris: I know we are almost out of time. I will write to the Deputy. The short answer is that I will contact NUI Galway. Autonomy cannot be used as a fig leaf for inflexibility. I take the point she makes. In the interest of time, I will write back to her on the remaining matters.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I am sharing time with Deputy Paul Murphy. I will take 50%. I will comment on the leaving certificate briefly. It was discussed earlier. There is no way the Government can guarantee the leaving certificate can happen in June. At the leaders' briefing, we asked Dr. Holohan whether the restrictions would be lifted by March. He said he could not possibly tell us and that he had no idea.

5 o'clock

There is therefore no way the Minister can remove the stress and uncertainty from students other than by saying they will not be forced to sit the exam. Where the Minister comes in, it seems to me, is offering an alternative that would allow open access for everybody to higher level and third level education. He should start now by establishing where the current cohort of leaving certificate students want to go. He should find out where they want to go and see how many places we have and then work out how many additional places would be needed to ac-

commodate them in the courses of their choice. That is what we should do. That would remove the stress, allow everyone to advance and provide certainty. By the way, in some countries they do that as a matter of course. They just let people go to higher education, and if they cannot manage the course, they drop out of it.

Fees of any description are unconscionable at the moment, particularly when we need more nurses, student nurses, doctors and engineers at a whole range of levels. When the ability of families and students to earn income is greatly diminished, and when the quality of the education experience is greatly diminished, how can the Minister possibly justify fees? We should remove all fees.

Lastly, I wish to ask the Minister about the student nurses. I think 6,000 healthcare workers have been out since Christmas. Student nurses will now once again be working just as they did all last year and they are offered the insulting amount of €100. This is at the same time as the Secretary General of the Department of Health gets a €90,000 pay increase to make an unbelievable salary of €290,000. I want the Minister to answer this. One of the arguments he has used is that one can have either an apprentice programme that is paid or a degree but one cannot have both. Student nurses have informed me that student paramedics are getting €28,000 a year for a degree course as we speak. How come student nurses cannot get that? In construction engineering in the University of Limerick one is paid €12 an hour for doing frankly less dangerous work than student nurses are doing. How come it can happen there? One can have a degree and quality education and get paid, and now is the time to give that to the student nurses.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Tens of thousands of young people are at home right now and looking to go to further education in September. They are anxious as to how places will be allocated and anxious as to whether they will be able to get a place. Last year, after a massive campaign by school students, the Government promised extra places to remove some of the pressure on students applying through the CAO system. This year we face a similar crisis, but now the Government has plenty of advance notice and time to invest in a serious expansion of third level to let all sixth year students know there are places for them and to help to remove the stress they are going through. It is absolutely clear the leaving certificate cannot go ahead as normal this year. It would be not only unsafe but also deeply unfair on the students. It would pile massive stresses onto people already struggling to cope. This is a year group that has faced massive disruption to both their two years of leaving certificate study: studying from home, coping with isolation, the stresses of the pandemic and, in some cases, students themselves getting the virus and missing classes. Yet the Government seems to want to put the institution of the leaving certificate before the mental and physical health of the students. Last year the compulsory leaving certificate was cancelled and students were given a choice between predicted grades and sitting exams. This year students are demanding exactly the same. Students are getting organised and speaking out on social media, and that self-organisation of students is how they will win.

The Government needs to take action now and accept that the leaving certificate cannot go ahead as normal. The students are calling for a choice between predicted grades and exams which are updated to take account of the circumstances. It is time the Government listened to the students. It is their future, it is their choice. Even before this pandemic, the leaving certificate was a horrendous way to treat young people, creating huge mental health pressures and incorporating a deep inequality. It follows an outdated model of rote learning rather than encouraging critical, independent thought. It should be abolished and instead we should invest in third level education in order that everybody who wants to access it can do so. The Minister's Department has a crucial role to play in addressing this. The more college education is

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expanded, the closer we are to getting rid of the rat race of too many applicants chasing after too few places and the massive stresses that results in. Will the Minister invest now to ensure that come September there are enough places available for students?

Deputy Simon Harris: I always appreciate people helping to advocate investment in higher education, and yes, I will. Last year saw the largest ever increase in the number of higher education places in our country. Many Deputies opposite were rightly concerned, as was I, that that would be a one-year-only investment. We have managed to ensure that all the extra places we put into the third level system last year will be available again this year, with 2,000 additional places on top of that. We are expanding and growing the higher education sector at a rate at which we have never done before. Policy on the leaving certificate does, obviously, reside with the Minister for Education, but Deputy Murphy is right that my Department's role is to make sure we have as many places available for people as possible.

Deputy John Lahart: I wish the Ceann Comhairle and his staff a belated happy new year. I welcome the Minister and the Minister of State, Deputy Collins.

In July 2019 I attended a speech delivered by the Taoiseach, Deputy Micheál Martin, who was then leader of the Opposition, in Dublin to the heads of universities and colleges in Ireland. He reflected on the theme of innovation and research in education in Ireland and its political roots in the ascent of Seán Lemass to the position of Taoiseach. During that morning he outlined his vision for higher education, research and innovation in Ireland and committed to establishing the first dedicated Cabinet position and separate Department of Government for higher education, research and innovation should he become Taoiseach. The speech was very well received on the day and, true to his word, on election as Taoiseach, Deputy Martin established for the first time in Ireland a Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science with a full Cabinet Minister and Minister of State. Deputy Harris is that Minister, and my able colleague from Limerick, Deputy Niall Collins, is Minister of State. Given the emphasis the Taoiseach placed on science, education and research, and given the critical importance he emphasises and places on this area of Government, it cannot have been easy when Cabinet allocations dictated that political oversight and leadership of that Department would have to be ceded to a member of a rival party. However, the overriding importance of the establishment of this Department rightly trumped any political partisanship.

Fianna Fáil is rightly proud of its pioneering role in education in Ireland. It is just one of the many areas of policy where we have left a positive, groundbreaking and enduring footprint. The establishment of a new education Department dedicated to higher education, research, innovation and science is a recognition of the vital work that is required to ensure that everyone, regardless of background, has a chance to achieve his or her potential beyond schooling and will be equipped to do so. It is also a recognition that without innovation and research, Ireland will fall behind in the world, lose its most talented and fail to harness the practical and intellectual genius of our people. With this Department Ireland can continue to be a world leader, to go boldly into new exciting areas of discovery and knowledge and to harness all our people's talents. The Taoiseach appointed Deputy Harris as Minister with responsibility for higher education. None of my colleagues serving with the Minister at Cabinet cross the boundary into his domain as Minister of this Department. He is a very bright politician and I believe he will do very well here. An emerging generation is depending on him for their very futures. He is also held in high public esteem for his stewardship of the health portfolio during the most challenging of times. Another occasion might allow for a robust interrogation of his tenure of that Department, but right now that is neither desirable nor necessary. No doubt leaving the Depart-

ment of Health was a wrench for him. However, for now the Department of Health has been entrusted to my party colleague, Deputy Donnelly. He is just six months into his first Cabinet position. While Deputy Harris, as Minister for Health, faced the enormous challenges of the onset of Covid-19, the Government was supported by all parties. Notwithstanding reservations around some communications, punches were pulled, people swallowed hard at times and lips were bitten. Why? Because the situation required it and the national interest demanded it. The challenges facing the Minister, Deputy Donnelly, are enormous. An unparalleled surge in the virus; an angry, frustrated, anxious, fearful and restless public is holding its breath for a vaccine; a baying Opposition; and the unprecedented logistical and practical challenge of ensuring the successful roll-out of that vaccine.

No Minister is perfect. Each has idiosyncrasies but once again the times require that Cabinet Government, in particular, stands united, acts collectively and supports one another. The national interest requires no more on this occasion than it did last year.

As the Minister is aware, this Government arrangement was not my first choice but it was the choice of the majority of my colleagues and for that reason I support the Minister in the challenges that he faces. He has the task of preparing a path for those students who have been stranded remotely for a year, missing out on much of the magical third and fourth level educational life.

Another challenge is to expand and promote innovation in the next chapter of apprenticeships in ensuring that we can deliver new homes and a green revolution, among other goals.

In returning to my original theme of the period of progressive policy innovation, I know that the Minister will agree that the period which was ushered in by Seán Lemass remains unmatched to this day. The bar was set high but we and all associated with this Government must aspire to surpass it. I support the Minister and his Minister of State in this Government as do all of my party colleagues. We want success for him in his position as Minister and our colleague, the Minister for Health, Deputy Donnelly, deserves no less.

When we see Covid-19 in our rear view mirror, a period of sustained, pent-up, dynamic and frenetic activity awaits this country, if we are ready to meet it. The challenges are considerable. This is where the Minister's leadership is necessary. If a fair wind blows against the virus and behind the vaccine in the immediate future, could third level students envisage any return this year to live college on-campus tuition? Can he inform the Dáil whether or not there has been an adverse impact to date on existing apprenticeship programmes? How are plans proceeding for the creative and innovative expansion of those programmes and when can students at second level begin to take advantage of them? Where and in what direction does the Minister see new apprenticeship programmes being oriented? How does the Minister propose to increase the awfully poor rate of participation by women in our programmes and what accounts for that lack of participation in the Minister's view? When will we be in a position to see dramatic increases in participation rates and apprenticeship offerings?

We talk so much these days about the cloud and I am proud to say that the cloud is in Tallaght and when Covid-19 is behind us the Minister is warmly invited to come out and see it at first-hand. Amazon Web Services, AWS, has developed amazing synergy with the local authority and the local hospital so that a child in Tallaght can now attend primary school, secondary school, attend Technological University Dublin, undertake a bespoke course connected and designed in conjunction with AWS and get a job right on his or her doorstep. The Minister

might expand either in writing or down the road on what kind of other bespoke opportunities may be there.

The private sector has traditionally always been asked to lead on apprenticeships. During the crash, however, I often saw the potential of local authorities and particular Government Departments or semi-State agencies being able to offer to lead in this area. We can look at local authorities, for example, in librarianship, and there are State agencies like Teagasc and Coillte which should also bear responsibility for leading and innovating in that.

As to international experience, I am aware that different economies make different demands on their people but in Denmark up to 11% of the work force has come through apprenticeships. In the UK a commission was established, the objective and goal of which was that by the time it had completed its work every parent might consider the idea of an apprenticeship for their child, which might not necessarily be followed through on. Some 45% of apprentices in Denmark are women. One of the things that I was really excited about was that one could embark upon an apprenticeship at more or less any age of one's life, up to the age of 60. What are the Minister's ideas on this?

I would love to be Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science. He has the opportunity to ride the wave of a post Covid-19 environment where there will be so much pent-up excitement, energy and dynamism just waiting to take off. It is an opportunity to set a blistering post Covid-19 pace that carries everyone along with it and leaves no one behind. I thank the Ceann Comhairle.

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank Deputy Lahart. I read the speech the Taoiseach gave to the Irish Universities Association, IUA. We have joked about how it must be peculiar for a Fine Gael Minister to have read and now praised a then Leader of the Opposition's speech, but it is a very fine speech. While Deputy Lahart rightly refers to the tremendously positive contribution that the late Seán Lemass made to this country, what most struck me from that speech was the contribution of Paddy Hillery. The Taoiseach referred in that speech to not enough having been spoken about the positive contribution that Paddy Hillery made during his period as Minister for Education because he indeed went on to do so many other wonderful things, including serving as our President. The Taoiseach and I have agreed in conversations that in many ways that speech is a manifesto for all that we collectively want to achieve. We have much to do in this Department and I will follow up on all of the Deputy's ideas and respond to him in writing.

I am also very conscious that I am a Member of a Cabinet and have a responsibility, as does every Cabinet Member, to contribute constructively to our national response to Covid-19. I am also an elected representative for the people of Wicklow and also have a responsibility to raise their concerns at my parliamentary party meetings. We have much to do. We have a strong Government with a strong working majority and programme and I am excited about what the future has to offer.

Deputy Claire Kerrane: Gabhaim buíochas leis an gCeann Comhairle. I am delighted to contribute to these statements. I am very conscious, as I do so, of the many young people right across the State who have missed out on so much both last year and this year. I was lucky enough to go to college. I attended NUI Galway, thanks to many sacrifices made by my parents. The experience that I had is the experience that has been missed both last year and this year by so many students and I am very conscious of that as we discuss this issue.

I begin by raising concerns about the private accommodation providers. I am aware that this has been raised at length not just today but previously. I find it a great shame that there are private accommodation providers out there behaving in this way. I am dealing with one such provider in Galway and also with a family which has spent more than €5,000 for that accommodation place for their son. It is very regrettable that these private accommodation providers could not have stepped up and allowed a refund or come to some arrangement with parents. We all know that so many parents out there sacrifice so much. Some have to get loans and go to their local credit union but they always, in as much as is possible, find a way to secure that place and accommodation for their son and daughter. Many students will also work part-time to try to help along the way. While I know that when it comes to private accommodation providers it is more difficult for the Minister to intervene in the same way as he might be able to with perhaps college-owned campuses, I ask, nonetheless, that he use this opportunity to call on these private accommodation providers to do the right thing.

I welcome the review that is underway of SUSI. I would really like to see some discretion exercised in the way that it makes decisions. I am referring in particular to the adjacent rule, that is the distance that someone lives from college. This is particularly important in rural areas where one might not live that far away from the college but the lack of public transport to get there creates so many added problems for students. I recall a student who contacted me. She had received a very small grant because she lived less than 45 km from the college. If she wished to be in college for 9 a.m., which is the start time, she would have to get a bus at 4.30 a.m. to get to the next town and wait two and a half hours for a connecting bus that would get her to college at 9 a.m. The college ended at 5 p.m. and she would wait an hour and 40 minutes for a bus to bring her to a town where she had to wait an hour and a half for the connecting bus. She would get back to her local village at 8.45 p.m. We must examine this when it comes to SUSI and rural areas. There must be a little discretion for these students.

I have a question for the Minister about social care students and the payment of €250. I was contacted by a number of students in Athlone Institute of Technology. They had to go back this year to do their placements, as they could not do them last year. The students are not paying college fees this year, but have returned just to do their placements. Will they be able to avail of that €250?

Finally, and I appreciate that this is not part of the Minister's brief, but many Members have welcomed the Government's announcement this afternoon regarding the provision of special education from next week. I very much welcome that and I commend parents who were the voice for their children. It was a very powerful voice, especially in the past week. It is a reminder to us all of the battle parents have from day one, a battle for assessments, appointments, SNAs and a seat on the bus. We must do a great deal more for special education in the State, and for those parents and children. They deserve it all.

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank the Deputy for her contribution. I agree with much of it. With regard to the SUSI review, she made a fair point about the extra costs that people, particularly from rural communities, have to face. There will be a chance to make submissions and have public consultation on that. I hope to have the review completed in advance of the budget so the House can make the necessary decisions.

I will check the specific point the Deputy made about social care students. One generally must be a full-time registered student. If they are full-time registered students they should qualify, but I will check and write to her on the matter.

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Deputy Matt Shanahan: I gather that higher education cost the State approximately €2 billion last year. To quote the late American Senator, Everett Dirksen: “A billion here, a billion there, and pretty soon you’re talking real money”. At a cool €2 billion, the sector costs real money and requires real and meaningful oversight and a thoughtful strategy. I appreciate that appointing a Minister for the sector is a form of recognition that something must be done about higher education.

As regards funding, it is hard to figure out where the €2 billion goes. The raw data or the dashboard that shows the flow of the money into the seven universities, whatever number of institutes of technology and technological universities there are and the various colleges does not exist. With all the agencies that fund higher education and their various funding schemes, taxpayers cannot see where the money is going. The annual accounts are usually late. The HEA appears to be actively trying to hide how much the system costs.

With respect to accountability, attempts to make the sector more accountable appear to be an absolute mess. The previous Government backed away from its legislative attempts to make universities more accountable and to give us oversight powers. The cheek of the sector to fund an elaborate marketing campaign, Save Our Spark, which got lavish and unquestioning coverage for its funding crisis, telling everyone who would listen that the sector was a financial time bomb. Then it came, cap in hand, to the Government for further support. The only time bomb I can see is the runaway expenditure in the university sector, with no effective oversight. I see the massive unchecked borrowing of our universities. The Department hardly knows the full scale of the liabilities in the supposedly independent university sector. It appears that the dozy professors have borrowings of close to €1 billion sitting on their balance sheets and the taxpayers, despite promises, are on the hook for it. Much of that runaway borrowing was for exotic property deals and student apartments, with universities often mixing it up with commercial developers.

I would love to know the financial arrangements of UCD’s operation in China. Are lecturers getting top-up salaries for doing their jobs? Who owns the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland, RCSI? It is another pertinent question. The Irish Management Institute, IMI, deal carried out by UCC, aside from the context of Brexit, appears fishy. How much do some of the buildings cost per square metre? They look like they would make Nicolae Ceausescu blush. Presumably, all of this is above board and there is nothing to see here, but much of this activity falls outside the Comptroller and Auditor General’s responsibilities. There is no public reporting and, to be honest, the annual reports gloss over the details of this stuff. I see inappropriate expenditure by our universities on palatial housing for their presidents and lavish entertainment. There are rumours of wine cellars, butlers, chefs and waiting staff. I also see huge sums spent without adhering to national and EU rules on procurement, governance failures, deficits, accounting issues, legal bills and vast cost overruns on capital projects. Accountability for funding in the sector is a myth. There is no economic evaluation or value-for-money analysis. I wonder sometimes if there is even a strategy.

We had the Hunt report in 2011 and the Cassells report in 2016, and we are awaiting the work of the European Commission. Meanwhile, the money going to the sector is rising apace. The sector appears to be adrift without a plan. That situation probably suits some, particularly our unchecked, bloated and bloviating universities. We must have high-quality data on expenditure from the Minister’s Department, and we need good comparison work on the performance of the funded institutions. We must have an economic evaluation of the funding and the Government must produce a credible vision for this sector as it gobbles up €2 billion per year,

largely unchecked and not bothered by oversight.

I have two questions for the Minister. In respect of the south-east region, the undergraduate platform costs approximately €125 million per year. With that, the region suffers a significant brain drain. Assuming we move to a south-east university model, the spend should be €223 million, an increase of almost €100 million per annum. Will he guarantee this additional €100 million per annum spend will be delivered to the south-east university to deliver educational equality for the region? Second, to deliver such educational equality to the south-east, what plans of governance oversight is he considering to regulate the university sector properly?

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank the Deputy for his questions. We were due to have an engagement this week, but I had to cancel for personal reasons. I am looking forward to having that engagement next week.

While I would not necessarily agree with all the language he used to set out his position, I take the points he made about the need for better governance structures. To take his second question first, we must overhaul governance and if he wants my Department to be able to do that, he must give us the legislative teeth we require. In March, I intend to bring the heads of a Bill to the Cabinet on a new governance Bill for the higher education sector. That will then go to the education committee for pre-legislative scrutiny. Subject to the committee doing its work, I would like to get that legislative measure passed by both Houses of the Oireachtas this year. In the legislative programme we published this week that is a key legislative measure for pre-legislative scrutiny in this session. I look forward to working with and briefing the Deputy, both as somebody who has an interest in higher education and as a member of the Committee of Public Accounts.

Quite simply, the governance structures are not fit for purpose. We must look at moving to competency-based governing authorities. We also must examine the HEA. It does very good work, but we have to consider it having the teeth it requires. The Minister of the day, whoever he or she is, needs to have the levers to pull so this House can oversee the investment. The extra investment in higher education has massively benefited many people. I believe it will transform our country. However, with extra investment there must be reform and a greater expectation of transparency and an alignment with national policies and goals.

As the Deputy knows, I want to deliver a technological university for the south-east. It is the only part of the country that does not have a university. Waterford Institute of Technology, WIT, is doing incredible work. With an investment in a university there will have to be an increase in budget and extra funding for the region. I am expecting an application from the Technological University of South East Ireland, TUSEI, consortium in April. I would very much like to see the new university being designated to commence on 1 January 2022 and, as the Deputy regularly tells me, there is a great deal of work to be done to ensure that happens, including the people of Waterford and other parts of the south-east seeing the additionality this university will bring. Rather than anyone asking what this or that county will get, the city and county of Waterford will see additional benefit in terms of investment, campus size, course range and research. I am very eager and determined that will happen if it is to be a university of the worth that we all want it to be, and that is very much the case. I look forward to engaging in the coming days with the Deputy, some of his colleagues, and some of the people from the south east he introduced me to.

Deputy Steven Matthews: I will share my time with Deputy Devlin. We will have five and

a half minutes each.

An Ceann Comhairle: Is that agreed? Agreed.

Deputy Steven Matthews: It is an extremely difficult year for students. The Minister acknowledged that in his opening contribution, as have many speakers in today's debate. There are difficulties across the entire education system for students of all ages. I acknowledge that all the staff, teachers, lecturers and support and administrative staff in both the Departments of Education and Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science are working as hard as they can to try to bring some normality and quality of learning experience to students and I thank them for their work.

I want to ask the Minister about first-year students at third level. They went through a very difficult time last year with the leaving certificate and the uncertainty surrounding it and they are mostly sitting at home in their bedrooms on Zoom meetings. They are experiencing another very difficult year in their education. They are missing out on important aspects of their first year in college - the social aspect, making new friends, sports, and on-campus activities - the parts that help students adjust to a new educational cycle. First year is often less about the subject matter that one is studying than the adjustment to a new way of learning. It is nobody's fault that these aspects are not available now, and I hope the students will make up for it over the remainder of their degree.

However, in the best of times, first year can be a difficult year for students. That is evident in the failure rates and drop-out rates. There is often a realisation that a person may have chosen the wrong subject and he or she tries to change. I am very concerned, having spoken to students and parents, that we may have a higher drop-out rate this year than previously due to Covid and the real difficulty of trying to attend lectures and complete course work in one's bedroom. I note the Minister said there has not been a higher drop-out rate, but I ask him to keep a close eye on that because it tends to happen in the period after Christmas between January and April.

There are difficulties too for second-year, third-year and final-year students around project work, group work and placements. I am concerned that there has not been enough direct communications with students. The Minister can correct me if I am wrong, but from talking to students I get the feeling that a lot of them feel isolated. They feel they are on their own and they are the only ones having this difficulty when we know from the number of emails and contact we get that it is across the board. Many students are struggling and if they knew how many others were involved they would know that we are all in this together. I ask the Minister if he, the Minister, Deputy Foley, and the Minister of State, Deputy Niall Collins, would communicate directly with students across the country to say to them that we know how difficult this is for them. We realise that they are under stress and have to work in ways that are not ideal. We can tell them that they are not alone. We should acknowledge that they need help and support and that we will provide it for anyone that needs it. We must assure them that a lenient and understanding approach will be taken to their exams or assessment, in whatever form they take place, given the difficulties they have encountered this year. These students have worked hard to get where they are and we need to make every effort to keep them in the education system. We do not want to let them drop out or to lose the connection with them. We must ensure they stay in the system and that when things return to normal it can offer them all the aspects they missed out on over the past 12 months.

My second question is probably for the Minister of State. It is about the apprenticeship op-

portunities for the highly ambitious and necessary retrofitting of our housing stock. We have a target in the programme for Government to retrofit 500,000 houses. This will bring thousands of job opportunities for long-term, decent, well-paid jobs in many trades. I refer to insulating our houses, making them airtight, improving ventilation, fitting heat exchangers, getting rid of the draughty, damp homes we have around the country, and creating a better quality of life and comfort as well as improvements to health, especially respiratory health. People's quality of life and comfort really improves when they have an energy-insulated house. There are opportunities to fit heat pumps and smart technologies to manage how we heat our homes, cut fuel bills and reduce harmful emissions, and in doing so we will also improve external air quality. We have seen poor air quality across Dublin in recent weeks.

The installation of solar photovoltaic systems and battery banks will allow us to produce our own electricity. A public consultation was launched today by the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications on the fact that people will have the opportunity now to sell back into the grid. Microgeneration communities and farmers can create their own electricity, which can be fed back into the smart grid and they can earn money for it. There is also an opportunity with electric vehicles, EVs, as we roll out a fleet of electric vehicles. They can work in two ways. They can be charged from solar power or there is technology to allow them to feed back into the grid. That is how our future housing stock will be built and we need to ensure that we have the skilled workforce to meet the challenge to change 500,000 homes in Ireland to this standard but also to be able to build the 30,000 homes a year that we need to build. Could the Minister of State outline his ambition to create apprenticeships and training courses and how to encourage the take-up of these opportunities, in addition to how that should include mature apprenticeships and upskilling across all employment sectors?

An Ceann Comhairle: If it is okay, we will hear from Deputy Devlin and then the Ministers can respond at the end.

Deputy Cormac Devlin: I thank the Ministers for their attendance. I have questions for both of them. I welcome the opportunity to discuss the impact the pandemic has had on the higher education sector. As we have heard both in this session and in the earlier session, Covid has had a devastating impact on the education sector as a whole. Lectures and tutorials have gone online. Events and sports events have been cancelled and students and staff have had to work from home. I had a conversation recently with a group of third level students who were envious of the second level students in the latter half of 2020 because they were in school. This has had a great impact on the well-being of students and academic staff alike. That must be recognised. While restrictions are justified, I look forward to everyone being able to return to some degree of normality as soon as possible, as I am sure my colleagues do as well. In the meantime, the Government must continue to support students and the higher education sector. One positive initiative in budget 2021 was the Covid-19 once-off emergency grant for students. Could the Minister provide an update on the progress of the roll-out of that?

SUSI has a key role to play in grants. I ask the Minister to take any necessary steps to ensure more flexibility is provided to that organisation. Concerns have been raised with Deputies about SUSI and Springboard over the summer. I tabled parliamentary questions to him in that regard. I hope that these issues are resolved and that the system will run smoothly from next September.

Turning to the class of 2021, as I mentioned in the earlier session with the Minister for Education, this year's leaving certificate students have been disproportionately impacted by Co-

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vid-19. Not only did they miss three months in their fifth year, but they missed at least a month this year, owing to the restrictions. I hope the situation will be such that they can be offered the opportunity to sit the leaving certificate. However, some would prefer the option of predicted grades. The Minister has a key role in easing their anxiety in his comments and statements. Third level institutions could ease the pressure on Central Applications Office, CAO, points by producing more general entry programmes and increasing the places, where possible. I note the Minister's comments in that regard. This would take significant pressure off those students and I hope it can be considered. Could he give an update on those plans?

I wish to ask about the capital programme for education and training boards, ETBs, and further education colleges. The Minister might come back to me with a written reply. Many of the colleges are in older buildings and they need investment. I would like to hear his thoughts on the matter.

The Minister of State mentioned apprenticeships in his opening remarks. He has done fantastic work in that regard. The apprenticeship incentivisation scheme provides a €3,000 grant for employers. I understand 1,358 employers took up that offer, with 2,350 apprenticeships. He might send me the breakdown by sector of those figures.

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank Deputy Matthews. I could not agree more with his comments on first-year college students. These are leaving certificate students from last year, who last sat in a classroom in March 2020. Against all the odds and all the challenges, they got themselves into college and now, as he rightly said, they are finding courses being done from the bedroom, the box room or the kitchen table. It is extremely difficult for them. Subject to the behaviour of the virus, I have not given up hope of trying to at least arrive at a point where first-year students could be invited in to see their campus, to get a sense of what college will be like, to feel connected to the institution and to know that the current college situation is not forever. That will very much depend on how the virus goes.

I will keep a very close eye on the drop-out rate. I take his point in that regard. I would not in any way be complacent or cocky about that, but the initial indications are that it is correlating with last year. I await an update from the HEA.

Direct communication with students is important. I raised this last week when I met USI representatives and also the representative bodies of the colleges. We asked the colleges and the student unions to identify how best to do that. We do not want to bombard people with lots of communication or another email to read. Deputy Matthews is correct: it is time to try to wrap our arms around all of the supports that are there and put one, easily digestible communication in place in that regard.

On the examinations, I want to see common sense, compassion and a bit of cop-on when it comes to flexibility. I think that will be forthcoming and I was encouraged by the comments of the Irish Universities Association in that regard.

In the interests of time I will send Deputy Devlin a written note on the once-off payment of €250 but it is going very well. The SUSI grant before Christmas gave a once-off bonus payment in December and colleges are now beginning to credit the accounts of non-SUSI students, so the process is very much under way. My Department is ready to assist the Department of Education on extra college places and is working very closely with it on that. We have an ambitious programme of capital development for the further education colleges. I agree with the Deputy's

point about them needing that investment. I will send the Deputy written detail on that.

Deputy Niall Collins: I thank Deputies Devlin and Matthews for their queries on the subject of apprenticeships, which is a major part of our programme for Government. We are very keen, as a new Department, to destigmatise the apprenticeships area and put these centre stage in our further education and training sphere. We hope to make this a very viable, attractive and rewarding career path and way of finding job options for people.

The new apprenticeship action plan is in gestation and the consultation period has closed. There was a high level of engagement with the consultations and they are now being assessed. In essence, we want to see a very strong pipeline of apprenticeships and traineeships, and we want to grow that number significantly. The commitment in the programme is to grow those numbers between now and 2025 to approximately 10,000 per annum. As Deputy Matthews has referenced, we are keen to ramp up the number of green apprenticeships and to provide new apprenticeships in non-traditional areas. One of our most important commitments and concerns is to promote more gender balance in apprenticeships as there has been very poor representation of women. These are concerns of which we are aware and that we want to address.

Deputy Michael Collins: If the Minister cannot answer all my questions in the time available, he might respond to me in writing. What action will the Minister take to ensure the return of accommodation fees, which were paid in good faith at the start of the academic year, given that because of Covid-19 restrictions, the majority of third level colleges are carrying out lectures online and students are no longer availing of student accommodation and cannot attend college? What plans does the Minister have to provide a support package for struggling families and students who have paid significant accommodation costs to private providers and who cannot receive refunds?

We have been importing over 85% of our fruit and vegetables into Ireland, most of which could be produced here while providing much higher incomes for Irish farmers while reducing environmentally costly transport for those items from abroad. The recent potatoes for chips scandal before Christmas is only one such example of an over-reliance on imports and long-term mismanagement of the horticultural sector. I am told most of this stems from a lack of support and prioritisation at the higher education level for horticulture. Will the Minister please tell me what plans there are for higher education for horticulture and those opportunities for Irish farmers, especially in places like west Cork?

There may also be opportunities for student placement programmes, as certificates in agriculture at Quality and Qualifications Ireland, QQI, levels 5 and 6, are due to come in shortly. I am aware a 16-week placement on a farm is part of a level 6 programme but in current circumstances, going ahead with such action in the midst of a serious pandemic would be both reckless and unwise. For the duration of this pandemic year, students should have the option to complete their placement on their family farm, thus eliminating risks to their health, the health of their family and that of the family where the placement would occur. Will the Minister deal with this extremely important issue with immediate effect, as the health and livelihoods of many farmers and the future generations of farmers is at risk if it is not dealt with?

What supports are in place for families who cannot access broadband, particularly when they have students in higher education?

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I wish the Minister and the Minister of State the very best in

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this dynamic and interesting portfolio. Sixth-year students of last year and those in first year this year have had a very traumatic time. Their families have had a traumatic time. It has not been easy on any of those in the third level sector either. There are difficulties arising from non-return of fees. Parents have been put to the pin of their collar trying to pay these fees. I have experience of this, with a first year student myself this year. I know the difficulties arising in trying to study at home. They will rise to the challenge. Mol an óige agus tiocfaidh sí.

I strongly support a university in the south east and we badly need it. There is also an application before Tipperary County Council for relocation and development of Limerick Institute of Technology in Tipperary to a new campus in the old Kickham Barracks. It must be progressed as well.

I would also like to get a list of apprenticeships, as the area must be broadened. We need these apprentices badly in the building, farming and agricultural and plant hire industries. I spoke to the Minister of State, Deputy Niall Collins, about this a minute ago. As those areas are finding it difficult to get skilled operatives and people with degrees, we must enhance and broaden the scope of apprenticeships.

I welcome the review of SUSI and thank the officials there. I also thank Geraldine Kelly in my office for dealing with them, as we are trying to assist so many families. There must be a review of the 45 km rule, as it can be very cruel. I heard a Deputy earlier speaking about a student who would have to give ten hours travelling to a college for four or five hours of work. This affects rural areas where there is no public transport.

I promise the Minister and Minister of State the support of the Rural Independent Group in helping students from rural Ireland in particular but all across the country. Those in rural Ireland are handicapped because of poor broadband and rural transport. Will the Minister and Minister of State answer some of those questions? Mol an óige agus tiocfaidh sí. They need our support. They will be the leaders of tomorrow and into the future. While they will not forget this time, I believe they will rise over it.

Deputy Simon Harris: Deputy Mattie McGrath is right to end on a positive note. As tough as this time is, we and the next generation will bounce back from this and we must all support them in that regard. Deputies Michael Collins and Mattie McGrath raised the very important matter of student accommodation and I will make a couple of points on it.

With college-owned accommodation, I expect universities and colleges to be flexible and give refunds where students have not been able to use the accommodation through no fault of their own. I note that some students, for a variety of legitimate reasons, have decided to take up that accommodation. Perhaps they might not have the space or opportunity to learn at home.

We need much more publicly owned or campus-owned accommodation and we will come forward with plans in that regard. We are still too reliant on the private market, which in many ways pits students against other people trying to rent accommodation. We have doubled the size of the student assistance fund, which is for students who have fallen on particular hardship. There is €16 million in that fund this year and it is available through all college access offices. I encourage the Deputies to direct their constituents to that.

I thank Deputy Michael Collins for the point he made relating to horticulture. I will make specific inquiries of the Higher Education Authority and come back to him in that regard and on the matter of placements. I am asking all bodies to provide flexibility and common sense on

placements so nobody loses out at this time.

Both Deputies referenced broadband and I announced in my opening statement our plans to roll out eduroam broadband to 90 more locations across the country. It is clearly a major issue. On the SUSI review, I take the point about the non-adjacent rate and its impact on people in rural Ireland. There will be an opportunity for the Deputies to make submissions when we open to public consultations very shortly. I will look at the application from Tipperary mentioned by Deputy Mattie McGrath and revert to him.

Deputy Niall Collins: Deputy Mattie McGrath correctly queried the range of apprenticeships. I will furnish all Deputies with the full range of approved apprenticeship schemes that are in place and available. We are anxious to create new apprenticeships in a range of new areas, and that will be a central tenet of the apprenticeship action plan, which we referred to a number of times in this session. It will be published shortly.

Deputy Marian Harkin: I raise the question of the Connacht-Ulster alliance, as I have done on many previous occasions. We had hoped that the application would be submitted by the end of last year but that has not happened. However, I believe that negotiations are in the final stages and hopefully the outcome will be positive. Can the Minister confirm what I have said regarding the Connacht-Ulster alliance application? Is the Government actively supporting this process?

Deputy MacSharry spoke about the possible linkage of St. Angela's College with IT Sligo, rather than NUIG, in the context of the upcoming application for technological university status. I do not always agree with the Deputy but I do on this occasion. He made a very comprehensive and cogent argument for considering that connection between the two colleges. Unfortunately, there was not time for an answer from the Minister so I would like to hear his comments now on the possibility of a linkage between St. Angela's and IT Sligo and whether he would support that course of action.

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank Deputy Harkin for her questions. My information regarding the Connacht-Ulster alliance and the application for technological university status is the same as the Deputy's. We are expecting that application imminently. My Department, I, as Minister, and the Government are very supportive of it. The north west needs this university which offers really exciting opportunities in terms of regional development, with students being able to access the full range of university education at all levels within their own region. The discussions we have just been having about people from rural communities having to travel long distances are relevant here. The ability to stay and learn in one's own region makes it more likely that one can continue to live in one's own region, which has very many significant benefits. I am very excited about the Connacht-Ulster alliance and am also excited by the possibility of collaboration between the north west in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland in terms of Government commitments regarding the Magee campus in Derry. I look forward to continuing to work with Deputy Harkin on the Connacht-Ulster technological university.

I thank the Deputy for raising the issue of St. Angela's College again and providing me with the time to respond which I did not have earlier, unfortunately. I have met representatives of St. Angela's and was blown away by them. It is a brilliant college and I want to pay tribute to Ms Amanda McCloat, the president, the chairman of the governing authority, Mr. Justice Fennelly, and the Ursuline Sisters. St. Angela's is a really proactive and innovative college which clearly puts the welfare of its students at the heart of all it does. I cannot speak highly enough of the

college, from the engagements that I have had with its representatives.

On the issue of which entity it merges with or where it sits, I would say two things. First, this has dragged on for way too long and I know that view is shared by St. Angela's. The fact that six or seven years on we are still talking about this is pathetic, to be quite honest. It is not good enough. A decision needs to be made, clarity provided and that needs to happen quickly. Second, the landscape has now changed, as the Deputy has pointed out. I am not coming down on one side or the other here because that would not be helpful to the process but the idea that there is only one potential partner is no longer the case for many reasons, including the development of the technological university agenda. When I became Minister the view was that there was one option and one option only but that view has now changed. My officials have written to St. Angela's College and invited it to put forward proposals or a business case for how it wishes to align, merge or engage with other institutions beyond NUIG. That process is live at the moment, with an opportunity for the HEA and my Department to consider any potential merger and a variety of different partners to put themselves forward. This has been going on for too long and there is now more than one viable partner. I would like to see those two issues addressed quickly.

Deputy Marian Harkin: I am really pleased with the Minister's response. He is taking a regional perspective, which is absolutely essential for the development of the region and of course, for my own particular issue of concern, namely balanced regional development.

My second question relates to a specific query from a constituent who is doing a bachelor of arts degree in social care in NUIG. As part of this course, students have to complete 800 hours of unpaid placement work over four years. As the Minister can imagine, that was especially difficult last year and is practically impossible this year. I am not expecting an immediate response from the Minister but I ask that consideration be given to stretching out the 800 hours over the remaining years of the course for each student or to cutting back on the total number of hours. Will the Minister liaise with CORU on this?

Deputy Simon Harris: The answer to the Deputy's final question is "Yes", but I do not hold all of the levers relating to this matter. I could give the Deputy a long answer about how all higher education institutions are autonomous and academically independent. There are, as the Deputy points out, also the professional regulators, including CORU but common sense is needed here. We cannot have a situation where we miss out on graduates in a given year, particularly in an area like social care where we need so many graduates to address a whole host of societal needs. I am asking all of the professional bodies and regulators to do what Deputy Harkin has suggested, namely, to challenge themselves to determine how they can respond in a pragmatic way that does not lessen quality or qualifications while taking cognisance of the very difficult situation presented by Covid-19. I assure the Deputy that there is a lot of engagement going on. I have asked for submissions, through my officials, from the USI, professional bodies and others to try to bottom this out this month. We are engaging very extensively on this.

Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

Flood Risk Assessments

Deputy Denis Naughten: I thank the Ceann Comhairle for selecting this very important issue. A very serious situation has arisen as a result of the continually rising waters of Lough Funshinagh in County Roscommon, with three homes and farmyards under imminent threat of flooding. There is a risk to a total of seven homes and six farmyards due to the elevated levels of this turlough. As of 4 January 2021, levels are 1.75 m higher than on the same date last year, which was itself a record level. The bulk of the winter rainfall has yet to come. In normal circumstances, the level of water in this former turlough does not peak until March each year. As a result, families who are already being impacted by Covid-19 restrictions are under additional untold psychological pressure as the flood waters outside their doors inch closer and closer.

After my appointment as a Minister in the previous Government, I engaged the Geological Survey of Ireland, GSI, to assess exactly what was happening with this turlough. The GSI completed a very detailed hydrogeological analysis of Lough Funshinagh. It is now imperative that a comprehensive review of the GSI work is carried out to incorporate the current situation, thus providing revised flood maps to take into account the fact that this turlough is now rising year on year and properties which would not have been considered to be under threat up to now, based on the original assessment, are now incorporated into this re-evaluation, due to the changing hydrology of the area. It was clear from the study that the turlough would not rectify itself and as a result, working with the former Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, Kevin Boxer Moran, I ensured that funding was provided to Roscommon County Council to appoint consultants to conduct a comprehensive analysis of potential solutions to address the flooding situation within the catchment of Lough Funshinagh. The consultant's report was published last September and indicated that the cost-benefit assessment did not justify the construction of an outlet for the excess water. However, the situation has changed dramatically since then, with the unimaginable prospect that this year could see all previous flood record levels broken. As a result, there must now be a complete review of the original cost-benefit analysis for the overflow pipe from Lough Funshinagh to Lough Ree. Such a review should not be completed in advance of the aforementioned revised mapping exercise based on the GSI data or the development by the Office of Public Works, OPW, of a revised cost-benefit analysis mechanism that clearly reflects the unique challenges of turlough flooding which is not accounted for in the current cost-benefit analysis.

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Also required is the reopening of the voluntary home relocation scheme; the establishment of a voluntary farmyard relocation scheme as agreed by Cabinet in 2016; specific funding provisions to help address the farming challenges within the catchment of the lough arising from the dramatic change in water levels including, at the very minimum, a mechanism to allow farmers, as a *force majeure* measure, to start their basic payment scheme entitlements; and the complete reassessment by the Minister of State, Deputy Noonan, of the special area of conservation, SAC, and national heritage area, NHA, designations in light of the permanent flooding of the turlough that has caused the destruction of all trees, shrubs and grassland as well as the rare plants in the area which, together, gave the turlough its unique status as an SAC and NHA designated area.

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We need a comprehensive assessment and a long-term solution to this problem. We cannot, under any circumstances, continue in a piecemeal fashion, relocating one or two properties every year until the existing community is completely relocated.

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Ossian Smyth): I thank Deputy Naughten. The Minister of State, Deputy O'Donovan, has asked me to apologise on his behalf. He cannot be here to contribute to this debate in person for reasons related to the pandemic. I understand that he has been in contact with the Deputy regarding this matter on a number of occasions since 4 January. The Minister of State with responsibility for the Office of Public Works, Deputy O'Donovan, and I are very aware of the significant impact on communities and distress arising from flooding and the continuing risk of flooding. I have seen at first hand the impact of flooding on people and their homes and farms and I convey my deepest sympathy to all of those in the area who are being affected by flooding and the risk of flooding from Lough Funshinagh.

Local flooding issues are, in the first instance, a matter for each local authority to investigate and address. All local authorities, including Roscommon County Council, may carry out flood mitigation works within their own capital works programmes and using their own resources or apply for funding under the Office of Public Works, OPW's minor flood mitigation works scheme.

With regard to Lough Funshinagh, Roscommon County Council applied for funding to carry out a study, funded by the minor flood mitigation works scheme, to establish if there were some environmentally acceptable measures which would provide a suitable benefit in light of their cost and which could be taken to protect the properties that flooded in the Lough Funshinagh area from a flood of a similar magnitude to that which occurred in 2016. A range of flood mitigation options were considered in the study, but it was determined that the options were not economically or environmentally sustainable. The study identified that the extreme high-water levels, while rare, are within the naturally occurring range. There is no evidence to suggest that the flooding was due to an abnormal decrease in the outflow rate from the lough other than that due to the possible seasonal variation in the subsurface water level.

It remains open to Roscommon County Council to make an application under the minor flood mitigation works scheme should further measures be identified in the future which meet the scheme criteria to mitigate flooding.

The applications of those property owners in the locality of the lough who have applied for the Government's voluntary homeowners relocation scheme are being advanced. For those farmers whose land and farm buildings have flooded and are at risk, I understand that the introduction of a voluntary farm building relocation scheme is being progressed by the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine. I understand that the Deputy has been in contact with the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine in this regard and in respect of measures to help address the farming challenges within the catchment of the lough. I am advised by the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine that it continues to monitor the situation with regard to the flooding of farmland in general and of farmyards, where it arises. A study to determine the feasibility of any future once-off targeted schemes for voluntary farm building relocation is being undertaken. The Department has evaluated a range of at-risk farmyards impacted by flooding to see if any alternative remedial works can be undertaken to protect farm buildings at risk of flooding. It is currently considering this evaluation.

The Minister of State with responsibility for the OPW, Deputy O'Donovan, had two meetings with the chairman of the OPW and senior officials on this matter yesterday. The OPW will be meeting with Roscommon County Council shortly and, through the council, with all relevant stakeholders with a view to considering ways to address the flooding problem. I am assured that, should an application to the OPW's minor flood mitigation works scheme be received from the council, it will be assessed as soon as possible.

I am grateful to all of those who have contributed on this important matter. I fully appreciate the impact flooding around Lough Funshinagh is having on the people and properties in this area.

Deputy Denis Naughten: Minor works are no good here. I ask the Minister of State to take the six suggestions I have put to him back to the Minister and to feed them into the meetings that are going to take place next week.

The Minister of State represents the Green Party and a senior Minister of that party, Deputy Eamon Ryan, is here as well. There is something their colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy Noonan, can do regarding this issue. Prior to 2015, the turlough flooded to predictable levels in winter and drained in the summer. Peak winter levels varied by no more than 1.5 m between very dry years and very wet years. The flood pattern allowed for the rare plants outlined in the turlough's designation as an SAC to flourish. From the winter of 2015 to the present day, however, the turlough has effectively become a lake with the summer level now at a height equivalent to the extremely high winter level. The current destruction of all plant life cannot be allowed to continue as it calls into question the status of the lake as a protected area. It was the responsibility of the State to ensure the protection of the turlough. Surely, it is now the responsibility of the State to restore it to its natural equilibrium. The other option is to do nothing, which will lead to the total and permanent destruction of the habitat and the turlough, which would surely contravene EU directives on turloughs and SACs. The other alternative is to de-designate the lake area as an SAC because of the failure to maintain the water levels at the turlough's designated levels.

We should examine the option of constructing an overflow pipe. This has been costed at approximately €1.3 million. This is a far more cost-effective option than the destruction of the turlough and the relocation of seven families and farmyards at a total cost in excess of €3 million. I plead with the Minister of State to talk with Deputy Noonan in this regard.

Deputy Ossian Smyth: My party leader is indeed here beside me so I am being watched but I will take Deputy Naughten's six suggestions back to the Minister of State, Deputy O'Donovan. The Deputy clearly cares very strongly about this issue and it is clear that he has engaged extensively with a number of Ministers on this matter. He has also been talking to Deputies Fitzmaurice and Kerrane and Senators Dolan and Murphy and is keeping them all up to date on this matter. He is clearly putting in a lot of effort. I commit to speaking to my good friend, the Minister of State, Deputy Noonan. He has responsibility for heritage, designations and so on. I will act as interlocutor between the Minister of State and the Deputy. That is no problem. I look forward to the meeting between Roscommon County Council and all stakeholders with regard to Lough Funshinagh. I hope they can identify solutions to mitigate the flood risk in the area and, in this way, address the significant concerns of the community living in the vicinity of the lough. I thank the Deputy for raising this matter.

National Broadband Plan

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: I thank the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications, Deputy Eamon Ryan, for coming in and taking this debate. The national broadband plan is very significant. It is the rural electrification of its time. Broadband is as important in this modern age as electricity was decades ago. I refer to high-quality fibre broadband in particular because of its speed and the amount of data it can carry. I am the Chairman of the Joint Committee on Transport and Communications Networks. We held hearings with National Broadband Ireland and Eir. Today I wish to deal specifically with my own constituency, which includes parts of Limerick and north Tipperary. National Broadband Ireland is rolling out service to more than 21,000 homes, businesses and schools in Limerick. Furthermore, they have already done advance work on 4,000 premises in areas of Limerick such as Mungret, Patrickswell, Crecora, Castleconnell and Caherconlish. There are two areas on which I want to touch. We are at a point where, with remote working as a result of the Covid pandemic, we need to expedite the national broadband plan. That plan is to deal with the amber areas that have not been dealt with by commercial operators. I know the Minister has spoken about bringing it back from seven years to five years. Peter Hendrick, the CEO of National Broadband Ireland has appeared before the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Transport and Communications Networks. I believe National Broadband Ireland is of a like mind. I ask the Minister to reaffirm that commitment. Could it be even faster?

Amber areas were not covered by commercial operators and are the areas where National Broadband Ireland is due to roll out a broadband service under the national broadband plan. Some are also adjacent to blue areas. In many areas in my constituency, such as Murroe, Newport, Lisnagry, Castleconnell, Caherconlish and Mungret, people in an amber area can look over their ditch and see their neighbour in the blue area with fibre broadband in place. They may be two or three years down the road with the way it is being rolled out.

Representatives of Eir and National Broadband Ireland have appeared before the committee. We have asked them to talk to each other. There is no reason why arrangements could not be made between National Broadband Ireland and Eir to fast-track these amber areas that are directly adjacent to blue areas so that they can be connected as a priority. Our understanding is there is nothing to prohibit that under the National Broadband Ireland contract. Would the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications support that?

Government policy should seek to fast-track the provision of fibre broadband under the National Broadband Ireland plan by a joint venture between National Broadband Ireland and Eir on the blue areas. We should also look to expedite the roll-out of the national broadband plan at least from seven years to five years. A further ambitious target of less than five years could be set. The number of people working from home has increased during the Covid pandemic and will now become mainstream. Having people working from home will enable them to live in rural areas while being able to communicate with New York, Hong Kong, Singapore, Australia and other areas without needing to leave their front room.

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The national broadband plan contract was signed with National Broadband Ireland, NBI, in November 2019 to roll out a high-speed and future-proofed broadband network within the intervention area, which covers 1.1 million people living and working in more than 544,000 premises, including almost 100,000 businesses and farms along with 695 schools.

The national broadband plan will ensure that citizens throughout the country have access to high-speed broadband services and nobody is left without this vital service. The national broadband plan network will offer users a high-speed broadband service with a minimum download speed of 500 Mbps from the outset. This represents an increase from the 150 Mbps committed to under the contract.

The high-speed broadband map, which is available at www.broadband.gov.ie, shows the areas which will be included in the national broadband plan State-led intervention, as well as areas targeted by commercial operators. I am advised that construction in all counties will commence in the first two years and over 90% of premises in the State will have access to high-speed broadband within the next four years.

Despite the challenges presented by the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, NBI has made steady progress on initial works. I am advised by NBI that as of 8 January 2021, over 158,000 premises across 26 counties have been surveyed, which is ahead of schedule. The next step is for NBI to develop network designs to deliver the new fibre-to-the-home network to these premises and substantial design work is under way.

Build work has started in rural parts of Cork, Limerick, Cavan and Galway. The first fibre-to-the-home connections are connected and are in a test-and-trial phase in Carrigaline, County Cork. They will be subject to technical testing and validation prior to a wider release in the area. In the coming months retailers will be able to resell the service and householders in these areas will be able to order high-speed broadband provided via the NBI network. A test-and-trial phase in Cavan and Galway will also commence shortly.

Further details on specific areas are available through the NBI website which provides a facility for any premises within the intervention area to register their interest in being provided with deployment updates. Individuals who register with this facility will receive regular updates on progress by NBI on delivering the network and specific updates related to their own premises when works are due to commence.

Broadband connection points, BCPs, are a key element of the national broadband plan providing high-speed broadband in every county in advance of the roll-out of the fibre-to-the-home network. As of 21 December, 241 publicly accessible sites have been installed by NBI and the high-speed broadband service will be switched on in these locations through service provider contracts managed by the Department of Rural and Community Development for publicly available sites and by the Department of Education for schools.

School BCPs will be provided with high-speed broadband for educational use only and some 70 schools will be connected by the end of January through service provider contracts managed by the Department of Education. An acceleration of this aspect of the project announced in December will see almost 700 primary schools connected to high-speed broadband by 2022, well ahead of the original target delivery timeframe of 2026. My Department continues to work with the Department of Education to prioritise other schools with no high-speed broadband for connection over the term of the national broadband plan. Further details are available on the NBI website at <https://nbi.ie/primary-schools-list/>.

While substantial progress has been made to date, the Covid-19 pandemic has had an impact on the delivery of the fibre network. The extent of this impact is currently being assessed and NBI has committed to put in place measures to mitigate the impact as much as possible.

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The pandemic has also highlighted the importance of good reliable broadband to ensure that citizens across Ireland can avail of remote working, education and other essential online facilities. This is reflected in the commitments in the programme for Government where delivery of the national broadband plan will be a key enabler to many of the policies envisaged particularly relating to increased levels of remote working.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: I ask the Minister to deal with the specific questions. Would the Minister support Eir and NBI coming together to expedite the roll-out of fibre broadband in the amber areas that are alongside blue areas where Eir has already rolled out broadband? People are looking over the ditch to their neighbours who have broadband and they do not, and they could be waiting two or three years.

Can the roll-out of broadband be expedited from seven years to five years? The Minister spoke about people working from home during the Covid pandemic. They need state-of-the-art fibre broadband to be able to work and communicate worldwide.

National Broadband Ireland has committed to provide a facility whereby people can key in their Eircode postcode and be told when they will get their broadband connection. At the moment they know that in general terms but not the specifics.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I agree completely with Deputy O'Donnell about co-ordinating in neighbouring areas. Obviously, we would like to see the commercial operators being able to ensure that every single house in the State is covered. There may be efficiencies in dovetailing. That is a commercial matter for Eir or the other commercial operators, such as SIRO, Virgin Media and others. I confirm that I would like to see that being co-ordinated but it is a commercial decision for the companies involved.

It is in everyone's interest, including that of NBI, for the roll-out to be accelerated and we will push that to the maximum extent we can. The Covid pandemic is affecting delivery as it is affecting every business with people out of work owing to being close contacts or for other reasons. A lag of several months occurred last year when contractors were not able to come in through the UK. That is probably the biggest restriction to an immediate acceleration. On the other side, the need for broadband as an essential service will help the acceleration. I agree with the Deputy that it is akin in importance to the rural electrification programme. Because of the clear need for it now, in part because of the Covid pandemic, I believe the commercial viability of the operation is significantly enhanced. There will be much greater uptake than otherwise would have been the case. I believe that can be a key driver in development.

It is critical that my Department does whatever it can. Local government also has a role in the next phase, which will see a move from surveying to building out and putting poles in place for the delivery of the service. That role will include being supportive of planning permission for those poles and helping with their deployment, as well as the opening of ducting, where necessary, to allow the acceleration of the process. We in government will work with local authorities to do everything we can to help in this roll-out. It is not going to move as fast as we would have liked because of Covid-19 but I am confident that once we move out of these immediate difficulties we will see rapid acceleration in this process.

The Deputy's proposal regarding the website seems eminently sensible. It would give customers a quick and easy way of assessing what the timeline is for their areas. I will pass on that suggestion, via the Department, to the company, and I think it would be a good way of using

our Eircode system to give greater certainty in this regard.

Maternity Services

Deputy Neasa Hourigan: I wish to raise an issue today with the Department of Health and its Minister. While I acknowledge they are well aware of the issue, it is so important that it is worth highlighting again. My constituency of Dublin Central is home to the Rotunda Hospital, which is the busiest maternity hospital in Europe. In 2019, more than 8,000 babies were delivered in hospital. In the same year, more than 1,300 of those babies needed to be admitted to neonatal care units. The hospital is run on a break-even budget and incredible care is provided to families at very important moments in life. The hospital has, indeed, won awards for its innovative care practices. All of this is done in a building complex which dates to 1757. The Rotunda Hospital is a much-loved building in Dublin Central, but it is nonetheless an old one. In short, the hospital is trying to provide 21st-century medical care in an 18th-century infrastructural set-up. The situation is now very serious. There is a particular concern regarding the provision of best practice care in the neonatal intensive care unit.

Several reports have pointed to the suboptimal conditions in our maternity hospitals, including inadequate space and outdated facilities. Nowhere is this more critical than in the Rotunda Hospital. The standards of buildings have an impact on the quality of care received and therefore on the outcomes of that care. What we are seeing here is a false economy because the cost to families and the State when things go wrong is well known. HIQA has repeatedly stated that capital investment is needed in modern maternity facilities and buildings, and that that investment must be timely. Babies in neonatal care are the most vulnerable patients I can think of. The current position in respect of the physical infrastructure in the Rotunda Hospital is not best practice in neonatal intensive care facilities, particularly in respect of infection control, which is so meaningful for all of us at present.

I implore the HSE and the Minister for Health to address overcrowding in the Rotunda Hospital, and especially in the neonatal intensive care unit, NICU, in the short to medium term. In 2019, the director of the Rotunda Hospital warned that the overcrowding was an intolerable patient safety crisis. The Rotunda Hospital takes babies from all over Ireland into its care. The staff there are doing their best but they are now doing their best under unacceptable conditions.

The management of the Rotunda Hospital has a plan to tackle this urgent need. I am aware that in the long term, maternity services will be moved to the campus of Connolly Hospital. The 1,300 babies who need care every year, however, must be safe and cared for now and to the best of our ability. They cannot wait for 15 to 20 years. There is a significant business and medical case for the immediate development of a critical care wing on Parnell Square, which could mitigate current risks in the medium term. This would be compliant with Government policy and has already been approved by the planning department of Dublin City Council. The estimated cost of that wing is €61 million, though I accept that procurement costs are difficult to ascertain and be certain about now.

I acknowledge there is a long-term plan to move the Rotunda Hospital but investing in a medical care building now would still be an efficient use of public money. The inner city would have a high-quality medical building for use in perpetuity. We would get 15 to 20 years of safe NICU care for our most vulnerable babies, and it is really only the commissioning costs of less than €5 million that would be non-transferable. This is an excellent business case for the wing.

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As we have heard this week, we have not always cared in Ireland for our most vulnerable children in the way that we should. I hope the HSE, the Minister for Health and the Minister of State present will consider my points.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank Deputy Hourigan for raising this important matter. I can be forgiven for saying that I am particularly pleased to hear her raising this issue, because I was born in that same hospital, though a little bit after 1757. I call the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte.

Minister of State at the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): I thank Deputy Hourigan for raising what the Ceann Comhairle has noted is a valuable topic. I am taking this issue on behalf of the Minister for Health, whose script I have to hand. I thank the Deputy for giving me the opportunity to outline to the House the position in relation to neonatology services at the Rotunda Hospital. As the House is aware, the Rotunda is one of the world's oldest maternity hospitals and one of the busiest such hospitals in Ireland. More than 8,000 babies, and one in four of all babies requiring neonatal intensive care in Ireland, are born there annually. Consequently, the Rotunda cares for the most vulnerable and fragile infants at the very extremes of prematurity, as well as sick babies with very complex needs. The challenges faced by the Rotunda to provide such critical services are well documented, and were also well detailed by Deputy Hourigan.

In particular, given the age of the buildings, the infrastructure of the hospital presents significant difficulties in terms of infection prevention control and patient safety. The Deputy is aware that in the medium term, the Rotunda will be co-located with Connolly Hospital. This is in line with Government policy, as articulated in the national maternity strategy. To ensure the provision of optimum and safe services, that policy states that all stand-alone maternity hospitals should be co-located with adult acute hospitals. The relocation of the Rotunda Hospital to the campus of Connolly Hospital is included as a commitment in the programme for Government.

The health and safety of mothers and babies in our care is always of the utmost priority. It is acknowledged that there is a need, in the short term, to address the highest infrastructural risks and capacity issues at the existing hospital on Parnell Square. However, given the plans to redevelop the Rotunda Hospital, we must ensure that any interim development and investment must be limited to the extent necessary to address priority patient safety risks. There has been significant engagement between the Department of Health, the HSE and the management of the Rotunda Hospital in an attempt to clarify the scope and extent of the developments needed at the Rotunda Hospital to resolve patient safety risks arising from infrastructural challenges at the hospital.

In 2020, €4.6 million was provided to the Rotunda Hospital to address capacity and infrastructural needs in the foetal assessment unit, neonatal intensive care unit, emergency theatre and delivery suites. Given the age and condition of the original hospital buildings, however, other issues remain. In that context, the management of the Rotunda Hospital has proposed a new development which will address identified key clinical risks. Additional funding of €100,000 was provided to the Rotunda Hospital in 2020 to prepare a strategic assessment report and preliminary business case in support of the proposed development, as required under the public spending code. I am advised that these reports have now been submitted to the HSE and are under consideration.

I also understand that the HSE intends to allocate additional capital funding of €250,000 to the Rotunda Hospital this year to further assist with the progress of proposals to address areas of critical risk with a particular focus on the neonatal intensive care unit. This investment will help ensure that the hospital is facilitated to make the necessary plans to ensure the babies born in the Rotunda Hospital continue to receive the safest, high-quality specialised care possible in advance of the hospital's move to the campus of Connolly Hospital.

Deputy Neasa Hourigan: I share the Ceann Comhairle's fondness for the Rotunda. All three of my children were born there, one with only seconds to spare. It is a place which is very special to many of us. I welcome the response from the Minister of State. The Department of Health has engaged with the management of the Rotunda Hospital. We welcome that engagement. To be clear, the best practice in neonatal intensive care units is that every child would have 16 sq. m. In the Rotunda Hospital now, the space available is 5 sq. m., and that impacts on children's care, as well as how much a mother can engage with her child and how many people can be in the room. It is, therefore, an urgent and serious situation.

I have a specific request. The Minister for Health and the HSE can see that there is a viable business case here and a medical argument in respect of a medical care wing being attached to the Rotunda Hospital, even given the deadline for the move to the campus of Connolly Hospital. Fifteen to 20 years is a long time to have a difference of that kind of space of 16 sq. m, versus 5 sq. m for those incredibly vulnerable babies. I am also aware that the Department and the HSE have a number of processes to go through for cost-benefit analysis before they would consider something like this or give it the green light, which is as it should be. For the project to proceed, one of the first steps is to complete gate 2 of the public spending code, which is the completion of a final business case and initial planning document and design. This requires financial support of, I believe, more than €250,000. I thank the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, for giving her time today to answer this. Perhaps the Minister of State could communicate back to the Minister for Health our genuine request that the Department and the HSE would consider supporting even this next stage of gate 2 of the public spending code in order that we can at least move forward with the cost benefit analysis for the neonatal intensive care unit, NICU.

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: I will take on board exactly what Deputy Hourigan has requested here this evening. I will articulate it to the Minister, Deputy Donnelly. Perhaps I could facilitate a meeting between Deputy Hourigan, the Minister and our new Secretary General, acting in the Department of Health, who has come from the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform and who would have a really good understanding of the gate 2 process the Deputy has referred to.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Minister of State for that helpful response.

Standards in Public Office Commission

An Ceann Comhairle: Our next Topical Issues matter is the relocation of Leave.EU from the UK and the regulation of its activities as per Irish electoral law.

Deputy Neale Richmond: I greatly appreciate the opportunity to raise this extremely serious issue with the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte and the Minister. When reports came out that Leave.EU had relocated or temporarily registered its location from Bristol to Waterford many people met the news with a sense of wry irony that an organisation that has spent the past

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number of years campaigning to leave the EU is seeking to remain within the EU in order to retain its favourable Internet rating and its brand.

Let us be under no illusion, however, this is an absolutely toxic brand. This group has wreaked absolute misery on the United Kingdom and around for many years. Beyond Brexit the group has traded an absolutely toxic brand of campaigns and politics, be it on immigration, on the relationship with the media or directed at personal individuals, including Ministers in our own Government. It also trades in senseless and baseless xenophobia the likes of which we in this country should not and do not have any time for.

When we look at this toxic brand of campaigning are we looking to see if the toxic brand of campaigning is being exported here? Is the group looking to locate themselves in Waterford to ascertain a flag of convenience and to maintain the prevalence in Internet searches and so much else? I have already raised a number of concerns with the relevant bodies at Irish and EU level with regard to the group's domain name registration and its accounts and status with the Revenue Commissioners, and crucially around the storage of data. This organisation has access to data of tens of thousands of individuals in the United Kingdom and beyond, and it must be ensured that these data are stored in a way that is compliant with the general data protection regulation, GDPR, even though the UK has left the EU.

When an organisation like this seeks to move around, even just as a flag of convenience or to export its toxic brand of campaigning, it absolutely requires a serious level of scrutiny by Government and by the authorities therein. I ask the Minister and the Department to give that level of scrutiny. This organisation trades in controversy and misery. The group has been levied with numerous fines in the United Kingdom for its campaigning activity, for its storage of data and for funding. The group has associations with quite dubious characters, inside and outside the organisation, which merit serious concern. The group is connected, directly and indirectly, with some of the scary events that unfolded in Washington DC last week and this should not be dismissed out of hand. While the people who run this organisation seek to mock those who question their authority and seek to dismiss any concerns, ultimately resorting to the level of insults one would not find in the schoolyard, we need to keep that level of scrutiny absolutely rigorous. We need to shine a light and put up a probe. I believe that this organisation is a threat to our democracy. It is a politically subversive organisation that, if it was allowed to gain a foothold in our democracy, would have a detrimental effect. We cannot dismiss this lightly. We must provide that scrutiny. I implore the Minister and the Government to make sure that Leave. EU, quite simply, is not welcome in Ireland.

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: I thank Deputy Richmond for raising this question. I hope my answer addresses the question the Deputy has asked. I am here to represent the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien.

As Members of the House will be aware, the Electoral Act 1997, as amended, provides the statutory framework for dealing with political donations and sets out the regulatory regime covering a wide range of interrelated issues such as the setting of limits of permissible donations, the prohibition of certain donations, the disclosure of donations and the registration of third parties who accept donations given for political purpose that exceed €100.

The Act also provides for the independent supervision of these provisions by the Standards in Public Office Commission, SIPO, which has published a number of detailed guidance documents to clearly inform candidates standing for election, Members of the Oireachtas, mem-

bers of the European Parliament, political parties, corporate donors and third parties of their obligations under the Act. At its very core, the Act has the objective of ensuring that there is transparency in how our political parties and the wider political system is funded, matters that are crucial to the functioning of our democracy. Important features of the legislation include relatively low donation thresholds, a prohibition on foreign donations and restrictions on the amounts that may be received from corporate donations.

Notwithstanding the existing legislative provision, the Government is committed to progress the commitment in the programme for Government to review our current electoral laws and the conduct of politics in Ireland to ensure that donations or resources from non-citizens outside the State are not being utilised to influence our elections and political process. We will legislate to prevent this if necessary. These matters are directly relevant to the political donations regime as provided for in the Act. The Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, has stated in this House that he intends to bring forward an electoral reform Bill that will, among other matters, establish an independent statutory electoral commission by the end of this year. The general scheme of the Bill was published last week and was circulated for pre-legislative consideration. One of the functions that will be assigned to the electoral commission from the outset will be a policy research and advisory function that will inform and advise the Government and the Oireachtas in their consideration of reform of our electoral laws. The Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, is of the view that one of the first items of research the commission could be asked to undertake would be a comprehensive review of the entire Electoral Act 1997. It is likely that such a review could be completed within a relatively short timeframe following the establishment of the commission.

Deputy Neale Richmond: I thank the Minister of State for the full and accurate reply, which certainly addressed some of my concerns. I appreciate that some of my concerns and the area I ask about do not fall under the remit of the Minister to whom this matter has been put forward. Some interesting points that will become very relevant in this regard have been made by the Minister on the role of corporate donations, of donation limits, of foreign donations and of influence outside the State on our electoral politics. I want to make sure they are in any review of the commission that may come forward. I have referred the organisation to SIPO. I hope the Minister of State will ask the Minister to also engage with SIPO where appropriate. I hope this will not just cover political parties, elected representatives and those seeking election, as mentioned by the Minister of State. It must also include campaign organisations and bodies, as well as campaign bodies that seek to base themselves in this State even though their activities are either stateless or, more pertinently in this account, are focused on a different jurisdiction. This is a real concern and I hope the Minister of State will engage with the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien and with SIPO on this. This entity, which has an extremely dubious past in fundraising, in storing data and in the pure hate it spouts, is trying to relocate to the State for convenience or for opportunity. We must ensure that the standards to which we hold all organisations already in the State are applied to this organisation. If it is unable to meet those standards, it should be closed down, shut down and told it is not welcome and should not to come back.

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: I thank Deputy Richmond for sharing the knowledge and the depth of understanding he has on this organisation. While my answer deals with electoral law, the issue of campaigning bodies is something I will bring back to the Minister. I will conclude by reading the Minister's remarks into the record. I again thank the Deputy for raising this important issue.

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As already indicated, our political donation regime is designed to maintain transparency in respect of our political process and to ensure the integrity of our elections in order that they remain fair and free from any foreign or hidden influence. The Government is committed to reviewing our current electoral laws and the conduct of politics in Ireland to ensure donations and resources from non-citizens outside the State are not being utilised to influence our elections and political process. The electoral commission that is to be established will be able to contribute to such a review. I expect that any review will not only deliver a wide range of recommendations aiming to strengthen our electoral laws and ensure political donations and resources from non-citizens resident outside the State are not being used to influence our elections and democratic process, among other matters, but will also inform the further transfer of functions to the electoral commission.

Written Answers are published on the Oireachtas website.

The Dáil adjourned at 6.42 p.m. until 10 a.m. on Wednesday, 20 January 2021.