



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

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

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Dé Céadaoin, 10 Feabhra 2021

Wednesday, 10 February 2021

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

Paidir.
Prayer.

Covid-19: Motion [Private Members]

Deputy Alan Kelly: I move:

“That Dáil Éireann: notes that:

— in March 2020, the Government published ‘Ireland’s National Action Plan in Response to Covid-19 (Coronavirus)’, and outlined proposed public health decisions and actions with the stated purpose of containing, delaying and mitigating the spread of the virus;

— by 4th February, 2021, 3,586 people had died with Covid-19 in the State, with another 1,899 having died in Northern Ireland;

— case numbers are over 200,000 in the State and 105,000 in Northern Ireland, more than 4 per cent of the population of the island of Ireland;

— the island has experienced three waves of infection, with the most recent wave, post-Christmas, being the highest in terms of overall infection and mortality and imposing the greatest pressure on the health service;

— our hospitals have struggled greatly to deal with the third wave of the Covid-19 pandemic, with over 2,000 Covid-19 patients in hospital at a point in late January;

— the economy has been shut down three times, for almost six months over the past ten months, and the movements of people have been severely restricted;

— the Government’s ‘Resilience and Recovery 2020-2021: Plan for Living with Covid19’, published in September 2020, has failed to cope with the most recent wave of infection and the emergence of more transmissible and lethal variants of the virus; and

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— Ireland has an open border with Northern Ireland that should not be sealed, and essential travel must be allowed to continue on our island;

further notes that:

— repeated surges in Covid-19 infections and deaths, and repeated lockdowns now demonstrate the failure of a strategy of containment, delay and mitigation;

— vaccination alone is not a ‘silver bullet’ solution in the short to medium-term, and will not by itself rule out the need for further lockdowns;

— a comprehensive strategy to eliminate community transmission of Covid-19 in Ireland, also known as a ‘Zero-Covid’ approach, which has been recommended by the Independent Scientific Advocacy Group, is now urgently required;

— new variants, due to mutation of the virus, present a significant risk and that it is therefore vital to take fullest advantage of our island status, and to significantly restrict all movement onto the island, or, in the absence of an all-island strategy, into

the State; and

— women are disproportionately bearing the burden from the Covid-19 pandemic, as has been laid out by the Covid Women’s Voices group; and

calls on the Government to:

— adopt a national aggressive suppression strategy for Covid-19, with the aim of eradicating community transmission and getting overall case numbers down to double digits, and then using aggressive testing and tracing against any outbreaks;

— prevent travellers from boarding aircraft or boats bound for Ireland in the absence of a negative polymerase chain reaction (PCR) test;

— introduce mandatory hotel quarantine for all travellers arriving by sea and air into the State, with the exception of designated essential and logistics workers, with PCR testing at arrivals and a follow-up test after five days;

— adequately resource the testing and tracing system to increase capacity for contact tracing;

— develop, with the Northern Ireland authorities, a fully integrated cross-border contact tracing system;

— increase permanent capacity in our public hospitals, including by nationalising private hospital capacity where necessary, as called for by the Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation;

— target areas of significant risk of Covid-19 outbreaks for serial testing, including healthcare settings and other workplaces where a higher risk of infection exists;

— implement rapid antigen testing in congregated settings, where appropriate;

— roll out rapid antigen testing in the community, including in our schools when they reopen, and serial PCR testing in healthcare facilities to control outbreaks;

— ensure that only genuinely essential employees are compelled to work outside the home by empowering the Health and Safety Authority to survey and inspect workplaces with 20 or more employees;

— pay student nurses who are working in our hospitals at the health care assistant rate that they were previously paid during the first wave of the pandemic;

— implement a support package for the aviation and hospitality sectors, recognising that they will not be able to reopen until Covid-19 is aggressively suppressed and a significant proportion of the population are vaccinated;

— publish, on a daily basis, the figures on the total number of people vaccinated, with details on the percentage of different age groups and priority groups that have been vaccinated;

— recognise the importance of investing in our public health system, address the longstanding concerns about the inadequate resourcing of public health in Ireland and implement consultant-level contracts for public health doctors;

— assess the public health cost implications arising from the effects of ‘Long Covid’;

— recognise the disproportionate impact the Covid-19 pandemic has had on women, and to address this by implementing measures recommended by the Covid Women’s Voices group;

— continue the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme until the end of 2021, and further commit to embedding such schemes into the labour market structure with important employment rights and other conditions attached as the scheme evolves;

— ensure that there is a moratorium on all evictions and rent increases until the economy has fully reopened, and call on banks to provide payment breaks to those in need, without charging any additional interest;

— proactively pursue a joint strategy and joint measures with the Northern Ireland Executive, in order to develop an all-island strategy to eliminate community transmission on the island;

— introduce Garda checks five kilometers from the border with Northern Ireland; and

— support the international campaign, supported by Oxfam and other organisations, for vaccines to be made available for all people, in all countries, free of charge as soon as possible.”

I will share time with my good friend and colleague, Deputy Nash. Today, the Labour Party is bringing forward an extremely important motion. I would like the Minister and Government to listen to what we say collectively over the next two hours. This is not about being right or wrong or political point-scoring. It is about giving information and having a strategy that we fundamentally believe we must support and work towards together.

Living with Covid-19, the national strategy on which we supported the Government, has

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failed. The absence of an all-island or, indeed, a two-island approach has left us in need of a strategy. The position at the moment is that the Government will make some sort of pronouncement in two weeks' time. I am not sure that is a strategy. Strategies have core areas and set out straight what we will do. I am not sure that having the Tánaiste and the Minister with responsibility for housing make statements publicly over the last 48 hours about what will potentially happen in two, four or six weeks' time is helpful. It certainly precedes any strategy. We do not have a strategy so I want the Minister to listen to what we say today and put it into a strategy.

We are advocating for a national aggressive suppression strategy, zero Covid by another name. We want to suppress the virus and ensure we get the case numbers down so low - to double digits - that it gives Ireland a chance of having a 2021 that is different from 2020. People are at the end of their tether and they need that chance. Once we have suppressed the virus, we should, with panzer-like speed, provide increased support for public health teams and tackle the virus in areas where it arises again. We need to eliminate community transmission as otherwise we will be in a fourth lockdown. The key test of whatever strategy the Government brings forward will be to prevent that happening.

We have so many unknowns. The vaccine is not the panacea many thought it would be late last year. It will take a considerable period of time to administer and even when it is administered - I wish the Minister the best in getting it out there and we will support him in any way we can - there are many unknowns regarding transmissibility and how the virus affects different people. The biggest issue we face is that of mutations and variants. There is a global issue with this virus whereby, if areas of the world are not vaccinated in a speedy way, variants and mutations will develop and find their way to Ireland. How will we ensure we protect our people? The real worry is that we will have a pandemic within a pandemic because of mutations. The public are ahead of us and they want us to address this issue once and for all.

There are a number of components to this strategy. The most important point is that we put forward a strategy that will have public confidence and that we will see through to get us to a point where we can live in some form of normality later on this year. Having the Taoiseach, Tánaiste and Minister for Transport make a statement to the country in two weeks' time without details, objectives or being able to confidently predict where we are going is not what we need. There is too much public anxiety and helplessness. I have never seen so many people in a distressed state. I say that openly. This is different from last year. We need to give people hope and direction and deal with that anxiety.

The fundamental component of our strategy is travel. Some say that travel does not account for a huge number of cases but they are wrong. We also thought the B117 variant was not a big issue in Ireland. How did it get here and become the dominant strain? The reason was travel. We need to ensure we have mandatory quarantine of travellers. I cannot understand why, since last May, we have not put in place the infrastructure and legislation to do this. What has happened in the past nine months? Somebody needs to explain that to me because nothing has happened, and that is a failure. We also need to ensure that quarantine applies across the board. The Brazilian and South African variants are on tour. It does not matter where they are from because they could as easily come from any other destination. That is not the way the virus works. Fundamentally, we need to ensure that people who come here are quarantined and take polymerase chain reaction, PCR, tests on arrival, then five days after arrival and again later on. They can then move on.

What is the point in fining people going to airports and ports €500 and then wishing them

the best for their holidays? This is driving people insane. We must have the power to tell people they are not going or to impose fines at a level that makes it not worth their while going. The volume of people travelling is still incredible. If the Minister wants to bring in legislation next week, which I hope he will because the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment, Deputy Varadkar, said so yesterday, we will facilitate it. We also need to ensure that we have serial testing, in particular, in healthcare settings, and that we have checks 5 km from the Border on all major routes and a significant amount of checks on all minor routes.

Furthermore, and this is something the Minister really needs to listen to, there are too many people who are not working from home. Compared to last year, the volume of traffic, again, this morning, is incredible. Through the Health and Safety Authority, will the Minister ensure that a survey be taken of all employers of more than 20 people as to how many of them are working from home and how many are not? The Minister would have full political support for doing it. It would be a good exercise. I ask the Minister to take that on board. Too many people are certainly working in environments where they could be working from home.

We also need to ensure that we have antigen testing where we cannot necessarily have PCR testing continuously; where there are large amounts of people. I have been advocating for this measure for six months. I have stood up inside the Chamber, brought out antigen tests and asked why they could not be used. In the past two months the European Commission has stated they should be used as part of a mix. Why are they not being used more across the board in order that we can track the virus and bring it down? It is a tool that has not been used enough.

Furthermore, when it comes to our public health teams, when we get this virus down they will have to be resourced to act panzer-like, to go in with the support of An Garda Síochána and whoever else, tackle the virus, which is where we need to get to as a country, and keep it down. They have to be resourced.

I saw a striking “RTÉ Investigates” programme last night on Tallaght Hospital and it showed how deeply in debt we are to all of our healthcare workers. I also listened intently to what the Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation, INMO, and other organisations had to say to the Joint Committee on Health. We must acknowledge this work in the near future. On 6 April last, I stated in the Dáil that we should give recognition to all of these workers in the form of some sort of payment. I recommended a once-off payment of €1,000. They are now looking for compensation for childcare costs, for other additional costs and for working longer hours. We are obliged as a country to do this and to acknowledge the efforts that they have made. The Minister also has to deal with the reality that student nurses are working through this pandemic and this was exemplified repeatedly in the programme broadcast last night. I ask the Minister to deal with those two issues. That will show that we really do support our healthcare workers and we recognise the work that they have done.

I ask the Minister to take on board what the Labour Party is proposing today. We need to suppress this virus and get it down to a point where we can give hope to people in this country. The tools to do so are outlined in our motion and I ask the Minister to bear them in mind.

Deputy Ged Nash: The living with Covid plan that Government published last autumn is, quite frankly, redundant. In fact, it was dead on arrival. There is no shame in standing down that plan. In fact, in our view, it would be to the Government’s credit. Given the trauma, tragedy and anxiety that the people of this country have gone through, in particular, in the past six weeks, citizens would prefer it were the Government to front up with them. Citizens know that

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a tweak here and a tweak there to a plan which has not survived contact with reality will not save lives, protect health or allow us to avoid a series of interminable lockdowns. This virulent virus cannot be reasoned with. That has been tried. It has failed. Most of all, it has cost lives. We owe it to the people to tackle this deadly threat head on, change tack, take it by the scruff of the neck and mean it when we do. By adopting the kind of aggressive suppression strategy that the Labour Party proposes, the sacrifices that we make over the next while will be worth it in the long run. It will save lives, protect our health service and health workers, allow for a resumption of meaningful economic activity and minimise the risk of yo-yoing in and out of damaging shutdowns.

Nowhere has the Government's softly-softly and incoherent approach to dealing with this unprecedented threat to human life been more evident than in how it has managed non-essential travel into this jurisdiction from the North. Time and again since last April, I warned the Minister's predecessor and officials in his Department of the effect that unimpeded travel from the North to Border counties and beyond was having on the spread of the virus and the threat to life. I told the Department what action needed to be taken. The Government failed to heed those calls. It is a poor reflection on this Administration that it only elects to sign regulations now nigh on ten months later placing the same kinds of restriction on travel for visitors from the North that have been imposed on residents of the South since last March.

While we would have preferred it had an all-island strategy been agreed, I do not accept for one minute that everything that could have been done to nail down a North-South strategy has been done. Not for the first time in our history has the retreat to tribal politics been responsible for an ever-rising body count on this island. Covid-19 is set to claim even more lives than the Troubles claimed over a 40-year period. The incapability to put narrow interests aside and adopt a common strategy to save lives should be a source of great shame. Sadly, it is a case of business as usual for some actors on this island.

Especially in a time of crisis such as this, leadership and good government involve deploying all of the levers at our disposal to protect the interests of the people we represent. It pains me to say it but when decisive action has been required to suppress aggressively this unprecedented threat to lives and livelihoods, this Government has too often failed or been plain incapable of getting even the basics right. If we are to accept the *realpolitik* that an all-island Covid-19 strategy is unattainable and if that route is exhausted, our attention must naturally turn to the prospect of an east-west, two-island strategy. On 22 January, the Taoiseach stated that such discussions with Prime Minister Johnson were at an "exploratory" and "embryonic" stage. I detected then that it was a half-hearted and anaemic commitment to pursuing such a strategy, but that strategy needs to be doggedly pursued. A degree of alignment with the UK on key issues such as travel, quarantine and the management of emerging variants should be paramount on the agenda at the highest level.

The pandemic represents two crises in one - we have a public health crisis and an economic crisis. We are all seared by the experience of the financial crash and its impact on the economy and people's lives. It is evident every day how the European Central Bank, ECB, and the International Monetary Fund, IMF, have learned from that experience. There are opportunities now. The medicine prescribed is different, for example, and the propitious fiscal conditions and the likelihood that low interest rates will remain a feature of the environment for some considerable time mean that, if the right approach and tools are used, a deep recession can be avoided. Ideologically, I am concerned that there are those at senior level in government and among other decision makers in the system who will want to fight this war with the outdated strategies and

weapons that were used to deal with the previous crisis. The message from the IMF is clear - spend what we can and then spend some more.

The pandemic has wrought havoc on our younger citizens. A staggering 56% of under-24s are unemployed. The Economic and Social Research Institute, ESRI, has warned of the scarring effect. Whole economic sectors have been ravaged. Consumer habits have changed overnight. Many jobs will not come back. A major injection of investment and support is required in upskilling, training and further and higher education. We need a new deal for a new generation in order that our younger population is not left behind.

Supports like the employment wage subsidy scheme, EWSS, have been a critical lifeline for workers and businesses. It is similar to one proposed by the Labour Party in the context of dealing with a potential no-deal Brexit a couple of short years ago. It would cost an additional €3.7 billion to extend the EWSS to the end of the year, but it would be money well spent. It is less costly, as the Minister knows, to protect a job than to create a new one. There should be no cliff edge in ending many of the important lifelines available to businesses and workers at present.

Those on the employment wage subsidy scheme have, in many cases, seen their income drop. They are still at work but they have seen their incomes drop. Since last September, the Government has thrown them and hundreds of thousands of others on the pandemic unemployment payment at the mercy of their banks in terms of the mortgage difficulties they experience. The European Banking Authority states the Irish State can reintroduce a further mortgage moratorium to assist workers who have lost jobs and who are in reduced circumstances but the banking industry, aligned with the Department of Finance, tells us there is no demand. This is not how the Labour Party sees it and it is not our experience in our constituencies. If a moratorium is required then it is required now and it certainly will be required. With little prospect of a return to any kind of what we might term normal economic activity any time soon, structured mortgage breaks are absolutely required now.

Above all else, what citizens need now is a sense of hope, a sense of a new direction, a sense that lessons have been learned and a change of tack to tackle the virus head-on once and for all. As my colleague and our party leader, Deputy Alan Kelly, has said time and again, the people are way ahead of the politicians. They know the Government plan, for whatever it represented, is absolutely holed below the waterline. It is redundant and obsolete. It does not make sense. It has been brought into disrepute. It has absolutely no hope of succeeding. I appeal to the Minister to have the humility and grace to acknowledge a change of course is required and take the country in a different direction at this very challenging time. I am confident the people of this country would get behind him and get behind the Government if he were to commit to embarking on that journey before it is too late. It is not too late to change course. People need hope and a sense of vision that 2021 will be better than the catastrophic year experienced in 2020. They need hope of a better brighter future. The Minister needs to paint a picture of a brighter better post-pandemic Ireland. I appeal to him to support the motion and I ask the House to support the motion, to change direction and to tackle this unprecedented threat to the citizens of this country. It is required and it needs to be done now.

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I welcome the opportunity to discuss Ireland's response to Covid-19 and I thank the Deputies in the Labour Party for tabling the motion. I have read it carefully and it contains many very good ideas, many of which are in line with approaches being taken or being considered by the Government at present. I look forward to an ongoing constructive debate throughout the House as we navigate our way through this

very difficult global pandemic.

Before I continue, I would like to express my deepest sympathies to the families and friends of those who have lost their lives to Covid-19 in the past year. It has been an incredibly difficult time for our country and it is important that we remember these family members, friends and colleagues.

I am sure all Members of the House will join me in paying tribute to our healthcare workers and, of course, the other front-line workers who have worked tirelessly since the beginning of this pandemic. Last night's "RTÉ Investigates" programme provided a stark insight into the enormous pressure that our healthcare workers are under, as well as the extraordinary professionalism and dedication they bring to bear on our behalf every day.

Ireland's National Public Health Emergency Team, NPHE, was established on 27 January last year, days before the WHO declared Covid-19 to be a public health emergency of international concern. Since then, Ireland's approach to Covid-19 has been informed by the guidance and evidence from the WHO, the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control and, obviously, advice from NPHE, together with close working relationships with colleagues throughout Europe. The Government remains absolutely determined in its resolve to tackle the spread of Covid-19. The comprehensive disease prevention and control strategy adopted seeks to prevent the virus spreading among our population to the greatest extent possible. The aim of the strategy is to limit transmission of the virus through a range of public health measures, including our testing and tracing contact programme. The resilience and recovery plan is based on a public health approach to the pandemic, and aims to suppress the virus to the greatest extent possible while allowing society and businesses to operate as much as possible. It was designed to help people and organisations anticipate and prepare for the measures that might be needed to suppress the virus.

The pattern of disease in Ireland is broadly similar to what has been observed in many other European countries. Like most of Europe, Ireland began to experience increasing Covid-19 infection rates in late summer and into the autumn. We achieved reductions in these infections by escalating measures in line with the plan following advice from NPHE. Most recently, as we are all acutely aware, infections increased again, and this occurred at the same time as the circulation of a new variant, the so-called UK variant. Again, measures were escalated in line with the plan. As a result of public support and adherence to the measures, we now have the fastest-decreasing 14-day incidence of the disease in the EU and we are about mid-table in terms of our 14-day incidence. This is as a direct result of the efforts of people to stay at home, limit their contacts and follow the public health advice.

While we have seen reductions in hospitalisation and ICU admissions in tandem with reductions in our case numbers, we need to make further progress to reduce the mortality that, tragically and inevitably, goes with higher incidences. Our average daily case numbers are still around 1,000 cases and they need to fall very considerably further than that. The Covid vaccine programme is a vital part of the public health response, and roll-out of the vaccine programme has started well and is ramping up.

Given the international dimension to the virus, we have worked closely with European partners on our approach to the spread of the disease. We have moved from an advisory regime to a mandatory quarantine regime that involves enforcement measures and penal provisions. Detailed work on new travel measures, including the drafting of primary legislation to provide

for designated quarantine facilities, is a priority. In addition, new regulations provide for mandatory home quarantine for arriving passengers.

Increasing capacity across the health and social care sector is a priority for Government and is fundamental to the response to Covid and ensuring the ongoing delivery of non-Covid care. Investment was provided as part of budget 2021 to fund an additional 1,146 acute beds, excluding ICU beds, on a permanent basis, and that is over and above the number available at the start of 2020. Efforts will also see increased capacity in primary and community care, which will reduce pressure on acute services and provide more healthcare options closer to people's homes, in line with the Sláintecare vision and plan. The strategic plan for critical care aims to bring permanent adult critical care capacity in Ireland to 321 by the end of this year and to 446 after that, which is in line with the recommendations of the health service capacity review on critical care. We have also secured agreement with private hospitals to provide up to 30% of their capacity, if required, to deal with surges in Covid-19.

Infection protection and control is, of course, of critical importance and significant additional funding is being provided to enhance the health services in infection prevention and control responses across acute and community services. As Deputies will be aware, we are targeting efforts at other sectors which are vulnerable to infection, including ongoing serial testing, now-weekly serial testing in residential care facilities and ongoing serial testing in food production facilities.

We recognise the need for consistent consideration of how best to support women through the pandemic, including our predominantly female health and social care workforce and, of course, formal and informal carers. Improving women's health is a priority, as laid out in the programme for Government. A big investment in women's health has been made for this year, including additional funding for maternity services, gynaecology services and actions arising from the women's health task force.

Cross-Government collaboration is essential to the response to Covid-19. We have worked together to introduce measures to mitigate the economic impact of Covid-19, including the pandemic unemployment payment and support for businesses, which includes businesses and pubs in rural areas. Some €221 million has been provided for the tourism sector and over €100 million in supports has been made available to date for Irish airlines and airports.

Finally, the Government is committed to close and productive co-operation with Northern Ireland to foster commonality in approach. This includes significant engagement in co-operation between the Chief Medical Officers and the two Departments of Health.

I wish to finish by acknowledging the widespread support for public health restrictions by the public and the solidarity shown by communities and citizens and residents right through the year. As we have so far, we will continue to get through this together.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I ask the Minister to move his amendment.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: I move amendment No. 1:

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

"recognises:

— that like most of Europe, Ireland experienced increasing Covid-19 infection rates

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over the winter months and by December and January infection rates were accelerating rapidly with consequent increases in hospitalisation and mortality rates;

— that the Government, following advice from the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE), took decisive and proactive action and put in place Level 5 restrictions from 31st December, in order to reduce the rate of infection and to prevent mortality from the disease;

— the widespread commitment and continued adherence to these public health restrictions by the Irish public; and

— that health and social care workers have been at the forefront of the response to the Covid-19 pandemic in Ireland since the beginning of the pandemic, and they have worked tirelessly to care for people who have become infected, while also delivering non-Covid services across the breadth of our health and social care services;

notes that the measures taken to address the third wave of the virus have:

— resulted in significant suppression of viral transmission, and acknowledging that in January Ireland had one of the highest incidences of the disease in Europe, Ireland is now suppressing this third wave of Covid-19 infection faster than any other country in Europe;

— following a surge in incidence, succeeded in reducing incidence, and hospitalisations, Intensive Care Unit admissions and mortality are now stabilising/declining; and

— enabled the successful ongoing roll-out of the Covid-19 vaccination programme, which, up to 3rd February, has resulted in over 200,000 Covid-19 vaccines administered, with 67,000 people fully vaccinated, having received their first and second doses and this is a key element of the ongoing public health response;

cautions:

— that notwithstanding the roll-out of vaccines, the current public health protective measures like social distancing, face masks and respiratory etiquette will continue to be fundamental components of the approach to the prevention and mitigation of Covid-19; and

— that the current experience of countries across the 27 European Union (EU) Member States/United Kingdom and elsewhere, demonstrates the fragility of the epidemiological situation in Ireland and the threat still posed by the Covid-19 pandemic;

acknowledges that:

— the emergence of Covid-19 worldwide:

— has taken a significant personal, societal and economic toll;

— has had a significant impact on the ongoing delivery of health and social care; and

— resulted in a very significant increased requirement for infection prevention and control (IPC) capacity across the health system;

— these impacts are inextricably linked to the levels of transmission of Covid-19 in the community and underline the need for continued widespread compliance with public health

guidelines as they evolve; and

— in light of the foregoing, the Government:

— is implementing an extensive and comprehensive strategy to the Covid-19 pandemic, including a range of public health restrictions and investments in public health capacity in line with the national framework for living with Covid-19;

— has taken measures in best interest of public health, having regard also to maintaining economic and social activity as safely as possible; and

— has taken measures in best interest of public health, having regard also to maintaining economic and social activity as safely as possible; and

— has ensured that the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme (EWSS) is providing support across all sectors of the economy to support viable firms and encourage employment in the midst of these very challenging times; to date, subsidy payments of almost €2 billion have been made and Pay Related Social Insurance (PRSI) relief worth over €300 million has been granted to over 46,000 employers in respect of over 515,000 employees;

— has supported businesses via the Pandemic Stabilisation Recovery Fund (PSRF) and the Irish Strategic Investment Fund (ISIF), as part of the National Treasury Management Agency (NTMA), has allocated €2 billion for deployment from the PSRF to support businesses that have been impacted by the pandemic and to invest in their recovery phase;

in particular, welcomes the significant investment in the vaccine programme and the successful commencement to the roll-out of the programme starting with the most vulnerable groups;

further acknowledges that testing and contact tracing are key components of the response to the pandemic and recognises the robust testing strategy under the guidance of NPHET and the comprehensive testing and tracing operation that has been put in place by the Health Service Executive, and welcomes the significant investment provided to the testing and tracing programme, amounting to €445 million in 2021, and the ongoing recruitment of dedicated community swabbers and contact tracing staff;

further recognises the very significant ongoing serial testing programme in residential care facilities and food production facilities, and welcomes the Government commitment to continue the programme of serial testing in those most vulnerable settings;

further welcomes the ongoing consideration of all appropriate mechanisms to target testing to detect and mitigate the impact of the virus across the population including the adoption of appropriate testing technologies based on evidence and evaluation;

also acknowledges the important role of strong measures in relation to travel in the wider strategy for the management of the Covid-19 pandemic, and welcomes the requirement for passengers arriving to Ireland from overseas to present a Covid-19 passenger locator form and evidence of a negative pre-departure test taken within 72 hours of travel upon arrival;

furthermore welcomes:

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— the work on new travel measures, including the drafting of primary legislation to provide for designated quarantine facilities, and the introduction of mandatory home quarantine for arriving passengers, with limited exemptions;

— the investment in hospital capacity, including €600 million in the Winter Plan 2020/2021 and Budget 2021 to provide for a permanent increase in hospital beds (excluding critical care beds) of 1,146 above the number in the system at the end of 2019;

— the Strategic Plan for Critical Care which aims to bring permanent adult critical care capacity in Ireland to 321 by the end of 2021, and to 446 in the long-term, in line with the recommendations of the Health Service Capacity Review on critical care; and

— significant additional funding in 2021 to enhance the health service's IPC responses in an integrated way across acute and community services;

further notes the agreement with 18 private hospitals to provide up to 30 per cent of their capacity, if required, to deal with the current surge of Covid-19 cases;

acknowledges the need to strengthen and reform how public health medicine operates, including the introduction of a consultant-led public health model, and notes the commitment to significant investment in public health with the announcement of plans to double the current workforce by recruiting an additional 255 permanent staff, at an annual cost of over €17 million;

furthermore, recognises the disproportionate impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on specific groups and in particular:

— the significant contribution made by women to the Covid-19 response, and the disproportionate burden which the pandemic has placed on women;

— the need for consistent consideration of how best to support women throughout the pandemic, including our predominantly female health and social care workforce and informal and family carers, within the context of the overall response; and

— the work of the Women's Health Taskforce, which is a priority in the Programme for Government: Our Shared Future, and the additional funding allocated to the taskforce and key services for women, including maternity and gynaecology services, in Budget 2021;

acknowledges:

— that Covid-19 is a global challenge requiring close international collaboration and commits to continue the close and productive cooperation with Northern Ireland to foster commonality in approaches, where possible, in addressing the Covid-19 pandemic;

— that the Government is negotiating its participation and contribution to Covid-19 Vaccines Global Access (COVAX) as part of a Team Europe effort following the EU joint engagement to mobilise resources in a coherent and efficient way in the context of the EU Global Response to coronavirus and welcomes that Team Europe's engagement will accelerate global efforts to bring the pandemic under control and scale up distribution of a successful vaccine as soon as it becomes available;

— that Covid-19 requires close collaboration across Government and across all sec-

tors and welcomes a record level of funding for tourism of just under €221 million that has been provided, and over €100 million in support that has already been made available under schemes for Irish airlines and airports; and

— the advice to work from home where possible;

commits that:

— the Government will continue to monitor the measures that have been put in place in response to the economic challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic, to support viable firms and encourage employment, including the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme; and

— regular assessments will continue to be carried out to determine whether it is necessary to adjust such schemes to better fulfil the objectives of providing the necessary stimulus to the economy so as to mitigate the effects on the economy of Covid-19, or to facilitate the efficient use of Exchequer resources and protect the public finances;

further again, acknowledges the widespread support and adherence to public health restrictions by the public and the solidarity shown by communities and citizens, in line with the Resilience and Recovery 2020-2021: Plan for Living with Covid-19;

recognises the reduction in the disease incidence, with Ireland suppressing this third wave of Covid-19 infection faster than any other country in Europe and the need to continue to maintain public health protective measures to minimise the spread of Covid-19;

welcomes the protective measures in place to ensure ongoing provision of healthcare including €4 billion to protect, reform and expand health and social care services and implement universal healthcare in Budget 2021;

highlights the measures put in place to mitigate the economic impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, including the Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment and supports for businesses, including businesses and pubs in rural areas;

emphasises the measures put in place to protect the elderly, vulnerable groups and those experiencing loneliness and social isolation, including increased funding for mental health services, extra counselling supports, home-help supports, and the expert panel on long-term residential care; and

strongly values the contribution of health and social care workers at the forefront of the response to the Covid-19 pandemic.”

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We now move to Sinn Féin. There are six speakers listed and 20 minutes.

Deputy David Cullinane: First, I commend the Labour Party on bringing forward this motion. I join the Minister in extending my solidarity to all the families of those who have lost loved ones to Covid-19 in recent months and especially in the past month, when the number of deaths has been very high.

There is no doubt whatever that we need a change in approach. Sinn Féin supports a maximum suppression strategy. We want to get to a point where we get the numbers down as low as we possibly can and thereafter to keep them low. If we are honest, we have failed in that

area in the past when the investments needed were not made in the appropriate responses and measures when numbers were brought low by huge efforts by people to abide by public health restrictions, which are really tough on families, workers and businesses. The inaction of the Government and the failure to invest in test and trace, as well as the failure to embrace all-island responses or to ensure that we have sufficient checks at ports and airports have resulted in this State losing control of the virus, not because of anything the public has done but because the Government has not got its house in order.

A strategy that is fit for purpose must be one that is underpinned by the public health advice. It has to be underpinned by a robust test and trace system that can be used to hunt down the virus when the numbers are low and stay ahead of the virus, and which really achieves the first principles given to us by the World Health Organization at the very start of the pandemic, namely, test, trace, isolate, and now vaccinate. We have to get the all-island responses right and get supports, measures and controls and checks at ports and airports right. The reality is that in most of these areas, we simply have not done so.

I wish to address some issues that arose over the past 24 hours. It is really important that lessons are learned. The further kite-flying by the Tánaiste yesterday is an absolute disgrace. No lessons at all are being learned, and the Government is pushing back against public health advice, again trying to blame others for the fact that this State, including the Minister for Transport, the Minister present in his capacity as Minister for Health and the Government, has never done its job in relation to travel. The Government has been warned time and again by public health officials that the discretionary elements of travel need to be removed and quarantine needs to be mandatory. The Minister's opening statement stated the Government is moving from an advisory regime to a mandatory quarantine regime but that is not true. What he is proposing cannot be enforced and unless it is mandatory quarantine in hotels for all non-essential travellers, then we can forget about it, it is not going to work. The Minister has tripped himself up in interviews, as has the Taoiseach, in trying to explain the difference between self-isolation and home quarantining when the reality of the need to get those restrictions right is staring them in the face and has been for some time.

The kite-flying from the Tánaiste yesterday again, in competition with senior Ministers in Fianna Fáil, on when certain elements in the economy will re-open is another lesson that has not been learned. It is not what people want to hear. They want a clear plan and a clear strategy that is based on the public health advice. A strong message must be sent to the Government to stop the kite-flying and please stop the push-back against public health advice. The Government should do its job and make sure that all of the protections and measures that need to be in place are put in place when people are making sacrifices. These public health restrictions that impact on workers, families and businesses are very challenging. Everybody accepts that. However, they become even more challenging when people see half-baked measures from the Government, which is not doing what it should be doing, not living up to its side of the bargain and, worse, kite-flying and pushing back against public health advice. Please, stop.

I want to make a brief point about what is happening in healthcare and the comments made by the healthcare trade unions yesterday. We heard of burnout and low morale from front-line healthcare workers, which all of us can understand given that they have been operating with one hand tied behind their backs. There is no serial testing of front-line workers in hospitals. What in God's name is going on if we are not even doing serial testing in hospitals except when there are outbreaks? How are we using testing and tracing to hunt down this virus? There is a battle every day for personal protective equipment, PPE. That is what the healthcare unions

are telling us. The vaccine roll-out is haphazard in that it was not following the data that the Department has in respect of the highest rates of prevalence of the disease. Finally, we heard about issues relating to childcare.

The Minister must resolve these problems. He needs to get his act together. The Government needs to get its act together. It is clear that the strategy is not working. It is not working because of this push back time and again and because the Government has not made the investments where they need to be made and people are feeling very let down.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: Can I raise an issue about the speakers?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I was just about to say that I inadvertently moved on to Sinn Féin speakers.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: I just wanted to make that point.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I will go back to the Labour speakers. It was my mistake. I did not put on my glasses when I was reading the list and I was waiting for Deputy Cullinane to finish speaking. It was my fault. We have stopped the clock for Sinn Féin speakers and I will come back to them when it is their turn. With apologies, I am going back to the Labour speakers, Deputies Ó Ríordáin and Howlin.

Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin: If the Minister succeeds in his endeavour to drive down the virus and rid this land of Covid-19, we will all succeed and we can all go back to the type of human relationships and interactions all of us have been sorely missing. It is now February. In January, we lost more than 1,000 people to this virus. We had more infections in January than we had in 2020 so clearly a new strategy is needed. Unfortunately, I do not get from the Minister's contribution that he understands the sense of the need for a new strategy.

Over the weekend, the Taoiseach acknowledged that mistakes had been made in December. It is fair to acknowledge also that mistakes were made across this Chamber in December in terms of what people were calling for and what the Government did. If politicians learn from those situations, that is good for politics. I can understand that the Minister gets frustrated when people in his party are peddling misinformation about Monday-to-Friday-only vaccinations. I would say that is deeply frustrating. I would say it is also frustrating when we hear people from the Opposition suggesting that we are at the bottom of the EU table in terms of vaccinations, which is also untrue.

I appreciate that the Minister is working within a level of misinformation. However, there are things within the Government's control that are making matters much worse. What happened yesterday was a classic example of that. We had a leak, again, from the Department of Education about the potential reopening of schools. I am sure this information will have been of interest to teachers, special needs assistants and parents who will be dying to know more about the potential reopening. It is literally days since 1,000 deaths were announced. We had more infections in January than we in the entirety of 2020. That was another leak from the Department of Education, the same Department that cannot seem to get anything over the line without making an announcement about it or leaking about it, which again makes the reopening of schools more difficult. Then the Minister for beer gardens comes out and furthers his personal agenda, again making things worse by talking about potentially reopening industry and having family gatherings. This in no way recognises the fact that we are in the teeth of a body count. The Government's legislation on travel next week will apparently reference two countries. This

is its great move after nine months of recommendations and calls from across this House. The UK is introducing legislation that deals with 33 countries, so why are we not going to where the UK is now? Why are we always behind? Why do we not become a European leader when it comes to suppressing the virus? There is genuinely no point in giving people hope about beer gardens, family gatherings and schools reopening if we are just going to go back and lock down again in May. People are going around the twist and finding it extremely difficult to function. We cannot give with one hand and take away with the other.

Unless we are serious about driving down this virus as far as it can go, we will just get into a yo-yo effect of reopening, then closing and doing it again and again. Then we will see new variants requiring a whole new strategy. This is not working and it has not worked so that strategy must be stopped. The elements in the control of the Government must be controlled. There must be no more leaks from Departments or self-indulgent press conferences from the Tánaiste, who is clearly not in line with the national effort and is again making the work we are trying to share in this House more difficult.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: I know the Labour Party thought long and hard about tabling this motion. There is almost a weariness in this House, as there is across the nation, about this terrible disease that has taken such a terrible toll on all of us. We have had a shockingly dreadful January, particularly for those who have lost loved ones. There has been a terrible rate of infection and death. We must ask questions and provide some answers as to why, after ten months of the pandemic, we arrived at our lowest and most devastating point.

In my judgment and that of the Labour Party we need a new approach and very clear signalling and messaging, as my colleague, Deputy Ó Ríordáin, has said. The mixed messaging is driving people bonkers when we need to be very clear. We want to work in concert with the Government and have a clarity of focus, strategy and messaging.

I will deal with two points in the few minutes I have. This pandemic has affected every man, woman and child in our nation. We will not truly know the full extent of the impact until well after this pandemic ends, including the degree of harm and things not done, such as screenings or identification of other health matters. They will come upon us and we must prepare for them now. For the very young we must think of the psychological impact and loss of education, and that may never be overcome. For older people, there is the sheer anxiety of fear of death and contact with loved ones as a vector for death. We have never lived with that before and we must prepare ourselves in a psychological way for it.

I will deal specifically with the issues faced by women. As international studies, the World Health Organization and women's organisations have recognised, women are uniquely affected and in a greater way by this pandemic than any other cohort. For example, there is the case of domestic violence. I commend An Garda Síochána on its efforts. It has gone well beyond what anybody could have asked for in respect of its efforts to address the issue. Gardaí have been visible and proactive.

I thank the NGOs in the women's sector, including the domestic violence NGOs, the rape crisis centres and the women's refuges. They have stepped up to the plate. However, despite their best and heroic efforts, there is, unfortunately, a sea of hidden abuse that we will see after this pandemic ends. As we know, women in the workforce constitute the majority of front-line healthcare workers. They are nurses in our hospitals, carers and home carers. They have been carrying an extraordinary burden. They are now at the end of their tether. They are at their

wits' end. They need recognition, and more than that, they need resources and help. We need to target those and set out exactly what we are going to do for them.

The next category of the workforce that we are going to ask step back is teachers. Again, this is a predominantly female profession. I refer to issues such as childcare provision. Why can we not address these issues as other countries have done? We have not done that well. We must also prepare for the aftermath of the pandemic, for example, the lack of screening.

My final point concerns international solidarity. We must recognise that until all our people are vaccinated - and by that, I mean all the people on this planet - none of us will be immune, safe or invulnerable. We are vulnerable to mutations of this awful virus as long as vaccination is not universal. We must ensure that we subscribe and advocate, not only providing funding but also the capacity to provide the vaccines to the scores of Third World countries which have not even started a vaccination programme yet. Their front-line workers are expected to walk into danger without that. We have much to do. We have set out an agenda. I hope that today is the start of a new approach of clarity, vision and united determination to defeat this virus finally, and to prepare for its aftermath.

Deputy Imelda Munster: The first big failure in tackling this virus was the failure to keep ahead of it when the numbers were low. The Government never got test and trace right. It was never used to full effect. It did not get travel checks right, and it certainly did not get the all-Island response right. Most people outside of government believe that a maximum suppression strategy is the only way to crush this virus. The key ingredients to achieve suppression are test, trace, isolate and vaccinate. Test controls at airports, mandatory quarantine for all incoming travellers and a strong, all-island approach are required.

We also need to know what will happen come 5 March 2021 for the rest of the year. What we do not need are contradictory messages from Ministers or half-baked measures that do not go far enough. The Government seems to add to the confusion and anxiety on a weekly basis. With all the confusion and contradictory messages, it is constantly adding to people's anxiety. All the ingredients for a maximum suppression strategy have always been there. The failure has been down to the lack of capacity and the failure of the Government to prepare for any possible resurgence in the virus.

I accept that the supply of vaccines is outside of the Government's control but many questions are being asked about the process, and no answers are coming from the Minister or the Government. There are 2,500 pharmacists. There has been little or no communication with them. They are supposed to be involved in the roll-out of the vaccines for the over 70s. They have still no idea what part they are going to play in this process. In respect of the ICT system, work only started on it a month ago. It should have been started six months ago. It was left until the last minute. Why was work not started on that during the summer? How can we register people without having a proper ICT system in place?

The health committee was told yesterday that there are serious problems with the initial roll-out. We do not even know if it will be fit for purpose. We do not know where the 15 mass vaccination centres will be located. We have no idea how many staff will be required. Even front-line staff do not know what is happening. For example, there are hundreds of front-line staff at Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital in Drogheda who still have not got their vaccinations. This is the sort of Government incoherence we are dealing with and it is not fair. It certainly is not fair on front-line staff.

From the get-go, the Government never got travel right. The guidance in this regard was always just advisory and there was never any enforcement. The discretionary element meant it was obvious that the strategy was never going to work. We need mass testing and quarantining for all non-essential travel. People have been saying that for months. We need a crystal-clear definition of essential travel and essential work. Back in May, when NPHET recommended mandatory quarantine, the Tánaiste at the time openly challenged the soundness of its advice. Here we are now with the current rate of infections. There should be testing of incoming passengers prior to arrival and five days afterwards. That will send out a clear message. As it stands, introducing mandatory quarantining will take weeks.

The Minister for Health has been on the back foot all along on these issues. Again, it is down to incoherence and his failure to implement a clear maximum suppression strategy to crush this virus. That goes back to the Minister and the Government. He needs to get his act together and set out a clear plan to end the confusion and anxiety.

Deputy Brian Stanley: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this motion. Our party supports maximum suppression, as outlined by NPHET. We want to continue to work with NPHET to ensure that we crush the virus and roll out the vaccines in a timely and efficient manner. We have worked hard for the implementation of a strategy of strong restrictions underpinned by a fast track and trace process. At times, things could have been done better and we have had our disagreements with the Minister and the Government on some of the decisions taken.

We know it is difficult but there is a lot more that can be done to deal with the pandemic. We have long called for greater cross-Border co-operation between the Governments, North and South. We want an all-Ireland approach to deal with the pandemic. It has been a great disappointment to see the lack of ambition by the Government to engage proactively with its counterpart in the North. Just last week, the health committee in the North heard that the assembly's Department of Health has yet to receive a formal request for data sharing from the Government. That is disappointing and it needs to be corrected. The position taken by the DUP in blocking Covid checks and quarantine at the ports in the North has caused difficulties. We need to keep lobbying that party, both the Government and everyone else, to change its position.

The virus does not recognise borders and nor should our strategy. We need sensible and practical solutions to the ongoing challenges around international travel. The Government has been foot dragging on this issue. The international travel restrictions it has introduced do not go far enough. It is a half measure to ask people to self-quarantine and for gardaí to call around to houses and apartments and knock on doors to check whether people are at home. Imposing restrictions on travellers from just two countries is hopeless. The Government needs to understand that. It seems to be in a world of make believe. We are calling for a mandatory hotel quarantine regime for all inbound air travellers that is enforceable and makes good use of limited resources. Of course we need a waiver for workers such as hauliers, health workers, engineers etc., who are essential, once they have the required documentation.

I will conclude by mentioning front-line workers, who are exhausted. They are playing catch-up with waiting lists and working excess hours. They have had to deal with appalling situations over the past 11 months. They account for more than half the cases of Covid. I am calling on the Minister and the Government to address these concerns within the health sector, the roll-out of the vaccine and the restrictions that are needed now. We need to crush this virus.

Deputy Réada Cronin: Aggressive suppression was never the plan of the Government. We

saw it welcome flights full of rugby fans from Italy's inferno and global guests for St. Patrick's Day and how there was not even a leaflet at the airport for people returning from Cheltenham. Last summer, fresh from telling billionaire tax exiles they were grand here and would not be overstaying their welcome, the Government sent inspectors to the airport not to check who was arriving but to check whether there was anyone on small State payments leaving. From the outset, wealth has been the motivation, not health. From closing down too early, opening up too quickly and doing too little too late in respect of testing and tracing to mandatory quarantine 18 months on, we are still thinking about it. Putting private wealth over public health is a symptom of the social disease sweeping old politics with its myopia and selfishness.

In 2019, the World Health Organization reported that 1.4 million people died of tuberculosis. Luckily for us in the developed world, they had the decency to keep it in their countries and die out of sight. Then came Covid, which hit us head-on. I said to the Minister at Christmas that the only reason the developed world cares about Covid is because it is a threat to our economies. Some of our front-line workers have yet to receive a first vaccine, yet family members or the celebrity in the room got the spare doses. In poorer countries, front-line workers are battling the virus and its variants and it is a case of nothing now and nothing ahead. We are all in this together, the Minister says, but he has not actually grasped that we really are. We are letting in the variants while the UK is reporting variants of concern on top of other variants of concern.

Sinn Féin has advocated for aggressive suppression from the start. I am proud we supported the No Profit on Pandemic EU citizens' initiative. I call on the Government to use Ireland's seat on the UN Security Council to make the world secure and to stand up for our shared humanity by championing early access to free vaccinations for our brothers and sisters in poorer parts of the world.

Yesterday, the Tories announced hotel quarantine for people travelling from 33 countries but we are still talking about only two. Imagine being shown up by the Tories. The embarrassment. We need an all-island strategy. We need mandatory hotel quarantine and sharing of data on passengers from the North. The Tánaiste stated yesterday that there are plans to launch a refreshed Living with Covid plan. The families of the 3,752 dead and dying would call that phrase deluded, insensitive and tone deaf. Facing into a crisis - we are a year into it now - all actions seemed too drastic. Afterwards, as we count the dead, they will all be seen to have been too inadequate. Chase this virus and dig the firebreaks in front of it; aggressive suppression is a no-brainer.

Deputy Johnny Mythen: I thank the Labour Party for tabling this motion. It covers a comprehensive number of detailed issues, many of which have been spoken about before in this House. Various proposals have already been discussed. I would like to focus on a few issues. This motion calls for student nurses to be paid. This is of the utmost necessity. What is needed is a sense of urgency to protect the well-being of all front-line workers, financially and in every other way possible. I spoke on the Sinn Féin motion calling for pay for student nurses and midwives two weeks ago. Notably, the Government did not oppose it. What has happened since then? There cannot be any more posturing or delays. It is wrong to place student nurses on the front line to work in this pandemic and not pay them for such a high risk. Knowing the conditions they face, it is reprehensible when a small financial gesture could at least relieve some of their financial pressures.

I recently tabled parliamentary questions on PPE for front-line staff. In particular, I asked about access to and the requirement for the FFP2 masks that the Irish Nurses and Midwives

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Organisation is calling for. I ask the Minister to give his response today or to kindly revert to me. This is an urgent matter and addressing it would have a genuine impact on transmission levels in hospitals. When a leading medical union is calling for practical, sensible measures, it should be accommodated.

This motion also touches on the mandatory quarantine measures. This is an issue in respect of which the Government has got it wrong. Our current Covid-19 restrictions on international travel are, by definition, impossible to implement. The only way to ensure and enforce quarantine requirements is with a mandatory hotel quarantine regime, with exemptions for essential travel. The same quarantine requirements that apply at Dublin Airport should apply at Belfast International Airport. There is no logical reason real-time sharing of incoming passenger data cannot be agreed to for the common good. The public is ahead of the Government again on this. When the Government is asking people to make a sacrifice and stay inside, and when they have practically been in lockdown since last March, it is reasonable for people to expect the Government to be able to get over the logistical challenges and implement a proper quarantine regime of the kind that has been introduced seamlessly in other jurisdictions.

11 o'clock

This brings me on to my final point, which is the absolute importance of a common, beneficial approach to an all-Ireland alliance, based on saving lives and eradicating the virus. The first task at hand is to establish which Minister and Department will take responsibility for driving this approach. An all-Ireland approach needs to be mindful and recognise cross-border communities. There are people who are elected to and serve in these Houses who cross the so-called Border to do their work and an all-Ireland strategy needs to be cognisant of that. I urge colleagues to listen and take on board some of the contributions this morning and, most importantly, to listen to the people of this country who have sacrificed so much and deserve far better than the mismanagement and drip-feed communications they are getting from the Government.

Deputy Martin Browne: One challenge we are facing right now when it comes to Covid suppression strategy is the lack of clear and determined decision-making. Kite-flying is all we seem to be getting.

Like many others present, I find it frustrating to be given fake answers to questions I submit on the roll-out of the vaccine and on quarantine or to be told that urgent details are yet to be decided. When seeking clarity on the various tiers in the vaccination programme, I too often have been issued with a standard response that does not relate to my question. For example, group 6 is still undefined. Childcare workers were said to be in this group, and then they were not. Carers are dispersed through various groups and people with disabilities are also uncertain about where they are included. When I submitted a parliamentary question asking whether pharmacist assistants will be vaccinated alongside pharmacists in the roll-out, all I got was a stock response with no reference to pharmacists at all. Instead, I was told to look at the vaccine allocation strategy on the *gov.ie* website.

Recently, I asked if travellers coming into the country who have to restrict their movements will be provided with secure transport from their arrival point to their residence or accommodation so as not to risk spreading Covid-19 on public transport. The response I received was that “The implementation of Government measures concerning international travel quarantine and supporting regulations are being worked through”. That means more delay.

Sinn Féin has been consistent in advocating a maximum suppression strategy for Covid-19. We need to crush this virus and keep the numbers down. We would aim to keep numbers low while facilitating, where possible, the reopening of schools and aspects of the economy, all guided by speedy and full implementation of public health advice. Socially, we have consistently pressed for proper supports for families and businesses and moratoriums for mortgage and rent payers. We advocate a robust trace, isolate and vaccination programme, which the Government has failed to use to effectively hunt down the virus. There is no serial testing in hospitals until after the outbreak.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: For the Social Democrats, I call Deputy Shortall.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: I welcome this motion, the essential elements of which amount to a zero Covid strategy. Whether people call it a maximum suppression strategy or an aggressive suppression strategy, it amounts to the same. It is about driving down the figures of the virus, ideally to single digits, while having a proper testing and tracing system that is capable of hunting down the virus, jumping on any outbreak, finding out where it came from and dealing with it. Critically, it also involves having clear controls on the importation of the virus, something we have never had in this country.

I welcome the fact that it now seems that all the parties in opposition are in favour of mandatory hotel quarantining. Some of us have been looking for this for quite a while. I acknowledge Solidarity-People Before Profit in this regard. We in the Social Democrats have been pursuing a mandatory quarantining system for quite some time. Now that Sinn Féin, the Labour Party and many Independent Members and Independent groups are supporting that measure, I hope the strong voice coming from across the Opposition might be heard by the Government. There is the potential to do something good and effective in this country by all parties in this Dáil working together on a clear strategy, which has to be a zero Covid strategy. Nothing else will work. It is infuriating to hear the Taoiseach talking all the time about being “cautious” and “conservative”. Those two terms are being used frequently. That is the last thing we need in this country in order to respond to Covid. We need our political leaders in government to be brave and courageous and to pursue a clear strategy that gives us the best chance of success. We need to do what works. What has been done over the past 11 months has not worked and we need to be clear about that. The Government needs to face up to the fact that that has not worked and a new approach needs to be taken urgently. The essential element of that new approach has to relate to travel and has to be about having strict controls so that we do not continue to import the virus.

Looking back over the past 11 months, we know that the virus came from China initially. It then came here as a result of flights for a rugby match from Italy that should have been cancelled at the time, but no decision was taken on that. It then came from Cheltenham, in respect of which no decision was taken and no leadership provided. During the summer, there was no leadership on travel, so we got the Spanish variant, which accounted for more than 60% of cases here by September. At Christmas, there was no leadership on travel, so we imported the UK variant. This will continue, time and again, unless there is a change in the strategy. That is the fundamental point that the Minister, along with everybody else, does not seem to accept.

It is infuriating to hear the Tánaiste musing about parts of the country or of the economy reopening. This is fantasy stuff. Unless we change the strategy and pursue a rigorous zero Covid strategy, we face rolling lockdowns at least to the end of this year and potentially further. The reason that now, at this point, a clear zero Covid strategy is so essential is that there are threats

from these new variants, namely, the South African and Brazilian variants, and who knows what other variants with what other impacts will arise. It is inevitable that there will be other variants. We need a clear strategy, therefore, to give ourselves the best chance of surviving all of that, because it is about surviving at this stage, and of being able to get to a place where at least we can look forward to some normality and some opening up of the country, if only at a domestic level, and a zero Covid strategy gives us the best opportunity for that.

That issue of travel is, thankfully, now coming to the fore and people are coming to the conclusion that we need mandatory hotel quarantining. I have a concern about who is in charge of travel in this country. I am making a call on the Taoiseach to assign responsibility for travel and quarantining to a different Minister. This is no reflection on the capacity of the Minister for Health - that is not the reason I am saying it - but as it stands, he is dealing with significant demands of responding to the pandemic and rolling out the vaccination programme while, at the same time, endeavouring to keep some element of our normal health service running. It simply does not make sense that the same Minister would also have responsibility for implementing and overseeing the regime for monitoring international travel during the pandemic.

There is not the capacity on the part of either the Minister or the Department of Health to do that, and nor does it come into that area of responsibility. That has to be made clear. This goes much further than that, if we are serious about addressing the issues of travel. It is particularly important now that the UK has announced new mandatory hotel quarantine rules for UK and Irish residents. This work demands a serious time commitment and a renewed focus to address both ongoing issues and newly emerging problems. Many of those emerging and existing problems need to be dealt with properly but have not been dealt with, such as oversight of what is being termed “home quarantining”. I cannot understand how that can possibly succeed but, in any event, there needs to be the involvement of a Minister allocating sufficient time. There is a need to prepare for mandatory hotel quarantining, including passing the necessary legislation, procuring hotels, transport and security and so on. Somebody needs to oversee the policing of ports and airports in line with the new rules. We need to stop the so-called Dublin dodge. It is unbelievable that has been allowed to continue and that we do not have sharing of data between North and South. That the Minister has ignored this for many months is unforgivable as there is an immediate need to share those data. The implementation of a joint strategy with Northern Ireland has been ignored. These things cannot be dealt with by the Department of Health or the Minister for Health. I call on the Taoiseach to now allocate responsibility to the Minister for Transport, to the Minister for Justice or to the Minister for Foreign Affairs, all of whom have roles and capacity in this regard. That needs to happen urgently.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I thank the Labour Party for giving us the opportunity to discuss Covid-19 strategy. It is critical that we do because, quite frankly, it beggars belief that the Government is continuing to talk about living with Covid-19. Even more shockingly, this week the Minister with responsibility for housing has been citing arbitrary dates in a few weeks’ time to reopen construction and other sectors of the economy with the cheerleading of Mr. Tom Parlon from the Construction Industry Federation, CIF.

This is a terrifying echo of the dire mistakes made by the Government in November and December that led to the terrible surge in infections that was fatal to many, which we saw in January, in a situation where our health services were almost overrun and our healthcare workers are on their knees. It therefore beggars belief that the Government yet again wants to go around for another twirl on the merry-go-round of surge and lockdown with all the terrible possibilities that means in terms of deaths, sickness, pressures on our healthcare workers and the

almost racing certainty of a fourth or fifth lockdown. Has the Government learned nothing from the terrible consequences of the last year or so?

I therefore welcome the fact there is a move towards a different strategy from some of the Opposition. It is absolutely right that Deputy Nash, for example, should talk about the need for humility and grace when it comes to recognising the mistakes that were made in the past. By the way, that should also extend to Opposition parties that are now rightly decrying the Government strategy. In September of last year, however, the Labour Party called for the pubs to reopen, decried the public health guidelines as “too draconian” and “bonkers” and called for the resumption of international travel. There need to be honesty about the mistakes that were made. If they are rightly criticising the Government’s flawed strategy and calling for an alternative, those parties that went along with it should admit to doing so as we make the case for an alternative.

Deputy Shortall has been consistent in questioning the Government strategy from pretty much the outset, along with People Before Profit, Deputy Pringle and the Leas-Cheann Comhairle. Let us call a spade a spade about who was actually challenging the flawed strategy, which led to this dire cycle of surge and lockdown with all the fatalities and pressures it put on the health service. That alternative is a zero Covid strategy to at least try to emulate what has been done in New Zealand, Australia, Taiwan and many parts of Asia. People have got their lives back because the governments there did not try their to live alongside a virus that kills, makes people sick and overruns health services. Those governments understood that one does not negotiate with a virus. A virus is not interested in a live-and-let-live relationship that one can negotiate. The virus wants to kill and to make people sick. One cannot live alongside it; one must chase and eliminate the virus and have the public infrastructure, which is chronically lacking in this country, to deal with the outbreaks that will come up until we completely eradicate it, if we can ever do so. We can at least deal with the outbreaks as they do elsewhere, however. Some of us have been arguing for that strategy and it must include mandatory quarantine.

I spent most of Friday talking to an Irish public health doctor who is in charge of infection control in Queensland in Australia. He told me they have not had a single Covid-19 outbreak since June. Everybody in that territory is going to pubs, restaurants, schools, work and living their lives because they had a plan. They had legislation even before the pandemic broke out. They have public health teams that can deal with outbreaks and therefore society can function. We can and must do the same. Lastly, we must support workers whose industries and sectors have been hammered. We certainly should not be taxing people on the economic supports we gave them.

Deputy Paul Murphy: On Sunday, the Taoiseach was quoted as saying he regretted the decision to reopen in December. It was the first time the Government came close to acknowledging its responsibility for the unnecessary and avoidable loss of more than 1,000 lives in January. Yesterday, however, the Tánaiste was talking about a revised plan for living with Covid-19. Mr. Tom Parlon from the CIF appeared on the radio this morning beating the lobbying drums again for a full reopening of construction and spinning a ludicrous line that it is safer to be on construction site is to be in a community. Interestingly, it was reported on the RTÉ website without any fact-check or anyone pointing out that this is complete nonsense. One thousand people died because of the Government’s failed strategy and here we are; it is Groundhog Day again and the same process is going to happen with the Government giving into the pressure of the lobbying drums and reopening.

We cannot live with the virus. That is the lesson to be learned from the tragedy we are in. That is a strategy for rolling lockdowns and real damage in respect of our health service, unnecessary loss of life, mental health and the economy. That is the consequence of sticking with the rolling lockdown strategy.

The alternative is a zero Covid strategy with mandatory 14-day quarantine. It is making this lockdown effective by allowing trade unions and the Health and Safety Authority, HSA, to inspect workplaces to ensure working from home guidelines and essential rules are being followed and to fine employers that are not doing so. It is a strategy of electing health and safety workers' committees to ensure proper procedures are being followed and by ensuring we do not reopen until we have eliminated community transmission. It is a strategy of investing in find, test, trace, isolate and support to hunt down the virus and of supporting workers with the pandemic unemployment payment, PUP, full eviction bans, full-pay childcare and sick leave.

There is huge support now for those measures. The proof of that is today's debate and in the Labour Party's national aggressive suppression strategy, NASS. The Labour Party is doing this because of the vast public support that exists for this sort of strategy. It is calling for this now although I note it called for reopening early in the summer. In October, it called on the Government not to move to level 5 restrictions but instead use the tax revenue gain from staying open to buy private hospitals, not thinking about the consequence in terms of extra debts when it welcomed the reopening in December.

It is a sign of the public mood on this and politicians being under pressure. Therefore, I say to the public to keep the pressure up. It is working; we can achieve zero Covid. We need Sinn Féin to get off the fence and we need the Government to commit to a zero Covid strategy.

Deputy Michael Lowry: This Labour Party motion is purely idealistic. It is a far cry from the Labour Party calling the lockdown too draconian and bonkers last September. Had it been presented at a much earlier stage of the pandemic, it may have had some advantages. That ship has sailed, however. Nowhere in the Labour Party plan is there mention of how business and industry would cope with a national aggressive suppression strategy. While they may have coped with such an approach in the earlier months of this pandemic, 12 months after Covid first struck and with more than six months of closures, the appetite and ability to commit to even stricter restrictions would be impossible to tolerate. The focus of business and enterprise now is the struggle to survive and rebuild. For them, the urgent need is to reopen safely and salvage what they can as soon as they can.

Yesterday, at a meeting of the Joint Committee on Transport and Communications Networks, representatives of the aviation sector set out a bleak analysis of the future of the sector arising from a further international travel ban. This ban will have enormous consequences and a devastating impact on thousands of workers and their dependent families. Airlines will not survive another summer of inactivity. The extent and magnitude of the problem in this sector are daunting. It is an appalling vista for the aviation sector and all those who are dependent on it.

There is no mention in the motion of how the education sector would handle an extended rigid lockdown. How would pupils in special schools and examination classes or students at third level manage if their centres of education were to remain closed? The mental health of people is also overlooked. The motion does not reflect the major impact that this pandemic is having on the mental health of people of all ages.

Significantly, a glaring omission in this motion is how the timeline for a zero Covid strategy would play out. The aim of such a strategy is to drive down Covid to as close to zero as possible by imposing radical restrictions. The motion does not outline how long such radical restrictions would last. Would it be a year or would it be two years? More important, the Labour Party motion does not provide a roadmap for exiting this strategy. If subsequent outbreaks were to occur, would we go back to stage 1 of the same stringent approach? The Government, in conjunction with NPHE, already has a suppression strategy in place. The difference between it and the aggressive strategy being put forward today is that the former takes into account the needs of all sectors of the economy. While the primary concern is always about people's health, there has to be recognition that economic and social needs must also be considered. Failure to incorporate this into any strategy will expose our economy and its citizens to long-lasting damage.

Three weeks ago, Deputies from the Regional Group stated publicly that the three strands of the State's Covid-19 response, testing, tracing and vaccination, were no longer enough. We highlighted the urgent need to introduce quarantining. The Labour Party is now echoing that call. We identified many suitable locations for mandatory hotel quarantining. We suggested that airlines and shipping companies which transport to Ireland passengers who have not taken a negative test in the previous 72 hours should be fined. We recommended temporary border checkpoints within 5 km of our land border to monitor and turn back non-essential travellers to reduce the numbers coming in the back door. We emphasised strongly the need to concentrate on the rapid roll-out of the vaccination programme.

The Labour Party says that the vaccine is not a silver bullet. I believe that it is in fact our greatest weapon. We must utilise and roll out the vaccine with a sense of urgency and cohesion. People throughout the country want mandatory quarantine, temporary border checkpoints, rapid antigen testing, tracing and, most of all, vaccinations. What they do not want at this time is a zero Covid strategy that will plunge them into an even more severe lockdown for a long and indefinite period. That is not practical or feasible. It is unrealistic and counterproductive at this point.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Táim buíoch don deis labhairt ar an ábhar tábhachtach seo. Covid-19 has radically impacted on the health and well-being of people around the country. Many families have lost loved ones in tragic circumstances and many families listening to this debate are in bereavement or serious grief. The country needs to do everything it can to make sure we reduce the incidence of this illness. We must do our best to make sure we get the daily case figures down to single digits if possible. It is important in a debate such as this that we do not forget the other elements in society which have also been severely struggling as a result of this pandemic. As we approach one year since this illness struck, it is important that we look at what is happening in real time in communities throughout the country.

The first issue to remember is that there is, as was said in a committee meeting yesterday, a tsunami of non-Covid illness washing across the country. Well over 850,000 people are on waiting lists for treatment for very serious health issues, including cancer, heart disease and stroke, and mental health patients are struggling to get diagnoses, never mind treatment. There is no doubt in my mind that as a result of what is happening in the health service and the withholding of treatment and diagnosis from these patients, many people will suffer serious deterioration in their health and morbidity and some will suffer mortality.

It is also important to look at what is happening in people's lives. As a result of lockdowns and the lack of schooling, the development of children into teenagers and adults is be-

ing radically stunted because of their inability to socialise, create friendships or develop their personalities and their parents' nerves are frayed. This is translating into major problems with alcoholism and domestic abuse, which are imprisoning many women and families in fear. In my community, older people are living in constant fear. Many of them feel the clock is running down on the remaining years they have on this planet and that this is happening while they are in isolation. The solace and supports that many generations have depended upon, for example, religious services, have been denied to these people.

Many people feel deep social isolation and claustrophobia as a result of lockdown. This is eroding their mental health in a big way. I spoke to a volunteer and anti-suicide activist in Galway, the Leas-Cheann Comhairle's county, who spoke of the chilling effect the sound of helicopters flying over the Corrib is having at the moment as they search for four people in the Galway city area. This is being replicated throughout the country. We need to suppress this virus but we cannot forget about the rest of society. We are in a dark place as a country but people must see light at the end of the tunnel.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: The real problem with the Labour Party approach is that a zero Covid strategy will kill off the entire domestic economy. Interestingly, it will not impact on the largest companies in the world today, some of which operate out of Ireland, including Facebook, Apple, Twitter, Google and the large multinationals. Ireland's small and medium enterprises account for approximately 45% of GDP and they employ 70% of the workforce. The lockdowns are having a severe impact on those sectors. I cannot understand that the Labour Party, a party of the working class, wants to have this regressive strategy imposed on them.

The Government, through ongoing lockdowns, is already putting the labour market into a deep hole. Most small businesses had between 30 and 90 days of working capital at the beginning of the pandemic. In the real world, this meant that this capital has been used up by last summer. When the Government schemes run out, the real extent of the pain will emerge. The longer the lockdown is kept in place, the less likelihood there is of these businesses reopening. That is not acceptable. I note the number of suicides, as Deputy Tóibín and others have done, and the number of small businesses the banks have foreclosed on, which must make payments, including insurance payments. This utopian idea that we can have a zero Covid strategy is pie in the sky. We cannot do so. It will not work. It is as simple as that.

Deputy Michael Collins: I have an issue with the Labour Party approach and the zero Covid strategy that will kill the entire domestic economy, as Deputy Mattie McGrath has just said. I look at small businesses such as barber shops, bars, hairdressers, nail salons and sit-in cafés. Lockdowns are putting these businesses under severe pressure. They are not sure if they will be able to reopen or what the circumstance will be going forward.

The mental health implications of lockdowns are severe. They are impacting on suicide rates and causing drug and alcohol abuse, which needlessly cause lives to be lost. The isolation and lack of social isolation does not stop the spread of the disease but it does destroy the economy.

My colleagues in the Rural Independent Group and I have been calling for over ten months for our focus to be on all incoming passengers. As early as last April or May, I called for mandatory testing of and quarantine for all incoming passengers and it was never put in place. Now we are frantically trying to do that and it is a bit late. Latest data indicate that 70% of all Covid cases in Ireland are from the UK variant. This means that 70% of all current cases emerged

from the variant coming into the country via someone who travelled here. The Government has completely failed to implement strict inward travel protocols here. This now means higher case number and harsher lockdowns.

We should be focusing on the nurse registration fee of €100 with which they are being hit-

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I thank Deputy Collins.

Deputy Michael Collins: -----the vaccine for the home helps and carers, and other issues.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: The lost Labour Party, which is walking in the political wilderness and whose members are just trying to make themselves relevant in today's political landscape by bringing forward this motion because they are on the sidelines and are wandering aimlessly, has no understanding whatsoever. For a once-great party that had great people in it, its members today are trying to scramble to make themselves relevant.

They do not represent the workers who are coming to us and asking how could this motion make any sense in terms of helping them. How could what they are proposing help small businesses in small towns and villages or bigger population centres where these business people are struggling? They really are suffering.

What the Labour Party is proposing to do here today includes a couple of issues where it is only saying what we were saying for more than ten months with regard to travel into the country. It was common sense but, unfortunately, the Government ignored our calls and pleas at the time. Labour does not understand work. It does not understand business. It does not understand what it is to try to keep a door open, whether one is a hairdresser, a small butcher or a person in the service industry. Its members do not have a clue. All they are trying to do here today, as I say, is make themselves relevant in a debate they know nothing about.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: I also question the zero Covid-19 strategy by the Labour Party. It will kill the entire domestic economy. In Ireland, SMEs account for 45% of GDP and they employ 70% of the Irish workforce.

If we are looking at strategies today, what we should be looking at is the roll-out of the vaccine. If we are to vaccinate the people who are over 70, that means from now until the end of April, when the Minister stated it will be done, 62,500 people over 70 will have to be vaccinated each week to reach that target. The United Kingdom has 12.81 million people vaccinated; Germany, 3.61 million; Turkey, 3.28 million; Italy, 2.66 million; France, 2.63 million; Spain, 2.12 million; and Poland, 2.11 million. Let us have a big hurray for Ireland. Up to 5 February, we had 230,766 people vaccinated. Europe and our Government have let us down in getting the vaccine. That is our strategy.

Listen to the Labour Party today. Its members know nothing about the workforce. They know nothing about the SMEs. That is why the party has become as small as it has. They know nothing. They have not been on the ground with the small business people. That is what we need to stand up for.

That is our strategy. Get in the vaccines and get people vaccinated, as all the other countries have done. The Government should stand up to Europe and ask where is our fair share. That is what we need to do; stand up for Ireland and shout and roar. Who shouts the loudest gets the

results. Start shouting.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I am glad to get the opportunity to say a few words. Even though the time is short, I am grateful for it.

I have to say to the members of the Labour Party that they must realise that the longer businesses are shut and the longer the doors are closed, the harder it will be to get these people's businesses back open again. It is far easier to shut places down and to keep them locked down. It is much harder to open them up. As a business person who has employed people, I know the value of business to the working person. Businesses are about giving employment to people. If the businesses are shut and SMEs are closed, locked down and locked down further, there is less of a chance of them opening back up again.

On the talk about the schools certainly not opening before St. Patrick's Day, I would hope that the schools would open before then and maybe a long time before then.

Labour has to consider what the lockdown is doing to people's minds. I refer to people in rural places who are locked down and cannot come out and have a short conversation with anyone. Members of the Labour Party do not realise that because they are far removed from what is going on in rural areas. Mental health is a big issue.

For instance, people trying to build their own house or who are trying to get in a carpenter or a plumber to do work to finish off a house are stopped from doing so at present.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: Does the Labour Party realise that people need to finish off their homes and put a roof over their heads? Do its members want to keep them in the wilderness for longer? Is that what they are about?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Tá mé ag bogadh ar aghaidh go dtí an Grúpa Neamhspleách - Deputies Harkin and Pringle.

Deputy Marian Harkin: When circumstances change, we need to change our approach. The information that we have gleaned in the past few months has to be factored into any ongoing policy decisions. What do we know now that we did not know two or three months ago? At that point, vaccines were on their way but we were still awaiting European Medicines Agency, EMA, approval. Now we know that there are a number of variants, namely UK, South African and Brazilian variants. Some are much more contagious and some seem to involve higher levels of mortality. There is uncertainty as to how the different vaccines will work on the new variants. Keeping those variants out is absolutely crucial.

People want this to be the final lockdown. Businesses want this to be the final lockdown. What we do this time must give us a sustainable future. Nobody wants us to fall at the final hurdle. Members of the public know that no system is perfect and that one cannot always cover all the bases but, as I said, they also know that the current vaccines may not perform as well against the new variants as they did against the original virus. Therefore, we now know it has never been more important than it is now not to import any new variants of this virus. It is far too late for the UK variant, which has become dominant, but we still have significant control over other variants. That is why it is essential, crucial, pivotal - use any word one likes or use them all - to stop those variants from entering Ireland.

We have new measures on the Border and I support them. Travelling from Derry to Donegal is the same as travelling from Donegal to Derry or Donegal to Sligo. There should be no unnecessary journeys. However, it is like having a field with two gates. One of the gates is closed but the other is open. That other gate refers to our ports and airports and the only way to close that second gate is to introduce mandatory quarantining of those arriving in Ireland. That means demanding a negative PCR test before anybody arrives and mandatory quarantining with a second test five to seven days later. I believe we will have mandatory quarantining a few weeks' time anyway, but will it be too late? I ask the Minister to bring the required legislation before this House as soon as possible and move heaven and earth, if it takes it, to keep those new variants out.

Finally, I will briefly address another issue related to Covid, and that is the need to give an *ex gratia* payment to healthcare staff. I am not jumping on any bandwagon or simply repeating the words of the INMO. I tabled a question to the Minister almost a month ago asking him whether he would consider a non-taxable flat-rate payment to healthcare workers just like everyone else, that is, an *ex gratia* payment. His response was not positive, but I am asking him to reconsider. Those workers deserve it.

Deputy Thomas Pringle: I welcome this motion and the Labour Party getting behind a national aggressive Covid-19 suppression strategy. That sounds unnecessarily negative and scary. I prefer the idea of working towards zero Covid, implementing a zero Covid strategy and supporting the We Can Be Zero campaign. That gives us something positive to work towards together, something to look forward to, something for which to hope. I understand Labour's position on this, given that the Government has stubbornly refused to admit its mistakes and take proper steps to suppress the disease.

I hope that the Minister will accept the motion before us, but I doubt that will happen. From the Opposition benches, I have been speaking and asking about a zero Covid strategy since last October, but the Government is too arrogant to work with us on the matter and accept ideas from these benches because it could not then take credit. Unfortunately, it can have the credit for all of the deaths since its so-called meaningful Christmas. There were more than 1,000 deaths and 100,000 cases in January alone. This is wrong, Minister. When I raised this issue during Leaders' Questions a couple of weeks ago, it seemed that some journalists were more concerned about manners than holding our Government to account for its dire and deadly mistakes.

Deputy Boyd Barrett referred to how it beggared belief that the Government would go down this road and not listen to what needed to be done. Unfortunately, I do not think it beggars belief at all. A focus group and opinion polls have not told the Government something and, therefore, it does not think it. That is the reality of the situation. Unfortunately, people are dying because of the Government's decisions or lack thereof. It is like the Government is so afraid of messing up that it does not realise the destruction it is leaving in its wake. People are tired, at their wits' end, suffering, grieving and scared. They want and need the Government to govern and to put the health and safety of people before airline profits, big businesses' turnover and industry lobbyists.

The economy is suffering, but at what cost? How many lives must be lost before the Government finally admits that zero Covid or something similar is the strategy that is needed? At this point, I do not believe the Opposition would grandstand and say that we told the Government so. In fact, many of the Opposition Members present are against this strategy and men-

tion the difficulties for workforces and how people would manage. How can people manage under this constant cycle of lockdown, undo, lockdown, undo, lockdown and undo? It makes no sense. No business person could plan in this situation. It is ridiculous. It is obvious that the only reason the Government will not close the airports and the like is because it is pandering to the airlines. It is putting the safety of citizens below the safety of airlines. Mr. Michael O'Leary is more important than the citizens of Ireland. That is the sad reality of the situation.

Rural businesses that are in lockdown would have a chance to come back after a proper zero Covid strategy and would cater for the people of Ireland as part of a local strategy, but they can do nothing now. They are all locked down. That is what the Government is doing for us. Some people have said that the zero Covid strategy would last for ten years, others have said only one. In a newspaper today, though, the Tánaiste spoke about the Government's nonsensical strategy, which will last into next year regardless. Be truthful with people and tell them exactly what the Government is thinking and hoping in this regard. What it is doing now will not deliver anything for people except more lockdowns and hardships.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan): I thank the Labour Party and all contributors to this debate on the motion on Ireland's response to Covid-19. The Government has taken strong and decisive action in its response to Covid-19. The overall strategy is based on the Government's resilience and recovery plan, which was published last September. The plan provides us with a framework to enable society and businesses to operate as much as possible while continuing to suppress the virus. It is designed to help individuals, organisations and sectors to better understand, anticipate and prepare for the measures that might be introduced to suppress the virus. Inherent in the plan is a prioritisation of activities and a balancing between the intertwined elements of our society and economy. Given the evolving nature of the pandemic, a certain amount of flexibility has been built into the plan to allow for new and targeted approaches. This allows the Government to take account of the disease's profile and trajectory at given points in time and to make decisions accordingly. That is precisely what the Government has done.

As we have already heard, Ireland has experienced a third wave of the disease, as has much of Europe. Consequently, the Government took decisive action with the introduction of regulations that were in line with level 5 of the framework under the plan. The current measures will remain in place until 5 March. They are having the desired effect, with Ireland having the fastest-declining 14-day incidence rate in Europe. However, we still need to work harder to achieve a reduction in case numbers. That reduction is possible.

Our ultimate aim is to reduce the level of infection in the population, save lives, protect the health services and other essential services. In doing so, we will be guided by NPHET and its public health advice, taking into account the international evidence and guidance as it emerges from the WHO and the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control. Covid-19 is still a relatively new disease and research is ongoing to better understand the virus and how we can interrupt transmission. We will continue to tailor our efforts based on the latest available evidence.

As the House knows, the Government has put in place an extensive range of supports for society and the economy. These measures are designed to mitigate the economic impact of Covid-19. They include the pandemic unemployment payment and supports for businesses. Particular sectors of the economy that have been hard hit have been supported, for example, tourism. We will continue to monitor the effectiveness of measures that have been put in place

to support viable firms and encourage employment, including the EWSS.

We have also put in place measures to protect the elderly and vulnerable groups and those experiencing loneliness and social isolation by increasing funding for mental health services, extra counselling supports, home help supports and the expert panel on long-term residential care. Additional supports are in place across the community sector and the Government has encouraged close collaboration between the statutory and voluntary sectors at local level to ensure that resources and supports are targeted at those most in need.

Last year was incredibly challenging for us all. I acknowledge and express my sympathies to the families and friends of those who have lost their lives to Covid-19. We need to remember this sobering fact and to redouble our efforts to control the virus in 2021.

All Deputies will join me in paying tribute to those healthcare workers and other front-line workers who have worked tirelessly since the beginning of the pandemic. Our healthcare workers have played a vital role in combating the disease and caring for those who required healthcare as a result of it.

We are making progress in tackling the disease and, through domestic measures that require individuals to stay at home except for essential reasons, reducing the opportunity for the virus to be transmitted. The current regulations will remain in place until 5 March and we are investing in and building up capacity right across our health and social care services, including those that are specific to Covid-19 responses. We are also working closely with our European partners on our approach to the spread of this global disease.

Our efforts have been bolstered by the new tool in our kit to tackle this disease, namely, the Covid-19 vaccination programme. It is delivering vaccines to the people of Ireland. Up to 5 February, more than 230,000 Covid-19 vaccines had been administered, including to approximately 80,000 people who are now fully vaccinated. The first delivery of the AstraZeneca vaccine arrived at the weekend and we started to include it as part of our vaccination programme this week, with front-line healthcare workers receiving their first vaccine. Phase 3 of our vaccination programme will start on Monday next, with GPs inviting those over the age of 85 to come forward for vaccination. Our objective is for nobody to be left behind, and our GP community is the most effective means of delivering the vaccine to this cohort. Vaccination centres have been identified for some GPs to come together and thereby ensure that the vaccine can be delivered speedily and safely. Deliveries of the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines, the current preferred vaccines for those aged over 70, continues. Ireland is expected to receive a total of 1.1 million vaccine doses by the end of March.

We have achieved reductions in infection rates this year as a result of decisive and proactive action by the Government following advice from NPHE. This is also as a direct result of the efforts of the population in staying home, limiting contacts and following public health advice. However, it is vital that we keep this up. The Government recognises the public support for public health restrictions. Solidarity among communities and citizens is the most important factor in driving down this disease.

I thank each and every one of the contributors to the debate. I thank the Labour Party for tabling the motion. Listening to Deputies Nash and Ó Ríordáin, there were two aspects to their contributions. Deputy Nash stated that people need hope and a sense of vision that 2021 will be better than 2020. I certainly hope we can work on that. Deputy Ó Ríordáin said he hoped

we will succeed. We will succeed together.

People referred to east-west and North-South issues, travel quarantine and emerging variants. It is very worrying that we have these new variants and mutations between the UK, Brazilian and South African variants. We must work together to try to suppress these variants. There should be a role for pharmacists, dentists and many other healthcare workers in helping to deliver the vaccine to the people who need it.

Deputy Howlin outlined the impact the pandemic is having throughout society and stated that women have been more impacted upon. This is something of which we are very aware. I thank all of the NGOs and the Garda Síochána for being aware of this very difficult situation. There are people across the island who are affected more than others by the virus and we hope that vaccines will be delivered as quickly as possible. They will be delivered as soon as we get them.

I thank all of the Members for their contributions. I refer them to the Government strategy to address Covid-19, which is extensive and comprehensive and which has been implemented through a range of public health restrictions and investment in public health capacity in line with the national framework for living with Covid-19.

Deputy Sean Sherlock: It was very interesting to listen to our friend from Limerick and our friends from Kerry speaking about the Labour Party motion. They reminded me of the missionary priests who used to come to Mallow when I was a boy in the 1980s. Those priests would preach fire, damnation and brimstone and engage in fine rhetoric. I am not sure the Deputies' rhetoric was so fine but there was plenty of it. However, there was very little enlightenment at the end of it all and I often wondered if it was more about spectacle than substance. None of the Deputies to whom I refer have spent a day in government and they never will because they would run a mile from it. I doubt any one of them would have the backbone or the courage to go into government or to spend one day inside Government Buildings. I think the Healy-Raes were in there for a little while all right but they ran out as quick as lightning. It is fine to preach when in opposition. It is the easiest thing to play the Tadhg an dá thaobh, and God knows there are plenty of people in this place who want to be Tadhg an dá thaobh. The Labour Party motion is honest. What we are seeking to do is to bring about a perspective which seeks to provide some enlightenment on this issue that exercises us all.

I want to focus very briefly on the issue of long Covid. I ask the Minister to take on board the fact there are people now suffering the effects of long Covid. It is an expression that has worked its way into the public discourse and we are seeing its effects. However, it has not been classified officially. I ask the Minister and the Government to put in place a pot of funding so that Science Foundation Ireland, the Health Research Board and the Department can take a collective approach to looking at the effects of long Covid. We are now seeing the effects of this in terms of the presentations of other types of illness as a result of people having contracted Covid. The only research I can speak to in an Irish context that exists at present is the 2021 Trinity College and St. James Hospital research by Townsend et al. The authors looked at post-Covid lung assessments and imaging to date. They examined 153 patients and concluded that 62% felt they had not returned to full health, 48% met the case definition for fatigue - this was not associated with severity of initial infection - and a number of the 153 had abnormal chest X-rays quite a length of time after having received a diagnosis of Covid.

All I am asking is that the Government adopts a cross-departmental approach, brings in the

research funders and start issuing funding calls so that our excellent scientists working in health can start researching this. If there is an evidence base for it, we can then acknowledge that the Department of Social Protection could put in place a payment which recognises the long-term impact on people of Covid, something akin to the enhanced illness benefit payment that recognises long Covid. Long after having received a diagnosis of Covid people feel the ill effects of it. They are missing work. There is the issue of fatigue and also issues relating to the impact on people's hearts and lungs.

As a society, we need to acknowledge this issue and address it. If we have an evidence base with well-funded research, we can take that research and turn it into an acknowledgement, through the Department of Social Protection and the Minister, Deputy Humphreys, of the need to establish payments for those people where they are missing work and require a supplementary income to acknowledge the suffering they are going through at present. This is the call the Labour Party is making through the motion and I ask that the Minister uses his good offices. I know he is a research-minded Minister and if we call on the Minister to do this we would be doing a good day's work to acknowledge those people suffering from long Covid.

Deputy Duncan Smith: I thank all of the Deputies, parties and groups that contributed to the debate. Well, I would like to thank almost all of them. It will come as no surprise to the Government that we will not accept its amendment. It may come as a surprise, although I hope it does not, to Comrade Boyd Barrett that we will accept his group's amendments. I wish to comment on the Deputy's contribution.

12 o'clock

He spoke about the Labour Party and some in opposition showing humility as to when we got things wrong in regard to this pandemic. Everyone has got things wrong in regard to this pandemic. In the exhaustive trawl of our contributions, press statements and comments which they did in advance of this debate, surely they would have the humility to acknowledge that the Labour Party has stated categorically, unlike others, that we have got things wrong, which is why we are at this point, which led us to this motion and which led us to the position that we have to be in now, which is to suppress this virus. We have the humility to admit that and we are fully behind this motion.

When the revolution comes, and I am genuinely looking forward to the revolution coming, maybe Deputy Boyd Barrett will have the humility to understand that we are not the enemy. I doubt it. In fact, if he could see us when the revolution comes, from the very back of the battalion, he will see, as usual, that we are at the front.

What really got me in this debate today were the contributions from the Healy-Raes - both of them. I am absolutely disgusted because it hit me personally. Usually, what they say is water off a duck's back to most or all of us in this House, but they had a go, and it was "the Labour Party this", "the Labour Party that", "relevance this" and "relevance that". They said we did not understand working people, and said we did not understand a carpenter coming to the house to fix a job. I am the son of a carpenter. I am not the son of Fianna Fáil privilege and millions and millions of euro. I remember, as a kid in the 1980s, having to take any work going, hanging doors in Finglas just to put a roof over our heads and food on the table. I remember that. I spent my teenage years working on sites, filling skips. Did they? Or were they driving their Mercedes into their big plant hire shops, walking past all of their machinery, worth hundreds of thousands, to count all their money, to count up all their properties?

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Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: That is not so.

Deputy Duncan Smith: The Deputy had his chance, so sit down. I did not come in-----

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: It is not so.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Smith has the floor. Please let him conclude.

Deputy Duncan Smith: I have the floor. I am not going to be lectured on understanding workers. I do not have to put on a political costume and a caricature to pretend I am working class, like some. They do.

This is a pro-worker motion. If they read it, if they understood it, if they took one second to remove themselves from their own regressive politics, they would see that this position is about a strong public health response to get people back to work and to stay in work, to get schools open and to keep them open. That is what this is about and that is where the Opposition is at. I do not think the Government is too far away either, but we need to meet in the middle and we need to get this through. We need to keep this virus down and that is how things will be opened.

The next time we have a motion or anything else, I will happily sit down or have a Zoom call and explain to them what it stands for because they never read it. They are pursuing a narrow, regressive, conservative agenda all of the time. It lets down the people of Kerry who they profess to represent; it lets down working people. This is a pro-workers motion. Everything we have put through is pro-workers. We will work together, we will admit when we are wrong and we will move forward.

Last night's "RTÉ Investigates" should have shown everybody where we are with this, and how desperate it is to see the work of the doctors and nurses in Tallaght Hospital, to see the work of the porters, the receptionists and everyone else in that facility and in healthcare facilities all over the country. That is why we are where we are. That is why we need to be supporting strong public health measures to protect those workers and to get workers who are currently at home on PUP, workers at home trying to educate their children with all the pressure that entails, to get all those people back to work and to get society back. I think it is what people on this side of the House want and what people on the other side of the House want. It is what the Labour Party wants. I very much doubt it is what they want.

Amendment put.

An Ceann Comhairle: A division has been called and, in accordance with Standing Order 80(2), the division is postponed until a weekly division time is agreed by the House.

Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I want to read a quote to the Taoiseach:

Under our proposals, people aged 65 will receive a State pension...which will be paid at the same rate as the State pension of €248 per week. This payment will not be means tested but entitlement will be based on an individual's employment record. In contrast Fine Gael will only pay those who are 65 a payment of €203 per week, which will result in an annual

loss of €2,340 for this age group.

Those words should sound very familiar to the Taoiseach because they are, as he knows, an official Fianna Fáil statement made by Deputy Willie O’Dea, when he was the party’s spokesperson on social protection, three days before last year’s general election. The Taoiseach knew at that time the strength of public feeling as regards the right to a State pension for workers when they reach the age of 65 but he seems to have forgotten that in the meantime, because his Government’s announcement on the State pension on Monday was exactly what Fine Gael proposed in the course of that election 12 months ago.

Only enormous public pressure has stopped the Government from raising the pension age to 67 for now, and it is not restoring the State pension (transition) payments, as it promised. The Government will continue to pay 65-year-olds what is, in effect, a jobseeker’s payment of only €203 per week, which is a loss of €45 a week, a loss, as the Taoiseach knows, of more than €2,000 a year when compared with the State pension. This cohort of workers also stands to lose out on a range of secondary benefits, including fuel allowance, as the Taoiseach well knows.

In summary, the Taoiseach has adopted the Fine Gael policy, hook, line and sinker and this is a real blow for 65-year-olds, who will rely on a decent pension to get by. The lack of fairness, the lack of respect, is absolutely breath-taking, particularly in these times when people are under such enormous pressure.

The Taoiseach should know that, by the age of 65, workers will have worked hard, paid their way, paid their bills, provided for their families and paid their taxes to this State. Many of those who now look for their pension entitlement at the age of 65 may have begun their working lives at the age of 14 or 15. They have more than paid their way. Many more have spent their working lives on their feet in very physical jobs in factories, on building sites and in retail. By the time they reach the age of 65, they are entitled to this because they have earned the respect and entitlement of their pension, should they wish to retire.

The Taoiseach’s failure in this now means that many 65-year-olds who may wish to retire will have to continue working. Many will head back to their places of work, even in these very difficult and treacherous times. I recognise there are those who would wish to work beyond the age of 65 and, of course, that right must be upheld, but it is wrong that, at the age of 65, those who wish to retire are forced out the door to work because they cannot afford to retire, because the State and the Government do not respect their working lives.

This is actually very straightforward. The Taoiseach is either for the right to a State pension at the age of 65 or he is not. Will he confirm that, under his plan, 65-year-olds will be out of pocket by €45 per week? How on earth does he stand over this, particularly given his election commitments?

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising the issue. It is quite extraordinary the two-dimensional thinking and approach from Deputy McDonald and the Sinn Féin Party more generally. They say one thing in this House and do the exact opposite in Northern Ireland on the Executive, for example. The Deputy calls for a pension age of 65 years here, yet in Northern Ireland last October the exact opposite happened after Sinn Féin voted for the pension age to be increased from 65 to 66 years. Everything the Deputy has thrown at me can be thrown at her with respect to what her party supported in Northern Ireland.

Deputy McDonald says the rate is too low when a 65-year-old on €203 in the Republic is

still receiving a higher payment than every single pensioner in Northern Ireland regardless of age. Where is the fairness or respect for people there? I have noted in the last week alone, between Sinn Féin's proposals on fuel allowance and the pension, that it has essentially looked for about €4.5 billion in spending in only seven days, and that is only from one Department. We can discuss on another day how the Deputy or her party believes all that can be sorted.

In the context of the election and subsequently, we did not win a majority but we did decide to go into government and form a coalition with the Green Party and the Fine Gael Party. Pension issues formed part of those negotiations. The programme for Government was very clear that those aged 65 years who are required or choose to retire early can receive an early retirement allowance or pension at the same rate as jobseeker's benefit without a requirement to sign on, partake in activation measures or be available for and genuinely seeking work. We introduced that new payment and we have fulfilled the programme for Government commitment on that to bridge the gap for people who were required to retire at 65 but do not qualify for the State pension until aged 66.

The increase in the pension age to 67 years, which was proposed prior to the general election and which we opposed, did not go ahead in January. The pension age was kept at 66 years. That was an outcome of the negotiations between the three parties in the formulation of the programme for Government. The decision not to allow the pension age to go to 67 years will cost €453 million.

Obviously, there is a wider issue around pension sustainability into the future. The Department of Social Protection will spend about €25 billion this year. Over 40% of that, about €9 billion, will be spend on pension payments alone. The Pensions Commission has been established to examine a range of issues and Deputy McDonald's party can make a submission to it. The commission is examining mandatory retirement ages in employment contracts where that age is below the State pension age. It is due to report back to Government later this year. It is important to be honest with people that the sustainability of pensions over the coming decades will be challenging for the State. That is why the Pensions Commission represents a very good context to try to outline how the State will meet its obligations and organise society into the future as we live longer and our demographics change significantly.

To make another key point, the State pension age has never been at 65 years. There was previously a transition pension which was abolished by the then Minister, Joan Burton, in 2014. The State pension age is 66 years. That has been the case since 1977.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Let me say very directly to the Taoiseach that he is in no position to make arguments to working people about the sustainability of very modest pension payments for them when, at the same time, the gold-plated pensions that the Taoiseach and his predecessors enjoy are not to be touched. There is a central hypocrisy in his approach - big pensions for the big boys and crumbs for working people. It is a mark of decency in any affluent society - in any civilised society actually - that working people have the right to retire with their pension at the age of 65 years. These are people who have worked long and hard in manual labour, retail and as carers. I could go on and on. Yet, rather than addressing that issue and leading from the front as Dublin and the sovereign Government here ought to, the Taoiseach dodges and prevaricates.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy's time is up.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I ask him again to confirm that the Government's proposal will see pensioners left out of pocket by €45 a week and more than €2,000 a year? I want him to justify that for those working people.

The Taoiseach: I am disappointed that the Deputy's party saw fit to raise the age to 66 years in Northern Ireland and voted for it. The Deputy did not even respond to that point. That is what Sinn Féin did. It is just hypocrisy and double standards. Historically, Fianna Fáil was responsible for significant increases in the State pension down through the decades, particularly in the late 1990s and early 2000s when very substantial increases happened. Successive Governments have done that, with the result that the Republic has strong State pensions in comparison with other jurisdictions. We need to improve if we can but we must have sustainability underpinning that as well. That is why the Pensions Commission has been established. As I said, the State pension age has been at 66 years since 1977. That is the reality. We need to change a broad range of areas around pensions and the Pensions Commission will bring forward a range of recommendations to respond to people's needs in this area.

Deputy Alan Kelly: I raise with the Taoiseach this week, as I did with the Tánaiste last week, the issue of the women and families who are suffering as a result of the CervicalCheck scandal. We all know of the case of Lynsey Bennett last week. I am sure everyone in the House wishes her the best in her travels for immunotherapy.

I am genuinely asking these questions, as someone who has been involved in this issue for some years. Have we learned anything? Are we doing everything we possibly can for these families who were let down by the State? The Ruth Morrissey judgment in the Supreme Court changed everything. Ms Morrissey was an amazing woman. The HSE is now primarily liable for these cases where negligence is found. Why are these cases not being dealt with beforehand? Why are they not being dealt with far quicker? I know there are a large number of cases coming down the line.

Following the recommendation made by the Chief Justice to us as legislators, why is it not a requirement in the Government's legislative programme to change the Civil Liability (Amendment) Act to ensure that women are not faced with having to choose between taking cases or allowing their families to do so after they pass? This is not a tolerable or fair choice.

Why, in response to the issues raised by Ms Bennett and others, did the Taoiseach, the Minister for Health, Deputy Donnelly, and the Tánaiste state last week that the tribunal was the solution? We now know, because I asked a question and the information suddenly appeared in the media, that nobody has applied to the tribunal. It is not fit for purpose for reasons that the Taoiseach and I have discussed both publicly and privately. These cases will not end up at the tribunal and the majority, if not all, of them will end up in the High Court.

Why are women who are affected by this scandal having to fight to get immunotherapy drugs? Vicky Phelan was promised by then Minister for Health, Deputy Harris, that pembro would be paid for, rightly so. I worked with her to ensure that all other women who were affected would also get it. Why did Patricia Carrick, whose family the Taoiseach apologised to in this Dáil, have to fight for months to get pembro, despite being clinically approved? Why, last Friday, did I have to contact the HSE to ensure that Lynsey Bennett would get pembro, even though she has passed her tests and was clinically put forward? Amazingly, because she was appearing on "The Late Late Show", all of a sudden it was approved.

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Why is the Government going to take medical cards away from the families of all the women who have been affected? Would it not be more fitting to ensure that the medical cards for those family members who are affected by this are given to them for their lifetime? I do not believe anybody would say that that is not warranted.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. We wish Lynsey Bennett the very best as she travels to Mexico. I spoke with Lynsey on the telephone over two weeks ago with regard to her devastating situation. It is devastating for all of the women involved and their families.

In terms of the issues relating to the establishment of the tribunal, prior to this Government being established, legislation was passed in this House. All parties, including the Deputy's party, participated in that process. The issue for this Government was to establish the tribunal in line with both the Meenan recommendations and the legislation that was enacted in the House, which had the support of all political parties at the time. The nominated members were appointed to the tribunal with effect from 1 December last. This has facilitated the tribunal in starting its work.

Liability and negligence are two very important but distinct issues. Negligence has to be proven in all situations, be it before a tribunal or in a High Court setting. The laboratories in all of these cases have been prove to be negligent and the State has indemnified them. There has to be the establishment of negligence. I think that was agreed-----

Deputy Alan Kelly: I know.

The Taoiseach: That is an important issue. The Deputy raised the issue about liability and negligence and I want to make the point that it is an important distinction and it is an important issue.

There is no Government edict stating that pembro should not be available.

Deputy Alan Kelly: Why is it not being issued?

The Taoiseach: I will pursue the point that the Deputy has raised. There should not be an issue. Neither should there be an issue with the medical cards, and I will pursue that also. What has been committed to should be honoured and I will undertake that it will be honoured in respect of those two issues.

What the Deputy says about the Morrissey case changing is contested. That is not accepted legally. In respect of the Civil Liability (Amendment) Act, that would have a broader remit, as the Deputy knows. It applies not just to the CervicalCheck situation but to a wider area involving personal injuries.

The tribunal is receiving queries. The Deputy would have been aware of the statement yesterday.

Deputy Alan Kelly: There are-----

The Taoiseach: No. I was speaking in terms of queries coming through about transfer of cases and so on.

Deputy Alan Kelly: It is zero - no cases.

The Taoiseach: I believe the tribunal offers a better forum than the High Court. It gives a great opportunity for mediation and in my view would be more expeditious and effective. It is a forum that should be given a chance in light of all of the work that has been put into it.

Deputy Alan Kelly: I do not have time to go into it but what the Taoiseach is saying in respect of the Chief Justice and his recommendation should be dealt with. I would have a different view on what he is saying about the Ruth Morrissey judgment. I welcome what the Taoiseach said in respect of pembro and people keeping the medical cards, particularly as they are about to be taken from them.

I want to raise one other issue. The national screening service issued a new edict yesterday regarding changes to the pathway for women who have cervical concerns, bleeding, etc. They must now be triaged instead of going to colposcopists. The recommended time for referrals to be dealt with was four weeks and it now seems to be a standard eight weeks. Local HSE groups will now be asked to put in place their own rules and procedures around that. Since this whole crisis erupted, what extra resources have been put in place to ensure that women could have their issues addressed and that there will be enough colposcopists and other resources? What has been learned?

I want to ask the Taoiseach a very clear question. Dr. Gabriel Scally compiled a report on all of this, as we all know. We all welcomed that report. Does he agree with the new pathways that were put in place yesterday? Considering that he was retained by the Government post his report, was Dr. Scally consulted on this matter? Has anyone asked him? I dare say that if he was asked, he would not agree with this.

The Taoiseach: First, these are clinical pathways. That is what the Deputy is referring to.

Deputy Alan Kelly: I am referring to what was announced in public yesterday.

The Taoiseach: I am not a clinician. I am not going to attempt to presume expertise in an area in which I do not have expertise.

Deputy Alan Kelly: The framework was in place. Was it followed?

The Taoiseach: The point I am trying to make is that there is no issue with resources from this Government's perspective. Four billion euro has been allocated to the health service this year - €2 billion for Covid and €2 billion for non-Covid matters. I ask the Deputy to hear me out. There can be no question, therefore, of any financial resources being pulled from any particular sector.

Deputy Alan Kelly: Have we enough-----

The Taoiseach: More than 7,000 additional staff have been recruited to the health service-----

Deputy Alan Kelly: Will the Taoiseach get to the specific point?

The Taoiseach: I am getting to the specific point if the Deputy would not interrupt. In comparison with January 2020, there were 7,000 additional healthcare staff in place last month. The point I am making to the Deputy is that where staff can be recruited, they are being recruited. That is across all categories. I talked to the CEO of the HSE this morning, not specifically in respect of this issue but the Deputy gets my point.

Deputy Alan Kelly: I do not.

The Taoiseach: There can be no argument that resources are not available to recruit-----

Deputy Alan Kelly: Where are the resources to-----

The Taoiseach: -----the specific personnel that are required in this area, no more than any other area. All healthcare personnel that are out there are being recruited by the HSE. It has recruited 7,000 additional staff in one 12-month period alone. In terms of-----

Deputy Alan Kelly: Did the Taoiseach ask Dr. Scally if he agrees with this?

The Taoiseach: I am sorry. There is an existing clinical team within the HSE and so on. The Deputy referenced the Morrissey judgment in terms of the tribunal and so on.

An Ceann Comhairle: I am afraid the Taoiseach is over time.

The Taoiseach: Okay. I will come back to Deputy later on that.

Deputy Peter Fitzpatrick: I want to raise with the Taoiseach a very important issue in respect of which clarification is needed. Last week, my local radio station, LMFm, made a number of claims in respect of the HSE temporary accommodation programme. It claimed that the HSE is using a local hotel under the scheme to accommodate healthcare workers who are Covid positive and those who are not Covid positive. It has also claimed that a healthcare worker who contracted the Covid virus while at work was told to stay at the hotel to isolate as they live with people who are considered to be vulnerable.

I contacted the HSE but we need full transparency and clarification on this matter. The HSE, in its reply, stated: "Under no circumstances are Covid-19 positive healthcare workers accommodated in hotels by the HSE." The HSE also confirmed that the temporary accommodation scheme is available to: healthcare workers who are living in shared accommodation with other health service workers; those who work in potentially Covid-positive environments; and individuals who may have people who are in high-risk categories and who are vulnerable to infection in their home settings and who, therefore, cannot return to those settings between shifts. The scheme is also available to healthcare workers who live with people who have been instructed to self-quarantine or who are required to work longer than usual shifts or overtime and who will not have time to return home between shifts.

It has also been confirmed by the HSE that there are procedures in place for those workers who contract coronavirus and who are housed under the temporary programme. In these circumstances, a healthcare worker must inform his or her line manager of the situation. The latter can, in turn, inform the hotel and the worker must vacate the hotel at the earliest convenience. The HSE has also confirmed that healthcare workers who test positive for the virus and who are accommodated under the programme will be transferred to the Citywest self-isolation facility by medical doctors.

As the Taoiseach can see, the claims made by LMFm are totally at odds with the HSE's stated position. In order to get to the bottom of this, we need a detailed statement from the HSE confirming that the claims made by LMFm are either incorrect or that there has been a breakdown in systems in this instance. This has the potential to be a very serious situation and clarification is needed as a matter of urgency. We cannot have a situation where Covid-positive healthcare workers are sharing accommodation with other non-Covid-positive healthcare work-

ers.

I have also been contacted by a healthcare worker who contracted the virus at work. She lives at home with her elderly parents, who are deemed to be in the “vulnerable” category. In this case, the healthcare worker was not offered the opportunity to self-isolate at the Citywest facility. This is also at odds with the statement from the HSE. I ask for the Taoiseach’s assistance in this matter in order to get clarification from the HSE.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising this very serious matter. I appreciate fully the concerns expressed following the reports in local media. I will ask the Department of Health and the HSE for full clarity on this, although I believe they have been in touch with the Deputy. I will ask them to contact the Deputy directly about some of the specifics in these matters. The HSE has stated that under no circumstances are Covid-positive healthcare workers accommodated in hotels by the authorities. The HSE is very categorical in its statement that it does not do it. That, however, runs contrary to the story in the local media.

Up to 3,000 staff per week are availing of the HSE temporary accommodation programme. This programme is available to healthcare workers who are currently living in shared accommodation with other health service workers; work in a Covid-positive or potentially Covid-positive environment and may have a person in the high-risk categories vulnerable to infection in a home setting and therefore cannot return to the home setting between shifts; live with a person who has been instructed to self-quarantine; or are required to work longer than usual shifts or overtime and would therefore not have time to return home between shifts. Staff who are Covid-positive or who need to self-isolate cannot and will not be accommodated under this service.

Where a staff member tests positive, he or she would be referred to the Citywest self-isolation facility by a medical doctor. The Deputy indicates that in a certain case the person was not referred. If we can have the details, I will certainly follow through on that. There is a need to reconcile the story as published by local media and the very categorical position that has been articulated by the HSE. I will follow that up.

Deputy Peter Fitzpatrick: Late last night, the HSE contacted the local radio station and confirmed that the incident it had raised was true. This is a very serious breach. We have healthcare workers who are putting their lives in danger for other people. They are being put in hotels with others who are positive for coronavirus. I am a wee bit disappointed. Yesterday, I gave the Taoiseach’s assistant the full details of the question I would ask today and I thought at the very least the Department would contact the HSE for an update. I am very disappointed as this must not have been done. The HSE came back to the radio station to confirm the story.

This is very serious so what can be done? I ask the Taoiseach to contact the HSE straight away and ask why its representatives did not have the decency to come back to the leader of the country on this matter, especially if his Department contacted the HSE for an update. I am astounded. A healthcare worker contacted me during the week to say she is living with her vulnerable parents and she cannot afford to go out and self-isolate. People positive for coronavirus are mixing with those who do not have the virus. It is a complete and utter mess.

Three or four weeks ago, I asked the Taoiseach about a case in County Louth and I was promised by the Taoiseach that his Department would contact me in three or four days. It did not happen. That was before Christmas. This is very serious. Healthcare workers are being put

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in with others who have tested positive for the coronavirus.

An Ceann Comhairle: Please, Deputy, the time is up.

The Taoiseach: It is very serious. The Deputy has said the HSE confirmed-----

Deputy Peter Fitzpatrick: Yes. It was confirmed to the radio station.

The Taoiseach: We have to get this reconciled, in terms of getting the truth. The HSE has said it was unaware at that time of any positive case going into the hotel and it did not arrange for healthcare staff with a positive diagnosis to be accommodated in that hotel.

Deputy Peter Fitzpatrick: The station was contacted.

The Taoiseach: We need this matter resolved and reconciled. The Minister for Health is here and I undertake to have this investigated. The Deputy will be contacted about that investigation and be notified of the outcome. As I stated, this needs to be reconciled, in terms of what the actual situation is and what happened. Up to minutes ago, the HSE was saying it was unaware that two positive cases were going into that hotel.

Deputy Joan Collins: Organisations representing healthcare workers, namely, the Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation, the Irish Medical Organisation and the Irish Hospital Consultants Association, made presentations to the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Health yesterday, describing what I can only relate is the appalling position of front-line workers in the health service. A properly funded, well-run health service would have struggled with this pandemic but as the Taoiseach is no doubt aware, as a former Minister with responsibility for health, a properly funded and well-run health service is something we do not have and never have had. The only reason we do not have an absolute disaster in our hospitals is the self-sacrifice, hard work and double-shifting of our healthcare workers.

Last night, we saw healthcare workers responding to the third wave of the pandemic on the front line in Tallaght hospital with the “RTÉ Investigates” programme. The same healthcare workers are predicting a tsunami of lack of care and missed care post Covid unless there is a radical change in terms of funding, staffing, recruitment and retention, extra beds and serious resourcing of public health specialists and facilities. We knew before Covid-19 and we certainly know now that the “make do” attitude at the top of the HSE, the Department and successive Governments will not do; it is not acceptable and it must change.

The inability to provide good quality healthcare, regardless of income, is one of the many shameful failings of this State. We are one of the richest countries in the world *per capita* but we continuously fail to provide for essential needs of citizens. Many issues were raised at the committee meeting yesterday, including a lack of protection in workplaces, where 12% of Covid cases are in healthcare workers. It is still an issue. There is abuse of trainee nurses and the random nature of the vaccine roll-out for healthcare workers because we are not targeting the most affected reasons. There is a lack of testing in hospitals, aside from when there is an outbreak. There is also the issue of childcare. It is appalling that the HSE has said childcare is not its problem and people had to deal with it individually. This must change and there must be a childcare allowance for healthcare workers.

I specifically raise the demand from the Irish Nurses and Midwives Association for compensation to its members due to overwork, long shifts, etc. This is in addition to the recent claim

from the health service staff panel. In England and Scotland, a once-off payment of £500 has been paid to healthcare workers and in France there has been a payment of €1,500. The key question is about post-Covid leave, respite and a chance to recover from fatigue and burnout. Will the Taoiseach give a commitment, on behalf of the Government, to facilitate this measure and start planning for it now?

The Taoiseach: I pay tribute to the “RTÉ Investigates” programme last evening, which revealed the extraordinary work of front-line healthcare workers in protecting our people and achieving incredible outcomes for a significant number of patients whom we saw on the programme. Unfortunately, a number of those patients passed on, which was very traumatic for the staff and all those who work in the hospital. It underpins the importance of all of us sticking to the guidelines and adhering to regulations in order to get down case numbers and reduce significantly the pressure on front-line healthcare workers in hospitals and nursing homes. It is a critical effort to get those numbers down and relieve the pressure we saw in last evening’s programme.

The programme also illustrated the fillip and morale boost that the vaccination programme provides to staff and front-line healthcare workers in the hospital. The phrase was used that it provided “hope” with an “end in sight” and there was a great buzz around the place when the vaccinations were taking place. More generally, we must say that the only issue impeding vaccinations so far has been the supply from the manufacturers. We are administering vaccines as we get them. The two priority groupings have been front-line healthcare workers and residents and staff in nursing homes. That is the truth of it. That is what has happened. In many respects, the personnel, all of the clinicians, everybody working in nursing and all of the staff who appeared last evening represent the HSE. From a policy perspective, when the Government did the budget this year, we increased overall resources by about €4 billion. Some €600 million was put in before the budget for a winter initiative, which has yielded results in terms of the flow through hospitals outside of Covid. As I said earlier, 7,000 additional staff have been recruited to the health service and many more will be recruited during the course of 2021. Coming out of Covid, one of the key lessons is that there will have to be significantly higher investment in our health service. The challenge now is to embed the increased levels of investment that we have experienced during Covid, while identifying and evaluating what works, and to make sure that this stays in the base of our health service funding into the future. However, it must be coupled with reform as well.

The idea of a national Health Service Executive has come into its own in the context of the pandemic. A single national entity that could, for example, resource PPE and administer it, operationalise a vaccination programme and deal, in a national context, with countering the global pandemic, has been an important point that we should register and acknowledge, despite all of the criticisms. The outcomes in our hospitals are on a par with if not better than the outcomes in the other European health systems. It is time to acknowledge that, too. While acknowledging criticism and limitations, there are quite a significant number of positives emanating from the performance of our hospitals and acute services, and of the HSE, in the context of a once-in-100-year global pandemic.

Deputy Joan Collins: I agree with the Taoiseach. The response from healthcare workers has been absolutely phenomenal. However, they have done it through hard work. They have been working double shifts, they are in the hospitals and they have made sacrifices in respect of their family life. In the case of one couple shown in the hospital last night, while one was working the other was at home looking after the children. They then turn around in the follow-

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ing week and do the same again. The fact that the HSE has not given a childcare allowance to healthcare workers is astounding and shameful. It must be changed immediately. The Taoiseach should come to the House today and say that it will be reversed.

Specifically, what I asked the Taoiseach concerned compensation for members of the Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation, INMO, as well as of the health service staff panel, that is, workers right throughout the health system, and the care they will need after the pandemic. I am not criticising the nurses and doctors. I am criticising the lack of targeted resources going into these areas. Yesterday, it was pointed out that 2,000 beds are needed in the healthcare service. Where is that money coming from and where is it being targeted? We must fight for the workers after the pandemic.

The Taoiseach: The Government will respond to and recognise the extraordinary efforts that front-line healthcare workers have made. The Government will do that. The precise time-frame obviously has to be considered. We are not out of this pandemic yet. There are just over 1,000 people still in hospital. The numbers are still 25% higher than the April peak. There are 175 people in intensive care. The pressure is still on our hospitals, and we need to get that pressure down. That is why we need to adhere to the regulations. That is why we are in favour of prolonged suppression of the virus to get the numbers down to very low levels and to keep them there. That will inform our approach to the period post 5 March, when there will not be a significant reopening of many sectors of our economy. We will focus on a phased return of schools.

In respect of non-Covid health services, there has been significant utilisation of the private sector deal on this occasion, with up to 2,300 bed nights alone used, and 30% of ICU beds used for non-Covid urgent procedures.

Deputy Joan Collins: What is the Government doing to compensate workers?

An Ceann Comhairle: That concludes Leaders' Questions for today.

Message from Business Committee

An Ceann Comhairle: The Standing Business Committee has completed its consideration under Standing Order 30 of the request by the Minister of State at the Department of Health with special responsibility for mental health and older people to waive the requirement for pre-legislative scrutiny, under Standing Order 173, on the general scheme and the draft heads of the Nursing Homes Support Scheme (Amendment) Bill 2019 and has agreed thereto.

The Standing Business Committee has also completed its consideration under Standing Order 30 of the request by the Minister for Health to waive the requirement for pre-legislative scrutiny, under Standing Order 173, on the general scheme and the draft heads of the Human Tissue (Transplantation, Post-Mortem, Anatomical Examination and Public Display) Bill and has agreed thereto.

An tOrd Gnó - Order of Business

An Ceann Comhairle: The House has agreed that for the duration of the Covid-19 emergency only, the rapporteur's report on the Order of Business shall not be read out but shall be taken as read. There are two proposals to be considered by the House today arising from this week's business. Is the proposal for dealing with Wednesday's business agreed to?

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Events in east Belfast and on the Ormeau Road last Friday have raised grave public concerns and have damaged public confidence in the PSNI. The fundamental duty of the PSNI to act impartially in serving the whole community is now in question. The actions of the PSNI in actively frustrating families in their search for truth - families who have lost loved ones, not least because of British state collusion - are a most toxic dynamic in the middle of all of this.

I am asking for statements from the Taoiseach and from the relevant Minister, Deputy Conroy, on these matters, and that we are given a full update as to the progress and the efforts made by the Government here in Dublin to secure the delivery of the Stormont House Agreement and arrangements that are the appropriate vehicle for dealing with the past, with legacy and the search for truth right across the community. I regard this as a matter of absolute urgency for the Dáil and the Oireachtas.

Deputy Mick Barry: I wish to register a point in the discussion of the Order of Business. We are operating on the basis of the Dáil sitting two days per week. I, along with my group, favour three sittings per week at this stage. If the schedule is to remain at two sittings per week, then two things must change. First, is the issue of Taoiseach's Questions. Taoiseach's Questions is an important forum for questioning the Taoiseach and holding him and the Government to account on a range of key issues. There has not been a Taoiseach's Questions session in 2021. That must change. We should have it next week.

The second point I wish to make is that we are having weekly debates on health, which is absolutely necessary. However, groups such as my own group having five or six minutes per week to contribute on that issue does not facilitate proper discussion and debate. The time for those debates must be extended. I want to register those points.

The Taoiseach: First, for all those who remember the 1992 UDA attack on the Sean Graham bookmakers on the Lower Ormeau Road, it was a particularly shocking and upsetting episode. I understand completely how raw it still feels for many people. I understand completely the anger provoked by images of PSNI officers breaking up a small outdoor commemoration at the site and the arrest of a survivor of the attack, Mark Sykes, which took place on Friday. As the Chief Constable of the PSNI himself has acknowledged, it has not been a good week for policing in the North. However, I suggest to the Deputy that we need to tread very carefully. Reform of policing and building community confidence in policing was a most difficult process and is central to political stability in the North. I know that people feel very strongly about it but I urge the Deputy and people generally to direct that energy into the mechanisms that are in place to hold the PSNI to account. There is a Northern Ireland Policing Board and a Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland. I call on everyone in positions of political influence to avoid escalating a political argument about policing and, instead, to use the very strong accountability processes that are in place. I call on everyone in positions of political influence to avoid escalating a political argument about policing and instead to use the very strong accountability processes that are in place. I know the Chief Constable is taking preliminary action against a

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number of officers. That process should be allowed to run its course. If the Chief Constable himself has questions to answer, there is a process for that too, and that should also be allowed to run its course. I think some of the statements recently are counter to the whole area of trying to build confidence in policing and that risks undermining-----

An Ceann Comhairle: We cannot go into a detailed debate on this matter.

The Taoiseach: In terms of legacy, I just want to assure the Deputy that the Irish Government and British Government are committed to a process for dealing with legacy issues and to the full implementation of the agreements that are in place.

In respect of Deputy Barry's point, first of all, I find a difficulty with reconciling a zero Covid approach with his approach in terms of the three days. Be that as it may, if we take the Deputy's proposal, it undermines the time and space for other Deputies, backbenchers in particular, to get in. I get the sense he is trying to give his own group prioritisation in terms of speaking time, to the detriment of others.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I have asked for statements on this matter and statements on the progress on the Stormont House Agreement. We are years waiting for the implementation of that agreement and it is being actively blocked. Are we to have those statements or not? It is a simple question.

An Ceann Comhairle: Are we having statements, a Thaoisigh, yes or no?

The Taoiseach: Sorry, the Deputy raised these issues and I gave my response.

An Ceann Comhairle: Yes, the Taoiseach was responding.

The Taoiseach: I have no issue with it but we are not in a position to do it this week because people were looking for significant debates on Covid.

An Ceann Comhairle: Okay.

The Taoiseach: Every week this happens. From my perspective, I have to say that I think there is a responsibility on the Deputy's party as well as on all of us to tread carefully. The past three weeks in Northern Ireland have witnessed different parties upping the ante and elevating issues instead of looking at it from a perspective of diffusing issues. There is that responsibility as well on all of us.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I am not interested in upping any ante. I want a debate in the Dáil on this important and pressing matter. Am I to take it that we will have statements next week?

An Ceann Comhairle: Okay, can I-----

The Taoiseach: A Cheann Comhairle-----

An Ceann Comhairle: I ask the Taoiseach and Deputy to wait for a second. The Taoiseach has made it clear it is not possible to have the statements this week. The Business Committee can consult on this matter on Thursday when it meets and can consider if it is appropriate or possible to have such a debate next week. That, I suggest, is the best way to move the matter forward.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I am quite astonished at the fact, given that the Taoiseach acknowledges the seriousness of the situation north of the Border and states that he wishes to see a situation of calm and orderly progress, which is what I dearly wish, that there would be any resistance to statements on this matter. I find that astonishing and I am within my rights to ask for statements on it. This matters to all of us, not just to those of who are organised in the North.

An Ceann Comhairle: In fairness, Deputy, I am not seeing any resistance. I am seeing that the schedule for this week is agreed and the time does not appear to be available for statements.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Do we have the Government's agreement that it will not reject or oppose statements on these matters next week?

An Ceann Comhairle: I presume the Government will come to the Business Committee and set out what its position is.

The Taoiseach: I just think there is an attempt to browbeat everybody into a particular position here. The Deputy has other mechanisms-----

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Says he, browbeating.

The Taoiseach: No, the Deputy is using language like "astonished" and that. The Business Committee orders the business of the House on a weekly basis and we make a contribution to the Business Committee, like every other party and every other grouping in the House. I take issue with the political grandstanding that is so evident.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Catch up, Micheál.

The Taoiseach: There are members of the Deputy's party questioning whether people should even be joining policing at this stage. Some of her colleagues have made that comment.

An Ceann Comhairle: We are taking up an awful lot of time on this particular matter. I am going to put the question. Is the business proposal for today agreed to?

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: No. Vótáil.

Question put: "That the proposal for dealing with today's business be agreed to."

<i>The Dáil divided: Tá, 28; Níl, 17; Staon, 0.</i>		
<i>Tá</i>	<i>Níl</i>	<i>Staon</i>
<i>Browne, James.</i>	<i>Barry, Mick.</i>	
<i>Bruton, Richard.</i>	<i>Browne, Martin.</i>	
<i>Calleary, Dara.</i>	<i>Cairns, Holly.</i>	
<i>Cannon, Ciarán.</i>	<i>Carthy, Matt.</i>	
<i>Carey, Joe.</i>	<i>Cronin, Réada.</i>	
<i>Chambers, Jack.</i>	<i>Cullinane, David.</i>	
<i>Devlin, Cormac.</i>	<i>Harkin, Marian.</i>	
<i>Duffy, Francis Noel.</i>	<i>Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.</i>	
<i>Durkan, Bernard J.</i>	<i>McDonald, Mary Lou.</i>	
<i>English, Damien.</i>	<i>Munster, Imelda.</i>	

<i>Feighan, Frankie.</i>	<i>Murphy, Catherine.</i>	
<i>Fitzpatrick, Peter.</i>	<i>Mythen, Johnny.</i>	
<i>Haughey, Seán.</i>	<i>Ó Murchú, Ruairí.</i>	
<i>Leddin, Brian.</i>	<i>Pringle, Thomas.</i>	
<i>Lowry, Michael.</i>	<i>Ryan, Patricia.</i>	
<i>Madigan, Josepha.</i>	<i>Sherlock, Sean.</i>	
<i>Martin, Micheál.</i>	<i>Smith, Duncan.</i>	
<i>McGrath, Mattie.</i>		
<i>McHugh, Joe.</i>		
<i>Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.</i>		
<i>Murphy, Eoghan.</i>		
<i>Naughten, Denis.</i>		
<i>O'Callaghan, Jim.</i>		
<i>O'Connor, James.</i>		
<i>O'Donnell, Kieran.</i>		
<i>O'Donoghue, Richard.</i>		
<i>O'Sullivan, Pádraig.</i>		
<i>Ó Cathasaigh, Marc.</i>		

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Jack Chambers and Marc Ó Cathasaigh; Níl, Deputies Pádraig Mac Lochlainn and Ruairí Ó Murchú.

Question declared carried.

An Ceann Comhairle: Is the proposal for dealing with tomorrow's business agreed to?

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: It is not agreed. For the attention of the Taoiseach and the Government, the Opposition has been co-operating with the fact that we are unique in the world in that we do not sit in our own Parliament these days and we are sitting at half the normal time. We believe that in the last few weeks the Government has taken advantage of this arrangement. We only have one Private Members' time per week. Normally there are two. We have no Private Members' time on a Thursday. We have no Taoiseach's questions or Ministers' questions. There is a range of responsibilities denied to us in this scenario.

The Business Committee is not a clearing house where we all sing "Kumbaya" and come together. The Government presents its draft schedule every week and the Opposition is normally turned down on requests it makes. Let us be clear on that: the Business Committee is not the deciding body in this House. The Government ultimately decides the schedule by coming here and voting it through every week. I ask the Government to be fair and, if it will not agree to this week's schedule, when it presents its schedule on Thursday I ask it to make sure that there is a balance of two Private Members' business slots and that the Opposition has the right

to legislate. As the Government has the right to bring forward legislation, we have a right to do the same. Balance needs to be restored and I appeal that it happens this Thursday when the Government presents its schedule if it votes this through now.

The Taoiseach: I am somewhat taken aback by the Deputy's contribution because I do not think it is fair or balanced. He seems to be progressively undermining the role of the Business Committee. In olden times, Government used to come in, lay out the schedule and vote it through. That is not the position now and Government will entertain suggestions and be part of the Business Committee to discuss the schedule for the following week. We are in unprecedented times with this global pandemic. Leinster House has not been ruled as suitable, not by us but from a public health perspective. We have to be informed by public health advice on this, in terms of how we sit and the venue we locate the Dáil in. Government will be reasonable and balanced. My understanding is the request came in last evening on this and it was not put to the original Business Committee. I stand to be corrected on that in terms of a debate or statements on Northern Ireland.

It has been my experience in the last while that the Business Committee meets and agrees a schedule but then new issues arise late in the day for inclusion and people want them on the floor of the House when the Dáil sits on a Wednesday. Then the Government is told it is resisting this or that debate but that is not the case. We need balance all round but I would prefer, if we get agreement at the Business Committee, that, barring some serious topical issue that arises, we proceed with the schedule as agreed by the Business Committee.

Question, "That the proposal for dealing with Thursday's business be agreed to", put and declared carried.

Ceisteanna ar Reachtaíocht a Gealladh - Questions on Promised Legislation

An Ceann Comhairle: Before I came into the House, 30 Deputies had indicated, including the Leaders. We now have 32, I think. I call Deputy McDonald.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The Minister for Transport, Deputy Eamon Ryan, has finally lifted his ban, or his delay, on the construction of the Coonagh to Knockalisheen distributor road in Limerick. It will now, I understand, go ahead as planned. Will the Taoiseach confirm that? The Minister's welcome u-turn follows weeks of deep anger and confusion among the local community after he cast doubt on the completion of this essential infrastructure. It is clear to me that the Government would have dumped its promise to the community of Moyross and Limerick if it were not for many people in the Moyross community. I mention especially Tracy McElligott of Moyross Residents Forum, Jason Craig, a family support worker, Adrian Power, a school completion officer, and Tiernan O'Neill, principal of Corpus Christi Primary School, Moyross. Will the Taoiseach also confirm that this will be just one of many steps to assist the community in building housing, jobs and educational opportunities?

The Taoiseach: I confirm that Deputy Ryan has made that announcement in respect of this road on a significant part of which construction had already commenced, including a bus lane and increased pedestrian measures. I assure the Deputy that, from my perspective, Deputy O'Dea has been a tireless advocate for Moyross and the entire area, as have Deputy Niall Col-

lins and councillors. They engage and have engaged on a consistent basis with the local community.

Deputy Sean Sherlock: And Jan O’Sullivan.

The Taoiseach: Jan O’Sullivan as well. We had an interesting presentation by Deputy O’Dea last week and, in his inimitable way, he brought home the importance of getting that project done but also the importance of wider issues of economic development in the Moyross area and greater opportunities which, through the urban regeneration and development fund, URDF, and other initiatives Government will undertake, we will be in a position to provide.

Deputy Duncan Smith: That is good to hear about Moyross.

Our question is on mandatory hotel quarantine. We are expecting legislation next week. Everyone knows here and we are hearing reports about UK emigrants who are hanging out in Ireland for a couple of weeks to get through our lax procedures in order to get a back door into the UK. We have a situation whereby people who are travelling for non-essential reasons, i.e. going on holiday, are being fined €500, handing it over and still being allowed go on their holiday. Why are we so far behind on implementing this? What is the latest status of the fines? Will the level of fine be changed? Will non-essential travellers be fined and sent back to their home?

The Taoiseach: About 60% of those travelling are returned Irish holidaymakers. There is a sense that €500 is not a sufficient disincentive to travel abroad. That will be increased. The Government is considering increasing that to €2,000 to act as a significant deterrent to people travelling because all non-essential travelling should be avoided. It is the intention to bring forward legislation for approval to Cabinet next Tuesday to deal with mandatory quarantining. If it can be done before that, every effort will be made to that end. There are significant complex legal and personal liberty issues involved that we have to be clear on, including in our own Constitution.

Deputy Holly Cairns: There is increasing opposition to the Government’s attempt to rush through the ratification of the Comprehensive Economic Trade Agreement, CETA, including several local authorities asking for Oireachtas scrutiny this week. One of the main objections is the creation of an investor court system which would allow corporations to sue the Government, bypassing domestic and EU courts. Big tobacco has used this system in other countries to sue governments. If this investment court system were in place in 2004, big tobacco could have sued to prevent the passing of the smoking ban the Taoiseach brought in, which has helped to save thousands of lives. Why is the Government rushing to ratify CETA when it will threaten progressive legislation such as the smoking ban into the future?

The Taoiseach: We are not rushing through CETA. It has been in provisional operation for three years, since the Commission signed it, and it has been of considerable benefit to quite a number of Irish companies that export goods and services to Canada, which underpins jobs in Ireland. That dimension of the debate should be articulated a bit more publicly because it is getting no airing. As a country, we are an open indigenous economy that exports most of what we produce in both goods and services.

The investment court issue would not have stopped the smoking ban. It has been categorically established in the European Court of Justice that any public health initiative cannot be thwarted by such mechanisms in CETA. Climate agenda policies or any other public policy

measures that a Government may wish to introduce cannot in any way be undermined by the provisions in CETA. That said, I have no issue with all aspects of this issue being aired in the House. I get the sense there is a glaring omission in the public debate around the importance to small and medium sized Irish companies which depend on exports to create jobs and an enterprise economy in this country. The debate on CETA seems very one-sided.

Deputy Mick Barry: Last night, I received a message from a Cork mother who is fearful that her son is so stressed by the leaving certificate carry-on that he could come to harm. She said it is at the point where she is sitting on his bedroom floor every night while he sleeps, just to keep an eye on him. Meanwhile, the Minister for Education is telling the media she hopes to be able to outline to the Cabinet on Tuesday next an alternative option to the leaving certificate. There will be six more nights of watch and anguish for this mother and six more nights of anguish for 61,000 leaving certificate students, who are sick to the back teeth with the Minister's talk of tomorrow, next week, never today, always *mañana*.

Students should not be forced to compete against one another for limited college places, least of all in a pandemic year. The Government should invest in third level education, adopt a policy of open access and open a place in third level for every leaving certificate student who wants one. Will the Taoiseach ask the Minister please to get a move on here?

Deputy Richard Bruton: I commend the Minister on her work in developing a leaving certificate for this year. Is it not time that we agreed to accelerate reform in the leaving certificate? It is a tyrannical test that serves only the interest of higher education wanting an easy way of access. It undermines vocational education and is a straitjacket on teachers who want creative learning. It is long past time that we accelerated the reform of this exam, which the OECD stated is too narrow and too rigid and does not match Ireland's needs for the future, or the needs of students sitting the leaving certificate.

The Taoiseach: This global pandemic has caused enormous stress, anxiety and strain on people generally, and no more so than on younger people in terms of the degree to which their lives have been upended. The routine pattern of life has been completely disrupted. Particularly in the context of this year's leaving certificate, given that the students lost some months last year and have lost some this year, it has been a particularly stressful and an anxious time for them. Last year, we had similar levels of anxiety and stress. It was managed, albeit the traditional leaving certificate did not proceed. There were predicted grades and students came through that and advanced to third level. It was not optimal or ideal but we always have to keep things in perspective. Many of us in this House sat the leaving certificate. We thought it was the toughest exam and the toughest period but years later, one looks back and asks what all the stress and anxiety was about.

The second point-----

An Ceann Comhairle: The time is up, Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: The Minister is engaging with all the partners. It is the correct way to do this so that when we make an announcement, it will have been thought through and there will be clarity for the students.

There has been reform of the leaving certificate over time and that should be acknowledged. There will be ongoing reform of the leaving certificate. Its one greatest strength is that it is impartial and it avoids subjectivity.

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Deputy Denis Naughten: Seven cent a day is what those working from home in 2020 will receive on average as a tax refund, and that is after submitting a year's worth of invoices for broadband, electricity and heating. That is a princely sum of €26.19 for a year, yet the AA estimates that working from home cost families an additional €210 on heat and electricity alone in 2020. The Government has promised a review of the current tax arrangements for remote workers in its remote working strategy published last month, but just 44 days earlier, the Minister for Finance rejected out of hand the very same proposal in Dáil Éireann.

Is the Government genuine about ensuring that people who are working from home are not left subsidising the Government, which is benefiting from reduced congestion and emissions, as well as some employers?

The Taoiseach: The Government does not benefit from reduced emissions; society does. We are all the Government, at the end of the day. The State is the taxpayer and represents all citizens. It is part of the social contract that we improve the environment and the climate for all of us, and improve our quality of life. In the context of the remote working strategy, everything will be looked at in the round, that is, pros and cons, benefits and burdens on workers, to see how we can alleviate the burdens and costs.

There are many pluses as well. In my view, reviewing tax arrangements and other issues in the context of the remote working strategy makes sense.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Last June, we debated at length in the House the issue of forestry and tree-felling licences. The situation has got worse. People cannot get forestry licences to sell their trees, whether from private forests or through the national afforestation programme. This has a significant knock-on effect on the building industry, the haulage industry, farm and forestry contractors and people who supply firewood. People cannot get timber for essential construction jobs and it has to be imported.

Will the Taoiseach please ensure there are enough staff in the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine to deal with the issue? Are serial objectors causing the problem? There is a serious problem. Small businesses are being wiped out, especially in this time of Covid, and jobs are being lost. Above all, people cannot get timber to roof their houses or to carry out other essential works. There is a huge logjam. The forestry Bill we passed last year, which I voted against, is not working. I do not know whether the logjam is due to a lack of staff or of ambition but it needs to be sorted out.

The Taoiseach: I have to disagree with the Deputy. It is not worse than it was. I do not know how he can say that because I am told the final three months of last year had the highest number of new licences issued of any months in 2020, with almost 900 new licences issued. Licences for a felling volume of some 2 million tonnes were issued in that time, which was 40% of the output for the year. This improvement continued strongly into January, which looks to have been the strongest month for licensing in 18 months. Coillte is the largest supplier of material to Irish sawmills. It has seen its 2021 licensing programme significantly improved and 80% of the programme has been licensed, with the final felling licences for the year to be processed in the coming weeks. It is working with the Department to close out any issues and to ensure availability of supply to market as quickly as possible. Staffing has increased within the Department to deal with all these issues.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I want to raise a matter relating to the destruction of envi-

dence. Page 11 of the report on mother and baby homes records that permission was sought from those who came forward to record their testimony and on the clear understanding it would be destroyed. That is not the clear understanding of those who went forward. I want to preempt the Taoiseach responding by telling me that this was an independent investigation. What action is the Government taking in respect of what looks like an action taken by the commission that is outside the terms of the legislation passed in 2004, which prohibits the destruction of information and evidence gathered?

On the information leaflet given to survivors to inform them that their permission was sought to record their testimonies, there was no mention of destruction. What action is the Government taking about that, in view of the fact that the Data Protection Commissioner has raised issues in this regard?

The Taoiseach: I will discuss this issue with the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, who will engage with the commission. The commission is independent but, on the other hand, the point in the context of the 2004 legislation, which provides for the preservation of records, is a fair one. That issue needs to be reconciled and sorted.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: Late last year, I raised the issue of delays in driving tests in County Kerry, especially in Killarney and Tralee. I thank the Taoiseach for his intervention at that time. Things improved then but they are now worse than ever. Looking forward, it seems we have a six-month waiting time to get a driving test. Essential workers who can provide a letter saying the driving test is for an essential need will be accommodated. The problem, however, is that driver testers are sending people home even when a slot is available, deeming that the need is not essential. We must deal with the word “essential”. If testers are able to carry out some tests, they should be doing all of them.

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

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: People in places like Valentia Island, Ballinskelligs, Brosna or Gneeveguilla are left stranded without a licence and cannot go to work.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy has made his point.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I ask the Taoiseach to intervene again.

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Martin Brown on the same matter.

Deputy Martin Browne: There are massive waiting lists all over the country, especially in County Tipperary, for driving tests and theory tests. Officials in the Department or someone else need to get their finger out. Young people are looking for theory and driving tests to allow them to go to work but the tests are not happening. The Government needs to start making progress on that as quickly as possible.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: I emphasise the problem this is causing on the ground. People are suffering distress due to waiting. The chaos that will ensue when things open up will be unbelievable. The Taoiseach must put measures in place now to deal with this problem. It is probably one of the most common issues on which I receive calls every day. I imagine it is the same for an awful lot of Deputies in this House. I ask the Taoiseach and the Department to tackle this issue head-on and try to give people a bit of comfort that they will be called for a test.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: On driving tests, the biggest problem is the number of testers

being taken on will not be sufficient. It is proposed to take on 140 testers who will do six tests per day. Even if we had a further 40 testers and all testers doing eight tests per day, the extra 180 testers would do 1,400 tests per day and it would still take a year to clear the waiting list of 64,000. More testers are needed. We need a plan of action so that when we come out of level 5, we will have enough testers in place to ensure we can get tests done quickly. Young drivers need to get their driving test, even in terms of insurance costs.

The Taoiseach: I understand the issue raised by the Deputies but we are in the middle of global pandemic. There is no easy answer to this. Provision was made for people who need tests for essential purposes and those involved in essential services and so forth. Additional staff have been hired. Some 40 temporary driver testers have been hired and 36 who were approved for retention were rehired in 2020. Further recruitment is going on. Waiting times have increased significantly. According to the Department, people applying today now face a potential waiting time of 25 weeks. My sense is that this is a challenging issue and will remain so for some time because of the changing nature of the virus and the arrival of the variant. I have said for a number of weeks that the variant will have an impact on many of areas of life given the higher level of transmission and transmissibility. We must get that into our heads in terms of how we roll out services. It creates the kinds of challenges to which the Deputies have referred. These issues will not be resolved simply.

An Ceann Comhairle: That concludes questions on promised legislation. The 20 or more Deputies not reached today will be given priority tomorrow.

Derelict Sites (Amendment) Bill 2021: First Stage

Deputy Sean Sherlock: I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to give security to local authorities, by way of creating a charge on the land concerned, in relation to the expenses incurred by the local authority in order to give effect to measures which the local authority considers to be necessary in order to prevent the land from becoming or continuing to be a derelict site, for that purpose to amend the Derelict Sites Act 1990, and to provide for related matters.

I seek leave to introduce the Derelict Sites (Amendment) Bill 2021. The Derelict Sites Act 1990 enables a local authority, where, in its opinion, it is necessary to do so in order to prevent land from becoming or continuing to be a derelict site, to serve a notice in writing on the owner or occupier of the land. Under section 11 of the Act, where the person on whom the notice has been served does not comply with it within a specified period, the local authority may take such steps, including entry on land by authorised persons, as it considers reasonable and necessary to give effect to the terms of the notice. The authority may also recover any expenses incurred from the person on whom the notice was served as a simple contract debt in a court of competent jurisdiction. If, however, the derelict site belongs to an insolvent company and a liquidator is appointed who sells the land, the proceeds of the sale must be distributed according to the rules relating to priority of debts. Secured creditors come first and unsecured creditors are at the end of queue. At the end of the process there may be nothing left to pay unsecured creditors, including the local authority. The Bill proposes a short amendment to the Act so as to convert

the expenses incurred by the local authority into a charge on the land, making the authority a secured creditor for the purposes of a subsequent liquidation.

The main reason I am introducing this legislation is that in my own home town of Mallow we have a derelict site, the former Central Hotel, which gave rise to litigation in 2012. A fire at the hotel, where there was continuing dereliction, gave rise to a court sitting. In an article in *The Corkman* newspaper, Mr. Bill Browne stated:

At a court sitting in October 2012 the then owners ... were hit with a fine of €91,033.07 plus legal costs under the Dangerous Structures provision of the 1964 bill. This total also included recouping cost of the remedial work undertaken by Mallow Town Council. It is understood the monies remain outstanding.

In June of 2016 two separate fires at the dilapidated building within the space of three hours caused even more internal damage to the building.

The following month the building once again came under the spotlight after it emerged a Dublin-based property developer had purchased it for a sum ... A subsequent application for a major plan of works there, lodged in the name of Mallow Capital Ltd, was shot down by county council planners.

In the case of the Central Hotel in Mallow and countless numbers of derelict sites throughout the country, the fact is that where a site is in the ownership of an insolvent company and the local authority intervenes to make it safe, the taxpayer loses. The taxpayer has no mechanism to recoup that funding through the local authority making the site safe. The purpose of this legislation is to make good that wrong and ensure the taxpayer is protected such that, where a local authority intervenes to protect citizens in a streetscape in the event of a building becoming derelict and requiring to be made safe, the authority will not be left at a loss for the costs of doing so. We are seeking to rectify and amend the Derelict Sites Act 1990. I am hopeful the Government will support this Bill and that it will receive cross-party support because this issue affects each and every one of us in our constituencies.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Is the Bill opposed?

Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Jack Chambers): No.

Question put and agreed to.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Since this is a Private Members' Bill, Second Stage must, under Standing Orders, be taken in Private Members' time.

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

Question put and agreed to.

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

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

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That, notwithstanding anything in Standing Orders, or in the Order of the Dáil of 16th December, 2020-

(a) Leaders' Questions under Standing Order 36, from 11th February to 4th March, 2021, inclusive, shall be taken in accordance with the temporary sequence contained in the Appendix to the report of the Committee on Standing Orders and Dáil Reform entitled 'Temporary Leaders' Questions rota' and laid before Dáil Éireann on 9th February, 2021, and

(b) on the conclusion of that temporary sequence, the sequence as contained in the rota adopted by Order of the Dáil of 16th December, 2020, shall continue, commencing on Day 15, unless the Dáil otherwise orders or resolves.

Question put and agreed to.

Covid-19 (Transport and Travel): Statements

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I am grateful for the opportunity to address the House on the impacts of Covid-19 on the transport sector. I will be sharing my time with my colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy Hildegard Naughton, who has responsibility for international and road transport and logistics at the Department of Transport. I will update the House on the impacts of Covid on the provision of public transport services and the opportunities it has afforded us to make some much-needed improvements in sustainable mobility in our cities. I will also update the House on international travel, while the Minister of State will address the impacts of Covid on our supply chains, especially on the maritime and freight sectors, and also on aviation.

We are now 12 months into the Covid pandemic. Throughout 2020, and into 2021, my Department has been at the forefront of this country's response to Covid-19, just as the transport sector is one of the sectors to experience the most profound and severe impacts of Covid. As with many other public sector organisations, the majority of officials in my Department and staff in our agencies have been working remotely, while managing a wide range of Covid-19 related issues. I commend them on the work they have been doing. These staff have supported the continued provision of essential services and maintained international access and connectivity through our ports and airports for vital supplies and essential travel. They have worked to develop urgent policy responses to address the economic impacts of the pandemic on our public transport, aviation, maritime, travel and trade sectors with innovative thinking. There are also many staff across the transport sector involved in the direct provision of services to the public who have attended the workplace throughout the pandemic to ensure these essential services continue to be available to citizens. I thank those transport workers for the work they have done.

Covid-19 has reached into every area of the transport sphere and has had profound impacts on every industry and service provided by my Department. I will briefly explain these impacts and the steps we have taken to address them to ensure a viable recovery for as many of our stakeholders as possible. We all know that Covid had an immediate impact on all our lives and many of those impacts are still with us, be they personal or professional. One noticeable impact

has been a reduction in traffic. Across Europe, public authorities are taking the opportunity to rethink how our urban centres are set out and how they allocate limited space to different demands.

In Ireland, we are also rethinking how we allocate road space and ensure we place pedestrians and cyclists at the centre of our thinking. This reallocation of space is supporting the Government's overall Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business. It provides additional commuting capacity to those people who will still need to physically get into their workplaces, as well as improving social distancing in our urban centres and supporting the gradual reopening of retail and commercial spaces. My Department has funded the National Transport Authority to work with local authorities in developing Covid mobility frameworks which will set out specific plans to deliver wider footpaths, temporary protected cycling facilities, revised bus routings and bus priority measures, and enhanced pedestrian priority zones. Letters were issued to all 31 local authorities in May, resulting in more than €15 million being requested for this purpose and the works identified being funded through my Department's sustainable mobility investment programme.

With the additional funding provided under Covid and the Government's July jobs stimulus, many measures have been put in place to facilitate the reopening of society and business generally. This emphasis on active travel is not just a short-term measure. It has been a feature of the submissions we received during our consultation on our sustainable mobility policy. More people are walking and cycling and, in time, more people will return to public transport, potentially reducing car use in our medium and long-term future. We are also continuing to fund the expansion of our bus, tram and train fleets and making sure we are continuing to plan and design those highly significant public transport projects such as BusConnects, MetroLink and the DART expansion programme, which will have a role to play in our post-Covid future. While I acknowledge the challenges we face in this regard, I look forward to addressing them head-on as we strive to make our transport sector more sustainable now and for future generations. I will be unequivocal in saying I am in no doubt about the scale and depth of these challenges, which are like none faced in our lifetimes. They are felt in all sectors of society, none more so than transport.

I will start with public transport, where profound impacts have been experienced. As Members will know, with the most recent move to level 5, capacity across the public transport network was restricted to 25%. Most, but not all, transport operators have moved to slightly reduced schedules, with some increased services at peak times, to deal with the lower overall transport demand. The Government has introduced a number of measures since the beginning of the Covid crisis to ensure the continued safe operation of these essential public transport services. These include restricted seating signs in place on bus and rail services to align with the 25% capacity restriction in level 5, as well as the mandatory use of face coverings.

The Government has been clear that the continued operation of the public transport sector is an essential service, even though many people are working from home or staying at home in order to comply with Covid-19 instructions. This has meant that although fare revenues have collapsed, most of the cost of operations remains and must continue to be met in order to fulfil Government's broader policy objectives. As part of the 2021 Estimates process, my Department secured significantly higher than normal levels of funding of €670 million for public service obligation, PSO, and Local Link services. More recently, the Government approved an extension of the temporary supports for the commercial bus sector, which were first introduced last summer. These supports ensure that public transport services continue to be available to

essential workers across the economy and for broader societal reasons.

I will move on to the issue of international travel, testing and quarantine. As an island, we are heavily reliant on our international connectivity. We have had to keep our borders open throughout this health crisis to maintain critical supply lines and allow essential travel. At various times over the past year, depending on the level of community transmission in Ireland and across Europe, the risk of international travel being a significant contributor to virus spread has risen and fallen. Striking the right balance in our approach has been challenging because the circumstances of the virus keep changing but the health of our people has been our first priority at all times.

Understanding how best to save lives and livelihoods at various times, as the virus has first surged, then retreated and then surged again, has, unsurprisingly, required quick decisions and direction changes as new information has presented itself. I would like to update the House on the Government's current thinking and latest decisions on international travel restrictions and quarantining requirements. The extent to which the public, including arriving passengers, are required to self-isolate, restrict their movements, adhere to other public health measures or undertake Covid-19 testing is based on the advice of the public health authorities. As Members know, the Government continues to advise against non-essential international travel and that any essential travel be undertaken with due regard to public health safety measures.

Since the emergence of new variants of Covid-19 in December in the UK, South Africa and Brazil, the Government has introduced travel bans stopped short-term visa entry schemes and introduced mandatory pre-departure polymerase chain reaction, PCR, tests for all international arrivals. Last week, it put in place a number of additional measures for international travel. A legal requirement to quarantine has been introduced for all travellers, unless their journey originates in Northern Ireland. A 14-day quarantine period must be undertaken at the address specified on the passenger locator form. This also includes people who travel from another country to Ireland via Northern Ireland. They must also observe the mandatory quarantine regime. If passengers do not do so, they are committing an offence and can be fined up to €2,500, sentenced to up to six months in prison, or both. They may only leave their places of residence during the quarantine period for unavoidable reasons of an emergency nature to protect a person's health or welfare or to leave the State. They may also leave to take a PCR test not less than five days after their arrival and if they have a negative and not detected result from this test, their period of quarantine can end. There are also some limited exemptions from the requirement to complete mandatory quarantine, namely, international transport workers such as hauliers, maritime and air crew, and patients travelling for urgent medical reasons. Essential transport workers, such as those required to carry out essential repair, maintenance, construction or safety assurance of critical transport infrastructure or critical utility infrastructure, must quarantine but can leave to go about their essential function. Passengers from Brazil and South Africa must complete the full 14-day period of quarantine.

This is on top of the already mandatory requirement to have evidence of a negative or not detected result from a PCR test taken within 72 hours of arrival to Ireland, and the requirement to complete a Covid-19 passenger locator form. In addition, An Garda Síochána can fine people who travel to an airport or port without valid reason. The fine relating to non-compliance with Covid-19 measures was recently increased to €500. Earlier, the Taoiseach outlined that the fine will be increased to €2,000 following consultation with public health officials. Urgent work is under way to establish a mandatory quarantine facility for passengers arriving from high-risk locations associated with the new variants emerging. The Department of Health is leading in

this regard and is reviewing a number of options, including in the context of location, size and all the other requirements involved. There is cross-Government support for this from a number of Departments, including the Department of Justice and my Department. The Government is taking action to ensure that we protect our population from the risk of importation of new variants of Covid-19.

I now hand over to the Minister of State, Deputy Hildegarde Naughton, who will outline the impacts of Covid-19 on Ireland's international transport sector.

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton): I will address the impact of Covid on the aviation, freight and maritime sectors in the context of the vital role they play in ensuring that our supply chains continue to operate effectively during the pandemic.

The maritime sector has had to be agile and shipping and ports operations have had to respond, in one form or another, in order to maintain delivery of essential goods and mitigate the risk of the virus, ensuring that both workers and passengers were transported as safely as possible. I want to say how deeply appreciative I am of these efforts. The maritime sector is essential to the continued supply of goods and accounts for 90% of Ireland's international trade in volume terms. This sector is facing challenges, not least of which is the significant decline in passenger numbers. Passenger figures for 2020 showed a reduction of over 70% in comparison with 2019. Continuing travel restrictions have severely impacted on the combined freight and passenger services and leave questions over their viability. These restrictions have been necessary, however, in order to ensure the protection of everyone. I am hopeful that as we roll out the vaccination programme and case numbers begin to fall, we can once again look to align ourselves more closely with the EU position on a more co-ordinated approach to international travel.

The haulage industry has also played a huge role in keeping flows of goods moving into and out of the country during the pandemic while also adapting to the huge changes to our supply chains arising from Brexit. The challenges to the sector have been compounded by the imposition of testing by some EU member states for some of our essential supply chain workers. A new French law came into force on 28 January requiring truck drivers arriving in France on direct ferries from Ireland to show a negative Covid test result. Following a rapid procurement process, my Department has contracted an Irish company, RocDoc Limited, to provide free tests for commercial drivers travelling to France. Three new test centres are now up and running and testing is also available at an existing facility at Cork Airport. This testing is separate to the public health Covid testing. The new arrangements are working well at both the Irish and French ends, but will be kept under close review. Ireland is still advocating that all EU member states should adhere to the EU green lanes recommendation that essential transport workers should be exempt from such tests in the interest of keeping essential supply chains running.

Turning to aviation, as with maritime passenger traffic, international air passenger traffic has collapsed due to Covid-19 and the Irish aviation sector is currently experiencing its most challenging crisis, more severe than 9/11 or the global financial crash. Many analysts are predicting that it will take several years for the sector to return to 2019 levels. Traffic in 2020 was down 80% on 2019. Traffic levels at our three State airports are down between 90% and 97%. Dublin is down 90%, and Shannon and Cork are down 94% and 97%, respectively. The smaller airports have also been affected. No scheduled services will be operating at Shannon until April at the earliest. Knock, Kerry and Donegal have no scheduled international routes either, and Cork

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Airport has currently one airline serving one route on which there are only three flights a week. The sector will continue to face a range of challenges over the coming months and a protracted recovery is likely. Irish aviation will only begin to fully recover when there is some prospect of a sustainable return to international travel, including non-essential leisure travel.

It is true to say that the maritime sector does the heavy lifting for Ireland as a global trading nation. It has proven resilient, competitive and robust throughout this and previous economic crises. It continues to provide an essential lifeline to our key markets and for the supply of essential goods into the country. That does not mean that this sustained pandemic has not severely impacted the sector. My Department provided for a financial intervention for the sector for a short period last year by way of the designation of five key strategic routes as public service obligation routes. Shipping operators are clear that their survival is not guaranteed should this pandemic and the associated impacts on international connectivity continue for a prolonged period. My officials continue to engage with the sector to determine the measures we can put in place which will ensure that the sector remains operational throughout this pandemic, particularly in light of the added challenges emerging since Brexit.

My Department is also monitoring the enormous financial impact of Covid-19 on the Irish aviation sector on an ongoing basis, in consultation with all key stakeholders and relevant Departments. The Government has put in place a range of supports for businesses, including the aviation sector. These supports include the wage subsidy scheme, waiver of commercial rates, tax clawback, the Covid restriction support scheme, the credit guarantee scheme, and the Strategic Banking Corporation of Ireland, SBCI, working capital scheme. In addition to these general business support measures, the Government has also agreed a revised €80 million funding package specifically for Irish aviation. Subject to state aid clearance, which is being worked on as a priority, this funding will be made available primarily to our airports through a number of schemes. Despite all of this, and my commitment to do more if it is needed, a protracted recovery is likely. Irish aviation will only begin to fully recover when there is some prospect of a sustainable return to international travel, including non-essential leisure travel.

I wish to briefly address the impact of Covid on the delivery of essential transport services a bit closer to home. There have been a number of impacts on driver and road safety services provided to the public by my Department and the Road Safety Authority and arrangements have been put in place to assist those affected. Extensions to both driving licences and learner permits were put in place in 2020 and certificates of professional competence have also had their validity extended. Special measures have also been put in place regarding the renewal of driving licences for the over-70s. The National Driver Licence Service has expanded the online facility to accommodate all driving licence and learner permit applications to enable accessibility online rather than by calling to an office. At present, in level 5, driving tests are available only to those who are involved in essential services and significant backlogs have resulted from this. We are discussing how we can return to the normal target for the maximum waiting time, which is approximately ten weeks. It is important to recognise that there are no quick fixes and that the continuing build-up of applications means that it will take time to reach a normal waiting time. The national car test and the commercial vehicle roadworthiness test inspection regimes are now classified as essential services and there is no suspension or interruption to either service at present.

Staff in the Department and its agencies are working to ensure that the most negative impacts of Covid on the sector are managed, and mitigated. Transport remains one of the hardest hit sectors. The minister and I are working ceaselessly to ensure that the sector continues to

meet the challenges facing it and delivers the essential connectivity, supply chain access and services that we all need.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I will focus my comments and questions on international travel and the aviation sector and colleagues will pick up on other issues.

The British Government's announcement on the introduction of mandatory hotel quarantine from Monday next completely exposed the Irish Government's excuses and delays in this area. Mandatory hotel quarantine can be done and there is no reason it should not be done here for all non-essential arrivals. The advice from the Chief Medical Officer, CMO, and National Public Health Emergency Team, NPHE, has been crystal clear on this. They stated, as recently as 14 January, that the discretionary elements of quarantine and post-arrival testing should be removed. They also stated that every effort should be made to remove these. Neither direction has been followed. Yet again, the public health advice has been shelved during this pandemic.

2 o'clock

While the Administration in London announced detailed plans for self-funded ten-day quarantines with strict measures and severe penalties for breaches, the Minister and his colleagues are still at the stage of confusion and indecision. It also announced mandatory testing for all travellers on days two and eight post arrival, something that Sinn Féin has repeatedly called for in Ireland but that the Government has inexplicitly resisted.

We have had nearly a year of inadequate and reactionary measures on international travel that have protected neither lives nor livelihoods. Every measure introduced to date has been half-baked. On 1 June, Sinn Féin stated that a traffic light system for international travel should be examined. Unbelievably, we had to wait until November before it was introduced, and then only at the behest of the EU. The Government waited until the passenger locator form was ignored *en masse* before making it mandatory, and follow-up remains inadequate. Well in advance of Christmas, we called for mandatory testing of arrivals over the Christmas period. The Government introduced voluntary, expensive airport testing, which was ignored by the majority of arrivals, resulting in severe consequences. Even the recent airport fines that the Government stated would be a major deterrent have failed, with people just paying the €100 or €500 and going on their merry way to the Canaries or elsewhere.

It is incredible that NPHE issued advice on 14 January, the Government responded and within hours, its proposals and measures were proven inadequate. I cannot understand how no lessons have been learned. The Government is constantly on the back foot as regards international travel. Leaving our ports of entry wide open during a pandemic has not benefited anyone over the past year. It has not helped aviation workers, kept the travel sector afloat, kept out Covid variants or reduced infections on our island. We know there are combined variants with increased infectivity, transmissibility and mortality levels associated with them.

The Government's measures have not worked and will not work. It needs to go back to the drawing board yet again. A system of hotel quarantine for all non-essential arrivals needs to be introduced immediately until such time as our infection levels drop, our health system is not at risk of being overwhelmed and the vaccine roll-out is more advanced. We realise that this means an extension of the current challenges facing those working in the aviation and travel sectors but decisive action now, with adequate sector-specific supports, will help these industries recover more quickly. Britain is introducing mandatory quarantine for arrivals from 33

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countries, covering 800 million people. The Government has stated that it intends to introduce mandatory hotel quarantine for arrivals from just two countries, Brazil and South Africa, at some future date as yet unknown.

Has the Minister's counterpart in London been in contact with him about Ireland being used as a back door into Britain to avoid the latter's quarantine measures? When will the Government introduce a more comprehensive list of countries to which hotel quarantine will apply?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I thank Deputy O'Rourke for his questions. This is the most serious issue and one on which we take and follow public health advice. The public health advice will come later this afternoon as to on which additional countries we, similar to the UK, should consider applying much stricter restrictions. We will implement that advice with full speed.

I have been in regular contact with the UK transport minister and colleagues in the North - it does not have a commensurate minister for transport - to ensure that we co-operate and coordinate as best we can. I will speak to the UK minister again later this afternoon when I have details of our public health advice so that we can inform each other of what measures we intend to take. There will be no holding back or unwillingness to take decisions.

I agree with the Deputy that, in the coming months at this critical moment when we have to get the vaccinations done and reduce the Covid numbers, it would be unfair if we at home were restricting our movements and our lives in many different ways when non-essential travel was seen to be facilitated. The Deputy is right about the fines being introduced and increased. They will be increased again should there be any evidence that they are not proving to be a restraint. We would also consider other measures should such non-essential travel continue.

Looking back over the past year and an analysis of what has happened in various countries within the European Union, which is our peer group, the level of reduction in travel into our airports and ports has just about exceeded every other country. In this as in other areas, the Irish people have seen strong measures to restrict travel. According to the latest figures from yesterday, the level of travel into the majority of our airports other than Dublin Airport had seen a 100% reduction because there was not a single passenger. Dublin Airport had seen a 98% reduction. I acknowledge that may need to be reduced further. We need some flights and ferries because we need cargo and essential workers, and there will be a small number of cases in which people have to undertake essential travel. We have to facilitate that while providing for and listening to the public health advice.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I appreciate that the numbers are down significantly but the risk is not a relative one. It is not a year-on-year comparison. The risk is a real one, given the numbers coming through. If we do not have an adequate system of checks and controls, it will not matter how few are travelling here. All that matters is how many come to Ireland with Covid, particularly its variants.

I wish to raise the related issue of the aviation and travel sectors and the supports for same, given the public health measures' significant impact on them. The Government's approach has not just failed to protect the population from further infection but has also done no favours for the aviation and travel sectors. Pilots, cabin crew, ground staff and travel agents have raised issues. They appeared before a committee yesterday. Significant proposals have been made. The Irish Air Line Pilots Association, IALPA, has pointed to other countries. For example, there has been a \$900 million investment in Air New Zealand. Air France has got €7 billion

and Lufthansa €10 billion. Fórsa, SIPTU and Connect Trade Union pointed towards a sector-specific intervention and supports based on the German model. When I asked parliamentary questions last week, I was given no figures for the supports for individual airlines. I read in the newspapers that the figure was €150 million. Is that the case and has it been provided? What scale of support is available for individual airlines and, as importantly, workers in the sector? What will the Government do?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Unfortunately, the Minister of State has been left with little time. The next Deputy is due to contribute in a couple of seconds' time.

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: I thank the Deputy for raising these issues. Many of the supports that the Government has implemented were raised by the aviation task force and the Oireachtas transport committee, which has done excellent work in this regard. The supports include the wage subsidy scheme, the alleviation of commercial rates, a tax clawback, the Covid restrictions support scheme, the credit guarantee scheme and the Strategic Banking Corporation of Ireland, SBCI, working capital scheme. Many of these supports have been availed of throughout the aviation sector, including by airlines. It is estimated that more than €100 million in operational support has already been made available under these schemes to Irish airlines and airports. The Government has also revised a support package of €80 million specifically for Irish aviation. It is being worked on as a priority. That funding will primarily be made to our airports across the country.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: I welcome the Minister's decision to approve the Coonagh-Knockalisheen road finally. I have been raising this issue in the Dáil, given that it has caused considerable concern in my constituency in Limerick. In particular, the community in Moyross has felt isolated, attacked by the Minister and his party, and marginalised. There has been a sense of despair and they have been through trauma for the past couple of weeks because of the Minister's decision or lack thereof. This morning's announcement was positive. I have no doubt whatsoever but that it would not have happened without the pressure that came from that community and I commend the people there, particularly the Moyross Partners group, which co-ordinates all of the groups in Moyross, including the school, the employers - of which there unfortunately only are a few and hopefully there will be more - the parish priest, everybody involved in the local soccer and rugby clubs, community groups, activists and every person involved in this massive campaign. I thank the Green Party for re-energising the community because they felt they had to defend themselves and they did it very well. I want to mention some people involved, including Jason Craig, who is a family support worker in Moyross school, Adrian Power, the school completions officer, Tommy Daly from Moyross Residents Alliance, Raymie O'Halloran, a local employer, Tracy McElligott of Moyross Residents Forum and Tiernan O'Neill, who is the principal of what I believe to be one of the best, if not the best, primary schools in the country, Corpus Christi School, Moyross. The news this morning has been very positive and very welcome. I have some specific questions on it. Will there be any more blockages to building the road? When does the Minister hope it will start and by when does he hope it will be completed?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I absolutely agree with Deputy Quinlivan that the people with whom I and my party have engaged in Moyross have shown real leadership and commitment and it is absolutely right to focus on the delivery of services for their community. They played a huge part in delivering this. There will be no delay in building the road. I hope that what the Deputy and I can agree on is that this in itself is not the only key thing. I was speaking to the city managers yesterday and to my mind, as Minister for Transport, it was appropriate to test and to look

at options and all of the aspects of this, of which there are many.

I hope Deputy Quinlivan will agree, and I will give time to him to come back in, that as we build the road it is also vital that we open up pedestrian access for the people of Moyross in every direction and really provide them with a public realm of the highest quality connectivity. We recently improved the bus services in Moyross but it is absolutely right to go further and to put bus lanes on the new road to make sure the people get high quality public transport. There are other new public transport projects that I hope to bring to the Dáil to seek support. It is also important that we connect to the rest of the city with further measures, such as high quality cycling and pedestrian facilities to the city centre, Mary Immaculate College, University of Limerick and Limerick Institute of Technology to connect the three colleges in Limerick. There is also new housing and proceeding with speed not only with the road but with the regeneration programme and new investments, which the local authority will be announcing in the coming days. It is about looking at the whole package with regard to transport and the other local measures we all want to provide for Moyross. I hope the Deputy will indicate what he thinks about these additional measures. I am telling those in management that these measures have to come in at the same time as the road, at full speed, particularly pedestrian access for the community.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: I thank the Minister and I agree 100% with what he has said. As we are speaking about extra public transport, the Minister might look at the area of Southill, which is another deprived regeneration area. Recently, the bus service into Carew Park was cut. The Minister might intervene and find out why one of the most deprived areas of Limerick is being deprived of a bus service. We can take with a pinch of salt what the Minister has said about the rest of the community if he will not restore the bus service to Carew Park. I believe the project we are speaking about will include pedestrian access, which will open up the Coonagh to Knockalisheen road and the direct provision centre in Knockalisheen, and will allow people in Moyross to feel they are not in the biggest cul-de-sac in Ireland, as they have for a number of years. A train line already goes through Moyross and this service also needs to be delivered. I agree with what the Minister has said. We need to open up the whole area.

Deputy Duncan Smith: I will make a contribution including questions and if there is time at the end the Minister can answer them and if not, I ask for the answers in writing. This would be most helpful. On mandatory hotel quarantine, we are expecting legislation next week. We are all waiting with bated breath to see the detail. I have been contacted by a number of Irish people who went away for Christmas to visit family and have stayed away with the schools being closed. They are asking for advice with regard to coming back. Should they come back now to quarantine in their houses for 14 days? If mandatory hotel quarantine comes into play will they have to go to a hotel when they come home or will they be able to quarantine in their houses? I have had several contacts in this regard. I would appreciate the views of the Minister on it.

With regard to the aviation sector, yesterday we had an hour long committee meeting which was wholly inadequate. This is no one's fault given the constraints under which the committees are operating but it was inadequate to discuss the many complex issues with regard to the aviation sector. I want to focus on the package of supports agreed and the Ireland Strategic Investment Fund, ISIF, funding. I know the Minister for Finance has a role in this. Has there been any move with regard to applying conditionality on employers to ensure workers and their jobs are protected while in receipt of any State assistance, be it through the ISIF or anything else? Have those conversations taken place in the Cabinet? Will the Minister for Transport, who is responsible for these workers, advocate for such conditionality to ensure that for however long

the sector remains on the ground that their jobs will be there for them when we as a country will rely on the sector's recovery to get our economy back up and running?

This morning, my colleague, Deputy Nash, raised extending the employment wage subsidy scheme for aviation workers. There have been issues with regard to short time work forms still being filled out incorrectly by employers. As the Minister with responsibility for these workers and that sector, I ask the Minister to raise this with the Ministers for Finance and for Social Protection.

There has been a report that Ireland is in breach of WHO regulations for failure to designate a competent authority at our ports and airports for dealing with contagious disease control. This has been reported in the media today. I must say it was news to me. I would appreciate a comment on or a response to the charge from the Minister. Are there measures he will put in place to rectify this?

At the end of her contribution, the Minister of State, Deputy Naughton, spoke about road safety. An element of road safety is improvement and maintenance of our roads. Will the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, be signing off on the regional roads maintenance grants? It is three and a half weeks later than when they are usually signed off. Local authorities throughout the country are seeking an update on this. The main representations I receive about road maintenance in north County Dublin are from cycling groups who look for the roads to be maintained in order that they can take part in their cycling, racing and training in a safe manner. I would appreciate an update on this.

As I am speaking about roads, and this issue has been raised already, we welcome the U-turn on the Coonagh to Knockalisheen bypass. The community of Moyross must be applauded. I have engaged with them through the Labour Party's local councillor, Conor Sheehan, in recent weeks. I have seen the positive campaigning they have done for this through their Facebook group and through engaging with all public representatives. I welcome this and commend the community.

There are other very important roads and infrastructure. We have the Athy distributor road and the M11 to Rosslare Europort, and all of the problems in the port. The M11 needs to be extended. There are traffic pile-ups in villages such as Oilgate, which are not good for the environment and need to be addressed. The Mitchelstown to Mallow road needs upgrading given the amount of haulage that takes place on that road and the impact it is having on the environment. When roads are done properly they can have a positive impact on the environment compared to what is there now. They are not the overall answer. There is a bigger picture at play and we know this. There is also where we want to get to with rail and active travel. We need these works to be done as soon as possible.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: My advice to constituents with questions as to whether they should travel home now is not to travel. If the question is when might be best, the answer is not now if there is a choice. ISIF funding is a matter for the Department of Finance. It is financially independent borrowing based on a contract arrangement with the company. The Government set up the fund to make sure we protected jobs and did not lose them but the specifics of the loan contract is a matter for the National Treasury Management Agency, NTMA, and ISIF in its funding.

The regional roads programme has been signed off and local authorities will get details of

that. I had a meeting this morning with Kildare County Council and I can say that the Athy distributor road is also proceeding.

I want to come back to the issue of Moyross because Deputy Quinlivan and others referred to it. When I was talking about pedestrian access, it is not just via the distributor road dual carriageway. This is for the entire community, and not just for that community but for all the local communities, particularly those in South Hill and the other areas the Deputy mentioned. We need to provide good-quality local connectivity and local ability to walk between estates or to have easy access to the shops, to school and to college. That is the critical issue. I was working with the council on this to ensure we get the entire transport plan right, not only to think about the infrastructure but also about people being able to move from one place to another very easily.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I call Deputy Murnane O'Connor, who is in a slot of four speakers. The Deputy might clarify how much time she is taking.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: We all have three minutes. I will take one minute and I will then ask the Minister to respond.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: There are not that many minutes.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: I will just take one minute. I have been informed by the National Transport Authority, NTA, that the provision of an urban bus service in Carlow town is currently at the top of the list of the NTA towns project but requires funding from the Department. This troubles me because there was supposed to be funding coming for this project. I have been told that it is at the top of the list many times yet, at the moment, my understanding is there is no funding. The estimated cost of providing a Carlow town bus service is in the region €1 million to €1.5 million but the NTA funding allocation for 2021 does not include provision for the introduction of the new services. My understanding is this is because double the annual funding was required to sustain the current network of public transport services during the Covid-19 public health emergency. I know the NTA is fully committed to delivering the Carlow town bus network as soon as possible, once it gets the funding. I also know Carlow could have applied for funding if it had known that no funding was coming through this mechanism. There is no funding. What is happening with regard to a town bus service for Carlow?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I realise I did not answer Deputy Duncan Smith's other question about the report. In that newspaper report, Dr. Ronan Glynn said that, as he understands it, the HSE is the designated authority. I apologise that I did not answer the question.

With regard to Carlow town, I absolutely support, and fully understand the Deputy's desire for, such a service. As we have seen in Kilkenny, a very similar urban bus transport service which was introduced prior to the onset of Covid was proving its worth and was hugely popular, with very high patronage, and it was transformative in terms of connectivity in the town. Although we do not have it in the 2021 budget - in part, as the Deputy said, because of all the emergency funding we have had to provide - this sort of service is exactly the sort of priority I would like to support if we have any budgetary flexibility. That type of bus service is exactly what we need for our towns.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: I thank the Minister. I will keep working with him on this.

Deputy Jackie Cahill: I want to raise a number of separate transport issues relating to my constituency of Tipperary. We constantly hear of the need to move towards a more sustainable, greener form of transport, yet Tipperary is losing services, left, right and centre, and a lot of what remains is unreliable, inefficient and needs major improvement. The people of rural Ireland deserve adequate public transport links. Nenagh and Roscrea in north Tipperary lost the Bus Éireann X12 service at the end of January. This was the main bus route that linked north Tipperary to Dublin and Limerick. Outside my constituency office in Nenagh where a bus stop is situated, I would see the crowds getting on this bus service every morning. Reducing public transport services that run through two major towns in the north of my constituency is not what a just transition is about. In the south of the county, the people of Cashel and Cahir in particular have been given some reprieve as the X8 Dublin to Cork route has been granted permission to continue, but the new reduced timetable in place to serve these towns is not permanent or guaranteed to continue beyond Covid-19.

With regard to the Ballybrophy train line, Roscrea, Cloughjordan, Nenagh and Birdhill have a train service on the Ballybrophy line that is unreliable, inefficient and slow. I understand the Minister had a productive meeting with the North Tipperary Community Rail Partnership a couple of weeks ago and that he committed to engaging with Irish Rail with a view to determining if it is possible to have train speed reviewed and increased, and an additional midday service introduced on the line. In 1962, the steam-powered train serving this line could complete the route in one and a half hours. In 2021, it takes the train two hours to complete the same journey. Line speeds are simply too slow and services need to be increased.

Tipperary town needs a bypass and I respectfully ask the Minister to engage with other Ministers, local authority officials and representatives of Tipperary town to ensure that it is included in the national development plan. The people of Tipperary town are currently living with the fact that their main street forms part of a major road on which 70,000 vehicles travel each week. This needs to be addressed as a matter of priority.

I believe the Government should engage with ride-sharing apps, such as Uber, to investigate the potential of introducing such a system in rural Ireland. Such a move has the potential to massively increase connectivity in rural towns and villages, which could help to save the local shop or pub in rural areas, and is something that needs consideration.

I ask the Minister for his intervention in order that my rural constituency will not be left behind as we move to a more sustainable, greener way of living. Tipperary deserves a just transition in this process, particularly in the context of transport. I ask the Minister to: intervene with Bus Éireann in order to reintroduce the X12 and X8 services for the people of Tipperary so they remain connected to our major cities; continue to support and engage with the North Tipperary Community Rail Partnership as they work to improve services along the Ballybrophy line; ensure that the Tipperary town bypass is included in the national development plan; and engage more with ride-sharing apps, such as Uber, with a view to introducing such services in rural Ireland.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I am happy to follow up on all four of those proposals, with which I am in broad agreement. First, in regard to changes to Bus Éireann services, we agreed on previous occasions, for example, when it took away a Cork route, that we would try to make sure that no town that lost a service would be left out, and that we would reconfigure the public service obligation to make sure we provided connectivity. I will come back to the Deputy with regard to those Limerick and Tipperary services.

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An Ceann Comhairle: I must interrupt the Minister. I ask him to correspond with Deputy Cahill.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I will have to do that, particularly in regard to the Ballybrophy line, in respect of which, as the Deputy said, I had a very good meeting with the local group.

Deputy Neale Richmond: I ask the Minister to provide a written reply to these interventions that will allow myself and my near colleague and dear friend, Deputy Devlin, the opportunity to make our contributions. To be specific, these are transport questions in regard to dealing with Covid-19. Understandably, many Members have spoken about air travel but we all know that it is community transmission which is of most concern.

The areas I want to touch on are the use of public transport, first and foremost, and the fact that, particularly on the Luas line and the DART, with which Deputy Devlin would also be familiar, there is still serious concern among front-line workers, who simply have to take that service, that the services are overcrowded and there is not enough security or inspection to ensure that social distancing and mask wearing is maintained. While I welcome the appointment of the 61 assurance controllers, this is something that is still lacking.

I know of a number of front-line workers in my constituency, particularly in the healthcare sector, who are so worried about transmission on public transport that they are not willing to get the Luas, the DART or the bus, and they are being forced into their cars. Taking a car into the city centre means they are then liable for massive parking charges, either in hospital car parks or car parks near hospitals. This is something I raised with the Minister and, more pertinently, with Dublin City Council a number of times because, from a personal point of view, back in May, I joined the long wait of expectant birth partners or fathers along Merrion Square, feeding euro after euro into parking machines. That was fine for a once-in-a-lifetime miracle appointment but, for those who have to go in every day on the front line to protect us, more needs to be done in regard to parking charges because they do not feel safe enough on public transport and that is driving them into their cars. Unfortunately, not everyone is in a position to walk, cycle or run into the city centre.

Deputy Cormac Devlin: The public transport system has played a vital role throughout this pandemic. I want to pay tribute to all front-line transport workers, who have really shown tremendous effort throughout. I wish to focus on the taxi industry in Dublin. I have raised this with the Minister before. Taxi drivers are front-line workers. They have been impacted severely by the pandemic. They are doing their best but are dealing with unhelpful speculation, particularly about whether they will continue to be able to use bus lanes. There are also other issues facing the industry. While I welcome the introduction of the PUP for those drivers under 65 years, many older drivers who had to cocoon for their own safety and that of family members have not been able to get back to work. They feel that they have not been provided with sufficient supports by this or the previous Government which is extremely disappointing. They have worked hard all their lives. They have been there for many of us over the years. What are we going to do for them now? What does the Minister propose to do for those drivers, particularly those over 65 years who might need to come out of the industry for any reason? Will he offer a scheme for that?

Taxi drivers tell me they are concerned about the future of the industry. They have repeatedly raised the fact that almost two thirds of the taxi advisory council membership is vacant. I have raised this in a parliamentary question to the Minister. When will those posts be filled?

Will the Minister engage with the stakeholders to agree a road map for the future of the sector?

Will he consider convening a high level stakeholder group to prepare a plan for the future of aviation and connectivity? Ireland is an island nation and after Covid the airline industry will be crucial to the viability of Ireland's economy. The Minister may reply to me in writing if there is no time.

An Ceann Comhairle: There is a little over a minute remaining if the Minister wishes to make some comments.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: Deputy Richmond is looking very well after a year of sleepless nights and so on. I commend him on that. There have been exceptions and we have to police it, but the public transport system here has, by and large, lived within the parameters set out in public health advice which is stricter than in other countries. There are very few other countries which apply the signage on the seats in effectively taking out half or 75% of the seats. That leads to enforcement, in a way. Similarly, I understand that mask wearing is in the high 90%. It is the Irish people who have policed that. I will look at parking charges particularly for critical workers at this time.

Deputy Devlin is correct that the taxi industry has had real difficulty. Their business, like so many transport businesses, has disappeared. The PUP has been critical. There is also the ability to earn and cover expenses for those who are able to work which will be a vital measure as numbers return. I will engage with all the stakeholders. The Department is currently looking at filling the vacancies on the taxi advisory committee. I will engage further and listen to the taxi industry representatives.

Deputy Seán Crowe: The Minister of State said that in normal times, there is a ten-week waiting list for driver tests. The waiting list for a driver test in the Tallaght centre was 9,500 in November. That is nearly one tenth of all the people waiting for tests in the State. There is clearly a problem. There was an increase of over 4,000 in just four months, so it is safe to assume that the number waiting now could be 10,000 or 11,000. I do not have the figures, maybe the Minister of State has them to hand, but the waiting list in Tallaght is equivalent to the population of a good sized Irish town.

Delays can have serious implications for employment, holding onto employment or simply bringing children to school or doing the weekly shop. Restrictions on public transport due to Covid mean this is having an even greater impact on people's lives. What specific actions does the Minister of State propose to take to reduce the backlog? Has she consulted with instructors, testers and their unions to find a way to accelerate the numbers of tests that can be carried out safely in the coming months? Have overtime, additional staff and so on been considered? I am looking for answers because it is a huge challenge and is negatively impacting a huge number of people.

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: I agree that it is very frustrating for people who want to get their driver tests. As a result of the suspension of the driver testing services during the first lockdown there has been a significant backlog. During level 5, driver tests are only available to those who are involved in essential services, including retail workers.

We should bear in mind there is no magic bullet for this because no matter how many testers we have, the issue is around the health protocols which limit the throughput in centres and the number of driver tests that can be done every day. In December 2020, the Department approved

the hire of a further 40 temporary testers for 22 months. They will be in addition to the 36 temporary testers who were rehired over 2020. The Road Safety Authority, RSA, will examine how the number of tests that can be performed every day can be increased, but of course we must make sure that we adhere to the health protocols around that.

The RSA has also advised that it has established a dedicated web form so that essential workers can access a driver test. Anyone looking for an urgent driver test appointment who falls into that category can apply online through *myroadsafety.ie* to request an urgent driver test.

There will be a backlog and delays. The RSA is hiring but it comes down to the numbers of people who can be put through the centre while ensuring that everyone is safe, both those working in the testing facilities and those getting their tests.

Deputy Seán Crowe: The Minister of State referred to significant amounts. It could be 10,000 or 11,000. I understand the challenges we face at the moment but I want to know if a plan will be put in place to deal with the backlog in the Tallaght area specifically. One person in ten on the national waiting list is waiting for a test in the Tallaght centre. It is equivalent to the population of a town. Something needs to be done. Will she address the situation regarding family carers, for instance? They are not seen as essential workers by the Government but it is essential for many family carers to have a car and to be able to access the test. Will the Minister of State look at the possibility of fast tracking that cohort?

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: It is possible to contact the RSA and request an urgent driver test and provide the relevant details. It is a decision for the RSA with regard to essential workers. Without wanting to repeat myself, the RSA is hiring those 40 extra testers and more will be hired if needed. However, the real issue is the pandemic and the consequent need to restrict the numbers going through the centres. Sometimes it is not down to the number of driver testers but the capacity of throughput in a centre while keeping people safe and ensuring we suppress the virus.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: Over the last year, we were repeatedly told that international travel was low risk. That was blown out of the water particularly with the new, more transmissible, UK Covid variant, the prevalence of the virus and the increased loss of life during January. We are aware of two other variants, the South African and Brazil variants, but we do not know what others will emerge. It already looks as though there is a new variant to the UK variant of Covid. It is essential that we consider that when we look to what controls need to be put in place.

About three weeks ago, the Tánaiste told me here that most international travel was essential yet, as the Taoiseach told us this morning, about 60% of travel was Irish people returning from holidays. What I was told was not true. I find it very difficult to rely on information when I am told things that turn out to be untrue.

I ask the Minister where the responsibility for transport lies, particularly international transport. It appears that the Department of Health has a more significant role than the Department of Transport. That seems to be to be at odds given the extent of the risk in respect of transport. The Minister might address that issue.

The Minister replied to a question from Deputy Duncan Smith on the WHO in the context of Ireland not having a competent authority. I believe it was the Department of Health, the HSE and the Department of Transport that were originally involved. Has the HSE been designated?

Has the WHO been informed that the executive is the competent authority? If there is an organisation in place, what type of organisation is it? Is it a subset of the HSE?

The Minister talks about transport and this virus. Most of us could go on all day about that because there are so many components to it. One particular component is that the state aid rules have been relaxed in respect of the fiscal treaty. We have seen how that has resulted in high levels of investment by the likes of Germany or France in the airline sector. How is this different to the way it plays out here? The Minister might address that.

With regard to surface transport, additional money has gone into the public service obligation, PSO, for public transport. Does the Minister have any idea of the impact it will have on those companies and their survivability, particularly the non-commercial elements of the routes that normally fall under the PSO levy? Surviving this pandemic will be the key issue and we will require an airline sector, a shipping sector and our public transport systems post Covid-19.

The Minister focused on sustainable transport. In the past day or so, I got a reply to a question on the amount of money that has been allocated to each local authority in this regard. It seems to be demand led in respect of the ability of the local authority to roll out the new cycle ways. In terms of getting to national standards, will the Minister talk to his counterpart in the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage about that because it is clear that some local authorities are doing better than others? That may well be down to the local authorities and to staffing, and I believe that is the case in some local authorities, but if we are to have a fair distribution across the country, we cannot have some local authorities not pulling their weight in respect of the rolling out of this or drawing down funds.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I think every Department has a role in this matter. Regarding international travel and quarantine, the Department of Justice has a key role in terms of Garda checkpoints at Dublin Airport and how we manage border control. Our Department has a key role. We have just rolled out a whole new antigen testing scheme for hauliers travelling to and from France. On the passenger locator form, we got stuck in with regard to using the expertise of the Dublin Airport Authority to get the call centre to try to operate that. In the end, however, the Department of Health has the final say. That is appropriate because if we are going to follow public health advice it has to make the call in respect of the final measures, not just on our public health system but also in terms of the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, ECDC.

In terms of what we have been doing this past year, we were following the European Commission's traffic light system. We did that not because it was from the European Commission - it was reciprocal - but because it was the ECDC advice. It will be critical in the coming days. I understand it is due to report on Monday with advice on how countries manage the variants. We are best following that advice because-----

Deputy Catherine Murphy: We have to follow up-----

Deputy Eamon Ryan: If there is any instance where the ECDC or our own public health authorities are saying that we should take a measure, we will take that measure. That is critical in terms of managing this variant issue, which does change everything. I heard Mike Ryan of the WHO say that the key thing is co-operation internationally and not necessarily banning in every instance but monitoring, managing and sharing the latest information so that we can isolate it.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Minister. The time is up.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I am sorry I have not got to the other points. I have some details on Kildare County Council as an example. I had a good meeting with its members today. I believe the council could be an exemplar. We have agreed 11 additional engineering staff to help it roll out the walk ways. I will be honest. If certain councils cannot do it, do not want to avail of that and are not up for it, I would prefer to see the resources reallocated to those that do in order that there will be a real impetus behind those councils which that want to make it happen.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: I want to deal with a number of issues. The Minister might answer my question on the first and I will then ask my follow-up question. I very much welcome his announcement on Limerick's Live 95FM this morning that the Coonagh to Knockalisheen road will proceed as planned in its entirety. It is a good news day for Limerick. Common sense has prevailed and I thank the Minister very much for making that announcement. It brings huge clarity and certainty to Moyross, the north side of the city and Limerick city overall with regard to development and in terms of connectivity, promoting public transport along the route, cycle ways and also investment. A specific investment around the Moyross area is about to be announced by Limerick City and County Council, which is to be greatly welcomed.

In that context, when will the Minister be signing off on this project to allow the final phase to proceed? I refer to the documentation going back to Limerick City and County Council to enable it appoint the preferred bidders who can then, when the lifting of the Covid-19 restrictions on construction, move on site and we will see JCBs in place to build the road.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: We have had sometimes lengthy and passionate discussions on this issue so I thank the Deputy for his welcoming of the announcement and his kind words this morning. I am just checking this. There has been a very useful engagement with the council on this issue. I am hearing that as well as the road, we should put in a bus lane in either direction, that we should address the pedestrian access issues in Moyross in order to ensure that we open up access in every way and that we should build high-quality cycling infrastructure from Moyross and Limerick Institute of Technology, LIT, to the city centre, Mary Immaculate College and University of Limerick as a way of connecting the communities and the city. The investments that will come on top of this good transport planning is only the start. We should have real ambition in terms of new housing and a high-quality public housing realm. The answer to the Deputy's question is "today". From what I hear, he is very supportive of those other aspects of what needs to be done as the road is built.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: A submission has come up from Limerick City and County Council. It has to be signed off by the Minister to allow it appoint a preferred bidder so we can get the road works physically under way. When will that be signed off by him?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: Today.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: I welcome that. Shannon Airport is a big issue for us. We had the union representatives for the entire airline industry in before our committee yesterday. There is serious concern about the future for their members. Is the Minister looking at a plan to inject further specific direct investment into airlines to support them through this pandemic and allow them come out of it intact? Also, when does the Minister anticipate that he will be making the announcement regarding the appointment of a new chairperson of the board of Shannon Group?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: The Minister of State and I had a very good series of interviews with prospective candidates. We expect to be able to go to the Government on Tuesday next and get approval from it for our preferred chair. I think it will be someone who will be able to help Shannon Airport and the whole Shannon Group to manage its way out of a very difficult situation in which it finds itself. That is critical. That leadership will be needed to help in the recovery to which the Deputy referred.

Deputy Alan Dillon: I will take three minutes and I would appreciate it if the Minister and Minister of State could provide a written reply. Significant travel restrictions continue to have an impact on our daily lives and it is fair to say the aviation sector remains worst hit by Covid-19. I welcome the publication of the Irish regional airports programme, with €21.3 million being allocated for 2021. The regional airport programme is a vital source of funding support for Ireland West Airport Knock in my constituency and other regional airports. I note the 2021 funding has been welcomed by Ireland West Airport Knock and it will continue to work with the Department to pursue further supports.

It is worth noting that the passenger numbers at the airport had risen to 800,000 during 2019, compared with 143,000 in 2020, representing a substantial collapse in people using the airport. The last time similar passenger numbers were seen at the airport was 1995. The people of the western region will again flock to the airport when the time comes and I am hopeful passenger numbers will bounce back quickly.

I recall the task force for aviation recovery made 12 recommendations, one of which was a stimulus package for the regional airports. It is excellent that progress is being made on this recommendation but it would be useful today if the Minister could outline the progress being made on furthering the remaining recommendations. In recent weeks there have been increasing concerns by those employed by the aviation sector, particularly airline employees, who point to the state supports given directly to the airline sector in other countries, citing various reports on aviation packages. Has engagement taken place, either with the Department of Transport or other Departments and employee representative organisations in the airlines sector? If that has not happened to date, it should be considered as a matter of urgency.

My final point is to raise the inclusion of the climate action initiatives to help the greening of Ireland's airports, which is an important step in the right direction. I certainly hope carbon neutrality can be achieved at Ireland's airports over the next five years as part of the national effort to seriously tackle climate change.

Deputy Hildegard Naughton: I can answer one of the later questions first. There is ongoing engagement on the aviation sector between my Department and the airlines and at a high level in the Government. It is absolutely critical. I do not need to tell the Deputy or anybody in his region the importance of Ireland West Airport Knock to the region. When we come out of this pandemic, airports like Knock should be in a position to be able to rebound and get back their critical international connectivity not just for the west but Ireland as an island nation.

As the Deputy mentioned, €21.3 million has recently been announced as part of the regional airports programme. As part of the announcement last year, the Government also allocated the supplementary support scheme for Irish airports, amounting to €26 million. That is subject to state aid approval but Knock Airport is one of the facilities that would be able to avail of it, which would help to address liquidity issues.

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The Deputy can be assured that it is of significant concern to me and the Government that all our airports can be in a position to come back and we can support them through this critical time, as he has stated.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: I will use half of my available time and leave the remainder for the Minister. Roads have been the topic of debate for the past week or so. I welcome the announcement of the Limerick road but a road in my constituency of Cork North-Central has been a topic of debate for approximately 25 years. I refer to the north ring road in Cork city. Great work is being done on the north side of Cork city with the rolling out of the Cork metropolitan area draft transport strategy, CMATS, which would provide for railway and cycling infrastructure on the north side of Cork city. Will the Minister comment on the status of the north ring road and where it might go?

I also ask about PCR testing. I welcome the circumstances in which Government is changing with the virus in that it is bringing in further restrictions, testing and quarantines. I listened to the Tánaiste on RTÉ Radio 1 yesterday indicating that, where possible, a two-island approach would be sought with PCR testing and quarantine. Given that the British have this week announced a fairly stringent regime and draconian measures - although some may be required and welcome - what is the view of the Minister, given that the Tánaiste was indicating that a two-island strategy may be the best way to approach the matter?

In the programme for Government, 20% of overall capital funding of roads was to be designated for active travel transport initiatives, walking and cycling infrastructure. Will the Minister elaborate on that 20% provision? Is it a requirement on all capital programmes from now or will it be specific to certain plans?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I have had very good meetings with council members about the north ring road in Cork. There is a variety of plans and I am trying to remember the full details. I recall the argument being made for immediate construction of a new distributor road for public transport and good active travel measures. I am trying to recall the geography of this across north Cork. I spoke with the council members and it seemed that the upgrade in the road network there was needed. I will have to come back with the details.

There is the wider question of an outer motorway or distributor road and this is connected with a variety of other matters to be considered. Included in that is the advancement, in my mind, of significant rail infrastructure projects in Cork. This includes the twin-tracking from Midleton to Kent Station and the building of new stations in the likes of Monard or Blarney on the way to Mallow, giving the potential to develop a new metropolitan rail network for Cork that would particularly benefit the city's north side. That is a project that would bring significant enhancement on housing and other matters.

I agree with the Tánaiste on a two-island approach and it is why we are in regular contact with the UK Government. That is clearly framed by the fact there are two administrations on this island and a Border we cannot seal. It makes sense in that context to work on a two-island basis.

The Deputy mentioned a 20% figure and it relates to the overall capital funding, with 10% for walking and 10% for cycling. They dovetail significantly but it is an OECD recommendation. It is following international best practice.

Deputy Matt Carthy: I am sure the Minister will agree that communities right across the

country, as well as businesses, families and individuals, have gone above and beyond anything we could have imagined this time last year with the onset of the pandemic. The truth is there are some things that only the Government can address if they are to be addressed adequately. The first is an adequate testing, tracing and isolation regime. The second relates to controls, regulations and the monitoring of particular sectors where clusters can develop very quickly and bring about a significant impact, including the meat industry. The third point relates to international travel restrictions. These are three big examples and with all three, the Government has fallen down somewhat in different areas.

I have listened to our transport spokesperson, Deputy O'Rourke, since the formation of this Government and on repeated occasions he has brought issues of concern to the Minister and the Government as a whole. These relate to the need for testing for passengers before and after travelling and he raised the need for a traffic light system as far back as last summer. He has spoken consistently about the need to put in place a quarantine regime. Any movement on these matters has often been too little and almost too late, although it is better late than never. Progress has been far too slow and we must address that.

This week in my county we have seen a number of additional checkpoints put in place on cross-border roads. The message should come from this House very clearly. People should not engage in unnecessary travel, regardless of where they are from. My native county of Monaghan borders six other counties, with three in the North and three in this State. The virus does not care which is which and will move across communities.

3 o'clock

My fear is that the prevalence of checkpoints in one direction is, in many respects, a distraction, because it does not deal with the issue of community transmission. The big advantage that we have had since the start, that we have articulated since the start, and that Ireland has in the battle against Covid-19, is that we are surrounded by water. That advantage has not been utilised to the degree that is necessary.

My two questions are as follows. When will quarantine measures actually be in place for all those who enter this State without having completed a PCR test for non-essential travel? Second, what is the Minister doing to promote and encourage cross-border and all-Ireland approaches in respect of this? I refer, in particular, to passenger locator information. When will the Minister ensure that there is seamless sharing of necessary information between authorities, both South to North and North to South?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: We work as fast as we can in the circumstances we are in. I will provide some examples. When the UK Government raised a concern about a new variant, the next day, we banned travel from the UK. I believe we were the third country to do this. Perhaps the Danes and the Belgians were an hour ahead of us in doing so. Our response was immediate. At the same time, I believe we were one of the first countries in Europe to require the completion of a PCR test 72 hours before arrival. We did this ahead of the UK Government and others. We do not always respond in lockstep. While it makes sense to follow a two-island strategy, in that case we were ahead. The French Government raised concerns about the new variant and demanded antigen testing for hauliers. We set this up within days and it has been running without any difficulty. It was a difficult thing to set up and turn around, but we did it.

As for concerns that have been raised about cross-border travel, I agree with the Deputy

that we cannot completely seal off the Border. For example, someone who lives in Newry and works in Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital or in Dundalk cannot be stopped from crossing the Border. One could think of a thousand such examples. There are those who have rightly pointed out that they were being restricted from travelling in the South but there was no provision in place to restrict others travelling from the North. In response, we immediately approached the Office of the Attorney General with a view to implementing a measure to impose fines in such cases. This was not easy from a legal perspective, but we did it.

To answer the Deputy's question on when quarantine measures will be put in place for those who arrive in the State without having completed a PCR test, the legislation will go to Government on Tuesday. It will then go straight to the Dáil. It depends on the business of the Dáil and there will need to be a vote on the legislation. It is something that is being worked out by the Business Committee. It will be done as soon as is possible. The legislation is not without complexity, and there are real concerns around civil liberties and other issues that we are seeking to get right. However, subject to the legislation being passed by this House, I imagine that it will be a matter of days following that, before it will be in place.

Deputy Bríd Smith: I also want to focus on the issue of mandatory quarantine. Anybody who watched the RTÉ documentary last night about our public health workers would have been struck by the superhuman sacrifices they have made. Then we wake up this morning and listen to the Minister and other Government Ministers talking about what needs to be done. The utter disconnect between what we witnessed on the documentary last night and the reckless behaviour of the Government is quite shocking. Last week, the Taoiseach spoke of his regrets about opening up the economy in December; a decision that led to the horrific impact of what we saw last night. However, for all those regrets, there is now a refusal by the Government to prepare and implement what is necessary, namely, a mandatory quarantine policy for people travelling to this country. It is incomprehensible and none of the Government's arguments stack up. The arguments on the technical difficulties, the Border and the civil liberties concerns do not stack up. The key argument that the Government has against implementing a zero Covid policy is the question of mandatory quarantine. The failure is not technical. It is political. It is not driven by the interests of public health. It is driven by economic interests and the interests of those who lobby the Government the hardest.

Yet again, there is talk of opening up the economy, resuming construction, ending restrictions and opening up the schools. For many people, the prospect is terrifying. The Government might see light at the end of the tunnel but most people see another lockdown at the end of the tunnel. It could possibly be in April or May. People see that as being inevitable. The public is way ahead of the Government yet again. The latest RED C poll has shown that 86% of the public is in favour of a tougher, Australian-style mandatory quarantining system for all international arrivals into this country. Yet, yesterday, the Tánaiste stated on RTÉ Radio 1's "Drivetime" programme that he had looked at the possibility of adopting this approach last May and decided it was too difficult, in respect of opening up the economy and civil liberties etc. I reject that assertion. This response clearly comes from the lobbying of big business interests. *The Business Post* reported how the chief executive of the US Chamber of Commerce met the three most powerful people in government for special meetings. Perhaps this explains why bizarre exemptions are in place, such as the construction for foreign direct investment companies like Intel being able to continue throughout the lockdown, with thousands of workers travelling throughout the country. It has to stop. We must start treating this pandemic as a public health issue, in its entirety, rather than as a bit of this and a bit of that.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I have two questions for the Minister. First, will he intervene to ensure that the 20% cut to Dublin bus services across the city is reversed? Essential workers, including healthcare workers, are being affected by this cut and I have been contacted by many. One route, for example, used by staff to travel to Tallaght University Hospital in the morning, has seen the number of services halved at that time. It makes no sense to implement this cut at a time when our individual buses are running at 25% capacity and those who have to go to work are being negatively affected by it. It was done without any consultation with the front-line workers or with their unions and with almost no notice. It was announced on a Thursday and implemented on the following Monday.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I will respond to Deputy Bríd Smith first. The advice that we must follow is the public health advice. As I said, we expect further details later on this afternoon in respect of public health advice on the countries to which travel restrictions should be applied and the type of restrictions that should be put in place. We will follow that advice.

We must consider the issues around the reopening of certain activities. In my mind, it is not driven by any lobbying or economic imperative, but by the following. First and foremost, children need to go back to school. The imperative there is mental health, which is a public health issue. It is a particular concern for children from disadvantaged communities, who may not have the same access to online facilities that other students have. In that case, while listening and discussing the issue with public health, we must get the balance right. We must decide when the right time is for schools to come back. Similarly, there is also an issue in respect of construction. We want to build homes for our people and other facilities, such as hospitals. A balancing of priorities is required. It is appropriate for us to open the schools and construction first.

In response to Deputy Paul Murphy's question, I will have to look into the details of the 20% cut in services and revert to him. I cannot make a comment on that issue immediately.

Deputy Paul Murphy: My second question is this. The Minister is on record as supporting the idea of metro south west. In fact, he has spoken about his preferred route being Harold's Cross, Terenure, Knocklyon, Firhouse and Tallaght. He is now the Minister responsible for this issue. The National Transport Authority, NTA, has commenced a feasibility study. However, there are major flaws in it. For example, the feasibility study ruled out many of the stops that are part of the Minister's preferred route, including in Harold's Cross, Firhouse and Tallaght. It does not include the whole area between the green and the red lines in terms of potential beneficiaries. It does not include a place of work, school or college anonymised records, POWSCAR, survey. In addition, it is not clear that it is entirely independent. I have two questions for the Minister in this regard. Will he agree to meet with the Metro South West group, which has written to him about this issue? Second, will he ensure there is a proper, impartial and independent feasibility study in respect of this project?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: There are three potential routes for metro south from Ranelagh. One would be to go up the existing line. I do not expect we will opt for that route but we should look at it. The recommendation to the NTA is that we should look at all three options. The second option is going south west, as the Deputy outlined, taking in Harold's Cross, Terenure, Knocklyon, Firhouse and beyond to Tallaght. The other option would run to the south east, through Donnybrook, UCD, Stillorgan and Sandyford, which has the benefit that it could address the issues of capacity on the green line. All three routes will be looked at and we will then have to pursue the best solution. I will deal with all the different communities in a very open

and transparent way as we go through that process.

Deputy Brian Leddin: Yesterday, the Government agreed to begin work on an overarching well-being framework for Ireland as a way of establishing a better view of how our society is performing beyond the existing economic measurement tools. Quality of life needs to be at the very heart of our policies and transport mobility has a significant part to play in that regard. We must change how we think about transport projects and, in that regard, people should be at the centre of what we do. Our priority must be focused on moving people in a way that is healthy and sustainable for them, for our communities and for our environment.

Transport makes up one fifth of our emissions. During this pandemic, while we have seen a significant reduction in road traffic, our transport emissions have reduced by only 17%. We need to triple that reduction approximately in the next ten years. The scale and urgency of our challenge is daunting. As Chairman of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Climate Action, I am pleased to tell the House that committee members are starting a work programme to look specifically at transport and climate action. I am very grateful to my committee colleague, Deputy O'Rourke, with whom I am designing the work programme. The committee will shortly be inviting a range of national and international expert witnesses to inform our work.

Transport is a vital part of climate action but its benefits reach far beyond that. Poor spatial planning and urban sprawl and its resulting car dependency have had severe adverse health impacts on our population. People are dying because of them. Each year in Ireland, there are 1,500 preventable deaths due to air pollution. Polluted air from traffic emissions is linked to asthma, eyesight loss and Alzheimer's disease. Research has found that inactive lifestyles are linked to heart disease, stroke and premature death. We have designed physical activity out of our daily lives through poor planning. We must proactively redesign it back into our lives.

I warmly welcome the Minister's announcement today about the improvement of the transport network in Limerick. It is vitally important that road access is not a stand-alone measure for the community in Moyross. A road for private cars alone will never solve a connectivity, economic or social inclusion problem. The revised approach of including dedicated bus lanes and finally opening up access from Moyross to neighbouring estates and education facilities for active mobility, walking and cycling is crucial for good connectivity and to provide true opportunity for Moyross. This applies across the country in all communities. Moyross is not a stand-alone community. It is part of Limerick city and its future is to be a centre of housing and employment as an integrated part of the city. For too long, despite its proximity to the city centre, it has been effectively segregated. That cannot continue and I will make every effort to ensure we resolve it. We are committed to investing heavily in a suburban rail system in the Limerick city area, with new stations in places such as Shannon, Raheen, Ballysimon, Adare, Annacotty and Moyross. Connecting all of them will bring very significant investment and development to those areas.

Let there be no doubt that sustainable connectivity is not only better for the environment but far better for public health, economic development and social inclusion. A modern national transport and mobility network helps to ensure that everyone can avail of the opportunities that come with access to education, employment, public services and amenities. We need to grow vibrant and sustainable regional cities if we are to achieve balanced regional growth in Ireland. I thank the Minister for taking the time to review the entire transport plan in order to achieve a better outcome for Moyross, the city of Limerick and the entire mid-west region.

Deputy James O'Connor: I thank the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, and the Minister of State, Deputy Naughton, for being here for this debate. First, I want to acknowledge the continued work and effort they have both shown in the Department. I have been working with some of their officials on a continual basis and they have been excellent to deal with during these incredibly difficult and challenging times. They are not only dealing with Covid but also Brexit and the impact it is having on our aviation sector and on other areas which come under the Minister of State's remit. In addition, the Department is dealing with the transition towards a greener transport system for the country.

I have a couple of points to raise with the Minister in that context. First, the active travel measures were a fantastic initiative by the Government to encourage more people to engage in more sustainable methods of travel and transport such as cycling and walking. It should have been done long before now but it is good to see a focus being put on it. I thank the Minister for his work in that area.

An issue that has come to my attention from talking to county councillors and people working in local government is that there is a significant number of blockages and a lot of red tape around projects in a number of communities, including in my own town of Youghal and in Cobh as well. Local authorities are trying to invest in sustainable travel and transport options such as cycleways and footpath improvements. However, when it comes to medium-sized and large-scale projects, a lot of projects are being held back because there is a fear of investing in them. I would like to see more targeted funding going towards projects that are specifically identified by local area representatives or county councillors in communities, as well as Oireachtas Members, in order that footpaths can be constructed in areas that should have been serviced long before now. That is just one helpful suggestion I am offering the Minister. I ask that he take it on board and, if possible, give me a reply.

The national development plan is an incredibly important part of the programme for Government. It is an opportunity to address many of the inadequacies that are currently there by focusing on increased investment in our rail capacity and road network. I have raised with the Minister on multiple occasions the situation in Castlemartyr and Killeagh. I take this opportunity to stress once again the requirement for that project to be included in the national development plan. I have brought to the Minister a far greener option than what some officials in our semi-State bodies and the local authority may have wanted. I know that process will be concluding shortly and I hope the issue can be reviewed with some degree of urgency.

I take this opportunity to talk about the eastern side of Cork city and the east Cork region. In terms of cycling infrastructure, we are seeing very significant investment in the Midleton area and in Youghal. I would like to see Cork city being joined up to those metropolitan towns and areas around the city in order to allow people to cycle to and from work and perhaps walk some of the shorter distances. At present, there is no real link between Midleton and Cork city. That is something we should try to address. It is a cyclable distance, particularly for people working in Little Island, which is a huge employment centre in Munster and one of the largest in the country. It would be fantastic to see those issues being addressed at a national level and a more localised focus from the Department in this regard.

Deputy Joe Carey: In the time that is available, I would like if the Minister could come back to be verbally on the points I intend to raise. I welcome the positive announcement he made today in regard to the Coonagh-Knockalisheen section of the Limerick northern distributor road. I thank him for his engagement on that project. It is a positive development that

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will improve connectivity and investment in the mid-west region, including for educational facilities such as Limerick Institute of Technology. It will also enable improvements in sewage facilities in the village of Meelick. I really welcome it.

In regard to aviation, can the Minister inform the House as to the appointment of a chairperson to the board of the Shannon Group? I am a member of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Transport and Communications Networks and we heard yesterday from the coalface, when representatives of the unions told us about the severe challenge the sector is facing. They referred to tailor-made income support packages that have been made available to workers in the sector by the German and Swedish Governments. I ask the Minister to consider such packages and possibly take the idea on board. We heard from the Irish Air Line Pilots Association regarding the need for direct investment in airlines. I recognise the support package put in place last year, amounting to €80 million, but we need to take a big step further and inject supports directly into our airlines.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I thank Deputy Leddin for his remarks. He is absolutely correct. Well-being comes from how we look after our local environment. Transport is critical to that. It will encourage him in the work he has been doing on transport policy in Limerick to know that what I heard today amounted to broad agreement that as we build the Coonagh-Knocklisheen road, we should put in bus lanes. As we build it, if not in advance, we should open up pedestrian access so the community gets the very best of access to the rest of the city and neighbouring areas. As we build it, we should put in high-quality cycling infrastructure connecting the three Limerick colleges, namely, Limerick IT, Mary Immaculate College and University of Limerick, and completely transform the way the city works.

On Deputy O'Connor's points, it is funny that we were discussing Castlemartyr with the Department yesterday. It is a very good example of what we need to do. Our Towns First strategy is central to everything the Government is doing. Investment in transport should be supporting that. I am not necessarily referring to over-dimensioned initiatives or those involving considerable expense or length but to critical bypass infrastructure that can revitalise villages and towns. The 19th century market towns and villages need to be the centres of our development. That is what the national planning framework states. We need to use the beautiful historical buildings and the public realm. I absolutely agree with the Deputy in that respect.

I assure Deputy Carey that the Minister of State, Deputy Naughton, and I are absolutely focused on Shannon, in particular, because we have an immediate decision regarding the chairperson of the board, but we are also focused on making sure the industries we need to create employment for our people, including the tourism industry and others that require connectivity, will be protected as we move out of this Covid crisis.

Deputy Johnny Guirke: I will leave a bit of time as the Minister might update me on the Navan rail line. Twelve months ago, we were all elected to the Thirty-third Dáil. During my campaign, one of the biggest issues to arise was the Navan rail line. Navan is the largest town in Ireland not serviced by rail. We have always maintained that the re-establishment of the Navan rail line must be a priority for whoever is in government. We were supported in this not only by our own voters but also by Fine Gael, Fianna Fáil and the Green Party, which all said during the election campaign that they would deliver the Navan rail line. Meath County Council has made it a major part of its new county development plan as it is so important to the future success of the county. I thank the councillors, of all parties and none, and the council officials in Meath for their total support for this project.

As the Minister knows, well over 200,000 people live in County Meath. More people leave Meath to go to work than from any other county in the country. The rail project will benefit so many, create jobs and benefit local businesses, and it will be a great asset to commuters. It will have a considerable impact on our environment, taking thousands of cars off the road every day. Many who choose to travel by public transport in County Meath spend many hours of their day waiting on buses, if they are on time or if they are not already full, in order to begin travelling and sit in backed-up traffic before eventually getting to work. They do their day's work and then face the agonising journey home. For some of the affected families, commuting means that the only time they get with their kids is at the weekends. The quality of life is very poor or non-existent.

At the minute, we have reviews of the national development plan and the greater Dublin area transport strategy and a reassessment of the Navan rail line project. We have enough reviews in County Meath. Will rail line infrastructure be prioritised? If so, how much additional funding will there be? Will Deputy Eamon Ryan, as Minister for Transport, prioritise the Navan rail line and deliver it? This year, 2021, is European Year of Rail. There has never been a better opportunity to connect all our regions through investment in our national railways. Meath has been left behind by successive Governments. The Minister can bring us up to speed by delivering the Navan rail line for the people of Meath.

I thank the Minister for engaging with our party spokesperson, Deputy O'Rourke, on this project so far. I hope he will keep the line of communication open. I acknowledge the Minister is in favour of the Navan rail line. Could he give me an update? Will he prioritise the rail line and deliver it in the lifetime of the Government?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I am very much supportive of the rail line. I appreciate the interest of Deputies Guirke and O'Rourke therein. The key point Deputy Guirke made that makes the case for the rail line is that the local authority is keen, in its development plan review, to really make it work and help deliver it.

The key thing we need to do in transport now is what is called "transport-led development", whereby new housing, communities and infrastructure are placed beside high-quality public transport infrastructure. That is the key next-stage approach. The review of the greater Dublin transport strategy will proceed. The National Transport Authority and others will examine the specifics regarding the Navan rail line but what will make it happen is the economics that come when the hands of housing and the hands of transport work together. I understand Meath County Council has plans that reflect very extensive population growth. It has to be sustainable and new developments have to be located close to the stations and connected to good local access travel systems. That is the way forward. If Meath County Council is following, in its development plan, an approach to back up the transport infrastructure that a rail line would bring, it would get it over the line. That is the key point.

Deputy Johnny Guirke: I thank the Minister for his support. Keep it coming.

Deputy Seán Canney: I wish to raise the issue of driving licences. Are the Minister and Minister of State aware of the service being provided by the Road Safety Authority to learner drivers and those seeking to renew their driving licences during this pandemic? Are they aware that learner drivers who booked a test as far back as June 2020 still do not have a test date? Are they aware that learner drivers are regularly on hold for 90 minutes trying to get through to the Road Safety Authority? Are they aware that emails are not being responded to and that booking

systems are repeatedly coming up with errors that are not being rectified? Are they aware of the stress and difficulty this is causing for learner drivers across the country, many of whom are essential workers who have spent additional months having to be accompanied by a qualified driver? In some cases, the only qualified driver available is over 70 and should be cocooning. Are the Minister and Minister of State aware of the difficulty this is causing for young rural dwellers, who have no public transport? What plan can be put in place to rectify this?

A person in my constituency wants to renew his driving licence. He is 70 years of age. He submitted all the paperwork last November and his licence expired on 12 December. The person still does not have his new licence and will not put the keys in the car without having it. His son spends 45 minutes at a time on the telephone and all he gets is a reply stating an internal memo will be sent around. This is not good enough. Owing to this complete breakdown, which is partly attributable to the exceptional health circumstances, will the Minister consider giving first-time drivers who have done everything right, who may have bought a car and who have work but cannot get to work a full licence on a temporary basis for up to 24 months on condition that they do their test in the meantime? It would allow them to get insurance and put them on the road on a legal basis. It is crucial where there is no public transport. I would like a reply to those points.

Deputy Hildegard Naughton: I thank the Deputy for raising this question. I know there have been issues in relation to people contacting the Road Safety Authority. My Department has been in contact with the RSA. There were delays for people who contacted it and had to wait online. We have been assured by the RSA that those issues are being resolved.

I will give an update on a number of other issues the Deputy raised. Driving licences that expired between 1 March and 31 August 2020 were extended for seven months and the possibility of further extension of driving licences is under consideration in Europe, with a decision expected shortly. On learner permits, they are a national competence and permits that expired between 1 March and 30 June 2020 were extended for eight months. In addition, learner permits that expired between 1 July and 31 October 2020 were extended by four months and the further extension of such permits is also under consideration.

Drivers aged over 70 are being invited to renew their driver licence by post and applicants will be contacted directly in the case of anyone over 70 whose licence has expired. If there are issues, the Deputy can raise them with me separately and I will follow up on particular cases. Drivers aged over 70 do not need to provide a medical report unless they have an identified or specified illness. This means they do not have to leave home to visit their general practitioner, provided they do not have a specified or identified illness, and can renew via An Post.

Deputy Peter Fitzpatrick: The front page of today's *The Irish Times* leads with a headline stating that new Covid restrictions will target foreign travel. It also states that a revised plan for living with Covid will be unveiled by the end of the month and that there will be some form of restrictions until at least the end of the year. It further states that the Minister and officials intend to introduce legislation next week which will provide for mandatory quarantine in hotels for incoming travellers. I find it incredible that we are still talking about something that should have been done well before Christmas. This sums up the Minister's approach to travel and Covid.

We keep hearing about plans but we need to see real action. Official figures show that 110,930 people came through Dublin Airport last month, of whom 60% travelled for non-es-

sential reasons. I find it incredible that even at the height of the third lockdown, such a large number of people were travelling through our main airport for non-essential reasons. The requirement for a polymerase chain reaction, PCR, test was only introduced on 16 January. Some 64,000 people passed through Dublin Airport between 1 January and 16 January. This is another example of the Minister doing too little too late.

I have been calling for much tighter control of our Border with Northern Ireland. At a time when the North had one of the highest rates of infection, we had no control of our Border and people were free to travel in both directions. It was no coincidence that counties along the Border had the highest rate of infections on the island. Only last week, An Garda Síochána was given the power to turn back travellers from the North if their journey is not deemed essential. This is another example of the Minister doing too little too late, which unfortunately seems to be a regular occurrence with him and his Department.

With regard to new powers given to the Garda in the area of cross-Border travel, will the Minister indicate whether the PSNI will replicate the actions of the Garda and turn back travellers from the South who cross the Border. My understanding is that the PSNI is not following the same guidelines as the Garda. The Minister needs to get a grip of the travel situation and speak with his counterparts in the North to ensure we have a common approach on the island of Ireland. I understand the need for essential travel and have no issues with people crossing the Border for essential purposes but we must put a stop to people on both sides of the Border crossing for non-essential purposes.

I read in recent days that UK travellers were using Dublin Airport as a means of returning from trips to places like Dubai and Portugal. They were apparently using it as a back door to Britain. The reason is that direct flights to these regions have been stopped in the UK. This is another example of the lack of action by the Minister and his Department. The UK Government took the decision to stop these direct flights and now UK travellers are using Dublin Airport as a means of going on holiday to Dubai and Portugal. This matter must be investigated and action taken. It is not fair on airport staff. I have spoken to a number of them and they have raised serious concerns about this. It is simply unacceptable, should not be allowed to happen and must be stopped immediately. Can the Minister confirm that he has discussed this with his UK counterparts? On people arriving at Dublin Airport and travelling onward to the North, will the Minister indicate whether he is in contact with his counterpart in Northern Ireland about this matter and on people using airports in Belfast and travelling onwards to the South? As an island, it makes sense to have a common approach to the pandemic when it comes to travel restrictions.

The Tánaiste was reported yesterday as stating that talks were ongoing between officials in Ireland and Britain about agreeing an overall two-island strategy, that we would see all jurisdictions adopt similar travel restrictions and that this could involve Ireland adopting the same restrictions as other countries. I find it incredible that, in the third wave of a pandemic that has been with us for a year, the Government is still having discussions with our nearest neighbours on travel restrictions. The Department and Government need to get a grip of this situation. The time for talking is surely over; we now need action on the ground.

I urge the Minister and his Department to get to grips with travel and Covid restrictions. It is not good enough that the Minister continually states that we are in talks with other jurisdictions about introducing restrictions. We were at least three months late introducing Border restrictions between North and South and we all know the consequences of that. I ask the Minister

to take control of the situation, show proper leadership in his Department and, once and for all, introduce travel restrictions that will keep the pandemic at bay and prevent any new strains or variants from entering the country.

Deputy Richard Bruton: I raise the issue of the airline industry, which is of major strategic importance to Ireland, far more so than any other EU member state. Over the coming years, I am aware there will be massive over-capacity in the airline industry. However, that does not ensure that access will be available for Ireland, which will be crucial. What goals has the Minister set for Ireland to protect our strategic interests, particularly in the event of restructuring occurring in airlines that prominently serve our airports? Has he assessed what are the best policy instruments to achieve these goals? I know there are attempts to underwrite certain routes but can that be a direction of travel? Should we consider taking preference shares in airlines that are making commitments? What is the process of evaluation being undertaken here?

One of the great challenges we face in transport is cutting dependence on fossil fuels. While I am as enthusiastic as the Minister is about modal shift, I am conscious that 80% of vehicle journeys made in Ireland cannot be easily replaced by public transport, cycling or walking. Will he commit to accelerating the roll-out of electric vehicles? The roll-out of electric vehicle chargers has been stalled. I suppose it is understandable, with Covid, but only 3% of the plans by local authorities and the ESB have been delivered to date. Half of the population would now consider a shift from combustion engine to fossil fuels. Will the Minister accelerate that and copper-fasten the ban on new combustion engine sales after 2030?

On cycling, I congratulate the councils on what they are doing and acknowledge the support from the Department of Transport. Would the Minister consider simple things such as the surface used by cyclists as an early win? Is he considering changing traffic rules to enable flashing amber signals at traffic lights for cyclists who can safely move at times but do not always observe the rather inflexible laws in place now?

An Ceann Comhairle: Given the number of questioners there are in this session, I will take all the questions and see if there is time at the end for the Minister to respond. Otherwise, I ask the Minister if he would correspond with the Deputies, if that is acceptable.

Deputy Richard Bruton: It is acceptable to get a written response, if necessary.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: I will only use 60 seconds and leave 60 seconds for the Minister to respond, if he can. We all know that during Covid-19 public spaces have proved invaluable, yet some of them remain very unsafe as a result of illegally driven scrambler bikes. I thank the Minister and the other leaders for securing a commitment on this matter in the programme for Government. I thank the Taoiseach for the leadership he has shown in convening a cross-departmental meeting on this issue, the Minister of State, Deputy James Browne, who held a meeting of the antisocial behaviour forum this morning, and the Minister for Transport for prioritising a road traffic amendment Bill in this legislative term. Will he update the House on that matter and provide some of the details on what he proposes to amend?

Deputy Cathal Crowe: I too will use one minute of my time to give the Minister time to respond. We had very good news today regarding the Limerick northern distributor road, which starts and ends in my home parish of Parteen-Meelick-Coonagh. It is good news and I am glad the Minister signed off on it. When are works expected to commence? When will phase 2 begin? The project is in the doldrums and clarification is needed in respect of it.

When does the Minister expect a new chairperson to be appointed to the board of Shannon Group? We recently met unions with members who work in maintenance, repairs and operations. They would like to know what supports or reassurances the Department can offer to help them through these difficult and meagre months of trade.

Deputy Christopher O’Sullivan: After the Minister’s good news for Limerick, we will all be seeking roads, which is exactly why I am here. I raise the need for the completion of the Bandon southern relief road. It has been 30 years in the making and it makes complete sense in the context of the town’s sustainability and viability. The Minister may have seen the “Eco Eye” programme last week on which Clonakilty was featured. Clonakilty, my home town, is held up as a success story. The reason for that success is that Clonakilty has a southern relief road, which has allowed incredible public realm work to be carried out within the town, allowing for wider footpaths and big open spaces. The people of Clonakilty have taken back public spaces within the town and this has led to higher footfall in shops and much greater vibrancy within the town.

It is a model for success and Bandon is seeking exactly the same initiative. There is a partial southern relief road there and we are seeking its completion. Bandon can follow Clonakilty and take back those public spaces for its people so that they can have wider footpaths, greater pedestrian access and increased footfall in the town in order that the businesses and the town can be vibrant and flourish. I ask the Minister to give his full commitment to the completion of the Bandon southern relief road.

Deputy Jim O’Callaghan: It is very important that we all remember that pandemics end. The Spanish flu ended, the black plague ended and the Covid-19 pandemic will end as well. The important thing for policymakers and politicians such as us is to ensure that we keep in place the fundamental structures in society while this very difficult period proceeds. The Minister’s responsibility is to ensure that public transport continues as effectively as it can in light of the circumstances so that when the pandemic has passed, we will be able to avail of it again in great numbers.

One of the most depressing aspects of the pandemic has been seeing empty Dublin Bus vehicles, empty Luas carriages and empty taxis. Many people just do not have the work available to them to allow those services to fulfil the roles they play in public transport. One matter the Minister needs to consider is the possibility of giving free travel on our public transport system to healthcare workers. That is done in Northern Ireland to great effect. It would be a good indication of the support that we, as a society, wish to give to our front-line healthcare workers if we were able to afford them free travel on public transport as of now during the pandemic. Obviously, those who generally avail of free travel, namely, people over 65 years of age, simply are not using public transport to the usual extent.

The Minister has been questioned on the imposition of mandatory quarantine and he will have to give it close consideration. At present, we are living under extraordinarily draconian restrictions. Our children cannot go to school, engage in their pastimes or play sport. We are allowed out of our houses only to get food or to exercise. I can understand, therefore, why there is a concern that if variants are travelling around the world, we should use our best endeavours to ensure that we keep them out of Ireland. I do not think that is too much to ask, considering the great sacrifices we are all making. I look forward to seeing the legislation that will be produced, hopefully next week. It is important and the public expects its Government to work on it.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: Deputy Bruton is correct; we need connectivity. It is critical to our economy. In response to his question, we will have to look to retain diversity in regard to the destinations and connectivity we have because that has been a significant benefit. We also have to look at diversity in terms of regional development. We have to maintain more balanced regional development and that will be a secondary element of any long-term plan. First and foremost, it is about getting through the immediate crisis. As Deputy O’Callaghan said, it will end, but particularly for people in the tourism, travel and hospitality sectors, it will be especially difficult. We are facing a second summer where we probably will not have a big international tourism season. For aviation, there is no end in sight for these measures in the coming months and that will present difficulties. Managing matters in this regard will be the first objective. Critically, we will absolutely support Deputy Bruton’s call for accelerating the roll-out of electric vehicles and his suggestion - we hope to bring in legislation on this - for more flexible traffic management arrangements to improve cycling behaviour and the ability of people to manage how they make their way on the streets.

To respond to Deputy McAuliffe, the Road Traffic (All-Terrain Vehicle and Scrambler Motorcycle) (Amendment) Bill 2020 is a key to our Department’s legislative programme and we expect to introduce it in the House. Obviously, it depends on the House’s sitting times. We are restricted at the moment, but I hope we will be able to introduce it and a series of other items of legislation fairly soon after we return to normal sitting hours. It will address the regulation of scramblers, e-scooters and variable speed limits on the likes of the M50.

Turning to Deputy Cathal Crowe and the position of chairperson of Shannon Group, we hope to be able to bring that to the Government next week and have that chair in position. It will be critical to the future viability of the airport and, going back to what I said earlier, to the region.

To respond to Deputy O’Sullivan, “Clonakilty, God help us” was what we were brought up to say as we went through the town, but now it is the pride of west Cork because it is such a beautiful town. I have seen it transform over the years, not only the central spine but the whole town. It got the public realm right and dampened down the traffic in the main street. It provided good pedestrian access and on-street furniture, and other small things. It is the hanging-basket capital of the world. It made a difference and changed people’s perception of the town. People wanted to live there and people now work there in huge numbers in brilliant shops. This move in Clonakilty towards active travel and a public realm is the best working example I cite to everyone. Part of that involved taking cars out of the town but Clonakilty is a good example of how that can work. It is not a massive bypass and it did not cost us an arm and a leg, but it delivered fundamental change. I would use Clonakilty as a good example for Bandon, if it is not a bit raw as a neighbouring town, and it is the way forward. We should follow Clonakilty in every town. God help us, that would be a turn for the better.

If Deputy O’Callaghan could send a specific written proposal about the public transport fares, I will happily consider it as part of the emergency measures we are taking. He is correct and, as a barrister, he will understand this. As I said earlier, the issues in the legislation are not insignificant and we had to consider them quickly last week, but the emergency requires it. The sacrifices we are all making in domestic travel mean we need something similar and commensurate in respect of international travel, and that is what we will do.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I am sharing time with Deputies Michael Healy-Rae and O’Donoghue.

I will bring the Minister on to Tipperary from “Clonakilty, God help us”. A wonderful exposé was aired by RTÉ last week and I hope the Minister saw it because he is due to hold a Zoom meeting next week with Jobs for Tipp, March4Tipp and the chamber of commerce. I thank him for that. We want to do in Tipperary what happened in Clonakilty and we want him to assist us.

The M20 reaches from Limerick to Cork. Joe McGrath, the Tipperary county manager, put forward a proposal some years ago that I brought to the then Minister, Shane Ross. The proposal sought to extend the road from Limerick to Pallasgreen and on to Cahir. The M8 is there but it is underutilised. It would have saved €400 million and cut emissions, and while it would have added 20 minutes to the journey, it would have been a quicker way to get to Cork or to Dublin. It would have had linkage from the port of Foynes to Rosslare, which is so badly needed.

The other issue I have to ask the Minister relates to the new tariff on imported goods that have supposedly been repackaged. Cars are not repackaged but, unfortunately, they fall into this category. There were 18 lorries this morning in Dublin Port, with up to ten or 12 cars on them, all held up because the duty on the cars has to be paid at the point of entry. It should be paid when the vehicle registration tax, VRT, is paid at a VRT centre, where it is always paid. The traceability is there. Will the Minister please look at this? Drivers are being incarcerated for one day or perhaps 48 hours in their cabs at the ports if money is not in the account to pay for one car or if that money has not been credited properly by Revenue. That is wrong. There is a problem with the Revenue Commissioners. It is trying to help at local level but the Ministers for Finance and Transport and the Secretary General must sort this out nationally. I ask the Minister to please sort out those issues. He might give me a written reply because he obviously does not have time today to sort that out. It is important that he deals with that last issue. I look forward to the meeting with him shortly in County Tipperary.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: First, I very much respect the powerful position held by the Minister and I wish him well with it. This idea, however, that he is Minister for Transport but does not really like building roads is not going to work. He saw that last week with the issue in Moyross in County Limerick. He will have to be proactive and understand that we need roads in Ireland. We need a considerable amount of money for the maintenance of roads. There was a €38 million cut last year. We need €630 million to be spent each year in the upkeep of our regional and local road network.

In the county I represent, for instance, I will give the Minister an example of some of the money we will need in the future, which will hopefully be in the term of this Government. The Minister will be presiding over that and over the building of many roads, because they are required. His partners in government fully understand how much they are required. I will give the Minister examples of what we require. In the great town of Killarney, for instance, we need what I call a bypass for the bypass, that is, a road that will take us from Lissyviggeen to Farranfore and give us great connectivity from the new Macroom bypass road and carry us into Tralee and on to Limerick. We needed that to be bypassed and for that road to go ahead.

We need, for instance, money for the great town of Killorglin to relieve the traffic congestion coming from the Iveragh road and to carry out upgrading work on the Laune bridge. We need money to continue further investment in the roads around Kenmare and throughout County Kerry from the Ring of Kerry to the Dingle Peninsula and in mid- and east Kerry. Work has started already on a good project there and we want to see those jobs progressing, proceeding and continuing.

10 February 2021

We need money for our local improvement schemes. The Minister should always remember that the most important journey a person living in a rural area must go on is when he or she rises out of the house in the morning and sits in his or her motor car. People will have motor cars for many years to come whether the Minister likes it or not. He knows now this idea of five cars for a village will not work. We want those people living in rural areas to be able to travel on their local improvement scheme road. I ask that the Minister please announce funding for the local improvement schemes as soon as possible.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: I will start by giving two statements. First, I welcome the road in Limerick. It was a wise decision and I commend the Minister on that.

The Government has committed to a 7% average reduction in overall greenhouse emissions with a target of zero emissions by 2050. Has the Minister ever driven by car from Limerick to Cork? He may think these are two random statements but believe me, they are not. We must be realistic here.

First, we are looking at the Adare bypass, which has been prioritised yet has been ongoing for the last five years. This must be completed by 2030 for Shannon Foynes Port to keep its port status. It is the deepest port in Europe and with a road and rail infrastructure it could facilitate the largest ships in the world. The long-awaited investments into Shannon Foynes Port would mean we can take produce in through Foynes from all over the world. All produce could come through this port to supply the western seaboard. Strategically, Limerick makes much more sense. It can make such a difference logistically as it is centrally placed in the country. Therefore, I will save the Minister's emissions. We are in the middle of the country. The Government should invest in Shannon Foynes Port, the deepest in Europe. The Minister does not have to bring everything down from Dublin. We will send it back up to him. We will send it all over the country because we are centralised in Limerick. There are no park-and-rides in our area.

I will ask again if the Minister has ever driven from Cork to Limerick. A one-hour journey by motorway can now take two hours with the current road structure. In the national development plan, €21.8 billion is allocated to energy and climate change and only €4.5 billion to the local road network. The Dublin metro, however, gets €5.4 billion and the DART expansion brings it up to €7.4 billion. Therefore, 94,427 km of local and regional roads are getting only half the funding the Government is giving to Dublin. Twenty-five other counties in Ireland are contributing to this country. Give us our equal share and invest in the infrastructure. The Minister should take a common-sense approach. He should look at Shannon Foynes Port, the deepest port in Ireland. We will save his emissions and bring them down because we are centralised. Remember, it is the deepest port in Europe that can accommodate the largest ships in the world.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I thank both Ministers for their written speeches. It is helpful to have the details. The Minister for Transport talked about how we are an island heavily reliant on international connectivity. That is correct. We have had to keep our borders open throughout this health crisis to maintain critical supply lines and allow essential travel. I do not believe there is a single person in this country who would have a difficulty with that. It is not what happened, however. We utterly failed to deal with people coming into our country and we are now belatedly looking at quarantine. That sentence is therefore disingenuous and should not be part of the speech.

Generally, with regard to transport, I agree with the Minister that there are opportunities now as a result of Covid-19. I hope we seize those opportunities. I will take a parochial view,

although with national implications, and refer to Galway. To date, the Minister has refused to sanction a feasibility study for light rail. We know Galway is one of the five cities destined to grow with a 50% population increase by 2040. We know traffic congestion bedevils the city. Notwithstanding that, it is a beautiful city and lucky with regard to employment, although it has been particularly affected because of Covid-19.

I would have thought one big difference the Minister could make is to sanction a feasibility study for light rail. Why do I say that? The Minister knows more than anyone the contribution transport makes towards greenhouse emissions. Indeed, at the moment, we are working in a vacuum since the judgment on the last day of July, which found that our mitigation plan was not fit for purpose. It was an unusual decision by a unanimous Supreme Court composed of seven judges that said the plan was not good enough and was not set out clearly enough for any reasonable citizen to know what was going on.

We are therefore working in a vacuum, and in that vacuum even Covid-19 has not managed to allow us to reduce our greenhouse gas emissions significantly. One way is a feasibility study so we can have it out of the way, one way or another. The second is to ensure there are park-and-ride facilities in Galway. As the Minister's colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy Naughton, knows well, the objectives were put in the plan in 2005 yet here we are in 2021 and no park-and-ride facility has ever been rolled out in Galway city. These are practical things. Equally, during both lockdowns we had better facilities on the promenade. As soon as we lifted those facilities, however, we went back to the old way in Galway.

I am utterly on the Minister's side with regard to all these measures. What I am frustrated with is the tardiness. We are using language to say there are opportunities but we are not seizing those opportunities to make lasting, long-term changes to our city and country in order that we comply with our obligations, not under national legislation because it is not clear enough, and as I said, we are in a vacuum, but for future legislation we bring in.

Deputy Marian Harkin: I thank the Minister and Minister of State for waiting. I have two questions and I will take a written answer to the second, if necessary. I have spoken before to the Minister of State, Deputy Naughton, about the need for essential funding for Sligo Airport. As it is not a regional airport, it no longer qualifies for funding. We know that and therefore we must look elsewhere.

As I explained to the Minister of State approximately a month ago or perhaps more, the Irish Aviation Authority, IAA, told Sligo Airport that certain mandatory works must be carried out in order for it to continue to provide, as it does now, the largest search and rescue base in Ireland with 24-hour air traffic control. I subsequently questioned the Tánaiste on this issue and he said that Sligo Airport will have to be provided with funding, if it needs it, to keep that service up and running. After that, the Minister of State, Deputy Feighan, organised a meeting on 22 December with the airports division of the Department of Transport, local representatives, Coast Guard representatives and a representative from the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine. They were all present. Arising from that meeting, Sligo Airport was asked to put forward a funding request through CHC Helicopter.

4 o'clock

To date, no feedback has been received. The essential works have been completed and the airport has used its own operational funds to front-load the cost. When will it receive word on

this funding?

My second question, to which I will take a written answer, refers to the €80 million support package announced in November, which is essentially a grant for Irish airports. This is needed but where are the funds to support our airlines? British Airways has received €2.7 billion, Lufthansa has received €10 billion and Air France has received €7 billion. Unless we want all flights into Ireland to be Lufthansa, British Airways and Air France flights, we need to support our airlines. I will take a written answer on that but I would like an oral answer from the Minister of State, Deputy Naughton, on my first question.

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: Officials in my Department are working closely with the providers of the search and rescue service in Sligo. There is no threat to the search and rescue service. We will revert back but the Deputy can be assured that there is work ongoing. I completely understand the importance of the search and rescue service in Sligo.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I will address Deputy Connolly's questions. I hope we can advance that feasibility study on a light rail system in Galway. Similar to what we are looking at in Cork, we need to connect it to what we must immediately do in the likes of rolling out BusConnects for Galway and then look to see if that can be upgraded. That is my sense of an approach we might take in both Cork and Galway. Similarly, as the Deputy said, the next time we come out of a lockdown we might keep some of the measures that are in place on the promenade so that we could transform the seafront in Galway. We could have it on a test basis for six months even, to see what the summer in Galway would be like on the promenade with that space held over. I know Deputy Naughton and other councillors have had extensive discussions about that. That would be a brilliant benefit to the people of Galway and to any visitors this summer, who will hopefully be able to come.

Appointment of Member of the Legal Services Regulatory Authority: Motion

Minister of State at the Department of Justice (Deputy James Browne): I move:

That Dáil Éireann, noting that the Government agreed on 12th January, 2021, to propose, for the approval of Dáil Éireann, the appointment of Deirdre Malone to be a member of the Legal Services Regulatory Authority, and pursuant to sections 9 and 10 of the Legal Services Regulation Act 2015, approves the appointment of Deirdre Malone, with effect from 1st October, 2020, by the Government to be a member of the Legal Services Regulatory Authority in accordance with that Act, such appointment being for a period not exceeding four years from the date of appointment, as the Government may determine."

I am speaking on behalf of my colleague, the Minister, Deputy McEntee, who regrets that she cannot be present due to other official commitments. The motion concerns the nomination for appointment of one remaining member of the Legal Services Regulatory Authority, LRSA, for a four-year term. It seeks the approval of the House to appoint Deirdre Malone to that position as the statutory nominee of the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission.

As Deputies will recall, the Legal Services Regulatory Authority was established on 1 October 2016 and came into substantial operational mode with the commencement of the relevant professional conduct, public complaints and legal costs provisions on 7 October 2019 under the 2015 Act. Its various reports and other information are available on its official website *lsra.ie*.

The more recent of these reports on legal professional training and education and on the possible unification of the professions of barrister and solicitor were, as is generally the case with the Legal Services Regulatory Authority's reports under the 2015 Act, laid before the Houses by the Minister, Deputy McEntee, on 19 November 2020.

Members may recall the recent appointment of five other members of the Legal Services Regulatory Authority, also with effect from 1 October 2020. The required motions of approval to appoint them were passed by both Houses on 10 November 2020. Today's remaining nomination by the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission had not been received at that time, the statutory membership of the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission having also recently changed, and so is being dealt with separately under today's motion.

The approval process for the nomination of members of the Legal Services Regulatory Authority is laid out within Part 2 of the Legal Services Regulation Act 2015. Under this process, resolutions have previously been passed by the Houses to approve new members of the authority in support of its establishment in October 2016, again in September 2019, and more recently, as I mentioned, in November 2020. As is now the practice, the resolutions of approval of appointment by the Houses are proposed so as to have effect from 1 October of the year concerned to maintain continuity of function. It is of note that the inaugural membership of the Legal Services Regulatory Authority had a mix of three and four-year terms under the Act to ensure continuity of expertise and function. The authority comprises a total of 11 members, of whom a majority of six, one of them the chair, are to be laypersons. The members of the authority are put forward by ten prescribed nominating bodies specified by the 2015 Act. Only then are they proposed by the Government for appointment, subject to approval by a motion of both Houses as required by section 9(2)(a) of the Act.

These bodies have been purposely set in the legislation to represent a balance between the interests of lawyers and those of consumers and other stakeholders in our regulation of legal services and costs. In addition to the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission, whose nominee is the subject of today's motion, the other prescribed nominating bodies are: the King's Inns; the Bar of Ireland; the Law Society of Ireland; the Consumers Association of Ireland; the Citizens Information Board; the Higher Education Authority; the Institute of Legal Costs Accountants; the Legal Aid Board; and the Competition and Consumer Protection Commission. The Law Society of Ireland has two nominees, reflecting the fact that solicitors outnumber barristers being regulated under the 2015 Act by over five to one.

Today's nomination for the approval of the House was agreed by the Government on 12 January 2021. The nominee, Deirdre Malone, has been put forward by the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission, as a prescribed nominating body under the terms laid out in the Legal Services Regulation Act 2015. Ms. Malone is legal manager of the Free Legal Advice Centres' Public Interest Law Alliance.

The key nomination and expertise criteria for membership of the Legal Services Regulatory Authority under the 2015 Act are therefore being met in this regard. This includes section 9(6) of the 2015 Act, which provides that in appointing members of the authority, the Government shall have regard to the objective of there being no fewer than four members who are women and no fewer than four who are men. As there are four serving members of the Legal Services Regulatory Authority who are men, subject to the approval of today's motion, the Legal Services Regulatory Authority will comprise four men and seven women. I commend the motion to the House.

Deputy Pa Daly: The Legal Services Regulatory Authority has been carrying out good work since it was established back in 2016. It is modelled on the core values of transparency; accountability; independence; protecting those who avail of legal services; protecting legal practitioners from frivolous complaints; and ensuring that justice is done and seen to be done. It has proven to be innovative, which is also among its core values. In November 2019, for example, it introduced regulations to allow partnerships of solicitors to apply to the LRSA for authorisation to operate as limited liability partnerships. This model of legal service delivery had been called for by people who are involved in legal services for many years and it allows legal practitioners in Ireland to avail of a model which is commonly found elsewhere. The limiting of personal liability by legal practitioners, however, comes with responsibilities. They must communicate effectively with clients and creditors and maintain appropriate professional indemnity insurance.

While legal practitioners are heavily regulated, a fair and open complaints system is also necessary and important. I note from one of the reports of the LRSA that in the six months from October 2019 to March 2020, there were 636 complaints. Of the complaints received, in the period to early December, 96 were inadmissible, 23 were withdrawn and a further 50 were resolved informally with the assistance of the authority's staff during what it calls the pre-admissibility stage. The LRSA must be adequately resourced and there seems to be a backlog, which should be cleared. The LRSA's work in reviewing the education and training of legal practitioners, which was mentioned by the Minister of State, Deputy James Browne, is also important, and we look forward to seeing that undergo pre-legislative scrutiny in the committee.

In any democracy, there must be strong advocates working to ensure that constitutional and statutory rights are respected and enforced. The Legal Services Regulatory Authority helps with this. I refer here to solicitors and barristers who are willing to take on powerful forces, vested interests in government and the media and insurance companies that seem to have far too much influence for my liking in any republic. Article 40 of the Constitution, which relates to fundamental rights, is brilliant in its simplicity. It states: "All citizens shall, as human persons, be held equal before the law." That is something that has to be enforced at all times because if one is unfairly dismissed, injured at work or accused of an offence, rightly or wrongly, and if one's liberty is at stake, one will need to seek the advice of a solicitor or a barrister.

We will not be opposing this motion. I wish Ms Malone all the best in her work with the Legal Services Regulatory Authority, which, I hope, will continue with the work it has been doing.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: I warmly welcome the nomination of Ms Deirdre Malone by the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission as a member of the Legal Services Regulatory Authority. Quite clearly, Ms Malone is most qualified to fulfil that role.

I agree with Deputy Daly that the Legal Services Regulatory Authority was long overdue in being established. I am delighted to see it functioning. It still has a very demanding agenda of work to be completed. The structure of the authority is a balance between representatives of the legal profession and representatives of consumers of legal services. If one looks at the ten statutory nominating bodies, four are from the legal professions and six are from what might be broadly categorised as representing consumers of legal services. We will have to watch with great care how they function into the future because they have a number of important functions. One is education and training and the requirement for a statutory framework set out in various analyses of the legal profession. Once one embarks on a legal profession, or any profession, one needs to have in-service training of a standard and that needs to be regulated in some form.

The authority has a responsibility under statute to promote competition in the provision of legal services in the State. That is a requirement under the Act. It is an important requirement because there are many citizens who fear seeking to vindicate their rights through legal process because of the prohibitive costs of taking legal actions. For those who are well financed, there is no difficulty in ensuring that their legal rights are well protected but that is not the case for all. It is something of which we must be mindful.

I want to raise an issue that caused me some concern when I heard about it during the week. I refer to a spokesperson from the Law Society referring to the charging of negative interest rates in respect of moneys held in solicitors' clients' accounts. If the banks levy such charges on the solicitors where there is an accumulation of moneys, for example, mortgages - in one bank there is more than €2.5 million and more than €3 million in another - it is being suggested that solicitors will aggregate people's hard-earned money that they got from the sale of houses until the transactions are finalised and might charge negative interest on those accumulated accounts. I do not recall interest being paid in respect of those accounts when positive interest rates were available. Maybe some solicitors' practices paid interest on those accounts but I am not familiar with any that did. It would be unfair for them to do as has been outlined. A more fundamental issue that arises is the objective of promoting competition. How can a spokesperson for the Law Society make a blanket statement to the effect that solicitors will apply this on a uniform basis. Surely that is anti-competitive and I am sure it is not allowed. If individual solicitors want to do that, let them argue the matter with their clients but surely others who do not want to do it should be able to provide that service to their clients as well.

As I say, the regulation of legal professions is important work. We are dependent on legal practitioners in this country and sometimes people are in awe of dealing with the law. We need to have an oversight body that has teeth, power and capacity. The framework is there but we need, as Deputy Daly said, to ensure that the authority has the resources to do its job. We need to provide adequate oversight of their functioning. I hope there will be regular presentations to the Joint Committee on Justice of the ongoing work as this important body beds down and provides services to our citizens.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: I welcome the appointment of Ms Deirdre Malone by the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission. Her experience with the Free Legal Advice Centres will be valuable in the context of her work with the Legal Services Regulatory Authority.

The Legal Services Regulatory Authority was established in 2016 and plays an important role in the reform of our legal services. Indeed, one of the areas identified by the troika as urgently in need of fundamental reform was that of legal services, as has been raised already in this debate in the context of the fact that it is prohibitively expensive for people to take action when it needs to be taken. In 2019, the body became responsible for progressing allegations of wrongdoing against solicitors and barristers. Since taking over the complaints procedure, it has detailed in its biannual report the number of complaints it has received and the stages of resolution. In total, 1,241 complaints had been made and 55.4% related to misconduct. Three hundred and fifty-six cases have been closed and 234 deemed inadmissible, with 35 withdrawn. Eighty-six were resolved prior to the informal resolution process, which has already been said. No cases have completed the informal resolution process to date and, therefore, none has moved to the determination process. I suspect that is the area where most resources will be required to get to resolution. We must keep under review what resources are available to the board and whether they are sufficient to do that work on an ongoing basis.

Informal resolutions, with or without the assistance of the Legal Services Regulatory Authority, are the preferred option and it can take some time to mediate these disputes. As has been pointed out, the Legal Services Regulatory Authority reports both parties receiving correspondence. Once they receive that correspondence, it often prompts them to find a resolution. We must be sure that such resolutions are fair. People can often feel that there is inequality in a process. I would like to see some further work done on that in terms of surveying what the experience has been. It is too early to judge the process given that it was only put in place relatively recently. It will also take some time to deal with the volume of complaints. I presume that some of those complaints would have been historical in nature.

Shortly after it was established in 2016, the authority began to review barrister and solicitor education. It found evidence of a lack of clarity in respect of the competencies required for a solicitor or a barrister, indirect barriers to entry to the professions, unnecessary duplication in learning and assessment, a mismatch in terms of the skills taught with the needs of users of legal services, gaps in quality and a lack of independent oversight in the education system. It is useful that this has been documented because it obviously sets out an agenda.

The traditions relating to the education of barristers and solicitors have remained largely unchanged since the 19th century, with the Law Society and the Honourable Society of King's Inns holding a monopoly over the professional training. The attitude towards professional and educational institutions has changed since both bodies were established. Institutions have become more transparent, accessible and diverse and less tolerant of privilege. The legal sector has largely been resistant to change, with a tendency to cling to tradition.

Last year, the Legal Services Regulatory Authority proposed a new statutory framework for the education of barristers and solicitors under which a new independent body, the legal practitioners education and training committee, would be responsible for setting and maintaining new standards. The Law Society and King's Inns would be required to meet those new standards. Crucially, this proposal would allow other educational institutions to provide professional training for barristers and solicitors.

Deputy Bríd Smith: While the board is new, it has seen hundreds of complaints from the public and others, more than 400 of which are still being addressed and investigated. The complaints seem to range across many issues, but one of the themes running through them is rudeness and a certain level of abuse by members of the legal profession. As such, it is welcome that there is some limited oversight of the profession's members. That is good for the public in general. However, there are wider issues to do with the power and influence that personnel in the legal profession can have over the lives of ordinary people. The poorer and more vulnerable and marginalised one is, the greater that power and the greater the calamitous impact the decisions of the law can have on one's life. Over the years, I have seen how judgments to do with workers' rights and trade union pickets can be used to browbeat trade unions and workers.

I will briefly deal with the impact of those in power and those with legal oversight on a particular vulnerable group, namely, asylum seekers and refugees. The workings and decisions of the International Protection Appeals Tribunal, IPAT, have often amazed and angered me, as does the entire process of how asylum seekers are dealt with. Many Deputies share this frustration. I have often had to listen to the far right and others who do not want asylum seekers to be given any right talking about "bogus asylum seekers". The evidence they use for this is the high level of rejections of applications for asylum status. When one examines some of the cases, though, it becomes clear that the criteria and bar used by the IPAT are ludicrous. A couple of

years ago, we knew a doctor who had fled from Sudan. He was a socialist and political activist in his country and was under threat from the Sudanese regime. His case was recorded by the UN as requiring asylum from the conflict, in which he had been involved. In Ireland, however, his case was rejected. I am glad to say that, years later, he won his appeal, but this shows that our system is not fit for purpose.

For many, their experience at the hands of the IPAT is harrowing. This month, we found out that a member the IPAT panel, which makes life and death decisions over vulnerable asylum seekers, who was appointed by the State and remains in that position holds views that are on the extreme end of the political spectrum on matters that are vital to the running of this country. Apparently, she does not believe it is possible to be gay and live in a country or society in which that is socially disapproved of. The implications of this are astonishing. As a result of her view, she rejected the application of a bisexual man from Nigeria and stated that, if he was returned to his country, there would be no reason he would suffer persecution. The same woman believes Covid-19 is a hoax and has addressed rallies of the far right and fascist groups. She believes that we are using Covid-19 to hold power and sway over people. It is unacceptable that any holder of an office that dispenses any form of justice or legal authority should have reactionary and offensive views like that. Will the Minister remove this person immediately from the two boards she is appointed to and signal that we view the abuse by any member of the legal profession on any of the groups to which the Minister makes appointments as unacceptable in our society?

Deputy Michael Collins: The Legal Services Regulatory Authority is the body responsible for processing allegations of wrongdoing against solicitors and barristers, but it should do more than that. It received an average of more than four complaints per day in its first six months of work. According to its annual report up to September 2020, the authority received 636 complaints concerning lawyers between 7 October 2019 and 6 March 2020. Of these, 633 related to solicitors while only three were about barristers, who typically do not deal directly with the public. There were 342 complaints concerning alleged misconduct, including 42 complaints alleging fraud or dishonesty. There were 238 complaints relating to allegedly inadequate services and 56 relating to overcharging. The authority expressed concerns about the number of allegations of solicitors failing to complete undertakings and stated that some complaints related to undertakings that were over a decade old.

These are the facts. I have plenty of constituents who have had tough times with solicitors and felt vulnerable in their hands. One lady who came to my office had bought a house that was structurally unsound. She had been pushed from one solicitor to another because there was a so-called conflict of interest. This went on for many years. To this day, she is still in a battle to keep her home. Another constituent went through a legal separation. The fees that person was charged would have gone a good part of the way to buying a house. I have also dealt with a case where a person was wronged by her solicitor concerning her house. My staff and I spent days trying to contact other solicitors the length and breadth of Ireland to take what was a legitimate case, but there was no way one solicitor would take a case against another.

There must be a full and transparent way for a client to see the charges before any work is carried out as opposed to the idea of sitting down with a solicitor who then simply charges whatever he or she wants. That is highly irregular in today's world and would not be accepted in any other business. More transparency is needed. The idea that solicitors can do what they want and get away with it needs to be done away with. I am not saying that all solicitors are like that, but there is a certain percentage in every profession who are disdainful. I welcome

the Legal Services Regulatory Authority and I encourage it to help clients who have been hard done by solicitors.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: In my life's experience, I have found the legal profession to be extremely professional to deal with and responsible. When people are at a vulnerable stage in their lives, be it at a time of death, purchasing or selling something or distress, they need someone they feel they can rely on and trust. As in all professions, we might know of a small minority of cases through our own experiences, having heard from people or having encountered them as public representatives where individuals had engaged in activity that was not above board. On the whole, however, those involved in the legal profession would only warmly welcome more regulatory stipulations that would ensure that the wrongdoing of others was penalised and stopped.

Anything that we could do to speed up delays in systems, be it the Land Registry or the legal profession, which is designed to grind very slowly at times, would be welcomed by the legal profession and the people whom we are here to represent. We constantly hear people saying that it is a fright that there is such a delay with this or that. I am not condemning the processing system for the Land Registry, but it is slow and cumbersome. Even if it takes more money, personnel or whatever, could we all work together to put something in place to deal with the delays? The courts system is very cumbersome and, as with everything else in the country, it is being held up by Covid. Life is very short and anything we can do to speed up what I would call the mechanisms of the State would be most welcome and most appreciated by the customers and the legal professionals themselves.

Deputy Marian Harkin: I welcome the appointment of Deirdre Malone by the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission to the Legal Services Regulatory Authority. She will make a significant positive contribution to the work of the authority, which plays an important role in ensuring confidence and trust in the legal profession.

I welcome the fact that the authority is ensuring gender equality in its membership with seven women and four men as members. It is also important that the majority of members on the board are what we call lay members. Five members represent the legal profession and six members represent consumers, legal education, legal costs, equality and access to justice and fair competition.

The authority is the independent regulator for legal service providers and its role is to work to ensure and improve standards in legal services and, crucially, to ensure value for money for consumers. The board is the first point of contact for any person who wishes to make a complaint about barristers or solicitors. The service is free and impartial. It investigates issues such as excessive fees, inadequate service and misconduct of any kind. Certain time limits apply so people need to be careful about this. Complaints can be made by letter or online.

With regard to excessive fees, it is clear the cost of legal services must be written in language the client can understand. The Legal Services Regulatory Authority also monitors advertising by solicitors and barristers. There are some restrictions, especially around advertisements for personal injury claims. The authority's annual report from March to September last year detailed the number and types of complaints and my colleague, Deputy Catherine Murphy, already outlined these.

I welcome some of the most recent recommendations from the authority, which deal with

the monopoly role of the Law Society and the King's Inns in providing professional training so people may become solicitors and barristers. This monopoly must come to an end. The authority has proposed a new statutory framework for the education of lawyers. A single body would be responsible for the setting and maintaining of standards of legal education, and a new committee, the legal practitioners education and training committee, is proposed in the report. Its role would be to ensure existing and new providers adhere to the standards. One of the benefits of this would be to break down some of the barriers to entry to these professions that still exist.

Since 2016, a series of reports have recommended reform. The Minister for Justice, Deputy McEntee, welcomed the recommendations on breaking down this monopoly when she said we must address the administrative barriers that aspiring lawyers continue to face. This is important but we need to see it happen. Last year, we also saw an important change, whereby solicitors are now able to apply to become senior counsel, overturning a 300-year rule. There is no doubt that the authority is bringing the legal profession up to date and making it more accountable to citizens. Transparency is essential so that citizens can have trust in our judicial system. The authority is helping to ensure this. I wish the new member, Deirdre Malone, well in her work on this very important regulatory authority.

Minister of State at the Department of Justice (Deputy James Browne): I thank my colleagues throughout the House for their contributions in support of today's motion to approve the appointment of Ms Deirdre Malone to the Legal Services Regulatory Authority. She has been put forward as a statutory nominee of the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission. This will enable a similar motion to be brought before the Seanad for consideration and approval. As I have said, Ms Malone's appointment, if so approved, will complete the current membership of the authority while also bringing her recognised expertise and experience to bear on its important work of regulation and reform.

The Legal Services Regulatory Authority has now come into full operational mode as a key component of the ongoing reform of the legal services and legal costs in the State. This includes the commencement, with effect from 7 October 2019, of a range of measures under the Legal Services Regulation Act 2015. These include the new public complaints and professional conduct regime, which is now in operation. The authority has appointed its new complaints and review committees to deal with allegations received.

Complaints are now made to the authority rather than through the legal professional bodies, as happened previously. More than 1,800 such files were open during 2020. Separately, this work will feed into the new and independent legal practitioners disciplinary tribunal, for which a chair and members were recently appointed by the President of the High Court, on nomination by the Minister, Deputy McEntee, following a public competition under the 2015 Act.

The authority has managed the regulated roll-out of limited liability partnerships for solicitors' firms, making them more attractive for international legal business. The new and more consumer friendly legal costs transparency requirements for legal practitioners, whether solicitors or barristers, have also come into force. The separate establishment of the Office of the Legal Costs Adjudicators to modernise the old Taxing Masters regime has been completed by the Courts Service. This is supported for the first time in legislation by a transparent schedule of legal costs principles and a publicly accessible register of determinations, which is maintained by the new office.

The authority recently completed two further statutory reports under section 34 of the 2015

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Act, which the Minister, Deputy McEntee, has also laid before the Houses. These deal respectively with the possible unification of the legal professions and the reform of the provision of legal professional training and education. The Minister has also asked the authority to examine further the conditions of apprenticeship and devilling undergone by aspiring lawyers to further augment the reforms in this area.

New and more consumer focused legal services advertising regulations for solicitors and barristers were introduced by the authority in December 2020 under section 218 of the 2015 Act. The legal bodies no longer carry out this function. The new Advisory Committee on the Grant of Patents of Precedence, which considers candidates for senior counsel, be they solicitors or barristers, has been established with the administrative support of the authority while chaired by the Chief Justice in its own right. The second round of applications for appointment through this committee has just closed. The Minister has sought to encourage a renewed focus on enhancing the gender balance and diversity of potential applicants. Clearly, there is much important work to be completed by the authority in the ongoing performance of its regulatory functions. Today's motion can augment this in progressing the appointment of Ms Deirdre Malone.

Question put and declared carried.

Criminal Procedure Bill 2021: Second Stage

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): I move: "That the Bill be now read a Second Time."

I am pleased to bring the Criminal Procedure Bill 2021 before the House. It is a relatively short Bill the primary purpose of which is the introduction of preliminary trial hearings. The need for these hearings has been agreed and their implementation has been called for over many years. The programme for government highlights the introduction of legislation to provide for preliminary trial hearings as a priority, and a number of reports have highlighted their potential benefits. This includes the expert group on Article 13 of the European Convention on Human Rights, or the McDermott report, from 2013; the report on efficiencies in the criminal justice system, or the Fennelly report, from 2012; the more recent review of protections for vulnerable witnesses in the investigation and prosecution of sexual offences, or the O'Malley report, from 2020; and most recently, the review of structures and strategies to prevent, investigate and penalise economic crime and corruption, or the Hamilton report.

Victims, in particular, have spoken about how difficult it is for them when they have mentally prepared for a trial and it does not go ahead, or how upsetting it is if something unexpected is brought up during the trial that results in interruptions while difficulties or arguments are dealt with by the court. While we cannot take away the fact that a trial is an adversarial process, that an accused person is entitled to defend himself or herself robustly and that events can unfold in unexpected ways, the introduction of preliminary trial hearings should make trials more predictable and help them to run more smoothly.

From the point of view of an accused person, if a trial is going to fail because of the inadmissibility of certain evidence, for example, this should be uncovered as early as possible to

avoid the person being put through a full trial unnecessarily. Uncovering such difficulties at the preliminary hearing stage should mean the accused will not have to go through the trial process for a case that was inevitably going to fail.

It is also in the interest of the jury that the information presented to them during a trial should flow more smoothly and without interruption, insofar as that is possible. These hearings should also reduce the length of trials which, as we know, can be considerable, sometimes in part owing to repeated adjournments.

Preliminary hearings will reduce delays and increase efficiency in how our criminal trials are run. They will allow the court to deal with many of the issues that currently arise during a trial which require the jury to be excused. The judge can also use a preliminary hearing to deal with issues that might currently prevent a trial from going ahead on the day it is supposed to, for example, problems with disclosure or a need for specific practical measures or technology. Preliminary hearings will not deal with matters which currently must be dealt with when the jury is present.

In practical terms, the introduction of preliminary hearings will mean the following. First, it is less likely that the jury will be sent away immediately after being sworn in, or sent away multiple times during the trial, which often happens. Second, there will be a reduced impact on the victim, who is likely to find the trial very stressful and will have prepared himself or herself mentally, only for the trial not to start on the designated day, or to be interrupted, potentially multiple times, dragging out the experience and making it more difficult. Third, there will be significant resource efficiencies where trials are ready on the day they are due to start, and more likely to proceed smoothly to a conclusion. Fourth, matters which would ultimately prevent a case being submitted to a jury will now be more likely to be identified in advance, thus avoiding the empanelling of a jury and subjection of a person to an unnecessary trial. These are important benefits which, I hope, will be supported by all sides in this House, and which will result in significant efficiencies in the criminal justice system.

Let me turn to the Bill and outline what is proposed. Part 1 is a standard part which gives the Title, provides definitions for some important terms used later throughout the Bill, and repeals some provisions in legislation which are being replaced by updated provisions later in this Bill.

Part 2 is the main part of the Bill and deals with preliminary trial hearings. As I have outlined, the principal purpose of these hearings is to deal with certain matters ahead of the beginning of the trial so as to ensure the parties are ready to proceed on the day of the trial, and to minimise interruptions to the trial while it is in train. The judge can order a preliminary trial hearing for any indictable offence where he or she thinks it is needed. A preliminary hearing can be also requested by the prosecution or the defence where the trial is for a “relevant offence” as set out the Bill. These relevant offences are, first, offences which carry a maximum sentence of ten years or more, including a life sentence, and, second, offences which the Minister has specified by order. When specifying an offence as a relevant offence, the Bill sets out what the Minister must consider, including the nature of the offence concerned and the relevant complexities that generally arise in the prosecution of such offences. The court must agree to at least one preliminary hearing for a relevant offence where either the prosecution or the defence has requested it.

The Bill specifies the timing for a preliminary trial hearing, which must take place before the jury is sworn in, or in the case of trials in the Special Criminal Court, before the trial has

commenced. It provides that if it is in the interests of justice, an accused may be arraigned at a preliminary trial hearing. The Bill also specifies the types of orders or decisions which may be made at a preliminary trial hearing.

With regard to the matters the court can deal with at the preliminary hearing, the court can assess various case management matters and make orders or rulings to ensure the just, expeditious and efficient conduct of the trial, including in regard to the following: the availability of witnesses; whether any particular practical measures or technology may be needed; the extent to which the trial is ready to proceed, including any long-standing issues with regard to disclosure; and how long the trial is likely to be. The Bill also provides that the court can also make a decision or order at a preliminary hearing in regard to: whether a number of persons charged in the same proceedings can be tried separately; amending an indictment under section 6 of the Criminal Justice (Administration) Act 1924, for example, to allow offences to be tried separately; under section 15A of the Juries Act 1976, to provide for additional jurors where the trial is likely to be long; allowing for evidence by written statement, or proof by formal admission under sections 21 and 22 of the Criminal Justice Act 1984; an application to question the victim in a rape offence about their prior sexual history in accordance with section 3 of the Criminal Law (Rape) Act 1981; decisions around how evidence may be given from behind a screen, via television link, including from outside the State, or via an intermediary under various sections of the Criminal Evidence Act 1992, as well as whether cross-examination by the accused in person will be permitted, and determination of issues around disclosure of the victim's counselling records in a sexual offence case under section 19A of that Act; under section 39 of the Criminal Justice Act 1999, whether a witness who is in fear or subject to intimidation may give evidence through live video link; under section 67 of the Criminal Justice (Mutual Assistance) Act 2008, whether a witness outside the State may give evidence by live television link; leave to call an expert witness, under section 34 of the Criminal Procedure Act 2010; under section 21 of the Criminal Justice (Victims of Crime) Act 2017, where a victim needs to be protected from secondary or repeat victimisation, intimidation or retaliation, whether to permit questioning or evidence about the private life of that victim; and to allow for evidence via video link under section 25 of the Civil Law and Criminal Law Miscellaneous Provisions Act 2020. In addition to this list, at a preliminary hearing, the court may also make a "relevant order" which is an order relating to the admissibility of evidence.

Finally, in this Part of the Bill, there is a general power for the court to make any other order that could be made in the absence of the jury, or any order relating to the conduct of the trial as appears necessary to the court to ensure due process and the interests of justice are observed.

As Members can see, there is a wide range of important orders provided for in the Bill which will now be able to be dealt with at a much earlier stage in the proceedings, which will be to the benefit of all parties involved.

It will not generally be necessary for the same judge who presides over a preliminary trial hearing to preside over any subsequent hearings or the trial of the offence. An exception to this is a preliminary trial hearing dealing with the admissibility of evidence, where, other than in exceptional circumstances, the same judge must preside over the hearing and the trial. There is also a general power in the Bill for the court to decide that the same judge must preside over subsequent preliminary trial hearings and the trial of the offence, if that is in the interests of justice.

Orders made during a preliminary hearing will be binding and may not generally be ap-

pealed until the conclusion of the trial. An application may be made to vary an order only if there has been a material change in circumstances since the time at which the order was made. The only appeals permitted between a preliminary trial hearing and the trial of the offence relate to significant decisions excluding evidence as inadmissible. If such a decision results in the case against the accused being very significantly weakened, then it is in nobody's interest for the trial to have to proceed to a conclusion before the related appeal can be determined. Participants who would be entitled to legal representation and legal aid for the trial will have the same entitlements for any associated preliminary trial hearings.

In general, preliminary trial hearings will be conducted in public. However, there is a power for the judge to exclude the public from any portion of, or all of, a preliminary trial hearing where that is necessary, and to prohibit the publishing or broadcasting of certain details until the trial is complete. This may be necessary to protect the accused person's right to a fair trial, particularly given that the jury will not yet have been sworn in and material may be discussed at the hearing which should not be presented to the jury, for example, evidence that is later ruled inadmissible.

Part 3 deals with the provision of information to juries. This arises from a recommendation of the Law Reform Commission in its 2013 report on jury service that the types of information available to juries in complex financial trials should be extended to juries in trials for all indictable offences. This Part of the Bill implements that recommendation.

Part 4 makes various small amendments to criminal procedure legislation. The changes in relation to evidence by written statement will allow the court to require a person objecting to the admission of written evidence, rather than oral testimony, to give his or her reasons for doing so and, having considered those reasons, to admit the evidence in written form where this is not contrary to the interests of justice. The other amendments are technical in nature or adjustments to existing provisions that are necessary to reflect the introduction of preliminary hearings.

The Criminal Procedure Bill 2021 contains important provisions which will enhance the powers of our courts in conducting efficient criminal trials. A better trial process is in the interests of everyone concerned, the accused, the victim, the courts and members of our juries. The provisions of the Bill have been carefully designed to strike the right balance and to improve the criminal trial process in a way that has been sought after by experts for many years. I look forward to the debate.

Deputy Pa Daly: I thank the Minister for her statement. Many of the features of the Bill are good and we will support its passage to Committee Stage. Some trials are becoming increasingly complex and lengthy due to technological advances and legal innovation. An informed, non-frustrated jury is an important part of the justice system. The provision to allow some arguments to take place pre-trial, thereby avoiding the need to have a jury in another room for perhaps a week or two, is welcome. If I am to be a little picky, I remember that when the Criminal Procedure Act was first amended about 20 years ago, the power of judges to review the evidence prior to sending it forward was removed. I thought that was unnecessary at the time. Perhaps that power could be reintroduced.

Section 6(6) states that where an accused has not been arraigned, the judge, if he or she considers it appropriate, may direct that the accused be arraigned at the commencement of a pre-trial hearing. If we are serious about the presumption of innocence, that provision should be tightened up a little. In the public interest, the accused should be arraigned at that stage only

in exceptional circumstances. We may deal with that issue on Committee Stage.

If the prosecution is to seek a pre-trial hearing, it seems only fair that all disclosures should be provided to the defence before that takes place. Anyone who has worked in the courts will know it is quite common for a notice of additional evidence to be provided on the morning of the trial or the night before. If the prosecution is seeking something like this, all cards should be on the table.

The Bill also provides for hearings on matters such as the availability of witnesses and issues related to discovery. The discovery aspect is especially important due to developments in technology, complex books of evidence, etc. The report on the future of policing envisions better Garda resources in cybercrime. Complex discovery and admissibility matters are well suited to pre-trial hearings.

It is important to maintain a balance between prosecution and defence at all times and the Bill will give a right to request a hearing, amends the existing laws on books of evidence to ensure information is shared and seen and provides an obligation to notify where expert witnesses or evidence are to be used.

The availability of witnesses and their suitability or otherwise to take the stand is also key. We see generally in the community a disturbing and unfortunate trend whereby young people under the age of 18 years are witnesses or the accused in high profile criminal trials, often in quite violent circumstances. While reportage of crime and discussion of crime is another issue, it is often dominated by the who, what and where. Until we reach the issue of the why, we will not be able to explain some of these acts. Often there is a performative ignorance at play with regard to these developments but there has been a neglect of urban centres, including the north inner city of Dublin. Addressing the causes of crime with early interventions, targeted resources and community policing, education, housing, social care and community-led initiatives is important.

We do not have a dedicated youth justice agency. Although the transfer of youth justice functions from the former Department of Children and Youth Affairs to the Department of Justice may yet deliver improvements, it carries a risk. That risk is that young adults and children might be treated with the same resources and processes as adults, which would be inappropriate. I have heard from people in the justice system that the situation has been a crisis point, particularly over the last few years, with younger and younger individuals in a greater state of crisis. A stand-alone youth justice agency, properly resourced, is important. It should include professionals from the medical, social work and justice fields. Young adults who are violent and a danger to themselves have no real place to recover when they are arrested by gardaí. Although a new national forensics facility in Portrane is welcome, we lack a dedicated centre for minors, and this might be increasingly necessary. There was a proposal to establish a facility for young people with psychological difficulties in Cork but that was one of the first things to be abandoned when the last crash happened.

The Bill before us will be one part of a solution but wider policy and societal issues must also be addressed. The Bill contains a welcome provision to extend legal aid services to cover costs incurred during preliminary trial hearings. Some judges can be difficult about extending legal aid certificates. The legal aid thresholds should be raised because the working poor are sometimes unable to fund and raise a defence.

Section 9 gives the power to exclude members of the public from preliminary trial hearings where some specific offences are being tried, including crimes of a sexual nature and where section 20 of the Criminal Justice Act applies. We welcome this provision. We will see what happens on Committee Stage.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I add my voice to that of Deputy Daly. Sinn Féin supports the Bill proceeding to Committee Stage. Anything relating to the streamlining and speeding up of court operations must be welcomed, and that is also true of anything that allows for issues to be dealt with at pre-trial hearings. Deputy Daly mentioned technological advances, some of which are helpful, while others in the realm of cybercrime are not and create serious difficulties. There have also been legal innovations. If we can deal with some of these issues at pre-trial hearings before encumbering a jury with them, that would be incredibly helpful.

I spoke last week of the need to ensure we have in place the legal infrastructure required to deal with the problem of cybercrime and protect our communications infrastructure. We also need to ensure we have a legal framework that can protect and also prosecute. I reiterate that point. I understand that there will be international jurisdictional issues that will need to be worked out. Legislation before the House this week deals with specific issues and that is welcome. However, we must also ensure that we have the capacity and specific skill sets that are required, particularly within An Garda Síochána.

Nobody will complain if we are able to speed up court operations. We will need to follow up with resourcing. While we accept that Covid has created specific issues that are holding up certain court proceedings, there was a logjam long before Covid. When I spoke with the National Transport Authority and Transport Infrastructure Ireland recently, they raised the difficulties around planning and how they were being impacted by logjams in the courts.

5 o'clock

The major issue I brought up previously with the Minister and with the Minister of State, Deputy James Browne, is the fact that even when we had huge Garda operations against serious drug dealers and organised crime figures that were successful, in some cases the hold up was at the courts level. That is one aspect we need to fix. I have said many times previously that we need a full multidepartmental response. Somebody has to lead that. If that is the Minister at Cabinet level that would be sound. We just need to ensure that it happens and that nothing gets dropped, as has happened over the years.

This is a pandemic that is not disappearing. We need to get a date or a general idea on when we will be able to have a citizens' assembly to deal with the wider issue of the drugs pandemic. I realise I am taking a liberty in terms of where I am going on this but if the Minister was able to come back to me on one or two of these issues I would very much appreciate it.

I will mention two specific issues that came up at the joint policing committee, JPC, in Drogheda and in Dundalk. The Ardee JPC is under way at present. In fairness, the Minister was on the local radio station, LMFm, speaking about the proceeds of crime and said there is great support for delivering some sort of natural justice scheme whereby proceeds of crime that specifically relate to drug dealing could be put aside and issued to groups operating front-line addiction services and other necessary services. In terms of Dundalk and Drogheda, the likes of the Red Door Project, Turas and the family addiction support network will say that they need multi-annual funding that cannot be dependent on the money taken from drug dealers. This

could be some of the pot, so to speak, and that needs to happen. It is very important. I welcome the fact that the Minister said she supports this and is talking to the Minister, Deputy Michael McGrath, with regard to delivery.

I reiterate what has been said by my colleague, Deputy Pa Daly, in respect of a fit-for-purpose youth justice system. I refer to the report with which the University of Limerick was involved on the possibility of up to 1,000 children being involved in criminal gangs or in danger of being involved in criminal gangs. We all know of situations and stories of drug dealers using children because it is more difficult for the Garda to take action and there are some legal protections. We need to deal with all of that to protect the children and put these drug dealers and criminals out of action.

The other issue that I brought up at the joint policing committee is the idea of these cross-border fines. Sinn Féin has strongly stated that we need to get on with the job of hotel quarantining and ensuring that anybody who is travelling into the country not only needs to have a pre-departure test but that there must be polymerase chain reaction, PCR, tests post arrival. Whether that is five days, ten days or whatever is the determinant factor, that needs to happen.

It must be put on the record that we need everybody to not engage in anything other than essential travel. The members of the Garda at the JPC informed me that they will be operating the same discretion for cross-border travellers as they operate for people who are travelling from mid-Louth to Dundalk, that is, anybody who is operating on the basis of essential travel, whether it is for childcare, work or necessary food shopping, will not have any difficulties. We need to ensure that this is the case. I put it to the Minister again that we need the Government to operate and engage with the Northern Ireland Executive and with the British Government on that because we need to ensure, if at all possible, that we can deliver an all-Ireland response. That means that travel information needs to be transferred North-South and South-North. It also means that, if necessary, we will deal with the British Government from a point of view of delivering a two-island response because it is far too important an issue not to deal with these specific areas. Were the Minister good enough to come back to me on that, I would very much appreciate it.

Deputy Patricia Ryan: I, too, thank the Minister for her presentation. I welcome the opportunity to speak on this important but quite technical Bill. The main purpose of the Criminal Procedure Bill 2021 is to provide for the introduction of preliminary trial hearings. These hearings deal with certain matters before a trial begins to ensure that the parties are ready to proceed on the day of the trial and to minimise interruptions while in progress.

Part 3 of the Bill deals with the provision of information to juries to assist them with their deliberations. This section arises from a recommendation of the Law Reform Commission in its 2013 report on jury service. There are a number of other recommendations in that report which we need to consider with a view to implementation. The commission recommends that the register of electors should continue to be the source from which jury panels are drawn and calls for the establishment of the electoral commission to ensure the accuracy of the register. That needs to be a priority to ensure that we can have confidence in our electoral process.

We also need to simplify the process of getting onto the register. The need for a stamp from a Garda station is an unnecessary burden on people. In small towns like Monasterevin, where I come from, residents have to try several times a week to get a garda in our Garda station which, to be fair, is very unfortunate. I may be taking liberties here but I ask that the Minister

might look at that also. If they cannot get a Garda member in that station they have to travel to Kildare, which is not too bad if one has a car but is a bit of an ordeal if one does not. A simple fix for this would be to have scheduled public office opening hours where people can call in to have various forms dealt with like we used to do in the past. If we could allow librarians and peace commissioners a wider role in validating the various forms that currently require a visit to the Garda station that would be very helpful.

The commission also recommends the introduction of a modest flat rate daily payment to cover the cost of transport and other incidental expenses involved in jury service. That is very important, particularly for our older people, many of whom have the State pension as their only income. Along with that it recommends that consideration be given by the Government to other means that could be used to alleviate the financial burden that jury service imposes on small businesses and self-employed persons, including the use of tax credits and insurance.

The commission also recommends that the Disability Act 2005 should include express recognition for the provision of physical accessibility such as wheelchair ramps and other reasonable accommodation such as induction loops that make participation by persons with different abilities in a jury practicable and achievable. In a year when we have a 24% decrease in capital spending Estimates for the Courts Service, we need to do more for those who have different abilities.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: Again, I am glad to have the opportunity to speak on yet another justice Bill. I should say by way of introductory comment that it is interesting that we are now dealing with a succession of single issue justice Bills, some of which have been around for a while. I have just been to a justice briefing in advance of this debate on another Bill which is on its way which deals with a Supreme Court decision. The Bill has been in preparation since last May. It seems that many justice Bills are being taken off the shelf and presented to us, many of which I believe could be amalgamated in a miscellaneous provisions justice Bill, which would have been the way in the past. I only say that by way of introduction because I am concerned that there is a lot of other important legislation that is not coming our way as we are dealing with backlog stuff that can be brought in now. That is not in any way to undermine or diminish the importance of the individual legislative measures. I am just saying that they can be dealt with in a more amalgamated way than the train of individual Bills being presented now.

This particular Bill, the Criminal Procedure Bill, provides for preliminary trial hearings in respect of trials of certain criminal offences. The particular offences have been set out in the presentation from the Minister and I believe everybody would be strongly in agreement that these legal arguments, to use that phrase, should be determined in advance of a trial proper being commenced and a jury being sworn in. It is an enormous imposition on anybody to be called for jury service but to be called for jury service and then be corralled in a room for hours if not days on end while legal argument is carried on outside is an unacceptable feature of our legal system. Putting an end to that via the proposed provisions is important.

The issues have been outlined by the Minister, including admissibility of evidence and what is admissible. That should be determined before anything is presented to the jury. That is quite right. Identification of matters that might lead to a trial collapse is also important as it is quite traumatic to be called for jury service anyway, even before being spoken to and selected. A trial may collapse after weeks because of a technical matter. I am not saying that this procedure will be foolproof in ensuring that this will never happen, but it is a reasonable stab at ensuring that whatever legal challenges or disputes might arise could be dealt with before the proper begin-

ning of the trial.

I will not go through the detail of the Bill, which has been rehearsed and presented well by the Minister. I have no objection to the details, although we will have scrutiny of the Bill on Committee Stage. It is right that in these pre-trial hearings, the power will be available to a judge to ensure they are not broadcast or published until the conclusion of the trial proper. It is a proper provision to be made because some elements may be argued that could have an impact on an individual if a trial collapses or evidence is found inadmissible and should never have been placed in the public domain. That is quite right and proper.

I welcome this as an important modernisation of the law because there is so much legal argument now at the heart of serious criminal matters that should be argued and determined in advance of the final presentation of evidence before a jury of laypersons who are not legal experts. That is right and proper and we will see how it pans out. There is no doubt that in future we will return to the criminal procedural legislation to amend it as technology and other developments dictate.

I will make some general points on the conduct of trials. Other Members referred to the fact that we now have a major problem regarding the backlog of serious trials. These are trials under the determination of the Courts Service that cannot commence during a period of level 5 restrictions. We have a serious backlog and we do not know how long either level 5 or analogous restrictions will apply, although it is clear that will be well beyond this month and probably next month. The old adage is “justice delayed is justice denied” and it is a fact. Witnesses become less clear in their recollections or they may well pass away. It really is a point that we need to have a structured approach to deal with. I am interested in the Minister’s response to how this will be dealt with over the next couple of months and in her post-Covid plan. What additional resources and so on can be deployed to ensure we have an immediate capacity to deal with the backlog building up daily right now? This is not only in criminal trials, of course, but in a variety of other legal cases where important commercial decisions are being delayed, sometimes to fatal detriment as the commercial decision goes beyond being made because of the delay.

I am also concerned about the development plan for the built infrastructure of our courts system. When we had no money in my time in the Department of Public Expenditure, I still tried to address this. I set up a public private partnership system, as well as a direct-build system, to provide for both courthouses and Garda stations. It is entirely unacceptable that in a variety of courthouses across the country, family law matters are not afforded the privacy or even the unimposing structure that a modern family law system requires in contrast to some of our older court buildings. What are the Minister’s plans in this regard? We were able to have substantial programmes of investment of hundreds of millions of euro at a time when the State had no money.

I really hope that the capital investment can be made in order to ensure that the infrastructure available to those who practice law and avail of legal services - that is all of us ultimately - is fit for purpose in modern times. There should be facilities for taking video evidence and evidence from individuals who may still be in custody and who may not need to be dragged around the country, particularly for perfunctory hearings such as those for further committal. People are dragged in vans around the country to present for those. We must deal with that in a modern way. Not all courts have the facility to do that. In particular, I am concerned about the matter of family law privacy and it should always be the case that the most informal of structures should be used. I know there have been enormous advances in that area in the past short while.

I will focus for a few minutes on juries. One of the elements of this legislation is making the life of jurors easier. As I said, they should not have to sit in private rooms together while legal argument is conducted outside of their hearing. Looking at who is eligible to act as a juror, there is a long list of people who can be taken from the register of electors. There is also a list of ineligible categories of people, mostly to do with the law, which is understandable. There is also a long list of people who, as of right, can be excluded, including ourselves as Members of the Oireachtas. Virtually any civil servant who can be certified by a head of Department as being important may similarly be excluded. The list reads as if these people are too important to be jurors, leaving another category of people who are not vital and who can be jurors. It is an odd approach to jury service and I make that general point.

There was an interesting article in *The Irish Times* in March last year under the headline “Serving on an Irish jury: ‘It’s very daunting’”. The opening sentence of the article states, “Type ‘jury duty’ into a search engine and the list of related search terms includes ‘excuse letter template’, ‘holiday booked’ and ‘payment’ - suggesting that the first thought of many when receiving a jury summons is not civic-minded.”. It is thought-provoking. It continues, “Last year, roughly one in five people called for jury duty attended court”. That was in 2019 and it means 80% of people called did not attend court. The article continues, “Of the 42,840 people asked to serve on a jury, 29,682 were excused, while 4,248 were no shows.”. Some 4,248 did not show up at all. A major report published in 2020 found that judges were understanding of this reluctance to serve. Indeed, some of the concerns expressed by judges in the analysis that was done in respect of their understanding of people’s reluctance, the giving of excuses, and the releasing of people from jury duty, included the emotional toll of listening to harrowing evidence, and the fact that jurors are often out of pocket for parking, public transport and childcare costs. Really, it is something we must be ceased of. We need to have the broadest possible spectrum of people available to do jury work. If people cannot do jury service because they cannot afford it and because of childcare and transport costs, these are surely things we can address.

The study was called *Judges and Juries in Ireland: An Empirical Study*, and was published by UCD’s Sutherland School of Law. It was launched by the Chief Justice, Frank Clarke. It was based on interviews with 22 judges and 11 barristers. The report focused on the experience of judges in criminal trials and the role played by juries. It is a most important piece of work. As instanced by another Deputy, in terms of expenses, there is no reimbursement for loss of earnings for the self-employed. One judge said that he frequently exempted self-employed people from serving because of the prohibitive cost. If we exclude another whole category of people - the self-employed, and that is a big category - simply because it is prohibitive for them to serve, we have a problem, and a problem we must address.

I invite the Minister to look at the way we construct juries. In the Netherlands, jurors are professional. It is suggested that a banking trial there, for example, would be decided by a panel of cost accountants.

I know it has been dealt with in other legislation, but we must also consider the issue of the intimidation of jurors. Thankfully, it is not hugely prevalent here, but it is something to which we should be alert, and we must put support in place for this. I am aware that we have professional minders for jurors. In fact, in the analysis done, many jurors commented positively about the jury minders that were provided. One juror described them as, “...great, terrific. Always good humoured and reassuring. They were like the hospital porters or the people who wheel patients in and out of the operating theatre making jokes.” That poor juror obviously felt that

being marched into court to hear a case was like being marched into an operating theatre.

What I am trying to say is that we need to look fundamentally at how the the panel of jurors is constituted and how they are selected. We have a very reduced panel of people available to be called, and of those called, 80% are excused or do not show, according to the analysis I have just given. Whole categories of people, like the self-employed, in the mind of at least one judge, are excluded if they ask to be excluded, because he is mindful of the impact on their livelihood of them serving as jurors.

There is also the issue of the complication of cases nowadays. I am very strongly of the view that cases should be heard by a jury of one's peers. However, there are very complicated financial cases and so on now. Perhaps we need to look at different models for different cases. Obviously, in purely commercial issues, there are purely commercial judges that will determine the outcome of cases, and it is not a matter for jurors. However, there can be criminal cases which involve serious financial issues like fraud. We dealt with fraud legislation here last week in respect of defrauding the funds of the EU. These are things we need to look at.

I put these matters to the Minister. Obviously, we need to reform the process of the law, so that people's experience of it is as positive as it can be. It is daunting for anybody to walk into a courthouse. It is like being stopped by a garda. One can be as innocent as they day is long, but one still feels guilty as soon as one is stopped by a garda for any reason. Many people are intimidated by the mere entrance into a court building. We have tried to improve that by having different styles of court building than in the past. However, we now need to move on to the next phase of that, which involves humanising the experience of people as best we can, and recognising the imposition we put on those who are called to act as jurors in this State. It is a most important role. It is a fundamental role for the operation of a fair society.

There are some who say that getting a wedding invitation now is like getting an invoice. Getting a jury summons in the post is certainly like getting an invoice, because the recipients feel like it will cost them money and knock them out of their normal routine. They wonder who will provide childcare and what they will do. We must grapple with that. We should not say it is a societal responsibility that people must take on and it is part of citizenship. That is all well and good, and right and proper, but we need to provide the supports that are required, so that everybody can feel that serving on a jury is a good, positive and welcoming thing, and an act of solidarity with the State. We must do that with our eyes open, as we simplify and modify the procedures in our court system.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: This practical Bill is most important in helping to speed up criminal trials, by ensuring that any preliminary matters are dealt with before the trial starts in front of a jury. Measures proposed to make it less likely that jurors are sent away during trials are most welcome. Jurors often make preparations to undertake their civic duty, and are most disturbed to have the trial they are sitting on extended beyond the date they expect because of trial delays caused by issues such as the admissibility of evidence. Often, procedure can delay things. Many cases can take years, leaving victims in a vacuum, struggling to move on with their lives. Anything which can assist in this not being the case is most welcome. Victims must extensively prepare themselves mentally for the start of a trial on a designated day, and it is often delayed because of procedural issues. This legislation will be a welcome fix to that issue.

This legislation will also help victims who can find the criminal trial process very challeng-

ing, because the process will be more streamlined. It is very important that we streamline the process. In reality, however, we should be trying to change the law, so that the trial process is less challenging for victims. I accept that this legislation is a good start. We need to start somewhere. We should look at ways to discuss the impact of crime on everyone involved, and how to repair the harm that is caused.

I welcome this legislation and how it will improve things, but much more needs to be done in this area. I know the Minister and her team are committed to doing this work. I look forward to supporting further law reform legislation in future.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: I would like to broadly welcome this Bill, which provides for the introduction of preliminary trial hearings and the provision of information to juries to assist with their deliberations.

Pre-trial hearings are a most efficient method of dealing with certain practical matters ahead of the beginning of a trial. Those hearings ensure that all parties are ready and able to proceed, and minimise interruptions to a trial once it has begun. In 2019, the Director of Public Prosecutions stated that the waiting period for a criminal trial in the Dublin Circuit Court had reached one and a half years. Obviously, the Covid crisis is going to make matters worse, but delays are particularly due to exceptionally long trials. In recent times, the Anglo Irish Bank trial was one such example. Other speakers have drawn attention to other cases and the kinds of trials that can be exceptionally long. In each of those trials, juries were sworn in before legal arguments took place, without the presence of the jury, over important practical matters of the trial such as what evidence could be introduced and what materials needed to be disclosed to the defence. Such deliberations can take weeks and tie up juries, witnesses and victims.

A pretrial process has been proposed as a method of introducing some efficiency into criminal procedures and as a way of not unduly inconveniencing victims, juries and witnesses. Approximately 150 cases are dealt with by the Central Criminal Court every year and issues have frequently arisen in regard to trials not commencing on schedule. The late disclosure of evidence from third parties, such as reports from medical institutions, telephone evidence or evidence from social media companies, has often played a role in delaying trials. Many of those companies and institutions are based abroad and the process for acquiring evidence can drag on. The difficulties in disclosing material from third parties have a detrimental effect on the management of the Central Criminal Court and lead to cases being adjourned. Another frequent reason for the delayed start of trials relates to issues surrounding fitness to plead and cases of capacity. Pretrial hearings would allow the early identification of such issues by the court and allow them to be addressed at pretrial rather than derailing a trial once it is already in process.

Pretrial hearings will be an important tool for the protection of victims of crimes. There is a need to strengthen victim protection during the trial process and avoid putting people through unnecessary hardship and re-traumatisation. The Minister referred to this in her opening statement. The O'Malley report reviewed the protection of vulnerable witnesses in the investigation and prosecution of sexual offences. It recommended the introduction of pretrial hearings where defence lawyers would have to seek permission to cross-examine the victim's sexual history. The report also recommended the provision of legal representation for victims at hearings, which should, of course, be covered by legal aid.

Pretrial hearings have long been suggested by various organisations, such as the Irish Council for Civil Liberties, ICCL, as an appropriate method to address the significant delays in court

proceedings. The most recent report by the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees highlighted that the State had yet to provide an effective remedy to individuals whose rights to a fair trial in criminal or civil proceedings without undue delay had been violated. The European Court of Human Rights has held the State to be in violation of Article 6.1, regarding excessive length of proceedings, and Article 13, concerning the lack of effective remedies, of the European Convention on Human Rights. In response to this, the Government proposed a statutory non-court compensatory scheme. However, the Joint Committee on Justice and Equality of the previous Dáil had a number of concerns regarding that proposal, including questions about access to legal advice and lawyers, the lack of clarity around appeals and the restrictions applicable to the awarding of compensation. In April of last year, the Irish courts, including the Supreme Court, were again criticised by the European Court of Human Rights for excessive delays in dealing with a civil case, *Keaney v. Ireland*, and the lack of an effective remedy.

Pretrial hearings, it is hoped, will make some impact in reducing the chronic delays in our courts system, but they are not the panacea for all our problems. More must be done to address the delays and provide an effective remedy for the people whose right it is to have a fair trial without undue delay where that right has been violated. We have signed up to the European Convention on Human Rights and we really need to stick to it. We cannot continue on a trend of brushing off these kinds of criticisms when our courts system has repeatedly been shown, for more than a decade, to violate human rights. These issues need to be taken seriously and addressed by the Department as a matter of urgency. I accept that there are a lot of issues queued up in the Department, but it will absorb a huge amount of time if the State has to keep on responding to the valid criticisms that come our way as a result of the ongoing delays in trials.

It is welcome that any legal aid certificate covering an individual's trial will also apply to a pretrial hearing. Every person is entitled to legal representation and the State holds a responsibility to provide legal aid when individuals cannot afford it. Unfortunately, the current system of legal aid is inadequate, by admission of previous Governments. Reforms to the Criminal Justice (Legal Aid) Act 1962 have been promised since 2015 but have been the subject of repeated delays. Submissions to the Joint Committee on Justice and Equality discussion on access to justice and legal costs highlighted the impact that the under-resourcing of the criminal legal aid system has on individuals' access to justice. I urge the Minister to progress the planned legislation to reform the current system of criminal legal aid as a matter of urgency. Properly resourcing legal aid is an essential component of fulfilling our obligations to ensure every individual has equal access to justice.

The Bill also covers the provision of information to juries to assist them in their deliberations. This follows on from the recommendation of the Law Reform Commission in its 2013 report on jury service to extend the provision of specified documentation to juries in all trials, on indictment. Those reforms are broadly welcome, if overdue, in order to better facilitate a jury in making its decision.

On the subject of evidence admitted in trial, I draw attention to the ICCL's recent report, *A Revolution in Principle*, on the exclusionary rule. This rule, also known as the green Garda rule, allows evidence that has been obtained unconstitutionally to be admitted if the court believes the breach was accidental. The rule was introduced five years ago following a contentious Supreme Court decision. In practice, it means that the Garda can breach a citizen's fundamental rights, such as the right to privacy from the Government, without repercussions in regard to the evidence, as long as it is done inadvertently. Prior to the Supreme Court decision, Irish law

mandated the exclusion of unconstitutionally obtained evidence unless there were extraordinary excusing circumstances. The new rule represented a substantial change. Throughout its report, the ICCL outlines the opinions of solicitors and barristers who expressed a great deal of concern that this rule is allowing the Garda to breach constitutional rights without any consequences. It is clear from the report that in the five years since the ruling, the courts have been operating on a presumption in favour of the admittance of evidence that has been obtained in a way that violates constitutional and human rights.

The statements given by lawyers display a very worrying chilling effect, with two thirds of practitioners offering advice to clients based on the view that they are not going to win. The report includes statements by lawyers to the effect that they have witnessed gardaí lying while presenting evidence, threatening to arrest close relatives, planting evidence and physically assaulting people. I am not making this up, I am taking it from the report. According to the DPP's most recent reports, the rate of guilty pleas stands at 92%, representing a steady increase from 86% in 2015.

There has been a very welcome drive towards professionalism in policing. I completely recognise that much has happened in recent years and that the vast majority of gardaí are absolutely beyond reproach. It is vital, however, that we hold gardaí to very high standards because they have an extraordinary role to play. In 2014, the Garda Síochána Inspectorate identified serious issues with Garda investigation procedures, including insufficient training for crime scene investigations and inadequate interview training for members of the force. Moreover, crime scene examination results were often not recorded on the PULSE system. There was an absence of effective supervision at all stages in some crime investigations, along with several issues relating to warrants and summonses. There were limited recordings of actions taken in the execution of warrants. Many of these issues were echoed in the 2018 report from the Commission on the Future of Policing in Ireland. Those who are charged with upholding the law and protecting the rights of Irish people should not be operating below the standards we expect from other citizens, who cannot stand before a judge and claim innocence on the basis of not knowing the law. Indeed, the opposite is the case; one is told ignorance of the law is no defence.

There are concerns regarding data retention and audio surveillance. Retired Chief Justice John Murray previously described the surveillance regime in Ireland as an illegal system of mass surveillance. The people of Ireland have fundamental rights afforded to them under the Constitution. Those rights should not be undermined by any of our institutions. There are significant issues here. I am sure they are on the Minister's desk or in the mix in terms of legislation we will see. Nonetheless, it is incredibly important to address them if we are to maintain trust in our criminal justice system.

When the Minister is wrapping up, she might indicate the position on legislation related to the naming of child victims. Just in the past couple of weeks, we heard about the tragic, high-profile murder of a young lad. Once the accused was charged, the child could not be named and the funeral happened without people being able to express themselves in a very public way, including through the media. A second case arose last week. The family not only wanted to have the child remembered as a victim but it also wanted people to know who the child was. The person whose name was anonymised was known very well because it was their child. What occurs is so hurtful. While the Minister is more than aware of this and has been working on it, when does she anticipate that we might see the legislation introduced and brought through the Dáil? I would sit here on a Saturday and Sunday if I believed it would overcome the issue. We would all feel like that. I do not believe the Minister will encounter any resistance. It is just a

question of when it is going to happen. What is happening is particularly hurtful.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I do not know whether Deputies have been taken unawares but I do not see any speakers from the Government parties, Sinn Féin, People Before Profit or the Regional Group. I am simply mentioning this in the interests of transparency. The next group with a Member present is the Rural Independent Group. I call Deputy O'Donoghue.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: As a member of the Rural Independent Group, I find it very interesting to talk about this matter. Any Bill that can provide for the introduction of hearings to reduce interruptions to and delays in criminal trials must be welcomed. I am sure we have all served at some time on juries and we must realise the amount of time that can be wasted twiddling one's thumbs waiting for the legalities. Other Deputies have mentioned that self-employed people can be left waiting for a week or two. Therefore, I welcome any measure that will address this.

All victims can be spared stressful and painful delays in waiting for court proceedings. Accommodations can be made for victims in advance of trials. If this leads to the improved operation of criminal trials and benefits systems for victims, witnesses, juries and gardaí, it has to be appreciated.

I welcome the efficient administration of justice but I am concerned that there are almost 1,000 bench warrants outstanding for Limerick. This is only the tip of the iceberg. Throughout the Twenty-six Counties, there are many more warrants outstanding. I have asked the Minister a parliamentary question on this with a view to highlighting the bench warrants issue that arises throughout the country.

Previous speakers mentioned the Garda. There are investigations into the Garda in various areas. Are some of these investigations related to the system and the training gardaí received over the years? A garda of my age - I am 50 - received training in a different era. At the time, one would have heard people using terms like "square" and "L7". Many times when gardaí were doing their job, they had to work on their own initiative based on the training they were given. While the legal system is changing for the better, we must acknowledge that part of the training of gardaí over many years was carried out in a way that was different from today. It was in different times. We have to be cognisant of this. We all want a fair and transparent Garda service and a fair and transparent Courts Service, and we want to make sure criminals are brought to justice quickly and on time and that the cases of people who have suffered at the hands of criminals are dealt with efficiently, but we must also examine the mistakes that were made over the years in the training of gardaí. I ask the Minister to look back and talk to high-ranking serving and retired gardaí between the ages of 50 and 70. I ask her to examine the various training regimes so we can improve. It is getting better but it is a work in progress.

I welcome this Bill and what it will do. It is another step forward in dealing with criminals in this country. It will send a clear message to people involved in criminal activity that we will be able to deal with them quickly and efficiently but we need to put the resources in place to make sure this can happen. What I am asking for is that in current investigations, we account for the errors made in training in the past. We are aware that there are live and ongoing investigations in An Garda Síochána but we must be realistic and ask whether the actions of gardaí were based on the training they received and whether that was the way particular matters were dealt with at the time. The system has to change and is changing. I welcome that. In the context of the investigations to which I refer, I ask people to look at the era to which they relate. I

support the Bill 100% and I will be voting in favour of it.

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): I thank all Deputies for their comments and their support for this Bill. It is clear that there is overwhelming support from all Members for the many reasons we have all touched on. The Bill will ensure that we have more streamlined, efficient and effective criminal proceedings. Particularly in the context of juries and jurors, it will enable us to create a system where they know that when they are called to jury duty they will have a start time and, potentially, a clearer outline of the work they have to do and that they will not be empanelled and sent away. When it comes to vulnerable persons, victims or those going through a particularly difficult time, this Bill will be a huge help in making sure they will know when their trial will start and that there will not be stopping and starting. There are many positives in this. I acknowledge the engagement and assistance of everyone who has contributed to this legislation, in particular the Director of Public Prosecutions and members of the legal profession who have given their insight into this over many years.

Deputy Howlin stated that this should have been a miscellaneous provisions Bill. There are many issues that will be included in miscellaneous provisions Bills we have coming down the line this year. I think we should have a miscellaneous provisions Bill for civil law and criminal law every year but there is an urgency with the legislation before us. It has been more than five years in the making and the requests that have come in date back as far as 2012. For the reasons I have outlined, there is an urgency to this legislation and I did not want to see it delayed any further by having to wait for a miscellaneous provisions Bill.

Deputies raised a number of issues to which they asked me to respond. Deputy Ó Murchú referred to the establishment of a citizens' assembly. Unfortunately, I am not able to give a date for that. Most of the citizens' assemblies have been delayed due to Covid but we hope to get them running as quickly as possible. Proceeds of crime is something I am committed to pursuing. I think money confiscated from criminals should go back into our communities so I would be supportive of that.

Deputy Howlin asked about a post-Covid plan. There is a huge amount of work under way already through the Courts Service to try and work through the backlog that has arisen and the challenges that are being faced because of Covid-19 with the implementation and use of digital technologies. Additional funding has been provided. People are being imaginative and forward-thinking in trying to address these concerns now. Looking beyond that, there is a significant plan within the Courts Service to digitalise it and move it into the 21st century. We fully support that and will provide financial support and other assistance as matters progress.

The family court Bill is a massive piece of work aimed at redesigning and restructuring not just the physical infrastructure of our courts system but the process of family law itself. It is not just looking at the physical structure but the ancillary supports that are required. That is being progressed. The Peter Kelly report, which makes recommendations as to how we can improve the overall civil legal aid system, will help to improve and speed up the process and make it more easily accessible for everybody. There is a massive amount of work under way, including reviews of the number of judges we have and whether it is something we need to expand again to address the workload that exists.

We are looking at the review of juries, how members of juries are picked and how that process happens, particularly in light of Covid. It is something that hopefully will be of benefit not just while we are in the midst of Covid but after Covid, as well.

10 February 2021

Deputy Catherine Murphy touched on criminal legal aid. I have committed to reviewing the overall legal aid system this year. That is something that will progress and will involve not just looking at the amount of legal aid but the types of legal aid, those who can access it and when they can do so.

The Deputy also asked about the naming of child victims. Government time will be provided in the Seanad next Tuesday for Senator McDowell's Bill to be introduced. There will be Government amendments to the Bill as it goes through the relevant Stages. I hope it can be before the Dáil in a matter of weeks and implemented as soon as possible because I share the Deputy's and other people's concerns about what has happened since the ruling in the High Court and, subsequently, in the Court of Appeal.

Deputy O'Donoghue mentioned training. Garda training is constantly upgraded and changes over time. Of course, the training gardaí receive today is different to the training their predecessors received many years ago. I assure the Deputy that this matter is constantly under review.

I thank Deputies for their support for the Bill. I look forward to working with them in dealing with the different sections in more detail on Committee Stage.

Question put and agreed to.

Criminal Procedure Bill 2021: Referral to Select Committee

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): I move:

That the Bill be referred to the Select Committee on Justice pursuant to Standing Orders 95 and 181.

Question put and agreed to.

The Dáil adjourned at 5.56 p.m. until 10 a.m. on Thursday, 11 February 2021.