



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

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

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Déardaoin, 4 Márta 2021

Thursday, 4 March 2021

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

Paidir.

Prayer.

Land Development Agency Bill 2021: Second Stage (Resumed)

Question again proposed: “That the Bill be now read a Second Time.”

Deputy Thomas Pringle: To resume from where I left off in my contribution on the previous day, I would like to note some of the points made in a recent *Irish Examiner* article by Rory Hearne entitled “Homeownership will remain a pipe dream for Generation Rent”. His article articulated many of the points that many of us in the Opposition have put forward against this inadequate Bill. He states that the Land Development Agency, LDA, is being tasked to pursue two conflicting objectives - becoming a developer of public land while purporting to be increasing availability of affordable homes. It is clear that the Bill will make the LDA the Trojan Horse that the Government wants to siphon off any remaining public land.

Section 22 of the Bill provides for the disclosure of interests of board members, staff of the agency or subsidiary designated activity company staff. Will the Minister of State indicate if that will include a register of properties? Will the register be looking at whether anyone involved in the LDA is a landlord? Surely it will be difficult for him to fill a board and staffing complement without any of the Government’s landlord friends.

This is a class issue. The housing and homelessness crisis is a direct result of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael policies over decades. It was a case of profits for the few rather than homes for the many. That has been the one objective of Government policy, probably since the late 1970s or early 1980s, and every Government since that time has participated in it.

Part 8 of the Bill will provide for compulsory purchase orders. The compulsory purchase practice is out there already but local authorities will not use it, and they will not use it for housing purposes either. They should be available but the Minister of State is going to give them to the LDA, which will use them for its developer friends.

If the tone of this speech sounds fed up, it is because I am fed up. I am truly fed up with the inaction of this Government and previous Governments, their neoliberal policies, their com-

modification of housing and their financialisation of a human right. While Donegal may not be experiencing the worst of the housing crisis, it is still an issue in that county. People are living in overcrowded accommodation and waiting years for homes. We know that people in domestic violence refuges and in direct provision centres are not included in official homeless figures but these would add to Donegal's overall need for public and affordable housing. Our rents may be among the lowest in the country but so is our income. Disposable income is lowest in Donegal and highest in Dublin so comparatively rent can still be unaffordable for many.

There is a serious issue in Donegal now where people who were in the process of purchasing a home and may have received a loan offer are now off work and in receipt of a Covid payment. Their original loan offers will expire within three or six months and will require updated income details. That will cause many house sales to fall through. People who are purchasing their homes through the council incremental purchase scheme have offers valid for 12 months but because of the crisis that 12 months is not long enough. Credit unions, banks, etc. will not even look at their applications for a loan without current payslips and will not take into account details of income prior to lockdowns. That is fair enough. It has been outlined many times in the House that it is about ability to pay and therefore the banks have to act responsibly but the councils should act responsibly as well because it takes a very long time to get approval for the council purchase scheme. The approval should continue past the 12 months duration. That small step would ensure people can purchase a home.

This Bill should be about empowering local authorities and empowering communities. It should not be about empowering developers and the private sector but, unfortunately, that is what this Government leans towards.

Deputy Brian Leddin: I want to thank the Minister of State, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, for his efforts in the Department. His leadership in working together with the Ministers of State, Deputy Malcolm Noonan, who is present, and Deputy Peter Burke, is a good example of the cross-party co-operation, respect and hard work that is at the heart of this Government. The Department has an ambitious work programme for the next few years in the areas of marine planning and development for offshore wind, electoral reform, protecting our natural and built heritage and reforming local government. I wish the Minister and the Ministers of State well in that regard.

One of the most important tasks facing the Department is the provision of new housing. Scaling up our housing ambition is incredibly urgent and there are no simple solutions but looking at how we manage and develop public land is a very good start.

I believe my own city of Limerick shows both what a huge opportunity this Bill offers but also perhaps a cautionary tale from the past. In terms of the opportunity, unfortunately, Limerick has been the victim of bad planning over the past few decades. The city has expanded further and further out into its hinterland while the city centre has been hollowed out. I wish I could say that we have learned from our mistakes but unfortunately the local authority is planning further expansion at the periphery of the city.

Planning issues in Limerick are primarily an issue for those of us in Limerick but my point is that the bad planning practices have left a great deal of vacant land in the city centre, much of it publicly owned. The LDA will have a mandate to identify publicly owned land and there is much of it in Limerick, which is either fully vacant or inappropriately used, for example as surface car parks. The LDA has already identified the lands around Colbert Station for high-

density, high-quality, transport-oriented development and I look forward to it bringing its expertise to the rest of the city.

The cautionary tale involves an agency that in some ways was the predecessor of the LDA, namely, the National Building Agency. For some years the National Building Agency was the de facto housing department of Limerick Corporation, performing virtually all of the building of publicly owned houses in the city. Limerick was suffering from a housing crisis at the time, with people living in slums and tenements in the city. In our haste, unfortunately, we built hundreds of houses on the outskirts of the city, many of which had to be knocked down a few decades later. The reason was that we sought to build houses but did not realise we needed to build communities too. One critical aspect of a thriving community is that it has a social mix. We learned in Limerick that building only public housing on public land was a mistake. While I respect my Dublin colleagues who are deeply concerned about affordability in Dublin, and while the Minister has the power to revise the proportion of public housing upwards, which is probably appropriate for Dublin, the provision of a minimum of 50% affordable housing is an appropriate proportion for Limerick, where we want to create mixed communities close to the city centre to revitalise our city.

I welcome the Bill and the openness of the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, to improving it. This is necessary legislation for the improvement of our villages, towns and cities throughout the country.

Deputy Chris Andrews: This legislation allows for public land to be used for unaffordable private market housing. This is coupled with a failure to prioritise the delivery of public and genuinely affordable homes. The Bill is deeply undemocratic and once again takes decision-making away from councillors and the local community. I recently saw a photo from 1974 of a housing protest on City Quay. The community was protesting that not enough homes and too many office blocks were being built. Decades later the same protests are being held and the same issues are still there. Inner-city communities are still being forgotten about. Big vulture funds and high-tech companies are still being facilitated at the expense of long-time residents. We need genuinely affordable homes for the residents living in inner-city communities such as Ringsend, Pearse Street, Ross Road and Kevin Street. This Bill links affordability to the market rate. That would be great if the market rate was relatively normal, but in some areas, such as the ones I have just mentioned, the market rate means homes are only accessible to the highly paid and the very wealthy. There is a two-bedroom house in Ringsend advertised in *The Irish Times* property pages for €475,000. There is no way ordinary working families can afford that. What use will the Government's definition of "affordability" be to someone living in Rutland Grove or Harold's Cross? Any linking with the market means that anyone living in Dublin 2, Dublin 4, Dublin 6 or Dublin 8 will not be able to afford a home in the community in which they grew up. This Bill will not give residents in these communities access to affordable homes or public housing. Ordinary workers will continue to compete with Google and Facebook and so many other high-tech companies and big vulture funds. These tech companies have significant property portfolios, and this pushes up the cost of homes. What chance have ordinary workers in competing with these big multinationals? People now refer to Ringsend, the Docklands and Pearse Street as "Googletown". I can tell the House as a representative of these communities that it is not "Googletown"; it is our town. It is Ringsend and the maritime traditions. It is Pearse Street and the docker tradition. Google and all these big high-tech companies have cast a shadow on the local neighbouring communities and need to start throwing some light on them by investing in education, employment and housing. That will not happen overnight, but these

companies' engagement needs to be broader and deeper than it has been so far.

The sector happiest with the Bill will be the developers, who will get a hold of private land and will not need to work with representatives in an area they want to develop. The Bill does not mention public housing at a time when housing is increasingly unaffordable, when housing such as Glover's Court, which is not too far from here, is effectively uninhabitable and when homes across the city are swamped with rats and suffer from bad housing maintenance. We cannot afford to give away our land to private developers for private developments. Capital Dock, which is a stone's throw from Pearse Street, has 190 apartments, of which 90 are empty. This is happening in so many developments across the city, the reason being that the vulture funds that own them are keeping them empty so the rents are artificially high. It should also be noted that the Capital Dock development in the south inner city and many like it, particularly in Ringsend and the Pearse Street area, are not getting the 10% social housing requirements delivered in their communities. It is being allocated in other communities further out. Therefore, not only is housing unaffordable; the community is being pulled apart and moved out of the city because of the failure by Government to ensure that the 10% public housing requirement is delivered locally within the community.

This Bill will not serve the communities that elected me.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Many speakers in previous days and today have spoken about the Land Development Agency and the fact that it is not fit for purpose. We know its job is to manage State lands. We talk about what has happened to date, with 60% of properties produced through the agency being unaffordable. This means we are not delivering for the people for whom we need to deliver. I do not see any solutions in the Bill. I see constraints in respect of freedom of information requests, which shows there is an element of hiding what is going on, and that is frightening people. We had a debate yesterday on the shared equity scheme and I do not need to repeat what was said about that. We have commentators from the ESRI, groups of Fine Gael councillors and people within Departments who do not see that the scheme will do anything but supply a greater level of finance to developers. It will not deliver for our people. The history of schemes such as this is that they just up prices and leave people financially constrained and in serious difficulty later and that is just unacceptable.

My colleague, Deputy Andrews, has spoken about this as another scenario in which we are talking about the long-term erosion we have seen of the powers of local authorities in being able to deliver for the people who live within those local authority areas. This Bill is just a further compounding of that. The compulsory purchase facility in the Bill relates more to ransom strips. There has been comment here on compulsory purchase orders of particular properties. Louth County Council has been excellent at times in doing this, particularly finding properties that had fallen to rack and ruin and putting them back in play at knock-down prices, which is beneficial both to the people who get the houses and to the finances of Louth County Council and of the State. We need to see more of that happening. It is as simple as that. I have said it and Sinn Féin has explicitly said it: we do not see this whole suite of solutions being offered to us as delivering for the people. What people need - everybody says it, from the Opposition to the Government - is cost-rental houses, council houses and affordable mortgages. We want delivery of all that. No matter what the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, says, we have no difficulty giving normal people, regular people, the ability to buy and own their own houses and the opportunity not to be completely screwed over with the extortionate rents they have to pay in places such as Dundalk. The Government is just putting pressures on families that are already in incredible difficulty and was doing so long before this pandemic.

I will digress and request a little liberty in respect of the questions I wish to put to the Minister of State, Deputy Noonan. I ask for somebody from his office to return to me on these very important issues. Usually I would attempt to come back in for the ministerial sum-up but I have to be at another event. That is unavoidable, so I will give my apologies for that now. Louth County Council has a huge number of land banks that were bought at very expensive prices. I know that the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, has dealt with the council in this regard. The council bought these land banks under instruction from the Government back at the height of the boom. I know that Louth County Council has met with the Minister and applications will be going in for housing developments that could deal with some of this. However, the entire problem must be dealt with. I do not want to hear anything about the local property tax and an increase there because that would barely wash-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I ask the Deputy to direct his comments towards the subject of the Bill.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: That would barely deal with the cost that Louth County Council is facing.

The other issue is that we are dealing with a maintenance budget that has been absolutely hammered. It is the case that no transfers, or very few, where people need them from a medical perspective, are happening in the likes of Louth County Council. Nothing is happening in relation to proper maintenance works. That is not down to Louth County Council and its employees. It is just that the finances are not there. What Louth County Council has been promised, and what we need information on, is a retrofit scheme for local authorities, which would deal with some of the issues as basic as windows and doors. We also need information from the Department on urban and regional development funding for Bridge Street and St. Nicholas Quarter in Dundalk. As important is the work on the Drogheda Port access route that would impact greatly future housing development. Deputy Munster and others have spoken about it. It must happen as quickly as possible.

Deputy Patricia Ryan: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this Bill. The origins of the State agency are to be found in the national planning framework, NPF, published in February 2018. Buried in this 182-page document was a commitment to create a national development and regeneration agency. Its focus was to ensure the best use of public lands, including working with local authorities to drive the renewal of strategic areas. It was a noble cause, but what we have instead, is a vehicle for delivering public land into private hands.

In September 2018, to great fanfare, the then Taoiseach, Deputy Varadkar, launched the Land Development Agency, LDA. It promised to deliver 150,000 homes over 20 years. One single sentence in the seven-page brochure, distributed at the launch event, jumped out at me, that is, that just 10% of the homes built on public land were to be social housing, while only afford a 30% would be affordable. In the middle of the greatest social and affordable housing crisis in modern times, Fine Gael is proposing to sell 60% of LDA homes to open market prices. That is incredible.

This Bill proposes to establish the LDA as a designated activity company - a commercial operation owned by the Ministers for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, and Public Expenditure and Reform. This allows the LDA to be classed as being off the Government balance sheet. Its borrowings will not add to Government debt, and its spending will not be included in the Government's annual accounts. While initial capital of €1.25 million from the Strategic In-

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vestment Fund is promised, the overwhelming majority of the €45 billion that will be required to deliver 150,000 homes over 20 years will be privately financed. This Bill will result in the average delivery of a paltry 750 social houses a year, and a hardly groundbreaking 2,250 affordable homes annually. However, the financial model to be used in delivery of these homes will price them well out of reach of working class people. We are in a housing crisis. It is shocking.

I am also worried that the Bill is completely silent on the issue of climate change, which, given the scale of the carbon emissions involved in delivering 150,000 homes, is bizarre, to say the least. While in opposition, the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage was highly critical of the Government's proposal to create the LDA during Oireachtas housing committee hearings. He described it as a "Del Boy" model. It is yet another U-turn by Fianna Fáil. I appeal to the Green Party Deputies in particular to stop selling their souls for power and to the end this discharging of Government, which proposes privatisation as the solution to all our problems. We have seen how the commodification of housing, through the housing assistance payment, HAP, system has failed to put a dent in housing waiting lists. Every reply I receive on the issue of housing from Kildare County Council states that it is currently dealing with applications dating back to 2008 and 2009, and that it is up to everyone else to join the HAP lottery, where there are no properties within the county limits. It should be noted that Kildare County Council is one of the better local authorities. A 12-year wait for a house is not acceptable. In fact, it is an absolute disgrace.

Deputy Johnny Mythen: The purpose of this Bill is to establish the LDA under primary legislation, which, as we know, has been established as an interim entity since September 2018. The LDA is tasked with managing public lands and delivering social rental and affordable homes. However, on examination, as they say, the devil is in the detail.

There are several serious anomalies with the Bill before us today. I am also most concerned about the impact that this Bill will have on hardworking families on low and middle incomes, who are relying on and trusting us to use our public lands to provide good quality and affordable public housing, without high-risk debt. The references to social housing in this Bill are minimal, and there is a real fear that an empowered entity such as the LDA will not deliver for those most in need. This is not good enough.

There were 661 calls to the homeless services and support unit in Wexford in 2020, with well over 2,000 people who qualify for social housing support at the last count. Unfortunately, I do not think that this Bill will adequately address the needs of these people. There are many references to affordable housing in this legislation, but the definition is meaningless. Affordable housing is defined as any property rented or sold below the prevailing market price in the local area. This is a concern. I will use the example of buying a property in my own county of Wexford. According to the Central Statistics Office, at the end of 2020, the average house price in Gorey was €235,708. In 2019, that figure was €222,000. That amounts to an increase of more than €13,000 or 6.1% in a single year. This increase in the market value goes to prove the point that I have made many times. People are being priced out of Dublin and the commuter belt, and are coming to settle in the north of Wexford in particular. Not only does this have profound implications for transport, education, health and infrastructure, but it also results in the overheating of house prices. If the Government's big idea of affordability is only set by the market price, then as the prices rise, so too will the definition of affordability. This leaves behind hardworking families on lower and middle incomes, who have been continually failed by the Government, which has favoured the private sector over the public sector for years.

I am also concerned that local councillors will have their powers eroded and stripped away by this Bill. It is a mistake to ignore the wealth of local knowledge of councillors. It is also a step away from knowing what type of developments and infrastructure are needed locally, which is vitally important to rural Ireland. It also takes away the best public consultation mechanism that we have and involvement in land development. The ESRI stated that the best way to fund the purchase of land for social housing is through the local authorities, and local authorities are best placed to assess demand for affordable housing. Public land belongs to the public, and it should have the opportunity to take part in the democratic process of what happens to that land.

This Bill will cause major trouble down the line. It appears that the Freedom of Information Act and the powers of the Lobby Registration Act will not apply to legal LDA subsidiary entities, also known as designated activity companies. Therefore, I am deeply concerned about the negative impact that this Bill will have on the low and middle income families of Wexford and Ireland. This awful developer-ridden system must never be allowed to resurface again. For those reasons, I believe that this significant change must be made to this Bill before it progresses any further.

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Skills(Deputy Josepha Madigan): I welcome the opportunity to speak on this Bill. I want to thank the Minister for taking the time to address some of the points that have been made on, what I hope can be, game-changing legislation for the betterment of all in our society. Indeed, his predecessor, and my former ministerial colleague, Deputy Eoghan Murphy, provided many Cabinet updates on the Bill's composition throughout the last Government, so I am pleased to finally see it has reached publication stage.

I am sure that the Deputies will agree that the Bill opens up a new chapter in the Government's aim of providing affordable homes to current and future generations, as well as representing concrete action by delivering many much-needed housing units that will go a long way to tackling the current housing crisis in our State. Indeed, we are used to reading and hearing about units during these debates, when it is just as important to remember that for every unit that is provided, another family can look forward to owning their own home.

I have been a public representative for almost seven years at this stage. There has not been one week since my first election when I have not received an email from a constituent, reaching out in the hope that something can be done to provide them, their families, a loved one or, indeed, a relative with a house at the earliest possible opportunity. We all entered the political arena to create, shape and implement real and meaningful change for our constituents. This Bill gives us the opportunity to achieve just that.

Despite what many Members in this House may suggest, there is no quick-fix solution to solving the housing crisis that has unapologetically wreaked havoc on thousands of families over the past decade and beyond. Indeed, it is fair to say that no political party has got it right on housing in recent years, whether in power or in opposition. It may disappoint the Opposition to learn that sound bites have never and will never build houses. I will be happy to look back and reflect with pride that I was part of a Government that was proactive rather than opposing many housing developments. For members of some political parties in this House, that opposition seems to be part of their job description as public representatives.

The latest Sinn Féin-pedalled plan for Oscar Traynor Road, which has gained much atten-

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tion in recent weeks, could set the development of hundreds of houses back an extra five years. In direct contrast to the Government, Sinn Féin seems to be in no great rush to solve the crisis that is before us. Its members cannot supply housing to their constituents if they continue to block supply. Any reasonable person sees through this cruel tactic of Sinn Féin of prolonging the housing crisis through its actions while continually pushing blame on the Government. After all, what good is it to Sinn Féin if the Government actually tries to solve the problems that have been raised on doorsteps across the country over the past number of years? I hope, with the agreement of voters in Dublin Rathdown, to be a Member of this House for many years to come. I hope that the passing of this Bill will enable my two children to acquire their own home whenever the time comes for them to leave our family home. I will have played my part in government in making it that bit easier for future generations to own their own home, which is what any parent wants for his or her children.

One of the many projects that the Land Development Agency wishes to develop is the site of the Central Mental Hospital in Dundrum, which is in the heart of my constituency of Dublin Rathdown. The hospital is due to be relocated to a new complex in Portrane in north County Dublin, an area with which the Minister is very familiar. The relocation date is not yet known and will be determined by the Minister for Health, as provided for under the Central Mental Hospital (Relocation) Act 2020, which was passed by the Oireachtas and signed by Uachtarán na hÉireann in December 2020. The relocation will leave an entirely empty shell for the LDA to work with as it plans for an ambitious housing development that could provide up to 1,300 units.

As I pointed out to the Minister in recent correspondence with him, the LDA has just concluded the latest stage of its Dundrum Central public engagement process within the community. Before Christmas, local residents who live within a 1 km radius of the site were invited to participate in a survey on the aims of the development, which sought information on how they wish to engage with the LDA. I welcome the fact that 80% of survey respondents believe the project “presents an opportunity for this currently inaccessible site to positively contribute to the wider community”. I agree with that view. I also acknowledge the efforts of the LDA, while faced with the many difficulties that the Covid crisis has presented to everyone, to facilitate two recent public webinars and a virtual consultation room on the project.

I have received hundreds of emails about this proposed development and I would honestly struggle to count on one hand the number of correspondents who oppose the idea of developing the site. However, I ask the Minister to note the trend that is emerging from all the residents associations, including those in Annville Park, the Dundrum Road, Highfield-Westbrook, Frankfort Park, Mulvey Park, Taney, Clonskeagh, Roebuck and Rosemount, that there are sky-high levels of disappointment among their members with the lack of meaningful engagement they have had to date with the LDA. The existing community has no intention of blocking this ambitious new housing development. All residents are asking for is the opportunity to work collaboratively with the LDA to ensure that the outcome of the proposed development is a safe and sensible integrated community that benefits both existing and new communities. I am sure the Minister will agree that this is a very fair and reasonable request.

I welcome the provision in section 73 of the Bill for housing developments to include a 50% baseline requirement for affordable housing units. This is something on which the LDA has not been fully clear in respect of the Dundrum Central project. I hope that further clarity can be provided in its master plan for the development, which I understand will be published early in the second quarter of this year.

I want to raise the provisions in section 56 relating to local authority lands. I hope the Minister, as a former councillor like me, will be able to provide some clarity in this regard. I am sure he can understand why there is concern from many elected county councillors in regard to this section. I have received some queries about it from councillors in my own party. Its inclusion presupposes that the LDA is better placed than a local authority to determine the best use of land owned by that authority. It also presupposes that councils, in the current environment, will continue to be opposed to the disposal of lands to the LDA. In fact, as I outlined, an overwhelming majority of public representatives, residents and councillors in the immediate vicinity of the Dundrum Central project are in favour of developing the site. Perhaps the Minister can examine whether this provision is entirely necessary.

I have also been informed of concerns regarding section 49(1)(a), which seems to interfere significantly with how democratically elected councillors can represent their area and appears to legally bind them to co-operate with the agency. If the Minister is to introduce these provisions, justification or clarity, at the very least, must be afforded to the 949 individuals in whom the Irish electorate place their trust to represent them in their respective localities.

On a separate matter, I find it incredible that the word “community” is used only once in a Bill that aims to enable the sustainable development of new and regenerated communities that are well-served by schools, public transport and public amenities. I am a strong believer in ensuring that local infrastructure is developed and improved as much as it can be alongside large-scale housing projects. This comes back to my earlier point of ensuring the LDA engages with local residents, no matter what the project is, in order that every development that comes through under the provisions of this Bill works for as many people as possible. I would be grateful if the Minister could explore suitable options to ensure that this becomes a reality rather than a box-ticking exercise, which I hope can be avoided. I am sure he will agree that the LDA cannot be a champion of community if it does not engage with existing communities.

I respectfully ask the Minister to ensure that his officials bring my correspondence and that of the local residents associations to his attention. A number of letters were issued to his office last week. I hope he will take on board the points that have been raised and address them through the progression of this legislation, which is long overdue. I look forward to seeing the development of the Central Mental Hospital in the near future. It is an exciting opportunity for the local area and I know many residents share the same eagerness to ensure their future neighbours can be part of a wider community that works for all who live in the Dundrum area.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: The problems with the Land Development Agency have been clear for some time. The main problem is that this Government, like the last Government, seems to think that the best route to deliver public housing is to bypass those institutions that are best at delivering it. For far too long, local authorities have been starved of funding to build social housing or to get it built but they have also been constricted in the development of a proper affordable rental scheme or affordable purchase scheme. All three types of housing will not by themselves address the housing problems but, if approached properly, they will put a huge dent in the problems we have been plagued with because of Government inaction or wrong action in recent years.

There are huge housing waiting lists for people who want and are entitled to social housing in this State. That problem has not been properly addressed despite the fact that the State owns huge tracts of land throughout the jurisdiction. My constituency, Dublin South-Central, is an example of where the State has both failed and delivered well. People will know Crumlin,

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Drimnagh and Bluebell, which mainly have social housing that was built in the 1930s, 1940s, 1950s and afterwards. The area has the greatest concentration of social housing in Ireland. In the south-west inner city, particularly Dublin 8, there are major complexes of social housing in the form of flats. I will return to this in a while. The model showed how social housing can work. It also showed how affordable housing can work because there were schemes in the area run by local authorities, but also by co-operative movements, to build houses at an affordable rate. Many of them were for people who could not get onto the social housing list or were not entitled to be on it because of the income threshold. Their incomes were over the threshold to make them eligible for social housing but they could not afford a home because of the mortgages required at the time. That is very true again in this generation. Large numbers of people have incomes above the social housing threshold. They are workers on low to medium incomes but they could never afford a home in this city. They would have to move quite far away from the city to afford a home that they could call their own. They could not afford the rent either because the rent in this city is now at a level equivalent to mortgage repayments for a home whose purchase price is from €400,000 to €500,000. A whole cohort of society is being squeezed out because the State has never taken on board fully its needs, including its need for affordable housing.

The people who can deliver the housing are those who have delivered housing for us over the years, namely the local authorities. However, the local authorities have been hamstrung by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage year after year and by Governments that have not funded their building programmes or attempts to move towards the building of affordable homes at the same time as social housing. Dublin City Council has major tracts of land. It has land banks, although not on the same scale as the State. There are State lands in my constituency that are large enough for tens of thousands of homes. Some of this land is already earmarked for development by the local authority. It has put forward plans that involve affordable housing, affordable rental and social housing but we still have not seen the State moving.

People will be aware of the debacle of St. Michael's Estate. It was levelled, and rightly so, but it was supposed to have been rebuilt and regenerated. We are still waiting. There is still no sign of the full development of the affordable rental and social housing model that is to be used in the estate. The same is true of other tracts of land, such as that covered by the Cherry Orchard regeneration scheme, which was signed off in a local area plan not so long ago. Other tracts of land include the CIÉ works land, which was earmarked for a whole new town not so long ago, just before the collapse. That has not been resurrected. It is a huge tract of land that could very easily be used to deliver on the plans we are talking about. Why are we talking about setting up an agency with 50 or 60 staff rather than using existing staff in the local authorities and building up once again the capacity of local authorities to get developers on site and building as quickly as possible?

Another site very near to my door is in Bluebell. I am involved in a community council there. We have worked with Dublin City Council and also with Luas recently to determine how to use lands more effectively in the Bluebell area for social and affordable housing. I am referring to the use of State land that runs along the canal in the area to the betterment of the small community, which is going to be surrounded by private developments that will tower over it. We were told nearly from day one that if we do not use the LDA model, what we propose will not happen. The implication is that if the local community is not willing to come on board, its area will go back down the ladder of areas that the city council and Department are going to consider. We are being held to ransom in that area. In other areas, the same argument is being

put forward.

The same is true of Dolphin House, for example. I am on the Dolphin House regeneration board, and I have been for many years. I have worked with colleagues from various parties and agencies on that but all of a sudden we are being told that we cannot go ahead with the continued regeneration of Dolphin House, some of which has been done spectacularly. What has happened to date is absolutely brilliant but all of a sudden the goalposts are shifting. For instance, we are now being told that there is no funding for a community centre or parkland as part of the development and that the only way to proceed is to use the private model. We would have to build according to a private, for-purchase model, not a model based on affordability. It would be private, with the rest of the scheme being affordable and social. I refer to private development on public land to pay for some of the development, particularly the community aspect.

The same is true of other estates and complexes that are being earmarked for redevelopment to bring them into the 21st century and to ensure people are living in fit accommodation. Each time a complex or the council raises the issue with the Department, it is told it is going to have to depend on the LDA as it is going to take charge. That will make everything dearer and ensure some of the affordable purchase schemes will be dearer because the agency will have to recoup its costs. There are major flaws associated with using the agency model rather than continuing with the local authority and addressing the pitfalls and obstacles that exist.

We are being told day in, day out that funding is not a problem internationally in that if governments seek bonds or loans to fund social projects, they are available, and that they can even get some of the funding at a rate of 0%. I appeal to the Minister not to go down the road of the LDA but to use instead the Department, working properly with local authorities, to ensure the delivery of the housing that is required for a new society. The objective should be to regenerate areas that already have problematic housing and to ensure the problems of the cohort who are being squeezed out because their income is above the threshold and who cannot afford a mortgage or to rent are addressed by ensuring the availability of affordable homes for rental and purchase. In every city anywhere in Europe there are apartments for rent are affordable in the main, though there are examples of huge rents. That is not the case in Ireland. A person cannot get a forty-year lease in Ireland, in the main. It is a year lease here or there. We still have major problems with the approach of landlordism in Ireland and the private rental market.

The Land Development Agency will not address this and will add to the hikes in private rental and private purchase prices. It is not aimed at reducing the cost of rental to working families, those who need to be looked after and those who cannot afford to compete with the millionaires in our society or with the vulture funds and pension funds which are buying up many if not all of the houses on the market. There are whole areas in my constituency where the complaint is that young families who could normally afford to purchase a two-storey, two-bedroom house are competing not only against the State, which is trying to build up its social housing stock, but also against vulture and pension funds, which seem to think these are happy days and are going into the rental market because they can rent these properties on the housing assistance payment, HAP, at the high rate, tying in the local council for ten years to pay the rent so the State will subsidise private landlordism in this State continuously. That is what is happening.

The funding being directed towards private landlords, mainly of late through HAP and partly through the rent allowance, is scandalous and needs to stop. We need to make sure funding from the State subsidises affordable rental and purchases and does not line the pockets of institutions. These are foreign institutions, in many cases, including foreign banking institu-

tions whose concept is to undermine our economy in many ways. It is driving up the price and making us compete with them, and there is no winner in this.

The only way to ensure we start to gain control over our public housing policy and public housing in general, by which I mean social and affordable housing, is by directing all of the State's money in that way rather than subsidising private entities. The Land Development Agency is one more step on that path. Why do we need to set up another agency? Not long ago, the State had a policy of getting rid of agencies and reducing the number of them. Rather than the Department taking responsibility for what is under its remit, it is setting up agencies at one remove so it is not directly responsible for policy or delivery. That is not just in this Department but others as well. Irish Water was set up to undermine local authorities, but it is also one step removed from the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications. The State should be responsible for its own policies and delivery of same rather than setting up a one-step removed agency with staff, a CEO and the huge wages some at the top will be getting. The State should ensure the existing institutions and the staff in them implement the policy of delivering social and affordable housing.

I am not naive enough to expect Dublin City Council or any council will set up a building section within it which will have the wherewithal to build huge estates again. I am not even looking at this stage for the councils to go back to the way they should be doing it of having proper maintenance crews. Regrettably, over the years, in particular since the Fianna Fáil-Progressive Democrats Government, which cut funding and continually cut the number of people employed by the public sector, there has been a reduction in the number of maintenance staff in every council area and it seems to be policy to reduce the numbers employed. I am not naive enough to think we will go back to the way of having several hundred workers employed by Dublin City Council to build houses or apartment blocks. I am, at this stage, happy enough that councils would be the developers of any State lands within their area to deliver social and affordable housing. They can do that by getting building companies to tender for those works.

We have seen the debacle in terms of State tendering and procurement. That is an area where, perhaps, instead of setting of a land development agency, the State should concentrate on how it can deliver best practice and value for money in tendering. It is getting walked all over day-in, day-out by those putting in bids for different programmes and schemes offered to the private sector. The private sector knows how to win them over and hold them over a barrel. The children's hospital is one example of how the State got procurement wrong. There are good examples, such as the delivery of apartments in Dolphin House and the new schemes there. The contractor there worked with the community to ensure there were apprenticeships and other work available for local residents on that scheme. The end cost is still quite high in terms of delivery of the unit, and much work needs to be done to ensure the price the local authorities deliver houses on can be further reduced. However, it is substantially less than what private developers are indicating. Up to €50,000 and €60,000 per unit is the difference. The Land Development Agency thus far does not indicate that it will be able to deliver in terms of cost.

There are major problems with the Land Development Agency. It is the wrong way to go and the Bill before us has major shortcomings. It has not fully addressed the concerns raised when Fine Gael originally proposed this solution, at which time Fianna Fáil were very critical. Even Fianna Fáil's criticism and proposals have not been taken on board or properly reflected in this Bill. We do not need to go back to the drawing board because the solution is already there. It is a matter of properly funding local authorities to deliver the housing required in those areas,

not just in Dublin but throughout the country.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: I am due to speak with a colleague but I think we are running a little ahead of time so I will use as much of the time as I can. The Land Development Agency Bill and its partner Bill, the affordable housing Bill, are two of the most important pieces of legislation that will come before this Dáil.

11 o'clock

I say that because they are the instruments which will allow the Government to deliver affordable housing to a society and an economy that has been starved of it for the best part of a decade. Not being able to afford or access a home has devastating consequences for society and crippling consequences for the economy. Getting housing right is crucial, therefore.

Within Fianna Fáil, we know that housing is important. We have a long track record of focusing on housing, delivering solutions and building homes. The Land Development Agency Bill was widely discussed by Fianna Fáil in advance of entering Government. We made criticisms of it and the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, who is now in office, outlined much of his concerns. One of the reasons Fianna Fáil sought the housing portfolio in this Government is so we could make the maximum possible impact on delivery of housing.

I will comment on the two Bills because they are very much partner Bills. Based in the LDA, they provide a suite of measures and a policy platform which will allow the State to deliver public housing on public land using an affordable housing and affordable rental scheme. That starts with the LDA, which will take public land owned by agencies such as the Defence Forces and the HSE and place on them a permanent affordability charge. I say "permanent" because, regardless of who owns that land into the future, the responsibility to deliver affordable housing will exist. It is possibly the largest devaluation of the cost of land in the history of the State. It will permanently reduce the cost of land owned by the State and put in place a permanent responsibility to deliver affordable housing. That is radical. In conjunction with the tools provided in the affordable housing Bill, both local authorities and the LDA have a really big challenge ahead. They now need to grab these tools and put proposals before councillors and communities which will deliver solutions to the housing crisis we have talked about for the best part of a decade.

Much of the LDA is framed in the context of state aid rules from European Union. The reason for that is because, in providing affordable housing, we are competing with other bodies or private entities which provide housing in the housing market. It is, therefore, a difficult job to negotiate the state aid rules. I believe the device used in the LDA, however, which effectively takes the commercial value of the land and applies an affordable housing charge on it, is an innovative way of ensuring that affordability is permanently attached to the land going forward. It is radical and important. The tools in the affordable housing Bill will ensure that what is built on the LDA lands will be affordable, State-led schemes.

The affordable rental scheme is particularly important in the affordable housing Bill. I want to see that cost rental model on much of the LDA lands. It is a new model that is unproven in the Irish market. I believe, however, it will provide security of tenure and affordable rental to a whole generation of people who want to secure that. This Bill provides land on which to develop that model of housing. This Bill also provides land on which we can once again build council-led affordable housing. We have seen done in the past and it will allow us to do that

again. It will also allow us land to build social housing.

It is, therefore, a radical Bill and there are important measures in it. Within Fianna Fáil, however, and I have said before why it is important to us, there has been huge scrutiny of the Minister and of this Bill, because we want to get this right. We want to make sure there is no lack of ambition and that it is not just radical, but very radical.

We have, therefore, discussed a number of measures with the Minister. I thank him for his engagement with the Fianna Fáil Parliamentary Party and those backbenchers with whom he has discussed matters. Let me put on the record, therefore, a number of areas where I would like to see the Bill go forward. I believe there is opportunity on Committee Stage where, perhaps, we might be able to do that. I say it not to undermine the Bill but to seek to improve it.

I believe the median market price is language that defines affordability in this Bill. The details of the schemes will actually be set by ministerial regulation. I would, however, like to see that language around median market price reflect affordability more as a relationship with income rather than market value. I do not see how regulations will do that. It will be difficult over time to do it. It will be far better to base it on income limits and so on rather than to be constantly pegging to market value. I appreciate it may be influenced by the restrictions around state aid. My preference, however, is that we should be defining affordability around income rather than market value.

The language in the Bill around the commercial value of the land again goes back to the restrictions on state aid. In reality, the commercial value, which is applied on the initial valuation, followed by the permanent affordability charge, will effectively render much of the land value as nominal. Therefore, instead of talking about commercial value in the text of the legislation, we should talk about the affordable land value. That is the real value that will be paid and built into the cost model and the real value that will impact the final price that is paid on these lands. As I said, that is an innovative way of complying with state aid rules. We should, however, reflect the language in the Bill and talk about affordable land value.

The third area in which I believe the Bill could go further is the percentage of that affordability charge that is applied by the Minister. The Minister said in this House that the affordability charge in Dublin is likely to be 90%, with a 10% social housing obligation, which would bring it up to 100% affordability on the sites in the region. It effectively renders the land in Dublin that will fall under this Bill at a nominal land value. That is very welcome because it will ensure affordability in Dublin.

The percentage in the Bill needs to be defined further, however. I want that target to be as close to that 90% as possible. Any exceptions should actually be down from that 90% rather than up to 90%. There will be places in the country where the value or the affordability may be changed. I accept we may look at different ways of delivering housing in different communities with different markets. They should be the exception, however, rather than those sites in large cities where we need maximum affordability. I would like to see the percentage target in the Bill defined higher and for it to be the standard, with exceptions coming down rather than the other way around.

The final area I will come to is section 183. The Minister of State has heard me talk about the merits of this Bill and the affordable housing Bill. It is significant in terms of housing and a real lean into public housing and the State providing housing rather than a market-driven ap-

proach. Therefore, at the end of the Bill, we come along with what is effectively a stick from the Custom House which says that if councillors do not develop land, it will be taken from them. At least, that is what the narrative says. And yet, when one talks to the LDA, it says it has more than enough lands under the other Government agencies, which it will be responsible for developing without having to go near any local authority lands. Even in briefings with their law agents over recent weeks, local authority members in different councils do not believe there will be significant land grabs.

Why is that power in the Bill? I believe, in part, it results from a perception among officials in the Custom House that those responsible for delaying the delivery of housing are local authority councillors.

As one of those councillors who voted against schemes when they came before me, I want to explain why I did so. I did so because there were no affordable housing schemes and no cost rental schemes. I did so because the only option was to build large scale social housing without fixed-income or mixed-tenure units. I represented Ballymun for more than 15 years and Finglas for nearly the same time. I knew those strategies did not work. I was not going to propose voting for a repeat of them.

Local authority councillors are now being given the power under the affordable housing Bill to have cost rental, affordable council housing and social housing. The budgets will be there in the years to come. Once this legislation is bedded down, the Government has committed that the budgets will be there. I am not convinced that the section 183 amendment is necessary. My concern is that at official level, there is not the ambition to deliver housing. It is not at the councillor's level.

Sometimes there can be NIMBYism in Irish politics. Sometimes councillors can hide behind arguments in order to vote against housing because there are other people in their community who do not want that housing. We have to make sure that this cannot happen because we have to be ambitious. Removing the power from councillors goes too far. I would like to see tests put in place that where councillors want and have the ambition to develop lands, they can instruct the manager to use the tools in the affordable housing Bill and the lands will be developed by that local authority. The LDA has stated that it does not want the land and that it has enough to do. Councillors may want to build on this land and officials tell us that they too want to build on this land. That is where the focus should be. That is where we should put our efforts. An academic argument about possibly removing land from councillors distracts from the good work in this Bill.

The powers defined in the Local Government Act, sections 139 and 140, allow councillors to instruct the local authority manager. If councillors instruct the manager to develop land in their ownership for housing along the lines of the affordable housing Bill, then lands should never end up in the hands of the LDA without the approval of councillors. I would like to see amendments in that area.

I appreciate there needs to be an incentive to stop NIMBYism and councillors hiding behind it. My experience of local government is that local authority members are far more responsible than that. In many cases, they have the same ambition the Minister has to deliver housing. The officials, with whom they need to partner, can often be the restriction. I say that not as a criticism of them because the tools and the budgets just were not there previously. They are in place now, as well as the legislation. We have the affordable housing Bill with all the tools

contained in it. We will have the LDA which will unlock plans and apply a permanent affordability charge. All of the mechanisms are on the table.

Now we come to delivery. Now we want to see the targets. Now we want to make sure that the agencies empowered by this legislation deliver for people. That will take time and may not happen in the next year or two. Will it happen in advance of the end of the lifetime of the Government? We will be judged by this. I do not believe we need to put short-term politics ahead of the right decisions, however. These are the right decisions. These are investments in public housing. The policies to provide public housing are too important. We must put them in place in this legislation, fund them in the budgets to come and make sure local authorities and the LDA deliver what we want. We must make sure a whole new generation of Irish people have access to housing in a way that they have not had over the past ten years.

Deputy Richard Bruton: I welcome the Land Development Agency Bill.

There is a great deal of cynical opposition to this Bill in the House, however. Sinn Féin's housing policy offers simplistic solutions. When those solutions do not emerge, it blames conspiracies or looks for people to blame, whether it be bankers or developers or whoever. The reality is that Sinn Féin's policy involves blocking rezoning, which is needed for supply. It involves blocking mixed developments, which the Dublin City Council put forward, for example, in my constituency in Santry, as well as freezing rents, which blocks supply in the rental market. It involves opposing shared equity, a scheme before the House to allow people on low incomes who are locked out of the housing market to aspire to home ownership. Sinn Féin even objects to developments in its own backyard.

That is a toxic mix. Sinn Féin attempts to squeeze supply, not increase it. It locks people on low to modest incomes out of home ownership and the aspiration to home ownership. It involves a return to a policy of segregated housing. In my constituency, as indeed in Deputy McAuliffe's, we have seen the consequences of purely segregated housing not delivering the sort of opportunities for families that we want to see. We have seen too much attitude to the housing issue from the left-wing parties stuck in a narrow lens of ideological thinking. As Einstein said, we will not solve problems by using the same thinking that got us into them. We need radical thinking.

The Government has been developing for some years exactly that radical thinking we need. For too long, we have relied exclusively on private developers to shape the sort of development we want. We have an aspiration now that by 2040 we will see a dramatically different type of development. We will see the growth of compact cities. The new cities will grow at 50% over the coming years, twice the speed of the growth in Dublin. That represents a massive shift in the way in which we develop. We want to see compact development that will meet our challenges with the climate crisis we all face. That needs State leadership. The LDA is the powerful tool that can deliver that State leadership. It is important that we welcome it. It can take on the hoarding of land. It can take on the exclusive remit of private developers who want to move to greenfield development and not to build in a sustainable fashion.

Now we have the vehicle that can change that and can assemble sites, particularly in those cities we need developed, to a master plan that fulfils the ambitions and the needs of society. It is important we give our endorsement and support to that area. It is interesting to see that on the LDA website, it has already identified 60,000 folios of publicly owned land which have the potential to be assessed for housing use. That has a significant potential to impact on the avail-

ability of land for development which has been a source of considerable strain and dysfunction over many years.

We also need to recognise that other changes must occur. We need to see rezoning, particularly within the M50 in Dublin and within developed areas where some lands have been assigned to uses that are no longer fit for purpose. Equally, as we introduce such rezoning, it is vital that it is done with new responsibilities on those who aspire to develop. It is important that in rezoning we introduce new powers, as well as the obligation to deliver mixed housing and ensuring the development of infrastructures at the same time as housing. All of these should be key elements when rezoning comes up to be considered.

Traditionally, we have allowed rezoning to be like a windfall lottery where people come up winning and get an outcome they pocket. That cannot be the way we proceed in the future. What is really important in the housing market is that we seek to align what the private sector and the public sector do to both serve the public interest. That has been a problem that has eluded us because the State's instruments up to this have not been sufficiently discerning to deliver that goal. Here we have the start of a shift that can give the State the tools it needs to ensure that what private developers are doing - they will want a margin for whatever they do - is aligned to the public interest. By having the control of the land agency, by having the master planning and by having new conditionality around planning and rezoning, we can deliver that.

We also need some new thinking about compact living. From the report of experts in the field, the chartered surveyors, we have seen how the cost of compact development in high-rise accommodation on brownfield sites is becoming prohibitively expensive. Effectively, we are asking first-time buyers to carry the capital cost of changes that will bring significant social benefits to the country over the years ahead as we live in a more sustainable way. We are asking those first-time buyers entering the housing market to shoulder that entire cost. In the case of higher rise in the city areas, that is simply putting living in those areas out of the reach of those people. That is not a sustainable policy. If we want, as we need, to see more compact development and higher density development, particularly on brownfield sites, we need to develop the tools to ensure that can be done in a way that is affordable. In the evolution of the LDA, the shared equity scheme and the serviced sites initiative, we are seeing the tools that will start to see us deliver that affordability in a more effective way.

The new relationship that the Bill seeks to forge between the LDA, which will have access to the entire portfolio of public lands, and the local authorities, which traditionally have not been able to carry land banks because of the severe financial constraints under which they operate, opens up the possibility of shaping our development with more democratic input for the future. However, it is crucial that the LDA meets its potential. In the past week alone, we have read in the newspapers from senior officials in Dublin City Council, one of the foremost agencies for delivering housing, how dysfunctional the public procurement process has become and how it is preventing effective procurement by the city of housing at an affordable price. That is unacceptable. Indeed, with some knowledge of public procurement in the area of delivering green procurement, I know that the system of public procurement is simply not equipped to meet public objectives and needs to be overhauled. That cry from the heart from Dublin City Council should be heard loud and clear in the Custom House and indeed beyond, in the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform and other Departments which shape public procurement policy. We need more flexible tools of public procurement so that we can deliver to the public interest which is rapidly changing. Many of the instruments used in public procurement have not kept pace with the changing expectations of public policy.

4 March 2021

We also read this week that Ernst & Young, having done a report on the capacity of public bodies to deliver the sort of projects that we need to see as part of the national development plan over the next decade, believes that many of those agencies do not have the capacity to deliver the scale of projects. That is a wake-up call that we have to develop that capability if we want to meet our national ambitions. If there is difficulty in State agencies and public bodies in delivering individual projects, there are far greater challenges ahead if we are to see the shift in the way our country develops in terms of regional balance. The cities that have been earmarked to grow by 50% will not organically grow by that rate. One will need to see very effective public planning and the execution of infrastructures and the assembly of plots of land for development in a compact and sustained way. One will need to see new expertise in those areas. It is a wake-up call for those who want to shape the national development plan, NDP, which is now under review. We need to look at the projects and where they stand in the pecking order but, even more importantly, we need to review our capacity to deliver those in a way that will meet the public interest, on time and on budget.

As we scrutinise the elements of the LDA, it is important that we ensure that its powers, budgets and capacities are adequate. I would like to hear how the figure of €2.5 billion has been decided by the Government as being half by way of equity from the Ireland Strategic Investment Fund, ISIF, and the remainder in borrowing capacity. What will that allow in terms of advance planning and the building of land banks for the future in five cities in which we need to see that development occur in a sustainable way? Will that be adequate or will we find that the LDA, like the local authorities, will struggle to build adequate land banks to ensure it can shape development in a timely way? Its capacity to build a land bank is not outlined in the Bill in any shape or form, and it is important that we know it has the capacity to build those land banks because development in these cities will not happen overnight. It will be a question of a decade or more of development and we will have to be anticipating that by building land banks to meet that need.

The LDA has adopted the National Asset Management Agency, NAMA, approach to compulsory purchase order. Normally, it should not have to rely upon compulsory purchase orders but as we go, we need to be satisfied that the NAMA powers that received state aid approval from Europe in respect of the acquisition of lands are fit for purpose as we develop the new mandate of the LDA, which is quite separate from the mandate that NAMA has had, and we need to ensure those powers and capabilities are fit for purpose.

There has been controversy about section 183. This is where the local authority, if it has decided that it will not use its land for housing, has to give the option to the LDA and does not have to get approval from local councillors. In reality, that will rarely, if ever, arise. I cannot imagine it would arise in Dublin City Council where it owns land that had been designated for housing but it decides that there are other purposes that would be better fulfilled. It will not be a frequent occurrence but if the local authority is selling its land in this way, the LDA is probably a good place for it to land. I am open to listen to both sides of the argument. I am sure the Minister has a reason for this and we ought to listen to those arguments.

The entire focus of the Government's strategy is to deliver affordability and supply to people who have been locked out. The sad fact is that anyone earning over €42,000, which is the limit for social housing, and right up to the limit of the Rebuilding Ireland home loan of €75,000, has been locked out. In reality, families in those income brackets can borrow probably no more than €200,000 for a home. Without the shared equity scheme, we would not be able to give them access to home purchase. The shared equity scheme is a very important element in

the jigsaw because, as we drive supply from the LDA, as we introduce new Part V obligations on private developers to provide affordable homes and as we drive the site service fund, we also need an instrument that ensures people on the lower ranges of income can aspire to homeownership. The tragedy at present is that many ordinary workers, be they in manufacturing or construction, teaching, gardaí or nurses, are not able to purchase and this scheme is a really important scheme.

I also would point out that there has been massive overexaggeration of the potential that this scheme might have to fuel additional demand that would promote price rises. The reality is that these families are now in the rental market and are often paying €20,000 or more for their home. What one is doing here is not creating new demand but moving that demand from the rental market to the house purchase market where they will be able to purchase under these schemes for probably €5,000 less. It is a win-win situation. One is unlocking the door for these families, allowing them to purchase at a lower price, and releasing some supply in the rental market which is very constrained.

It is also important to say that supply is responsive. The ESRI, in an extraordinary piece, decided that it would measure the impact of this scheme on demand, assuming that supply would not change. Of course, if one assumes that the supply will not change the only thing that can happen is for prices to go up. The reality is that supply does respond. In my area, in particular, I can see that there is a massive undersupply of starter homes. Developers are preferring to build more expensive homes for the trading-up market. We need to see a shift in that mix so that we see more starter homes being built which gives access to people who are on lower income.

This is a very targeted scheme unlike mortgage relief or the rent relief that is favoured by Sinn Féin. Those are broad-based reliefs which would push up price. This is very targeted at a particular segment of the market which is now locked out.

I commend the Minister on the work he is undertaking. We must have ambition in this area and I would hate to see the potential of these instruments constrained by a very conservative approach to building on land banks and shaping master plans for the future. It is really important that the Minister retains his ambition and ensures that the powers are in this Bill to realise it. I thank the House for the time to speak.

Acting Chairman (Deputy John Lahart): I thank the Deputy and call the next speaker on the Government side, Deputy Hourigan, who is sharing with Deputy Cathal Crowe. The final speaker before Leaders' Questions will be Deputy Bríd Smith.

Deputy Neasa Hourigan: Gabhaim buíochas leis an gCathaoirleach Gníomhach. The Green Party agrees with the principle of active land management, of utilising under-used sites and identifying private lands that could be of benefit to projects for renewal of particular areas or consolidation of public lands with off-cut lands or lands of that type.

The core principle of the Land Development Agency, LDA, should be to operate to support local authorities in providing housing and managing land and be based on the following principles. Public and affordable construction of public homes on State land to be the norm so that all procurement is on an affordable basis and is done directly by the public body, either the approved housing body, AHB, or the local authority without out-sourcing to private developers. All housing constructed on State land should be sustainable, climate resilient and based on the principles of community wealth building with social clauses included. The establishment

of the LDA should be used to reverse the bonfire of building regulations and design standards we have witnessed since 2015, including the failed build-to-rent typology that has trapped so many housing assistance payment, HAP, tenants in substandard living. We should see this as an opportunity to require the implementation of the Safe as Houses report, including building control reform and the third party certification of building standards. We should include in the legislation a provision that the State retains control in the long term of any and all lands procured with State funding. The Land Development Agency must never find itself in a position as a permanent or temporary landlord to any tenant.

The LDA should never be in the business of facilitating projects and removing risk in projects for private developers and private equity investors, which is not how public money or public effort should be employed. The LDA should not be entitled to sub-lease or transfer public lands other than in accordance with social housing, affordable purchase and cost-rental models that are mutually agreed. This Bill should provide for leasing from public bodies rather than land transfers, with a power to enter into development agreements with local authorities and State bodies that would be subject to minimum terms that would be scheduled in the Bill.

For this purpose, the primary housing models should be: social housing, that is, housing owned and provided by a local authority or AHBs for which the tenant pays a differential rent in accordance with the Housing Acts, on State lands and provided on the basis of cost plus a maximum of 5% developer profits; and affordable purchase housing which is defined as being provided on public lands with the benefit of a waiver of development levies and serviced site funding and is acquired by the buyer by a long-term lease with controls included for the community trust or the AHB or similar body that retains ownership of the land, financed and built on the basis of costs plus a maximum of 5% developer profits and subject to a right of first refusal to the local authority or AHB landlord of the home, with a clawback to repay the land value and State subsidy

I am outlining a very basic principle here that is absolutely vital to the operation of any body that would seek to undertake the work that is outlined in the LDA Bill and that is that there is no such thing as affordable housing and community affordable housing without first setting out a model for affordable construction and without agreeing or setting out some sort of a ceiling on developer profits. As instigated in other European countries, this Bill would become a gift to the profit margins of private landowners.

I would like to echo Deputy McAuliffe's previous sentiment in that there is much to like in this Bill and I hope that some of these issues can be addressed on Committee Stage.

As a member of the Committee of Public Accounts, I spend a good portion of my week reviewing the audited accounts of taxpayer-funded entities that have fallen short of standards of fiscal performance and-or governance. It is in that context I will say a brief word about the fact that the LDA is already fully operational under an establishment order but with very little oversight as to its proceedings, hiring policies or how it is operating right now. Even before this Bill proceeds through the Dail, the LDA can enter into contracts, acquire lands and negotiate land transfer with Departments, agencies and local authorities. The legislation we are now considering seems to allow the agency to form subsidiaries, acquire public land on the basis of first refusal and enable it to implement compulsory purchase orders.

At the moment the LDA has an interim board. I accept that this board may possibly be reformed on the passing of this Bill. Currently the board consists of 12 members, including

five from the banking sector, four from Government Departments or local authorities and one academic in social policy. There are no specialists in community design, in environmental design or on the sustainable development of housing or communities. In fact, considering it is International Women's Day on Monday it is fair to point out that there are more bankers on the board of the LDA than there are women. The LDA will have far-reaching and considerable powers. It already does and that activity concerns me. I do not look forward to the inevitable appearance of the LDA in front of the Committee of Public Accounts.

In 1963, Seán Lemass, a Fianna Fáil Taoiseach, presided in over the development of the Local Government Act which enshrined many of the housing and planning frameworks we still work with today. It has been a powerful Act in the development of housing in this country. It established our local authorities as the core body responsible for the provision of social and public housing. It is our local authority, local government and local democracy that should be providing housing for us. Under this legislation the legacy of this Government will be the dismantling, in a very real way, of that 1963 legislation. Local authorities will no longer be the foundational providers of public housing in the State. This legislation effectively locks in the failed and hugely discredited strategic housing development framework, bypassing democratic oversight and erasing local voices from planning decisions.

I urge that some of these points be considered on Committee Stage of this Bill.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this Bill today. The Land Development Agency Bill is one of the transformative measures in bringing about accelerated social and affordable housing in this country. I am glad that it is my colleague, the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, who is leading the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage because Fianna Fáil over many decades has been known as a party that in good and in bad times delivered on housing and communities. When I think of all the local authority housing schemes in my constituency, most were built during times when Fianna Fáil was in government. I am glad, therefore, that it is a Fianna Fáil Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, who is heading the Department as a partner in a coalition government.

I see many positives in the Bill. I note the Land Development Agency is already working on nine sites throughout the country developing 4,000 homes. It is very important that many of these homes are affordable. Like many Members of the House, before I was elected to Dáil Éireann I was a county councillor. I was very involved in housing policy committees and in observing how all of this happens at grass roots level. Far too many people on our housing waiting lists do not necessarily need to be on a social housing list. Many of them have incomes, although they are low to medium incomes, and they should be on affordable housing lists. The drive now by the Government is to provide more affordable housing so that those who have low to medium incomes can go forward and end up owning homes in their own right and this is hugely important. It has been part of the Irish psyche for many years.

Some say we should live in high-rise apartments in city centres. I do not think that is fully sustainable for our country. It is good to see small villages and towns throughout Ireland sharing population bases. It brings vitality back to places. I have seen far too much rural decline in my constituency. We have a two tier Ireland with the east coast thriving and some parts of the west coast lagging behind. We also have two-tiered development in each county. In County Clare we see the middle column of the county driving on, accelerated and accentuated by the presence of Shannon Airport industrial hubs, but when we go further east or west of this we see rural decline week on week and month on month.

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A key element of the Bill is that it will initially deal with land banks in towns with 10,000 or more people. There is a need for added scope for social and affordable housing to become a feature of our smaller villages to breathe life into them. Most rural Deputies can relate to the long-standing battles many of us have fought to retain a local schoolteacher or to keep a post office, shop, pub or bank open. This week, we have been speaking about Bank of Ireland announcing many closures of its branches. All of this is predicated on having a population base in a small village. We can only have a population base if there are houses and children playing on the streets and in playgrounds and going to school during the day and bringing vitality back. There is a need to go beyond towns with a population threshold of 10,000 and get this level of social and affordable housing build into smaller villages.

The Bill is in line with EU state aid rules, which is very important. The big brother of the European Union is always breathing down on us and this is fully compliant and can be easily funded by the Government and driven as a priority in the years to come.

I also welcome that the Bill empowers the Land Development Agency to use compulsory purchase orders to acquire ransom strips. These were a phenomenon of the early noughties whereby a developer would build 50 or 60 houses and put in a lovely concrete kerb with a 1 m or 2 m grass margin. To most people in the community it meant nothing and it was just a little grass strip at the end of a turning area in a housing estate. It was called a ransom strip because anyone who wanted to develop housing or bring services beyond that point would have to pay the developer or landowner an extortionate amount of money. I am glad that once and for all, although it is too late for some because it should have been done many years ago, there is now a compulsory purchase order mechanism to acquire these ransom strips at fair prices and not at extortionate or rip-off prices.

I have some small concerns about the Land Development Agency Bill and I will speak about these. A big issue in any community is a lack of information. We are dealing with an issue in my village at present. A large windmill has gone up and it is causing much offence in the community. When people do not have information on what is happening in their communities it can be quite upsetting and frustrating.

We have also seen with housing developments where social or affordable housing is planned in an area and residents who have already bought into that road and are paying sky high mortgages are not aware of it happening. Perhaps they were not made aware of it by the developer at the time or by the local authority. Information is vital at all stages. It concerns me somewhat that much of the Land Development Agency Bill measures will allow for a little bit of bypassing of the local elected councillors. This will remove a key section of the chain of command that was always there with regard to local authority housing. There is a need for stakeholder engagement whereby there is not just railroading through land banks in communities to develop housing and that there would be a little bit of stakeholder engagement. I am concerned about this.

State lands tend to be in very large tracts. Some communities have dozens or hundreds of acres, such as the Curragh, for example, where the State owns hundreds of acres. In my community in Meelick we have Knockalisheen. Way back in the 1940s and 1950s it was on land owned by the Department of Defence. It was an old rifle training range for Irish soldiers. In the 1950s or 1960s, and I ask the House to forgive me as I may have my decades mixed up, it became a centre for refugees fleeing the Hungarian revolution. Where I am getting to with all of this is that in recent years it has again been serving a role in providing for refugees. It is the

site of one of the largest direct provision centres in the country and it is on State land.

This week, we have heard there is a plan to wind down direct provision, which is very welcome. I have grown up beside a direct provision centre and I know the families. I know that more than anything they yearn for some normality for their children and to be able to integrate into society. This is really good. However, also raises questions as to what will happen with the huge land bank in Knockalisheen in Meelick and other such land banks throughout the country. It is State owned and many of us in the community are concerned that a State land bank such as this could be used overnight for a colossal social or affordable housing development. People are probably saying that I am contradicting myself but I am not and there is a very simple reason for this. Just 100 m from Knockalisheen is Moyross, which is just over the border in Limerick. It is one of those large housing estates, and there are only a few in the country, where the Government has realised that putting hundreds of people in an area that has been economically disadvantaged, and piling social housing on top of social housing, does not necessarily work. It has been subject to a regeneration plan for the past ten or 12 years. We have seen how overdeveloped social housing is a bad thing and a regeneration plan is still playing out there.

Our concern is that just up the road from Moyross is a colossal State land bank, one of the largest in the midwest, where there could be another wave of social housing. It would be only repeating the mistakes of the past. Yes, we need social housing, we need a drive for affordable housing and we need to do everything in the Houses of the Oireachtas to ensure it sees the light of day but we should also not make the same mistakes that far too many made in the past by crowding social housing to the point that disadvantage becomes perennial and inescapable. Good communities are those that are smaller with proper amenities. It goes back to the whole point I have been making with regard to a community becoming sustainable once again with a school, a shop, a post office and a pub. This is what we need to get back to.

With regard to overloading social housing in one area, in many counties if people apply for social housing they get an application form that may have 18 or 19 locations where they can seek houses. It is imbalanced. In parts of rural Clare there is nowhere to get a social housing unit but in places such as Clonlara, Shannon or Ennis there is probably an overload of social housing, perpetuating disadvantage in some instances. The key to this is that it is sustainable and long term. I am not speaking about the little cottages at the roadside that local authorities built in the 1930s and 1940s. We moved on from them a long time ago. There is much logic to going to small villages that are suffering and struggling to survive and saying that developing two or three social housing units in those villages would breed essential new life back into them. We need to get to this model. Despite all the positives of the Bill, and do not get me wrong because I do not want to knock it, it concerns me that we are going on a trajectory of large multi-unit developments on large tracts of land and we could be turning our backs on the small villages where we could be breathing vitality.

All in all it is a good Bill. I hope the Minister and Minister of State will take on board the concerns I have. They are well rooted concerns that are based on my concerns for rural communities that continue to lag behind. In some instances in years to come there will be accusations of a lack of transparency because those who bought a house in an area did not know a new wave of development was coming behind them. We all know the carnage it can create in a community when people do not have an awareness of things.

I hope the concerns I have expressed will be taken back by the Ministers to the Department. I am glad to have had the opportunity to speak on the Bill.

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Deputy Bríd Smith: I listened to the Minister's speech the last time we discussed the Bill. I congratulate him and his speechwriter as it was a very fine speech indeed, full of high-flying rhetoric, full of absolutely correct observations about the housing crisis and the importance of housing as a basic necessity of life. It stated:

...the State has to step up to the mark to provide affordable homes for purchase and rent using all the means at its disposal. A good home ... should be the launch pad for life's adventures and a refuge from its storms. The bricks and mortar of a solid home are the cornerstone of a good life.

[...]

...the central promise of democracy is that each generation will be better off than the last, the current housing crisis represents a fundamental threat. In an era where the waves of dangerous populism are hitting the shores of established democracies, we need to keep our democracy strong and vibrant.

These are very fine words indeed. The only problem, of course, is that this Bill and other Bills the Government is progressing do none of the things the Minister claims are needed to address the housing crisis. In fact, if we could build homes with the fine words of all the previous housing Ministers to sort out the crisis, we would have a surplus of homes in the State for the people who need them.

The Minister's words reminded me of another speech at the unveiling of a previous grand plan in 2014, where we were told by one of his predecessors that it is the right of every household to access secure, good quality housing at an affordable price and in sustainable communities, and that this strategy would put the State back at the centre of social housing provision. That was in 2014 and it was Deputy Alan Kelly, who was then the housing Minister. His plan did not work either. I could quote from the former Minister, Deputy Eoghan Murphy, and the Minister, Deputy Coveney. Their plans, their strategies and their grand press conferences did not work either.

The State is not stepping up. The State and the current Minister are actually doing the same as his predecessors. Far from the pragmatism the Minister claims, a pragmatism that is supposedly devoid of any ideology, this is, in essence, pure ideology masquerading as the answer to the housing crisis produced by that very ideology. If we take the Minister's pronouncements at face value, the purpose of this is to build social and affordable housing but it would be doing so in the most elaborate, complex and Byzantine way. This is the State stepping up to build homes for its citizens. In reality, this Bill, like other grand plans, is utterly reliant on developers, builders, financiers, estate agents, property gurus and those who have bequeathed us this crisis in the first place. It accepts that the market is an actual living thing, a natural occurrence, and it places its hope that this market can, with the right mix of coaxing, possibly some prayers and lots of incentives, actually provide people with the homes they need. This is not the State building homes. This, like many other acts, is the State facilitating developers to do the building they want to, if they decide it is worth their while and the profits accruing to them are sufficient.

The Minister told us some weeks ago that, perhaps, depending on what he thinks, or what his successor feels, or which way the wind is blowing on a particular day in a particular place, there may be more than 50% of social and affordable homes on any plot of land developed by the Land Development Agency. Might be, could be, or there might be less; it will depend on

a number of factors, such as the Minister's particular humour on the day the decision is taken. No, it will not. It will depend on location, location, location and what the market value is. What will determine the market value? The Minister seems to think he might determine the market value. That would be news to everyone, including the market, and not least the developers and the financiers who have basically written Government housing policy over the past three decades.

The Minister seems to think if he declares something is affordable, then it is. It is as if he declares that a donkey is a unicorn, it is, but it still will not fly. The definition of affordable, whether that turns out to be to rent or to buy, is not linked to what people actually earn. It is not linked in any way to the Minister's gift under the regime envisaged in this Bill to declare something affordable based on what people actually earn. That is not what this Bill does. The Minister seems to believe that, like Humpty Dumpty in a Lewis Carroll yarn, "When I use a word...it means just what I choose it to mean - neither more nor less." He can waffle on all he likes, he can be outraged at the ignorant Opposition who do not understand his beautiful Bill, but none of his outrage and none of his waffle will make a €400,000 two-bedroom apartment affordable for an ordinary citizen in this country. None of his outrage or evocation of the days of de Valera and social housing projects of the 1950s will turn a monthly rent of €1,200-plus into an affordable rent for ordinary people.

The Minister has denied that this Bill guts local democracy. It removes the last vestige of local councillors' ability to have any say over land development in their area, and there is no doubt about that. I note that, hilariously, other Government Deputies tried to blame local councils for the failure to build or boost the stock of social homes. Aside from the fact that most of those local councils are run by Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, one would think, listening to them, that the housing crisis only started last year. One would think that the inability and unwillingness of local authorities to build public housing was a decision of their own, not an actual belief and a project built into Government policy, with their reliance on the market on the one hand, and the crash and fallout from their reckless mates in the finance and development class on the other.

I have observations to make on the specifics of the Bill, if I have time.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I will be asking the Deputy to move the adjournment shortly.

Deputy Bríd Smith: I have some observations on the specifics of the Bill. At one point, it states we need to counteract undue segregation in housing between persons of different social backgrounds. On the one hand, to any outsider, it would seem a laudable objective. Who wants segregation? In reality, however, for more than two decades I have heard this time and again, and each time the purpose of anti-segregation policy is not talking about the need to ensure people on lower incomes, from the Travelling community or from ethnic minorities should be given access to housing in Ailesbury Road, for example, probably the most segregated area in the country, or in any of the upper middle-class strongholds. No, not at all. What they mean is that we cannot have too many lower income tenants in any area where it is possible to sell houses to higher income brackets and where developers can make a fortune. The safeguard against social segregation only applies in one direction. It is not Vico Road they mean; it is Ballymun Road. They are talking, in reality, about stigmatising social housing and painting it as a refuge of troubled tenants and antisocial issues.

There is a way of avoiding social segregation. When we built public housing in the 1950s

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and 1960s, it was used to house everybody – teachers, bus drivers, butchers, civil servants and all others who could not pay private rents or afford to buy. The segregation happened because of a deliberate housing policy. It was not an accident. We can reverse that by allowing ordinary workers on average incomes access to public housing by widening the income brackets beyond what they are at present.

This Bill will not do that and is not designed to do it. Instead, it aims to reinvent the wheel with elaborate, complex and unworkable policies to build a new model of cost rental. If cost rental is affordable, rent, of course, will depend on what the cost actually is, something the Minister cannot tell us. Cost rental will still be pegged in some way to the market, not to people's earnings. Differential rents set by local authorities, on the other hand, were truly cost rental and truly affordable. This Bill will not address that basic issue, and no amount of wishful thinking or rhetoric from the Minister can hide that.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We will return to the Bill this afternoon.

Debate adjourned.

12 o'clock

Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Ní hamháin go bhfuil fadhbanna ann maidir leis an roll-amach den vacsaín ach tá fadhbanna níos mó ná sin. Thug an tAire Sláinte gealltanais go mbeadh an vacsaín acu siúd atá os cionn 85 bliana d'aois roimh dheireadh na seachtaine seo ach tá a fhios againn anois nach bhfuil sin ag dul a tharlú. Tá dochtúirí ginearálta faoi bhrú mar go n-inseofar do chuid acu go mbeidh an vacsaín ag teacht ar lá faoi leith agus ní tharlaíonn sin. Ansin bíonn ar na dochtúirí teaghlaigh seo na céadta scairteacha ghutháin a dhéanamh agus na coinní le seandaoine a chur ar ceal. Níl seo maith go leor.

We are at a crucial point in the suppression of Covid-19 and the roll-out of the vaccine, but the Government is dropping the ball on both fronts and letting people down. Figures released yesterday by the Department of Justice show that international travel is increasing. That is because there is no serious deterrent to travel in place at present and little or no follow-up. That puts all of us at risk, regardless of how strongly people are trying to adhere to the public health advice.

It is also increasingly clear that problems relating to the roll-out of the vaccine go well beyond the issue of slow supply. Last week, the Minister for Health wrote to all Deputies to say that the HSE had confirmed to him that it was on target to administer a dose to all people aged over 85 years by the end of the week. He has since rowed back from that position and the Government is now set to miss that target. General practitioners have contacted us to express their serious concerns about the buddy system. They tell us they have not been provided with a single point of contact to co-ordinate the roll-out. The communication is shambolic, with little notice given as to when the vaccine will be made available to their practices and patients. Other GPs have been telling us that while they were promised vaccines on certain dates, the vaccines did not arrive. That leaves GPs obliged to make hundreds of telephone calls to cancel vaccination appointments for their vulnerable, elderly patients. This is simply unacceptable. It must be resolved, and resolved quickly.

The HSE must examine this urgently. It must reassure the public, who want their loved ones to be vaccinated. What is happening here? What is the situation? There has been a lengthy lead-in time. We all knew that it would be necessary to deliver the logistics for a vaccination programme. The uncertainty in this regard is causing great anxiety.

All the while, another issue I raised with the Tánaiste remains unresolved. It is the urgent need to afford priority vaccination for family carers. Many carers are at their wit's end. I am sure they have spoken to the Tánaiste in the same way they have spoken to us. The question thousands of carers ask is: who steps in to take care of the vulnerable family members who need around-the-clock care, seven days a week, if they get sick? This is especially true for carers with vulnerable children who cannot yet be vaccinated. Their only protection is if the carer is vaccinated. Family carers provide care that is often very specialised, intense and intimate. The case for family carers to be afforded some level of priority is very strong, but the Government has not listened so far.

Perhaps the Tánaiste will not take my word for it, but he should listen to the words of the carers. One lady writes:

I am a family carer. I have cared for my Dad for the last ten years. He has Parkinson's and dementia, and my mother suffers from serious medical conditions. If I get sick, there will be nobody else to care for either of them or to even bring groceries to their house.

Another carer tells us:

My little girl has special needs and I am so fed up of fighting for her basic rights. My biggest worry is if me or my husband get Covid as I fear the impacts for Ella. We would not self-isolate from her as she simply would just think that we have left her. It is an insult being so far down the list with absolutely no back-up plan.

I want the Tánaiste to answer the question that is on the mind of every carer in the country, and that is: who will step in? The Tánaiste told me two weeks ago that he asked the national immunisation advisory committee, NIAC, to examine this matter, but we have heard nothing since then. It is time for the Tánaiste to afford family carers the respect and recognition they deserve. Will the Government provide the relief family carers so badly need and tell them if they will be afforded priority for vaccination?

The Tánaiste: Tá brón orm go raibh mé déanach. Tá dul chun cinn maith á dhéanamh i leith dáileadh na vacsaíne. Táthar tuar go mbainfear amach an sprioc de 500,000 an tseachtain seo. Beidh an chéad dáileog faighte ag ár gclainne agus ag ár gcairde a bhfuil os cionn 85 bliana d'aois faoi dheireadh na seachtaine seo. Cé go bhfuil bóthar fada amach romhainn go fóill, tá sé le feiceáil go bhfuil toradh dearfach anseo agus go hidirnáisiúnta ó thaobh tionchar na vacsaíní. Tá sé mar sprioc ag an Rialtas go mbeidh an chéad dáileog den vacsaín faighte ag breis agus 80% de dhaoine fásta faoi dheireadh mhí an Mheithimh. I appreciate that there have been some issues and delays with the vaccine programme. A consignment of 25,000 AstraZeneca vaccines that we had expected to arrive last week did not arrive at short notice. We are told it will arrive before the end of the month, allowing us to catch up. There will be weeks when we fall behind target and there will be weeks when we go ahead of target. I acknowledge that there have been difficulties in getting the vaccine to some general practices. This is a big logistical operation and we need to be patient and supportive with the HSE as it works this out and gets the job done.

There are reasons for optimism and reasons for comfort. By this weekend 500,000 vaccines will have been given in the State. We will be close to completion with nursing home staff and residents, with front-line healthcare workers, and we will be there or thereabouts with the over-85s. This week already we have moved on to people in the 80 to 84 age group, which is very encouraging. This is happening in some parts of the country.

On priority and how people are prioritised, at the moment two groups are being prioritised. The first is the healthcare workers, and we all understand why this should be the case because they are the ones most at risk of getting this virus, and people over the age of 70 and those under the age of 70 with medical conditions because they are the ones most likely to get severely ill and most likely to die from this virus. The groups being prioritised are healthcare workers, who are most at risk of getting sick, people over the age of 70, and those under the age of 70 who have a medical condition who are most at risk of dying or getting very sick as a result of this virus. The national immunisation advisory committee, NIAC, advises that these are the groups that should be prioritised. The Government agrees with that prioritisation. While I totally appreciate and value the work done by carers all over the country I do not believe they should be prioritised at the expense of healthcare workers, at the expense of those aged over 70 or at the expense of those under 70 who have a severe medical condition. In fairness, I do not think that Deputy Doherty believes that either. We all accept that healthcare workers must come first, then the elderly and then people with medical conditions as they are most at risk. Once they have all had their first dose, then NIAC will be able to consider other groups, including carers. I do not believe one should play politics with this, which Sinn Féin is doing. If Deputy Doherty was being honest in his position he would at least say who he thinks should be downgraded. Any time one moves any group or profession, anybody in society or any cohort up the list of priority, by definition one has to move somebody down. When the Deputy calls for groups to be prioritised and does not have the honesty to say who he wants to be moved down the list, it means that the Deputy's position is not genuine and that he is playing politics. Carers are too busy and have too much on their hands to be played politics with in the way the Deputy is doing.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: That is a very disappointing response from the Tánaiste. I will make the point that the only person playing politics here is the Tánaiste. There is a very genuine argument and rationale for having some priority for family carers. There is no priority for them at all at the moment. They fall into the general population priority of age groups. I know many of these family carers. Some of them are very close to me. Do not tell me that I am playing politics with this when I know the risks associated with this. Some of these carers look after very vulnerable children and if they contract Covid-19, it could have serious consequences for these younger children. Did the Tánaiste ask for the advice with regard to family carers? He said in the Dáil that this advice was being sought and last week he said he had not got it. All we are asking is whether NIAC has given advice on family carers.

With regard to the mess around communication and the infrastructure not being properly in place to roll out the vaccine for the over-85s, the Tánaiste's argument that AstraZeneca did not arrive last week does not wash. AstraZeneca is not being provided to the over-85s.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Time please Deputy.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The problem is that the Tánaiste has been in government for quite a period of time and we do not have the proper infrastructure in the middle of March, where GPs had to cancel hundreds of appointments because the vaccines that should be arriving are not arriving, and others are getting it with very little notice.

The Tánaiste: The answer to the Deputy's question is "Yes". The Government has asked NIAC to consider prioritising family carers after the current groups. I strongly believe it is right that we prioritise healthcare workers, those most likely to get sick, people over 70 and people under 70 with medical conditions because they are most likely to die or get very sick from this virus. We have asked NIAC to give consideration to prioritising family carers, once those groups have been vaccinated because they should be prioritised. I am disappointed, once again, that Deputy Doherty will not answer my question. Any time one moves a group of people - several hundred thousand people in this case - up the list, one has to bring somebody down the list. The fact that the Deputy will not say so really shows how hollow and dishonest his position is and how he is trying to court votes and take advantage of family carers in the way he is. I believe this is entirely wrong. Trying to play politics in this way with carers, who have too much to worry about than this type of carry on, is the most cynical form of politics possible.

The reason we did not meet the 100,000 target last week was because of the AstraZeneca not arriving-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Tánaiste, we are over time.

The Tánaiste: -----with 25,000 intended for healthcare workers. That will arrive before the end of the month.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I ask for co-operation in using the time appropriately.

Deputy Alan Kelly: I want to ask the Tánaiste today about the volume of job losses recently. It is destroying the livelihoods of hundreds of thousands of people. I am concerned that some of the losses are coming under the cover of Covid. I am not alone in that regard. All of the changes in banking will rip the heart out of so many rural and urban towns across the State. Ulster Bank's announcement affects 2,800 staff, Bank of Ireland is closing 88 branches affecting 1,400 staff and on top of that, the Kerry Group announcement of the loss of 150 jobs and Aer Lingus's job losses are reaching 600. These are just the jobs we hear about. There is a growing epidemic of job losses in all sectors and small businesses, and not just where we would expect some issues due to Covid.

The Central Statistics Office, CSO, has put the February adjusted unemployment rate at just under 25%, which is more than 330,000 people or one in four workers. The situation is even worse for young people, which is a real concern, with 57% of young people being out of work. This will be a scar on that generation and the body politic, collectively, will have to address it. We have a national crisis and we need to take responsibility in terms of how we are going to get out of this. Before the Tánaiste refers to them, I accept and welcome all of the income supports and business supports that have been put in place. I have, however, a real issue with the fact that Ireland is saying we are only eligible for €853 million from the EU recovery and resilience fund. This simply is not enough. I do not believe it is proportionate or fair. I know we have had a changed economic situation over the past years. Where is our national economic recovery plan? What are we going to do on the redundancies where ICTU has warned of hundreds of thousands of workers who could lose out on redundancy payments because of time spent on the pandemic unemployment payment, PUP, would not be counted?

Bearing all of this in mind, what is the Government's plan to ensure that some job losses are not being pushed out by some companies using Covid as cover? When will our national economic recovery plan be published? Specifically, what are we going to do to prevent the scarring

of a generation of young people, given what they have gone through? Will the Tánaiste make a commitment today that workers who are made redundant will not lose out because of time spent on the PUP?

The Tánaiste: Many job losses have been announced in recent weeks, which are a deep concern to all of us. As the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment, I get notification of many of those, and I am very aware of the real impact it is having on people. Some of those job losses are directly related to Covid-19, for example, in the airlines the Deputy mentioned. Some are not; they would have happened in any case. I refer to those in banking and those in the Kerry Group, for example, which the Deputy mentioned. In fairness, nobody in those industries, certainly not in the banks and certainly not in the Kerry Group, has pretended they are related to Covid. They are related to restructuring in the case of the Kerry Group and to a change in the way people bank and the way banks operate in regard to banking.

In terms of the policy of Government, it is three-fold. First, it is to save as many jobs and businesses that we can, particularly those businesses that are viable but vulnerable. We have put €11 billion into that already if we take the employment wage subsidy scheme, the Covid restrictions support scheme, CRISS, and the pandemic unemployment payment. A huge amount of money is borrowed but it is the right decision to borrow that money to save as many jobs and businesses as possible.

The second is to continue to create new jobs. What is encouraging at the moment is that there is still a very good pipeline of new jobs being created, particularly in areas like technology, digital, pharmaceutical, medical devices, distribution and transport. IDA Ireland and Enterprise Ireland, EI, under my remit, are driving forward that jobs agenda.

The third is offering training and educational opportunities to as many people as possible to people who may wish to retrain to gain new skills and to the young people the Deputy mentioned. More people will start third level education this year than ever before and from a more diverse set of backgrounds than ever before. The same applies to lifelong learning and further education, which is being driven forward very much by the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, Deputy Harris.

In terms of the timeline for the national economic plan, we had initially proposed to do that in January given the effect of the third wave on our country in terms of jobs lost and the effect on the economy. We have put back that. We expect now that it will be in the summer, probably around May or June, but in April we will have the stability programme update, the spring statement, which will be brought in by the Minister for Finance, Deputy Donohoe. Also in April, we will have the allocations from the €850 million European recovery fund and, hopefully, the €1 billion Brexit fund but that is still under negotiation. We will then have the revised national development plan and the new economic plan, which we expect to have for May or June.

The issue the Deputy raised on redundancy is difficult and complicated. It affects a number of issues and we are in discussions with unions and employers on that. Nobody wants to see a year's redundancy being lost because people were on the PUP through no fault of their own. At the same time putting that cost on business has a consequence also. We are trying to work out that in consultation with ICTU and IBEC.

Deputy Alan Kelly: I thank the Tánaiste. Regarding the PUP and redundancy, speed is of the essence. It is affecting people's lives in terms of decision making. I would appreciate a

quicker timeline. This issue has been raised continuously with me by ICTU. It cannot affect people's redundancy so we need to work out a formula for dealing with it.

I noted in his reply that the Tánaiste did not answer the question on the plan with regard to young people. I have a serious concern that we need to be planning now for young people because they have been scarred unlike any others trying to enter the workforce, losing their jobs, etc. What is the plan for young people?

Finally, is it fair to say now that given the disruptive nature of Covid on everything in this country the Ireland 2040 plan is in need of a total revision?

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy. The plan for young people and to ensure we do not have high levels of youth unemployment when the pandemic is over is three-fold: it is to save as many jobs and businesses as possible; to create new jobs, which we are doing; and to create more educational and training opportunities ranging from higher education to further education to apprenticeships to lifelong learning opportunities. All of that is being done currently and driven forward by Government.

The review of the national development plan, NDP, and Project Ireland 2040 is currently under way. We expect to be in a position in May or June, led by the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputy McGrath, to publish a revised Project Ireland 2040, a revised NDP. That will run out to 2030. That will allow us to include more projects than are currently in it but it needs to be reviewed because one thing that is very different from when that was launched in Sligo is that we had almost full employment at the time. We are in a very different position now. Obviously, issues like employment and climate action have to move up the agenda and other issues may have to come down the agenda.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Workers have been treated appallingly during the pandemic. I refer to the front-line health workers, student nurses, Debenhams workers, Arcadia workers, taxi drivers and artists. The list could go on and on but among all the cases of abuses of groups of workers the treatment of workers in meat plants stands out as particularly shocking. They are low paid and highly exploited and are often migrant workers. They work in workplaces where a regime of fear and intimidation often exists, where almost 50% of workers say they face bullying and where Covid has run rampant in the past year.

I know of one worker who spoke up about conditions in the factory, including on social media. As a result, the employer did not sack him because then he could take an unfair dismissals case. Instead, he kicked him out of his accommodation because for many working in these plants the boss is not just their employer; he or she is also their landlord.

These workers have been abandoned repeatedly by a Government which is more interested in appeasing the beef barons than protecting the health of workers and the wider community. Today's Health Protection Surveillance Centre, HPSC, report reveals that out of 56 meat plants in the State there are 34 open outbreaks now. That is an extra four outbreaks in the past week. Almost two-thirds of meat plants across the State have had Covid cases in the past 28 days.

In the Larry Goodman-owned ABP Bandon plant, 70 out of 300 workers have tested positive for Covid. It is clear that the big beef barons are putting their wealth before their workers' health and the Government is letting them away with it. SIPTU has reported that the level of serial testing has been cut back in recent months also.

None of this should come as a surprise to the Government. It is now ten months since I first raised it in the Dáil. The response then of the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine was to accuse me of smearing the meat factory owners.

When the scale of the Covid outbreaks became clear, the Government was forced to feign concern. Last September, the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine told the Dáil that the issue of sick pay for meat factory workers was being addressed but nothing has changed. Ninety per cent of those workers still do not have sick pay. Many feel compelled to go into work even if they feel sick. I have asked the Minister about that repeatedly and have got no response.

My questions are very simple. Will the Government act now to ensure sick pay is introduced for meat factory workers? Will it step up serial testing in the meat plants? Will it extend the eviction ban to cover those in so-called tied accommodation to stop meat factory workers and others being kicked out of their accommodation for speaking out?

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy. It is good to see him here for Leaders' Questions. I am not sure if this is his regular slot or whether it is a consequence of his decision to join People Before Profit but I look forward to some interesting exchanges in the months ahead.

Let me be very clear. I do not have the slightest interest in beef barons. I have never met a beef baron. I do not know what a beef baron looks like, quite frankly. That is a populist conspiracy theory and it has no legitimacy whatsoever.

With regard to meat plants, meat plants are a high risk environment, and not just in Ireland. We have seen very serious outbreaks occur in meat plants all over the world, in Europe and in America. As we learn more and more about the virus we know that it is to do with the conditions in the plant itself more so than living conditions or transport, although they can be part of the picture. It is also to do with the air, the speed, the flow and the fact that people can be in quite close quarters and that often there is a lot of noise. That is why we now understand that they are a high risk environment. There had been thoughts previously that it was related to living conditions and transport but that does not seem to be the major factor because people living in similar conditions do not have as high a rate of contracting Covid.

In terms of what we are doing about it, for a start we are doing serial testing. The Deputy acknowledged that we are carrying out serial testing in our meat plants. I understand that the incidence is low. I do not have the exact figures now but I believe it may be substantially lower than 3% or 4%, which is the current rate in our community for symptomatic people. I think it may even be less than 1%. It is encouraging that the number of positive cases is so low. I think there is an opportunity for greater use of antigen testing in meat plants and other workplaces. It is happening in construction. Kerry Group and Combilift are doing it. I would like to see the meat industry doing it as well if it is not already doing so.

As for sick pay, it is really important we get this message across: anyone, no matter where they work, is entitled to the enhanced illness benefit if they have Covid or symptoms of Covid, if they are waiting for a test or a test result or if they have been told by the HSE or their GP to self-isolate. The benefit is €350 per week and can be paid for up to ten weeks. It is important that this message comes across because sometimes I think that when workers hear they are not entitled to sick pay, they think that means they are entitled to nothing. That is not true. Any employee, any worker, no matter where he or she works, is entitled to €350 per week in the

enhanced illness benefit. We are bringing through legislation to extend sick pay to all workers, something I am determined to do, having built on other things I have done in the past: extending social insurance rights to the self-employed, which I did as Minister for Social Protection and as Taoiseach; increasing the minimum wage to be one of the highest in Europe; and bringing in things such as paternity benefit and parental leave. These are real things we have actually done for workers, something I do not think Deputy Murphy claims to have done. Added to that now will be sick pay, and we anticipate having that legislation done this year.

Deputy Paul Murphy: If it is a populist conspiracy theory that the Government represents the interests of the beef barons and not the interests of the workers, why, ten months after this issue was first raised in the Dáil, has the Tánaiste not acted to introduce sick pay for beef factory workers? It is a very simple question. If the Government does not represent the interests of the beef barons, who had sales of €5 billion in 2018, which is huge money, why has serial testing been reduced at the plants? If the Government does not represent the interests of beef barons, why is it the case that employers who have their employees in so-called tied accommodation are not covered by the eviction ban? Why are they able to evict their workers if they speak out? There is lots and lots of evidence, unfortunately, to suggest that from the very start, when this issue was raised and the Government's response was to dismiss it, deny it and talk it down, the Government has consistently had the back not of the workers - and the workers need support - but of these big beef barons.

The Tánaiste: The job of any government - or at least any centrist government - is to represent all the people and to take account of all interests and not seek to create conspiracy theories about the 1% or to divide capital from workers or the middle class from the working class. Any responsible government, any centrist government, any moderate government, which is what we have in Ireland, tries to represent the interests of the whole population as best it can and takes into account all the factors at play. Workers need jobs, and we always have to bear that in mind in our policies too.

To respond to the question about sick pay, once again the message has to be put out there loud and clear in case any worker gets the wrong end of the stick: any worker who is off sick as a consequence of Covid is entitled to the enhanced illness benefit of €350 per week. We are bringing in legislation to extend sick pay not just to meat plant workers but to all workers who do not currently benefit from a sick pay scheme. I intend to publish that legislation before the summer recess and I hope, with the Deputy's co-operation, that we will get it through. I imagine that, as is often the case, he will find a reason to oppose it.

I will have to check the position on serial testing. The reason is probably that the risk profile has fallen and the number of positives is so low, but I do not know that for sure and I will check it.

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

The Tánaiste: I will also check the issue of tied accommodation.

Deputy Michael Lowry: We have entered the second year of the greatest crisis in recent history. The focus remains on suppressing Covid-19. However, those who have seen their businesses suffer and jobs evaporate are beginning to place serious emphasis on where we are heading and what the future holds. They are asking how the Government intends to rebuild for the future. As the lead Minister with responsibility for this vital task, will the Tánaiste outline

his plans and his vision to revitalise our business sector and our economy? Many sectors of the Irish economy need to be nurtured and assisted with practical support to recover from the devastation of Covid. It is accepted that aviation, retail, hospitality, tourism and the arts and entertainment have seen the collapse of their business.

The aviation industry in Ireland is decimated. Prior to the pandemic, aviation supported 140,000 jobs in Ireland. The aviation industry has issued a stark warning that the longer the disruption to air travel continues, the less appealing Ireland becomes to foreign investors, which will be crucial to our recovery. It is estimated that 75% of the tourism sector depends solely on overseas visitors. There were no visitors last year, and as we approach the start of this year's season the outlook is bleak. Without our own population fully vaccinated, there is little likelihood that Ireland will be the destination of choice for tourists. Lack of tourism for a second consecutive year will spell doom for many who depend on tourism as their sole income.

Before this pandemic, 250,000 SMEs were the main source of jobs and enterprise. They are the backbone of urban and rural communities. They are family businesses, farmers, hairdressers, coffee shops and tech companies. They are innovators and risk takers. They need to reopen and trade, develop and grow again. We need to review the current Irish banking environment in respect of the provision of lending to SMEs, the financing of SMEs, the terms of credit and the banking alternatives available to them. Pre-pandemic SME interest rates were the second highest in Europe. This must be addressed.

The time has come to concentrate on solutions. Hand in hand with the plans to suppress the virus must be a plan to rebuild our economy. The key focus must be on sustaining Irish jobs and exports and increasing the resilience of the enterprise base. There is now an opportunity for the Government to refresh its approach to delivering for the long-term needs of the economy. Chambers Ireland has said that with the current availability to the Government of low-interest finance, there should be a doubling of our investment in energy infrastructure and strategic transport as well as an upskilling of our workforce and support for gender equality through investment in childcare. What preparations are under way? What plans are being made to revitalise and stimulate the Irish economy? What is the timeline for Government initiatives to reboot and grow our economy? With the information available to the Tánaiste's Department, can he see our economy bouncing back in the short term?

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for the question and for his ongoing interest in issues affecting businesses and employees not just in Tipperary but across the country. Our strategy is threefold. First, it is to save as many businesses that are viable and as many jobs as we can during this period of pandemic and lockdown. There has already been €11 billion invested in the economy, propping up the economy through pandemic unemployment payments, the wage subsidy scheme, the commercial rates holiday and all the other financial supports for workers and businesses, which will remain in place until at least 30 June and will need to stay in place beyond 30 June, I think, for some businesses, particularly some of those the Deputy mentioned.

The second and most important part of the strategy, of course, is to beat the virus through testing, tracing, non-pharmaceutical interventions and vaccines to get the virus down to low levels, therefore allowing us to reopen the economy safely and in a sustainable way. Businesses that I talk to say to me that when they are told they can reopen next time, they want to know that it will be for good or at least for a prolonged period. That is why we want to get the numbers of sick people, the numbers of deaths and the numbers of cases down very low before we reopen again.

Third, once we do that - and that is the time to restimulate and reflate the economy, when the economy is reopening - one thing we will definitely have to do is to get people spending the savings that have built up. There is €12 billion, €13 billion or €14 billion in savings in the Irish banks at the moment that was not there a year ago, and we need to avoid the paradox of thrift and encourage people to spend and invest that money once they can. It is often the case that people are unable to spend at the moment because shops and businesses are closed. We need to make sure we encourage people to spend that money in our economy once it becomes possible for them to do so. Part of this is giving people the reassurance that while we will need to bring the deficit down, that will not involve cuts to pre-existing, pre-pandemic welfare payments or pensions, will not involve pay cuts, at least where we control pay levels, and will not involve increases in income tax. I think that will give people confidence to spend and invest when the economy is opened again. There is also the national development plan, the €850 million from the EU, and the €1 billion from the Brexit adjustment reserve fund, all of which can be used to stimulate and reflate the economy, once it is able to reopen. That is the key to it, of course.

Finally, on aviation, €200 million has been already provided to the aviation sector under different headings, to airports and airlines. We are in further discussions with Aer Lingus regarding a package of financial support for that airline.

Deputy Michael Lowry: The availability of and access to funding is crucial for small and medium sized businesses. The option of establishing a State-supported community bank should be reviewed. The post office network and the credit unions have the capacity and ability to bring financial services to the public. This community model works very successfully in Germany and other European countries. Pillar banks and community banks can co-exist in this market.

The departure of Ulster Bank has left the Irish consumer reliant on a duopoly. Ulster Bank holds approximately 20% of SME lending. We now know the Bank of Ireland and AIB are buying up its loan books. This will mean less competition for the consumer. Our economy needs a competitive edge within our banking system. Pillar bank monopoly will lead to restrictive and selective lending. It will facilitate higher loan charges and general manipulation of the consumer. Lack of competition in the financial sector will disadvantage business and enterprise and hold back our economy. I ask that this banking situation be reviewed. We should avail of the opportunity presented by Ulster Bank leaving-----

The Tánaiste: The Deputy is absolutely right that access to finance is crucial for businesses, and particularly the small business sector. It is not a well-known fact but currently one third of all lending to SMEs is now Government backed - it is State-backed lending. That is done through various schemes, including Brexit loans, Covid loans and the future growth loan scheme. It has been recently confirmed that Microfinance Ireland, which lends to very small businesses, will now be able to lend through the Strategic Banking Corporation of Ireland, SBCI. That will allow us to provide additional lending through Microfinance Ireland to very small businesses. It will be welcome in small towns and villages and rural areas in particular.

I absolutely agree that the decision of Ulster Bank to leave State is bad news, but it presents an opportunity. The Minister for Finance is talking to its owner, NatWest, and has had some discussions with AIB and Permanent TSB on what opportunities might arise to reform banking and create new forces in the banking sector in Ireland.

Ceisteanna ar Reachtaíocht a Gealladh - Questions on Promised Legislation

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Before we move on, ní mór dom a rá go bhfuilimid i lár Sheachtain na Gaeilge. Bainimid úsáid as coincheap na meithle i gcónaí. I spiorad na meithle, b'fhéidir go mbeimid in ann obair as lámh a chéile chun a chinntiú go mbeidh deis ag chuile dhuine ar an liosta teacht isteach inniu. Tá 24 ainm agam anseo. We are in the middle of Seachtain na Gaeilge. In the spirit of the meithle, which is a word that is used often here, I ask the Members to work together to ensure that as many of those on the list as possible get the chance to speak today. I ask Deputies to be as brief as possible and to stick to questions. As it stands, there are 24 names on the list, in addition to the leaders.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: This morning, the *Irish Independent* reported that one of the authors of the Government's pro-developer shared equity scheme has confirmed that it may push up house prices. Mr. David Duffy, who heads IBEC's Property Industry Ireland, was asked about the scheme and whether it would push up prices. He said it would be something that would contribute to the demand side. This confirms the concerns of the Tánaiste's party colleagues in Dublin City Council, who wrote to the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage last month, urging him to scrap this scheme. In their letter, they stated that it is a demand-side measure and risks a return to the failed housing policies of the Celtic tiger era. Does the Tánaiste agree with Property Industry Ireland and the councillors on Dublin City Council that this scheme will push on house prices? Will he support his own party colleagues, including the Minister for Finance's own parliamentary assistant, who have called for this reckless scheme to be scrapped?

The Tánaiste: I do not agree with Property Industry Ireland on this particular issue. The reality is that when one does something that increases demand for housing, it may have a side effect - increased house prices. However, that does not mean that people should not be helped to buy. People argued against the help to buy scheme for first-time buyers because they thought it would increase house prices. The evidence that it did is pretty minimal, but the same arguments were used. Yet, it helped tens of thousands of people to buy their first home. The new scheme being developed by the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage will help hundreds, if not thousands, of people to buy their first home. It happened in my local authority area of Fingal ten to 15 years ago. I know many people who were helped to buy their first home through shared equity schemes. If it is the case that increased demand for housing increases house prices, then the solution is not to stop people from buying houses or to make it possible to buy houses, the solution is to increase supply. That is how house prices can be reduced. That is why it is so disappointing to see the Sinn Féin Party vote against new housing in the Dublin city area. The party has helped to block the development of more than 2,000 new homes in Dublin city alone.

Deputy Alan Kelly: I am sure we all agree that last night's "RTÉ Investigates" programme on the impact of illegal adoptions was really shocking. The requirement for legislation on adoptive information and tracing is being brought forward by Senator Bacik in the Seanad tomorrow, a person who the Tánaiste acknowledged previously as a very good legislator. What are we going to do to ensure that those who were illegally adopted have legal certainty?

My former colleague, Joan Burton, published draft legislation in 2019, with Ms Anne O'Meara, who was impacted by illegal adoption. The Bill would allow people to go to the Circuit Court to get a declaration of adoption where there is not clear documentary evidence

that their birth certificate would be admissible. There would be admissibility and they would have a court decision. What is the Government going to do to provide those who were illegally adopted with legal certainty into the future?

The Tánaiste: I watched the “RTÉ Investigates” programme last night. It was really well produced and well researched, and I want to extend my compliments to those involved in putting it together. I also pay tribute to the people who told their stories. It cannot have been easy. It is hard to imagine a social worker coming to one’s door to break the news that one’s parents are not one’s biological parents, one’s name is not the name one was born with and one’s birth date is not one’s birth date. We must do everything we can to assist these people and help to make up for some of the wrongs of the past. That means giving them access to records about them and to their birth certificates. It also entails regularising their status, their names, inheritance tax and all those issues. The Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, Deputy O’Gorman, and the Government are committed to doing exactly that.

I have very strong feelings about GDPR. When I supported GDPR, I supported it on the basis that it would give people access to their personal information, ensure their personal information would be protected and ensure information could be corrected if it was wrong. It was never intended that the GDPR would be used to stop people from getting access to their personal information. That is what is currently happening and it is incumbent on us, as a Government, and on the Oireachtas, to change the law in that regard.

Deputy Cian O’Callaghan: People have been waiting years for the right to access their identity. Swift action must be taken to bring closure to that.

The Government is planning to give €500 million for the new maternity hospital to a private charity set up by the Sisters of Charity. The core values of the constitution of St. Vincent’s Holdings are identical to those of the Sisters of Charity. Given last night’s “RTÉ Investigates” programme on illegal adoptions, it is utterly unacceptable that the Government would gift the National Maternity Hospital to a private charity that has been set up. Given the need for accountability and the role of the Sisters of Charity in carrying out illegal adoptions, how can the Government justify gifting the new National Maternity Hospital to a private entity set up by the Sisters of Charity?

The Tánaiste: I will have to check with the Minister for Health on that, but I do not think that is the correct representation of what is intended. The hospital will be built with public funds and will belong to the people of Ireland. There may be an issue around the technicalities of the ownership of the land on which the hospital is built, but I am quite confident that the hospital itself will be controlled and owned by the public. I will double check that with the Minister and revert to the Deputy because the situation has changed over time.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Ten families and individuals, in the St. Helen’s Court apartment complex in Dún Laoghaire, whose plight I have raised around 20 to 30 times in the past four years, received letters to tell them they will be evicted within ten days of the lifting of level 5 restrictions, or 56 days from the receipt of the letter. I want to stress the landlord in this case is a vulture fund. The residents have always paid their rent and they are model tenants. However, because of loopholes in the Residential Tenancies Act and the fact the Covid-related ban on evictions is linked only to level 5 restrictions, these ten individuals and families will be knocking on the door of Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council this week saying they are to be made homeless. They are in a building where, in the same complex, there are ten apartments

that have been sitting empty for two years. The tenants are asking why they need to be evicted and why they cannot continue living there. Does the Tánaiste recognise this is fundamentally wrong and measures need to be taken to stop perfectly good tenants from being thrown out on the street?

The Tánaiste: I appreciate the Deputy may have raised this matter before but it is not a case with which I am familiar. I certainly will let the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, know the Deputy has raised it in the Dáil and I will try to get him a proper reply from the Minister.

Deputy Cathal Berry: I have a brief question on the Defence (Amendment) Bill 2020, Report Stage of which was scheduled to take place in the Dáil before Christmas. It is March now and we still have not had sight of it. I fully appreciate the delays caused by the third wave of the pandemic, but perhaps the Tánaiste might have an indicative date for when the Bill is likely to come back before the Dáil. It is badly and urgently needed by the Reserve Defence Force.

The Tánaiste: I am advised we are not yet ready to bring forward that Bill on Report Stage. There are some delays and issues that need to be worked out. I will arrange for a written reply to be sent to the Deputy in the next couple of days explaining the situation.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: There is huge inequity in the scheme of funding to support artists, especially single artists, arts centres, dance schools and other groups like that. This scheme is under the remit of the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media, Deputy Catherine Martin. The application process is the same as under the old system we had prior to the pandemic. It needs to be adapted and changed because the Arts Council and several other larger groups have got huge funding, sometimes from two or three different strands of funding, while groups such as the South Tipperary Arts Centre in Clonmel, dance schools and different festival groups in Tipperary are denied funding, as well as the single artists who have got no supports. The work of all of these people and groups is of huge benefit to communities and society. We need to change the funding application process to a new system that will take cognisance of those people and artists and the concerts and festivals they run every year. We need a sense of hope that we will be out of the pandemic and can have some festivals this year, but those involved cannot get the funding. The Arts Council got tens of millions in funding. It is not fair or transparent and it is not an equal playing field.

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for his question. The Minister, Deputy Martin, is working on some new schemes at the moment, one for live performance and another for musicians. Perhaps it is possible, as part of this, she will take into account the Deputy's views.

Deputy Michael McNamara: The only announcement of new flight routes out of Ireland for the past 12 months have been out of Northern Ireland. Today, eight new routes were announced out of Belfast City Airport by Ryanair, which, along with Aer Lingus, has largely moved its operations out of this jurisdiction. In this State, we have had only base closures and flight route cancellations. Is any of this ringing alarm bells for the Government? Is the Tánaiste concerned the net effect of the restrictions the Government has introduced, which are limited to ports and airports, is merely to drive up business for Northern Irish airports at the expense of airports in this State and the people they employ?

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for his question. It does ring alarm bells for the Government, quite frankly. Here in the Republic, south of the Border, anybody arriving through a port or airport has to have a negative PCR test and must quarantine at home or, in some cases, will

soon have to quarantine in a hotel. There is a very different approach in Northern Ireland. For people arriving there from Britain and, in the future, from other parts of Europe and other parts of the world, potentially, there is no requirement they show a negative PCR test and no requirement for mandatory quarantine at home or in a hotel. There are members of the Sinn Féin Party in the Chamber and I ask them to use their influence in the Northern Ireland Executive, which is co-chaired by that party, to change this policy.

Deputy Michael McNamara: I am talking about legislation in this State, from this Government.

The Tánaiste: The reason this is happening is we have a different regime south of the Border. We have decided to restrict international travel and aviation severely on public health grounds-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Thank you, Tánaiste. I must move on to the next speaker.

The Tánaiste: -----whereas the reverse approach is being taken in Northern Ireland. It was the same last summer when the Northern Ireland Executive agreed a green list of 60 countries, supported by Sinn Féin and the DUP-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We are over time. Tá mé ag bogadh ar aghaidh.

The Tánaiste: -----and that contributed enormously to the Spanish strain coming into this country and seeding the second wave.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Tá mé ag bogadh ar aghaidh. An Teachta Danny Healy-Rae.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I respectfully wish to highlight the problems with forestry felling licences. Very few are being granted despite the Bill that was passed recently in the Dáil. Munster Joinery employs 1,400 people on the Cork-Kerry border and has done so for years. Kelly's of Ballydesmond has been supplying the timber to the Munster Joinery plant for many years. However, since 9 September last year, Kelly's has not brought one stick of timber into that plant. The company has put in 27 applications for felling licences but none of them has been granted. One of those licence applications goes back to 2013. A very honest man from Rathmore is being denied his application since 2013.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy. We are over time.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: Are people in the forestry service dragging their heels?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I ask the Deputy for his co-operation. He has put his question. Deputy Michael Collins has a question on the same issue.

Deputy Michael Collins: There is a very serious issue with forestry felling. We have a crisis because an objector has held up the whole process. In some cases I know of, a licence cannot be got where forests have been blown due to storms. There is a very worrying situation at GP Wood in Cork, which employs 500 people, because it has a massive shortage of timber. Another growing worry is the Government's targets for growing forestry will not be met because farmers are running a mile from forestry at present. The problem is there are so many restrictions attached to any new licences that might be given. I plead with the Tánaiste to intervene on this issue.

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The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputies for raising this important issue. A big part of our climate action strategy is to increase the amount of land under the cover of forestry. That will not be possible if we are living in a country where it is virtually impossible to get a licence to plant or fell. I know many people are experiencing that at the moment. It is something the Government is apprised of and it relates to certain court cases. The Minister of State, Senator Hackett, who is totally committed to sustainable forestry, is working very hard on a solution.

Deputy David Cullinane: It has been reported today that 300 extra training places for doctors that were funded and put in place in the earlier part of the pandemic look set now to be cancelled. Those places were launched by the Tánaiste, when he was Taoiseach, in April last year. Having 300 fewer doctors working in the Irish healthcare system at a time when we have a huge crisis is not what should be happening. The Irish Medical Organisation has written to the HSE asking for the funding to be restored and for those places to go ahead. Will the Tánaiste back that call and make sure it happens?

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy. I am going to check this out. I only read about this yesterday. What I launched this time last year was a one-off announcement that we provide an extra 200 or 300 internships, particularly for medical students from overseas who train in Ireland and often struggle to get an internship. I had hoped that would continue. It seems it is not and I do not know why. I do think we treat overseas doctors and foreign medical students unfairly in Ireland, and that is not right. I will check it out over the next couple of days and see what I can do.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I want to raise the situation of Abigail McQuillan from Blackrock in Dundalk. Her mum, Deborah, made contact with my office. Abigail is 16 and is getting ministerially approved cannabis from a London clinic through a pharmacy in Newry.

1 o'clock

She has Lennox–Gastaut syndrome, which is life-changing. She has been on the product for nearly six months. It is usually imported from the Netherlands for €5,000 but it is being obtained for €600 per month. Ms Deborah McQuillan has dealt with the HSE, including the primary care reimbursement service. My office has dealt with the matter multiple times and we are told further information is needed. One is not told the exact information required. We just need this issue dealt with and the system streamlined.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We are dealing with promised legislation and the programme for Government.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Yes, but this is about reimbursement. Could the Tánaiste deal with that?

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy. I am sorry to hear about the experience his constituent is having. I am afraid I do not have any information on the particular issue. Reimbursement is a matter for the HSE. I will certainly let the Minister for Health know the matter was raised in the Dáil.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I want to raise an anomaly with the Tánaiste. The Government provided clarity to leaving certificate students on 17 February. Five days before that, on 12 February, the window for external applicants to apply for leaving certificate 2021 closed unbeknown to many. I have a constituent who sat the leaving certificate 2020 examinations

in November and wants to repeat one subject in leaving certificate 2021, but has missed the window. Every other year, there is a late application opportunity but it does not seem to exist this year. Could the Tánaiste follow up with the Minister for Education and perhaps the State Examinations Commission because I do not seem to be getting anywhere with them?

The Tánaiste: I will get that checked out. I will let the Minister for Education, Deputy Foley, know the Deputy raised the matter here, and we will see whether we can find a solution.

Deputy Chris Andrews: Mr. Julian Assange has done the world a huge service by exposing crimes and human rights violations in Iraq and Afghanistan. He deserves everybody's gratitude, not incarceration. He has suffered and has been tortured. Will the Tánaiste raise his case with the British ambassador and call for and demand his release?

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: "If wars can be started by lies, peace can be started by truth," according to Mr. Julian Assange. The case of Mr. Assange is very simple. Acting as a journalist and publisher in co-ordination with *The Guardian*, *Der Spiegel* and *The New York Times*, he exposed major war crimes by US forces and their allies. The National Union of Journalists has said the charges seek to criminalise activity that for many of its members is their daily work. As Mr. Assange is not an American citizen, his extradition by the British Government would mean that the US would have *carte blanche* across the globe to persecute journalists and publishers for revealing state crimes. I ask the Tánaiste to raise his case with the British ambassador and the US Administration.

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputies for raising this issue. I will ask the Minister for Foreign Affairs to provide them with a written response.

Deputy Martin Kenny: I was delighted to hear the Tánaiste's reply a few moments ago on the "RTÉ Investigates" programme last night. We all believed GDPR would protect people's identity and data, yet we find it is now being used to deny them their data. It is about time that we did something about this. I have been in contact with constituents who have been told they were adopted, but nothing else. There is a blank. The horror of that is really concerning. We have a system that actually denies people information about their own data and lives. To use GDPR for this is totally inappropriate. The legal basis on which it is being done needs to be checked by the Government. It needs to publish the reason it can be done in that way.

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy. All of us in this House, when we voted for and supported GDPR, the new European law on personal data, understood it would mean that people would have access to their personal information, that it would be protected and that it would be corrected where it was wrong. The law on people who have been adopted, both legally and illegally, has been interpreted in a different way. In fairness to Tusla, it is just following the law as it understands it so the responsibility falls on the Government and Oireachtas to resolve this. I am aware that the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, Deputy O'Gorman, is committed to doing exactly that.

Deputy Richard Bruton: Chonaiceamar radharc uafásach an tseachtain seo caite ar shráideanna Bhaile Átha Cliath. We were all appalled by the scenes on the streets in Dublin last weekend and the violent disorder targeted at the Garda, which has served us so well in this very difficult pandemic. It showed total disregard for the more than 4,000 people who have lost their lives. How can we prevent a repeat of this sort of incident? Can we look at the role of social media and the misinformation that is being spread encouraging people to join such protests?

Can we move against those organising such displays of violence and disorder?

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: On a related issue, I have raised the Garda Síochána compensation (malicious injuries) Bill many times. The Bill appears to have become more urgent and important following the events on the streets last week. Can a special effort be made to expedite its enactment?

The Tánaiste: Gabhaim buíochas leis na Teachtaí as a gcuid ceisteanna. I am told the Garda Síochána Bill will be published in this session, an seisiún seo. On Deputy Bruton's question, there are two ways we can deal with this. In the first instance, it is a question of Garda action. It is unlawful both to organise and participate in these gatherings so Garda action to prevent them and police them is part of the solution. Another part is putting pressure on digital platforms to take down sites that promote violence or encourage people to break the public health regulations. I have made contact with the platforms on that and, in fairness to some of them, they have already taken action and taken down some of the sites.

Deputy Brian Leddin: Today is World Engineering Day. After this contribution, I will be speaking at an Engineers Ireland event to celebrate the role of engineering in building Ireland's sustainable future. The Tánaiste has a personal interest in the issue of innovation. I commend him on the work he is doing in his Department. As an engineer, I recognise the significant contribution Irish engineers will make to our economy and society as we tackle the challenges of energy and mobility, in particular, and also the contribution they will make to the global effort to mitigate carbon emissions. The Government has committed to developing a long-term sustainable funding model for higher education. Does the Government agree that this is critical to ensuring we can continue to have a supply of engineers to meet the enormous challenges faced by our country?

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for giving me the opportunity to acknowledge that today is World Engineering Day. I acknowledge the enormous contribution that engineers make to strengthening our economy and making it a better place, particularly when it comes to housing and infrastructure. I very much agree that finding a sustainable model for higher education is essential because we need to continue to educate people and train people for the professions of the future. Engineering is one of those.

Deputy Jackie Cahill: Thankfully we are seeing clear evidence that Covid-19 vaccines are working. Now that those most at risk in nursing homes and the elderly in the community are becoming increasingly protected from the dangers of Covid-19, it is time to do what we can to tackle loneliness and isolation among older people. It is time to ease the restrictions on nursing home visits. I fully accept these were needed in the past. The general population sees signs of hope that the vaccination process is working. I would like us to reopen our day care centres for the elderly living in the community, some of whom depend on those centres for meals and hygiene services and to serve as a social outlet. It is 12 months since most elderly people living at home had a chance to avail of these day care services. Since most of the elderly population is now vaccinated, we should seriously consider reopening these services as a matter of priority. It would also help to tackle the growing mental health pandemic among the elderly. I urge the Tánaiste to have these services opened as quickly as possible and to allow visits to nursing homes. The population in general sees that our vaccine programme is working and that we are on the road back to normality.

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy. I very much appreciate the sentiments. I am sympa-

thetic to them. At the moment, it is too soon for us to make those kinds of decisions and calls. The next decision date is 5 April. In the run-up to that date, the decisions in question are the kinds of decisions we will consider in consultation with NPHE, the public health doctors and the scientific advisers. There has to be a dividend for being vaccinated and a benefit for people who are vaccinated. We need more data and we want to see the cases in the community come down more.

Deputy Paul Donnelly: I bring to the Tánaiste's attention the difficulties with the housing assistance payment, HAP, scheme for those living on the border between Dublin 15 in our constituency and Meath. A constituent came forward to me who was looking at a house less than a hundred metres from the Meath border, so close that it has a Dublin 15 Eircode. The problem is that if she was on the Fingal payment, she would get €1,250. Unfortunately, with Meath it is €975. I ask that we make the HAP system more flexible when dealing with situations like this, particularly in the midst of a housing crisis.

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy. I have come across similar cases. I am not sure if it is the exact same constituent. I will raise it with the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage on behalf of us both. It is a hard one to solve because any time a boundary is moved, the same issue arises. If the Dublin 15 figure is applied in Clonee, why not apply it to Dunboyne and then Dunshaughlin? These things are always difficult but the Deputy makes a good point.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: We have put in place huge supports for businesses during this pandemic but we have not done enough for those who do not have a fixed premises. I am thinking of many people in small businesses or who are self-employed who might have a catering truck that operates at festivals or events. Will the Government bring forward supports for them? They have fixed costs but not a fixed premises. The business aid scheme was aimed to perhaps help them but I have yet to see the details on that. I ask for the details to be brought forward.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: In Limerick, people going out on their walks could go to the coffee trucks and the rest and get their cup of coffee. The licensing was not in place for these and they were all closed down because of licensing rules. We need to relax licensing rules for pop-up coffee trucks so people can go out for a walk and have a cup of coffee and so these businesses are supported.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: We have been asking people to spend local and stay local for the summer, but a few weeks ago Fáilte Ireland announced support schemes for outdoor dining and infrastructure with local authorities. My issue is they picked eight areas, namely, Dublin, Killarney, Limerick, Waterford, Galway, Cork, Athlone and Kilkenny. They forgot the Carlows, and small counties like my own are struggling to make ends meet and are being forgotten when there are grant supports like that in conjunction with local authorities. Will the Tánaiste go back to Fáilte Ireland and make sure everyone gets these grants? It is unfair to single out eight locations and leave out the rest.

The Tánaiste: I am sure the Deputy will not begrudge Kilkenny being one of the eight areas that benefited from those grants, but she makes a reasonable point as to why Carlow should be included as well. I will take that up with Fáilte Ireland.

On the small business aid scheme that Deputy McAuliffe raised, that will be launched next week or so and it is a cash grant to help those businesses with fixed costs. It will only apply to businesses that have a rateable premises, and I acknowledge that raises an issue for people

whose business is home-based or based on vehicles that have to be taxed and insured. I will look at that. The new scheme is not the last scheme the Government will bring in.

Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh: On page 78 of the programme for Government, there is a commitment to enshrining disability rights by finalising the legislation required following Ireland's ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. I note the Disability (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2016 lapsed on the dissolution of the previous Dáil and has not been restored. Will the Tánaiste give me an update on progress for legislating on this important issue?

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Ó Cathasaigh for raising this issue and acknowledge his interest in issues relating to people with disabilities and his advocacy in this area. I checked in advance and that Bill has not been restored to the Order Paper when the new Dáil was formed. There are issues around policy and principles that need to be worked out. I will ask the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, to provide more detail on that in the form of a written response.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: This is also in connection with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, especially in relation to a person who has been in contact with me, namely, Catherine Gallagher from Achill. She is 23 years of age and has undergone dozens of operations. She ploughed through college and has now been offered a scholarship for a PhD. She is told that if she takes up that PhD and scholarship, her disability benefits, medical card and travel pass will be taken from her. The Tánaiste has been Minister for Health and for Social Protection. Please tell me this cannot be right in this day and age, that can we have that barrier in front of people like Catherine Gallagher and many others who have been in contact with me.

Deputy Thomas Gould: We know that people with disabilities constitute one of the sectors that has suffered most due to Covid-19. I have been contacted by people with disabilities who are entrepreneurs, who want to start their own business or who want to get their businesses going again but there is a lack of support for them. Will the Tánaiste and the Government provide supports for people with disabilities to help get them up and running and put them on a level footing with everyone else? They need support, especially at this time.

The Tánaiste: On that latter question, if I recall correctly from my time as Minister for Social Protection, someone in receipt of the disability allowance can move over to the back to enterprise allowance and receive both social welfare payments and grant support to get their business up and running. Perhaps I will come back to the Deputy with some more information on that

On the issue raised by Deputy Conway-Walsh, a similar issue was raised by Deputy Dillon in our parliamentary party yesterday. I imagine it is the same case, and if it is, it sounds like a mistake. The Minister, Deputy Humphreys, will look into it. It would be a terrible thing for somebody with a disability who has qualified for a scholarship to do a PhD to find he or she would lose his or her welfare payments as a result. There must be a way around it and, if there is not, we ought to find one. I thank the Deputy for raising the issue.

An Ceann Comhairle: Sin deireadh le Ceisteanna ar Reachtaíocht a Gealladh agus ar a lán rudaí eile. Níor éirigh linn deichniúr den bhallraíocht a shroichint an tseachtain seo agus tá brón orm faoi sin.

Road Traffic (Amendment) (Personal Light Electric Vehicles) Bill 2021: First Stage

Deputy Alan Farrell: I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to regulate the use of personal light electric vehicles, including electric scooters and electrically assisted pedal cycles, and for that purpose to amend the Road Traffic Act 1961, to make a number of consequential amendments and to provide for related matters.

I seek leave to introduce the Road Traffic (Amendment) (Personal Light Electric Vehicles) Bill to provide for electrical scooters and electrical bicycles in Irish legislation. It is an important step forward in micromobility, which is a growing and innovative sector of the economy and one which I expect will play a greater role in our lives as we adapt to cleaner and more efficient technologies and transport methods in the fight against climate change.

In mid-2020, I began work on this legislation to address what I see as an urgent need to provide clarity to consumers, providers and law enforcement bodies in relation to e-scooters and certain e-bikes, which all Members of this House will have seen. They are a common sight on our streets and, without legislation, we run the risk of permitting devices which are unsafe or unsuitable for the Irish market. For example, during my research I was contacted by a provider of electric bikes who was made aware of a customer who had privately acquired a bike that exceeded 70 km/h when assembled. There are examples of e-scooters advertised on international websites as having speeds in excess of 50 km/h with availability in Ireland.

This Bill will seek to regularise these vehicles while providing regulations that will ensure their safe use on Irish roads, thus bringing Ireland in line with many of our European partners, and put us on a path to providing eco-friendly and sustainable microtransport options in our urban centres. Transport in Ireland is a changing sector and an area in which I believe we can make a real change in a relatively short amount of time. Micromobility will be fundamental to this, providing people with sustainable options for those last few kilometres of their journey. By adapting new technologies and making them safe, we can become a leader in using innovation, not only to meet our climate change target, but also to improve our villages and cities and make them more liveable. We have an opportunity here to encourage entrepreneurs and consumers to make a difference and make more sustainable choices. In the process we will grow new jobs, drive the economy forward and make our cities healthier.

Climate change will not be reversed with one Bill or with one sector meeting its goals. Instead, it will take a whole-of-government and a whole-of-society approach, working with businesses to help consumers make the best decisions possible. We have it within our power to try to negate the effects and avoid the worst-case scenarios in regard to climate change. Engaging with environmentally friendly technologies and transport options is one small piece of this puzzle. I hope it will ultimately see us become not only a leader in climate action but also, as an international community, pass a healthier planet on to our children.

Section 1 of the Bill defines the phrases contained within. Section 2 prescribes the necessary specifications with regard to electric scooters and electrically assisted pedal cycles for the purposes of the Bill. Those that do not meet the specifications will continue to be bound by the Road Traffic Acts 1961 to 2018, as other multipurpose vehicles, MPV. The section will allow for the Minister for Transport to prescribe other electrically-assisted vehicles as personal light electric vehicles, PLEV, which is important to allow innovators to innovate without the need

for further legislation.

Section 3 allows the Minister to prescribe certain specifications with regard to the weight, height, length or width of a personal light electric vehicle, or any class of such vehicle, for the purposes of section 2. Regulations under the section can prescribe a maximum or minimum amount in respect of any amount of measurement concerned. Section 4 prohibits the removal of, or tampering with, the speed-limiting device that shall be installed on all PLEVs, and it shall be offence to do so. Section 5 provides for the holding of a mobile phone while driving, with some minor exemptions, as an offence. Section 6 prohibits persons under the age of 16 from driving a personal light electric vehicle. The Minister may also prescribe an age greater than 16 years of age as the minimum age for the purposes of any particular class of personal light electric vehicle should he or she choose to do so.

Section 7 makes amendments to the Road Traffic Act 1961 with regard to the definitions. Sections 8 and 9 amend the Finance (Excise Duties) (Vehicles) Act 1952 to exempt PLEVs from the requirement with regard to motor tax and vehicle registration. Section 10 gives the Road Safety Authority, RSA, an express function with regard to providing guidance on the safe operation of personal light electric vehicles. Section 11 provides for a number of consequential amendments. Section 12 is a standard provision and provides for the Minister to make powers of regulation under the Bill. Finally, section 13 is a standard form provision and provides for the Short Title of the Bill, collective citations, constructions and commencement of the Bill.

In conclusion, it would be remiss of me not to mention prior attempts to legislate for electric scooters taken in the Thirty-second Dáil. Deputy MacSharry, former Deputy, Mr. Noel Rock and many other Members should be commended on their efforts to raise the issue in debates and parliamentary questions. Thankfully, we now have a far more responsive Minister in the Department of Transport.

The Bill took an unfortunate length of time to reach the floor of the House after I completed it. I would, however, like to thank not only my own staff and, indeed, outside counsel for their assistance, but also the Office of Parliamentary Legal Advisers for its wonderful work in 2020. I also thank members of the Green Party, Fianna Gael and Fianna Fáil for insisting that this provision be included in the programme for Government and, indeed, for our collective membership for endorsing it. I commend the Bill to the House.

An Ceann Comhairle: Is the Bill being opposed?

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): No.

Question put and agreed to.

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

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

Question put and agreed to.

Covid-19 Vaccine Roll-out Programme: Statements

An Ceann Comhairle: We move now to the next item of business, which is statements and questions and answers with the Minister for Health on the vaccine roll-out programme. I welcome the Minister, Deputy Donnelly, and the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, who is also with us. The Minister has 20 minutes.

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I welcome the opportunity to discuss the vaccine roll-out with the House. By the end of this week, approximately 500,000 vaccine doses will have been administered. Our aim has been and remains to administer vaccines as they arrive into the country, while maintaining a small buffer to ensure people get their second dose as scheduled. This aim is being met.

At the start of this week, we had received delivery of approximately 520,000 vaccine doses. By the end of this week, approximately 500,000 of these will have been administered. I am delighted to be able to share with the House today that cohort 4, that is, those with underlying conditions putting them at very high-risk, will begin to be vaccinated next week. It is really good and welcome news. It is a complex group and complex work, planning and engagement is going on. The HSE is currently working through the details on how these patients will be contacted and where they will be vaccinated. I am sure it is a development we all welcome in the House today, however.

We have been able to do all this, in terms of the number of vaccines that have been rolled out, thanks to what really is an army of vaccinators, including our school and community vaccination teams, thousands in general practice, including GPs, practice nurses and administrative staff, hospital-based healthcare workers, both clinical and administrative, medical students, the fantastic support of the Defence Forces, the involvement of voluntary organisations, such as the Order of Malta Ireland, staff in nursing homes and other residential and daycare facilities and many more right across the country. It has been, remains and will continue to be a truly national effort.

There are challenges, of course. The HSE is managing a vaccination programme with uncertain supplies arriving, particularly from AstraZeneca. I remain concerned about the ability of AstraZeneca to deliver on schedule and at the agreed volumes. The HSE is managing a complex distribution network involving 1,300 GP practices across the country, with vaccines that must be handled very carefully, and in the case of Pfizer, a vaccine whereby there are five days from when the freezers are opened in Dublin to when the vaccine can be administered.

The HSE is managing a vaccination programme for which the clinical advice is updated on a regular basis, as it should be, as new studies and new evidence emerges from around world providing our experts, namely, the national immunisation advisory committee, NIAC, the National Public Health Emergency Team, NPHET, and the HSE with the most up-to-date information.

Yet, in spite of all this complexity and uncertainty in this rapidly evolving situation, thanks to the efforts of everybody involved in the national vaccination programme, Ireland has consistently had one of the fastest roll-outs anywhere in the European Union. It is very important that we acknowledge the work of the vaccination teams across Ireland which has made that possible. It is no mean feat. We have achieved that while, at the same time, prioritising the most vulnerable.

Thanks to the efforts of all the people involved - 6% of our population have now had at least one dose - there has been a huge reduction in Covid-19 infections in nursing homes and health-

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care settings and the vast majority of people aged 85 and older will have received their first dose by the end of this week. Most of our front-line healthcare workers will also have received at least their first dose by the end of this week. Our vaccination programme is only 65 days old. Much has, therefore, been achieved.

Next week, the European Medicines Agency, EMA, will make its decision on the Janssen vaccine. This is a single-dose vaccine serving to further enhance Ireland's vaccine portfolio and facilitate the continued acceleration of the programme, which is something we all want. Our hope is that the EMA will authorise the Janssen vaccine. Last week, I received the Government's approval to purchase additional doses of Moderna and opt in to future advanced purchase agreements with both Novavax and Valneva. This will take Ireland's total vaccine supply to over 18 million doses. When one accounts for the fact that the Janssen vaccine will be a single dose, we have advance purchased enough to fully vaccinate more than 10 million people.

Ireland will also be contributing vaccine to other countries via the EU's contribution to COVAX. This is only right and ethical. The pandemic will not end until everyone has access to a vaccine. At a meeting of EU health ministers earlier this week, I called on the EU to do more and to be the leading force globally when it comes to a just global vaccine programme. We need to do this because it is the ethical thing to do and we need the world vaccinated to have the best possible defence against this awful virus.

The Covid-19 vaccine allocation strategy sets out how the population should be prioritised for vaccination. The initial strategy was approved by the Government in December. Last week, I announced that the strategy had been updated to reflect emerging evidence on the disease. When compiling the initial vaccine priority list, the national immunisation advisory committee, NIAC, listed several conditions associated with increased risk of severe disease and death. It was indicated at the time that the allocation groups may be updated in the future, if necessary, in light of new evidence. In recent months, we have seen the emergence of the B117 variant of the disease which is more transmissible and more severe in terms of hospitalisation.

Thankfully, we now know much more about the disease than we did a few short months ago. There is a growing body of national and international evidence on which comorbidities present the greatest risk for those who contract Covid-19. NIAC has used these findings to inform its revised recommendations. The updated strategy identifies those with underlying conditions at either very high or high risk of severe disease or death as a result of contracting Covid-19. Priority will be given to these groups as the programme progresses. Vaccination for cohort 4, the group deemed to be at very high risk due to underlying conditions, will commence next week.

Accelerating the vaccination of those with certain pre-existing medical conditions adheres to the ethos of the vaccination programme to minimise harm and ensure equitable access to vaccination. The primary aim of the Covid-19 vaccination programme remains unchanged. We are continuing to vaccinate those most likely to suffer severe disease and, sadly, death as a result of contracting Covid-19. The changes made are based on the latest clinical and medical advice that those who are being prioritised would suffer the worst outcomes if they were to contract the disease. The approach is also consistent with the advice given to EU member states by the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control. The vaccination programme is being adapted to account for NIAC's recommendations to ensure those who are most vulnerable continue to be prioritised. NIAC will continue to monitor data around the disease and emerging evidence on effectiveness of vaccines on a rolling basis.

The Covid-19 vaccination programme is truly a national effort. Up to 1,300 general practices are participating in the vaccination programme at this stage. This week is also seeing those aged between 80 and 84 begin to receive invitations to attend for vaccination.

There is significant demand for and confidence in Covid-19 vaccines from the public. Up to 86% of the public now indicate they will definitely or probably seek the vaccination when it is available. There will be an extensive communications campaign in an effort to further increase uptake. We anticipate significantly increased vaccine supply from next month. Preparations continue to be made in order to ensure this can be administered without delay.

We continue to build the appropriate capability, processes and systems to quickly distribute all vaccines as supply increases. As of last Monday, 8,629 vaccinators are trained. I signed a statutory instrument last week to enable registered optometrists and dentists to administer Covid-19 vaccine. Large vaccination centres are already in operation in Dublin's Helix Theatre, Cork's Munster Technological University campus and Galway's Merlin Park. These will be joined by many more in the coming period with 37 sites having been selected including one for each county.

It is just over a year since this disease resulted in the declaration of a public health emergency by the World Health Organization. Over the past year, it has inflicted an enormous toll of grief and hardship on so many, here and around the world. While we must remain vigilant and continue to adhere to public health measures, the vaccination programme continues to be a source of hope. Continuing to maintain reduced personal contacts is extremely difficult for the public, particularly as the weather improves after enduring an incredibly difficult winter. As vaccine supply increases, however, we have genuine cause for optimism. Vaccine availability is anticipated to increase significantly from April. From that point, we expect 1 million doses to be administered each month, subject to the delivery of contracted supplies. As we progress through spring and into the summer, I am confident there are better days ahead.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): Ireland's vaccination programme is designed to protect the most vulnerable in society, beginning with older residents of long-term care facilities. I acknowledge the huge contribution made by all involved in establishing and commencing roll-out of the vaccination programme. We are prioritising our most vulnerable to Covid-19 infection. Health workers who care for them come first in the priority list for vaccination. Priority groups were approved by the Government based on public health and ethical guidelines.

The vaccine is being rolled out to the initial cohorts outlined in the vaccine allocation strategy including residents of long-term residential care facilities, front-line healthcare workers and those aged 70 and over. As of 28 February, 159,350 doses have been administered in long-term care facilities and 62,654 residents have been fully vaccinated.

When a resident has been infected with Covid-19 or there has been an outbreak in a facility, vaccination may be deferred until it is safe to do so. The HSE continues to actively follow up with those residents and facilities where vaccination was deferred. As the Minister of State with special responsibility for older people, I assure the House that every resident in long-term care facilities will be offered vaccination once it is deemed safe for them to receive it.

The roll-out of the second vaccine dose to the majority of residents and staff in nursing homes is nearing completion. Vaccinations in residential and-or congregated settings which

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were not included in the first series of the vaccine programme, such as unregistered voluntary and religious order service providers, will be completed as soon as possible.

On 15 February, we began the process of vaccinating older people living in the community, beginning with those over the age of 85. We expect to be in a position to have administered a first dose to the majority of those aged 85 and above by the end of this week. Following those aged over 85, the focus then moves to vaccinate people aged between 80 and 84 in a timely and efficient manner. Those aged between 80 and 84 will begin to be invited for vaccination from this week. All over 70s who wish to be vaccinated will be contacted by their GP and will be fully vaccinated as a priority cohort in the coming months.

The vaccination programme is truly a national effort. By the end of this week, approximately 1,300 general practices will have participated in the programme. Without the assistance of GPs, it would not be possible to reach the most vulnerable in our community. I thank GPs and their staff for their ongoing efforts which will facilitate the delivery of our programme.

The vaccination programme continues to focus on vaccinating those most at risk of poor outcomes as a result of contracting Covid-19. The primary objective of the vaccination programme is to reduce mortality and morbidity which, in turn, will protect the healthcare system from becoming overwhelmed. The vaccine allocation strategy deemed those most at risk to be those over the age of 65 and residing in long-term residential care. I welcome the progress made with regard to protecting this vulnerable cohort. As the Minister of State with responsibility for mental health, I am pleased that NIAC's updated vaccine allocation strategy was approved by the Government last week. The strategy will see those with severe mental health illness, including schizophrenia, bipolar disorder and severe depression, being prioritised for vaccination. The vaccination programme has already demonstrated agility in adapting to changing clinical advice, including the decision to prioritise the use of mRNA vaccines to those over the age of 70. The vaccine programme will make the necessary adjustments to accommodate the updated strategy, ensuring that those who are most vulnerable continue to be prioritised.

The pandemic has been a profoundly challenging and stressful time. It is of vital importance that mental health services continue to operate during this period. Despite the increased strain placed on the healthcare system, specialist mental health services are continuing to operate at between 85% and 90% of pre-Covid levels. I am pleased to inform the Dáil that Covid cases in residential mental health care settings continue to decline. As of 19 February, cases had reduced by more than half. The majority of cases that are being reported relate to staff, rather than residents. The majority of eligible staff and residents over 65 in mental health centres have received a vaccination. Second doses have been administered to service users and staff in some centres. Progress is continuing to be made with regard to those who are yet to be fully vaccinated.

This will be the largest vaccination programme in the history of the State. Remarkable progress has been made in a relatively short period of time. Our immediate priority, and our complete focus, is to look after the most vulnerable and our front-line healthcare workers who have worked so hard in the battle against Covid-19. They are being vaccinated as quickly and safely as possible. Supply of vaccines will be the only limiting factor.

The vaccination programme will take a great national partnership to complete. Pharmacists, GPs, all doctors, nurses, paramedics, nursing home staff and many healthcare professionals, as the Minister, Deputy Stephen Donnelly, outlined, have a role to play in the vaccination

programme. We are now in a position where we have three authorised vaccines being used to protect our most vulnerable, something which would have been unthinkable until recently. I wish to thank everyone who has brought us to this point. The initial vaccine roll-out is focused on protecting the most vulnerable among us, but as supply increases in the coming weeks and months, vaccination will ultimately be extended to everyone who wants it.

Deputy David Cullinane: I am sharing time with my colleague, Deputy Ward.

We are at a very important point in the battle against Covid. In fact, I would argue we are at a critical point in relation to suppressing this virus. We have had debates in this Chamber on a range of different ingredients to keep driving down community transmission and then keeping the numbers low. That includes having a first-class test and trace system. It obviously includes sufficient checks and controls at ports and airports. As the Minister and the Minister of State are aware, we have disagreements in those areas. The roll-out of the vaccine must be front and centre. Everybody in this State wants that process to be a success because it is a route out of the crisis we are in and it gives people hope that we will have some level of normality back in our lives in the next number of months.

However, it must be said that there are problems. It is our job to raise those problems with the Minister. Those problems are not only on the supply side but there have been some problems on the supply side. We are hearing that some countries, such as Denmark, Hungary and Austria, are ahead of us in vaccinating their population. Those countries have hit a target of 9%. We are on 6%. There are reports of some countries going outside of the EU procurement process and doing side deals and additional deals with pharmaceutical companies, and yet there is no sense that there are any additional vaccines coming our way in this State.

There were issues last week. Much of the evidence was anecdotal, but I spoke to many GPs who did not receive their vaccines on time. It was right across the State. County Monaghan, in particular, was bad, but there were many examples. I dealt directly with GPs and with the HSE in trying to resolve the problem. That was problematic. It showed, if there are problems at that level when we are only rolling it out for the over 85s, what will happen when we get to the general population roll-out. There are problems and I will get to some of those in a moment.

There are also issues in relation to transparency and daily reporting. We are still not getting sufficient information to give us confidence that there is absolute transparency about the number of vaccines in the country, the number of people vaccinated and the number of vaccines which are in storage on a daily or weekly basis. The absence of that information and transparency is problematic. We have mixed targets. We saw this week where targets were not met. We also have some groups, such as carers, who are not defined as a distinct cohort. These are all real problems that have been raised with us on a daily basis.

I have a number of questions for the Minister. The first relates to the procurement side of this matter. Many EU states have now gone outside of the current EU procurement process. Can the Minister confirm that has happened and can he state why we are not looking to increase supply as well? If other countries are able to do it, why is it not possible for this State to be able to do it? I want solidarity across the European Union. I want global solidarity but when people watch other member states going outside of the process, including Germany, they are asking reasonable questions. What is the Irish Government doing? What is Deputy Stephen Donnelly, as Minister for Health, doing? Is the Minister being proactive enough in ensuring that we maximise the supply side of the vaccine? As a first question, I put that to the Minister.

Is it the case that other member states have gone outside of the process? Is that allowed and if it is, what are we doing about it in terms of increasing the supply side for this State?

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: I thank Deputy Cullinane for the question and for his remarks. The information I have is that a very small number of EU countries are looking at going outside the EU process. The Deputy referenced Hungary, for example. My understanding is that they have elected to use a vaccine that has not been authorised by the European Medicines Agency, EMA. I would hope one thing we would all agree on in the House is that, regardless of where the vaccines come from, we would stick to vaccines that are authorised by the EMA. It is a very small number.

If the Deputy looks at the table of countries in the EU and the total doses administered per head of population, he will find that Ireland has been consistently very close to the top. That is because we are getting them out as quickly as they are coming in and we are drawing down the total number of vaccines that are available to us through the process. As I stated in my opening remarks, we have now approved advance purchase of nearly 18.5 million doses. However, the Deputy's question is a reasonable one, and one I have engaged with the task force on as well to see if there are legitimate mechanisms in parallel with the EU process whereby we could secure vaccines that are validated and have been authorised by the EU.

It is worth restating the process we are going through so far. I know there is frustration all around the world in that everybody wants many vaccines as quickly as possible. It has given us access to a level of vaccine which, many people tell me, simply would not have been possible if we had tried to proceed on our own.

Deputy David Cullinane: I come to the reporting - the daily reporting and the transparency. Why, even at this point, we do not have, even on a weekly basis, information on how many vaccines have arrived, how many vaccines have been administered and how many are in storage? Such information would give people confidence and it would ensure that we have full transparency. There is some reporting but it does not go far enough. Would the Minister commit to reviewing that issue and enhancing the reporting to ensure we can say to people that the vaccines are coming in, people are getting vaccinated as quickly as possible and there is not a situation where we have any amount of vaccines in storage?

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: I certainly can commit to talking to the task force and the HSE about this. If I may, I will respectfully push back a little here. I take Deputy Cullinane's point. He is asking about supply coming in and we will look at that. In terms of the doses administered, in fairness to the people who are running the programme, the House asked for weekly numbers and then daily numbers. I committed to that and that was done. They go up online every day. I asked for them to be put onto the tracker app as well so that people could access them. The Members of the Oireachtas are getting a daily briefing as well. In fairness to the teams running this, much effort has been put into it. Of course, if there is more information the House would like to have, I will endeavour to make that available.

Deputy David Cullinane: There are a lot of questions I want to get through, and I thank the Minister for his brevity in responding. Some GPs have claimed in recent weeks they did not get their vaccines in time, and many of us have been contacted by relatives of older people who were in GP surgeries expecting to get their vaccine and it did not happen. Does the Minister have numbers on reported cases where GPs were due to get their vaccines on a certain day and it did not happen? I am sure that would be valuable information for the Minister so we can

learn lessons as we move on to the next numbers of cohorts. Are those data available and does the Minister know how many reported cases there were of GPs who were due to receive their vaccine on a certain day and it did not happen?

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: I thank the Deputy for that. On his previous point, I am publishing right now for the Oireachtas the deliveries to date so that, by the end of or even during this session, the latest figures, I believe for the start of this week, will be available. I certainly would like to see that published weekly for the very reasons given by the Deputy.

As to the GPs, there are approximately 1,300 GP practices involved and it was ramping up over a three-week period. The latest information I have as of this morning is that approximately 65 of the GP practices, which were practices with fewer than 200 patients over the age cohort, were not buddying up for various reasons. My understanding is these were smaller GP practices and, in some cases, due to location, it was very difficult for them to buddy up. These are all being contacted today and tomorrow and a delivery plan is being put in place so that they all get their deliveries next week.

Second, my understanding is there is a group of approximately 25 other practices with very small numbers of patients over 70 years of age, and the HSE is engaging with those practices. While the vast majority of the GP clinics got the deliveries - they may not have got them on the exact day but they did get them - there were a small number where there were issues in the supply chain and the HSE is working hard to resolve this.

Deputy David Cullinane: I will put my remaining questions in one block. Will the Minister outline to the House the new target dates for all the over-85s and all the over-70s to be vaccinated? We are now hearing some other countries in Europe may use the AstraZeneca vaccine.

We hear Britain is now examining the possibility of a third jab of the vaccine in the autumn. Is that something that is being considered in this State?

Regarding people who are housebound, and while I, as somebody who first raised this issue, welcome the move starting next week to have people with underlying medical conditions vaccinated, some of those will be housebound, as are some of the older people, and there are questions relating to GPs being part of that. Perhaps the Minister could answer that.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: I thank the Deputy. The target for the first dose for the over-85s was for the vast majority of them to have been done by the end of this week. There are a small number of GP practices, for the reasons I have just given, which did not receive their deliveries this week, and they will get them next week.

On the point, which the Deputy has raised before, about people who are housebound, the good news is GPs will be able to make, and are already making, house visits. The National Ambulance Service is being used as well. There was a question at the start as to whether the mRNA vaccines could be transported a second time. The clinical advice now is they can be.

On the Deputy's question on the over-70s, the answer is partly in the second part of his question. He quite rightly pointed out some countries are now electing to use AstraZeneca for the over-70s. There is emerging evidence from UK studies the national immunisation advisory committee, NIAC, is looking at at the moment. The clinical advice remains that the mRNA vaccines will be used for the 70-year-olds and older, but NIAC is always looking at emerging evidence. Certainly, it would be the case that, if it advised as per France, for example, which I

believe is now giving the vaccine for those above 65, it would accelerate the date.

This means, in answer to the Deputy's final question as to when the end date for that cohort will be, as with so much in this programme, it depends. It depends on the clinical advice and on the deliveries coming in.

Deputy Mark Ward: Because some of my time has already been eaten up, I will ask some questions and will appreciate if the Minister can get back to me in writing because he may not have time now.

The delivery of the vaccine to our citizens is of paramount importance in getting people back to work, allowing families and friends to meet up, enabling our children to get back to sports and to school, and basically in getting back to everything we took for granted before this pandemic reached our shores. Teething problems cannot be used as an excuse by this Government to explain away issues about the vaccination roll-out. They may have been an excuse or acceptable 12 months ago but not now when we have had more than a year to plan for these vaccine roll-outs.

The Minister mentioned, for example, that the HSE was in talks with the National Ambulance Service to see if something could be done in respect of vaccinating the over-85s who are confined to their own homes. Surely, these talks could have taken place months ago, and it is not as if the Minister has not had the time to do this. Did these talks include the ambulance service vaccinating other vulnerable groups in their own homes as we move forward? The next roll-out, for example, of 80 to 84-year-olds could be included.

As has already been stated, the vast majority of people are willing to take this vaccine when they know it works and is safe. Countless numbers of people's lives around the world have been saved by vaccines. Vaccination levels, however, have been dropping off over recent years. The Minister mentioned a public information roll-out. How will this be delivered to people who may not have access to broadband, to the Internet or to facilities through which they may be able to get that information? How will access to this information be rolled out to these people and to others who may be in vulnerable groups, such as Travellers, homeless people, and people who may have mental health or capacity issues? Those are some questions I would like answered.

Some issues have been brought to me locally. An elderly gentleman from Clondalkin was asked to go to the Helix on the other side of Dublin, which it would have taken him a couple of hours and two buses to get to, to get the vaccine. Another lady was told to go to her GP to receive the vaccine, and when she got there, the vaccine had not arrived. Another lady from Lucan, who works as a hospital cleaner, and her colleague, who is a security guard, have not received a vaccine despite working on the front line right throughout the pandemic. Will the Minister give me some reassurance on how these issues will be addressed? I will accept these answers in writing from the Minister.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): The Minister will respond in writing to the Deputy.

Deputy Alan Kelly: I am very interested in the process by which the three companies which are providing vaccines - we hope there will be more - are providing information on the numbers of vaccines they are giving us as a country. We have heard the Tánaiste saying 300,000 people a week will be vaccinated in April. I pray and hope there will be even more. Have we as a

country and the Minister been told in writing by each of the three companies - Pfizer, Moderna and AstraZeneca - how many vaccines they are going to provide us with for each of the three months, March, April and May?

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: I thank the Deputy. Yes is the answer. We have a provisional schedule week by week for all of the vaccines. The problem, as we are all becoming painfully aware, is that while the schedules for the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines have broadly come on time - there were one or two changes to the Pfizer schedule which we got at late notice, but by and large they have been coming in on time - there has been huge uncertainty around AstraZeneca, and it has been frustrating on a number of different levels. First, its deliveries are not always arriving when they are meant to. Second, we are receiving very late notice of that. Third, unfortunately, it has on more than one occasion forecast down the total volumes. AstraZeneca remains a very serious concern in terms of reliability and volume.

Deputy Alan Kelly: That is fair enough.

2 o'clock

I have a question on this. Obviously this is sent to the Minister in writing every week. Is it possible for the Minister to publish it every week? That would help us to help the Minister. He has a schedule for the next three months. Will he publish that schedule each week so that we can have transparency? Transparency is a big issue. If the Minister published it we could transparently see how many vaccines are coming in from each provider and how much is projected to come in for each month. Then we can estimate with regard to the various cohorts and work with the Minister. Will the Minister commit to doing this?

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: I will certainly commit to speaking to the Department, the task force and the HSE about it. We all want maximum transparency and I hope the Deputy would agree that on the supply side, a real effort has been made to make the data available. The challenge is that anything we publish will change. As we in here know, it has changed repeatedly. If we take this week as an example, a figure was given in good faith. The hope was to vaccinate 100,000 people this week. For one reason, and one reason only, it will be lower than that. This is because at the last minute, mid week, AstraZeneca said we will not get what we need. Unfortunately, how this is being portrayed by some is that the HSE has missed its targets whereas, in fact, that is not the case. The HSE's target is to get out what it gets in. The HSE is hitting its target. My concern, and perhaps it is something for us to consider further, is that even if we publish the forecasts at this level of detail they will change regularly. My concern is this could cause an awful lot of concern among the general public and it might erode trust. It could be down to just one company moving around its supplies all the time.

Deputy Alan Kelly: I understand where the Minister is coming from but I respectfully suggest it would actually do the opposite. We would all see it transparently. We could not be called hypocrites in this House because we would know we were receiving vaccines and we would know that everyone projected honestly based on the timelines they had at the moment those projections were stated publicly. Once that changed we could see it. I would say the Minister should not do it daily but once a week, every Monday, every Friday or whatever. I urge the Minister to take this suggestion on board for the very simple reason that it would help everyone. It would help in politics because we would have to say honestly how it had changed and it would be transparent. We would not be second-guessing the Minister or the HSE. I ask the Minister to take this on board. It would really help the HSE also.

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I will ask my next questions together. The Minister hit on my next question earlier. If we could get AstraZeneca approved for those aged over 70 it would change things and help with the timelines. When does the Minister expect that NIAC will update him on the use of AstraZeneca? I am not saying it will change its advice but I hope it will do so. When does the Minister see pharmacists in particular getting involved in vaccinations? I believe their role could be dialled up. Their access to the public and knowledge of the public and patients is pretty important.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: On the issue of deliveries perhaps we can discuss it further. It would require co-operation. For example, in good faith I gave a detailed target for September and that then moved because of AstraZeneca. Within an hour I was being accused of making false promises. If we are going to use forecast information my ask back is that all of us in the House use it accordingly because it has not always been used in that way.

On AstraZeneca, NPHEC will meet today. I do not believe there will be a recommendation from NIAC today but I know it is something we are keen on and NIAC is looking at. It may not make that recommendation but, in the context of the Deputy's question, if it does so it would accelerate vaccination of those aged over 70. With regard to pharmacists, cohort 3 is with GPs and the details for cohort 4, which comprises those at very high risk with underlying conditions, are still being worked out. The latest thinking is cohort 4 will be vaccinated by GPs and consultants at a mixture of GP practices and hospital settings because we are dealing with people with very serious conditions. I do not like hazarding a guess on these things because it tends to get one in trouble when it does not come true but very shortly thereafter, as we begin to ramp up to the more general population, the pharmacists will get involved.

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: We know that a lack of supply has been an issue in rolling out the vaccine. We also know there are extra supplies of vaccine in other countries. I ask the Minister not to consult with the task force but to mandate it to secure unilaterally extra supplies of vaccine for Ireland. The European Commission has said we are free to make these deals. Germany has done its own deal with Pfizer and it was followed by the Danes. The Danes and the Austrians are now in the first movers group with Israel for future vaccination roll-out. Sputnik V has arrived in Slovakia and there are rumours that the Czech Republic and the Austrians will follow. They are not waiting for EMA approval because they do not have to. Today, there are more than 1 million doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine in Germany not being used and 1.5 million doses in France are not being used. I ask the Minister to mandate the task force to get these supplies for Ireland.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: I thank the Deputy. I certainly share his desire to get as much vaccine into the country as possible. As a starting point, we would use vaccines authorised by the EMA. I can confirm the EMA has now put Sputnik on its rolling review, which is a step on the way to the manufacturers of Sputnik applying for conditional marketing authorisation. I have asked the task force to take a look at what other legitimate avenues might be available. Certainly if there are EU countries that do not want to use all of their AstraZeneca doses we will most certainly take them. There are some countries where the uptake of AstraZeneca has been poor, for sloppy reasons to be perfectly honest whereby the wrong information was put out. In fact, the emerging and ongoing evidence on AstraZeneca in the field is very positive. I fully agree with the thrust of what the Deputy is asking. If there are other supplies we can access certainly the task force will look to see what they may be.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: As the Minister is aware, the Limerick vaccination centre is

technically based in Clare at the Radisson. What would be the process by which the Minister would expedite the roll-out of the vaccine with an additional mass vaccination centre based within the boundaries of Limerick city and county? We have had 17,000 vaccines delivered to Limerick to date. I believe this is way behind other areas. It would make much sense at this point to publish a breakdown of the cohorts by county. It would provide a transparent system that would give huge extra confidence to the public in the vaccination programme.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: I thank the Deputy. With regard to a second larger vaccination centre for Limerick city and-or county, it is something that is kept under constant review for the whole country. If there is a demand for another centre one can be sourced and set up quite quickly. Remember the vaccinations centres are simply one part of the infrastructure. As we move out to the general populace, and particularly through April as we scale up to perhaps 250,000 vaccines a week, we will involve GP practices, pharmacies and vaccination centres. Every town in Limerick will have at least one option and probably multiple options, and many of the villages as well. I can assure the Deputy that if that is not enough, and if there is an obvious need for a second vaccination centre for the city and-or the county, that can be done.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: There was a question on the breakdown by county in terms of cohorts of vaccines being given out and a weekly breakdown of that.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: It is certainly something I can take up with the task force.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: I want to comment on the desire of people to have as much information as possible on the vaccine issue. I heard the Minister's answer earlier and I appreciate his bona fides on it. However, I think we are setting up a situation where we are being forced to manage a story that is ultimately in the control of the manufacturers. In many cases, open source data is a great solution in terms of communication with the public in other areas of public policy and we should adopt it here because it would give confidence to people. That open source data would also make transparent where are the issues and the blockages.

We cannot have enough coverage on the vaccine issue - more questions and answers, more briefings in the media, more opportunities for Professor MacCraith to be out and about and more up-to-date information. Even today, I see the Covid app has the details but it only has them updated to 1 March. The more updated information we have, the better.

I heard what the Minister said in regard to Germany and France's approval of the AstraZeneca vaccine for older age groups. While NIAC is looking at that, if there is a date on which the Minister expects it to make that decision, I would appreciate that.

We discussed in detail countries such as Denmark, Austria and Malta, which have looked elsewhere, outside the EU arrangements. I would encourage the Minister to do that because we are getting many queries into our offices in that regard.

It was great to see the Minister at the mass vaccination centre in DCU in my constituency. The publicity around that has resulted in many calls for vaccination centres in other places. Can the Minister give us the percentage of people who will be vaccinated in those centres compared to those to be vaccinated in GP practices, given the vast majority will be vaccinated much closer to people's homes in their communities? If we knew that percentage, it would bring greater clarity.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: I thank the Deputy. With regard to transparency, we will al-

ways endeavour to do as much as possible. I hope the House appreciates that real efforts have been made. There are daily updates online, daily updates on the tracker app and the Oireachtas gets a daily update. In my ten years in the Dáil, I do not remember ever getting a daily update from Government on anything. While we all want more information and I accept that, I hope the House appreciates that real efforts have been made and continue to be made in terms of transparency.

When it comes to forecasts of delivery, I reiterate what I said earlier. The forecast deliveries change all the time. They changed at least three times in the last week, for example, and AstraZeneca in the last seven days has changed its forecast to us three times. If we put out these forecasts and they get changed on a Monday, then get changed on a Thursday and then get changed on a Saturday, there is a real concern that people will say this programme is not under control when, in fact, all it would be is one company which, very frustratingly, has not been delivering accordingly. We want to make sure we get the balance and that we do not cause undue concern.

If we look, for example, at the coverage this week, something very simple happened. One figure went out for a forecast for administered vaccines but because of AstraZeneca not delivering, that was reduced, not by a lot but it was reduced by a bit. There was widespread coverage that the system was in trouble and certain Members of this House were on the media, giving out about it, attacking the HSE and attacking the Government. That was with one number for one forecast for one week. We have to try to get the balance right in terms of information that we know is going to change, and change regularly. We do not want to cause undue anxiety and we certainly do not want to erode confidence in the system.

With regard to the question of more centres, the situation in the Helix was absolutely phenomenal to see. It was incredible. It was like walking into a room of raw, undistilled hope. Certainly, if the right thing to do is to have more of them, we can certainly do that.

With regard to NIAC and the over-70s, that is being kept under review. Obviously, I do not want to pre-empt what it may say.

Deputy Colm Burke: I thank the Minister, his staff, all of the HSE personnel and the GPs who are working very hard in rolling out the vaccine. There are two issues I want to raise. Although it is a bit down the road from being delivered, the first issue concerns those in category 4, for example, patients on dialysis and people on chemotherapy treatment, who were brought from category 7 to category 4. I want to know which facilities will be used for the roll-out of the vaccines for them. There is a lot of confusion. The GPs do not know, the hospitals do not know and the clinics they are attending do not know. It is important that clarification is provided as soon as possible.

The second issue is in regard to Johnson & Johnson. It is very likely that it will receive approval on Thursday of next week, 11 March. What is the time period in which the Johnson & Johnson vaccine will be made available in Ireland? What is the level or number of doses that will be made available? It is a single-dose vaccine and would really reduce the workload. I ask that we get clarification on that.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: On cohort 4, the really good news, which I have just announced today, is that for cohort 4, which is people with underlying conditions who are deemed to be at very high risk of serious illness or fatality, that is going to start next week. The details are still being worked out and I ask the House to bear with us on that. The NIAC recommendation

happened very recently and from the moment it was made the HSE has been working through its clinical programmes, through its consultant teams and through its GP networks to identify these groups. These are groups and subgroups of patients all over the country, with quite a wide variety of complex conditions. As to exactly where they will be vaccinated, the current thinking is that it will probably be a combination of hospital settings, where that is appropriate, and GP settings, where that is appropriate. The details are being worked through at the moment.

In terms of Janssen, I share the Deputy's hope that it will be approved. We have seen what happened in the United States. I very much hope the dates the Deputy has given turn out to be correct. The task force is in very regular communication with Janssen. We have tentative dates but they are so tentative that I do not believe it would be useful to give them out right now. The thinking is that it would not be in March. We would be looking, as soon as that vaccine becomes available, at getting it into the country and into people's arms. As the Deputy said, it has the great advantage of being a single shot vaccine.

Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): I wish to advise the House of the following matters in respect of which notice has been given under Standing Order 37 and the name of the Member in each case: (1) Deputies Aodhán Ó Ríordáin, Gary Gannon and Pauline Tully - to discuss accreditation for the national training programme for special needs assistants; (2) Deputy Ciarán Cannon - to discuss establishing a Garda training programme to protect vulnerable road users; (3) Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor - to discuss plans to streamline the process to refund medical card patients for incorrect phlebotomy charges; (4) Deputy Patrick Costello - to discuss the amalgamation of St. Dominic's College, St. John's College and Caritas College in Ballyfermot; (5) Deputy Jennifer Whitmore - to discuss concerns regarding the integrity of certain heritage sites in west Wicklow; (6) Deputies David Cullinane and Brian Stanley - to discuss the closure of 103 Bank of Ireland branches; (7) Deputy Colm Burke - to discuss the site for a new elective hospital in Cork and consultation with Cork's voluntary hospitals; (8) Deputy Steven Matthews - to discuss a review of existing mental health services in County Wicklow; (9) Deputy Catherine Connolly - plé maidir le fadhb leanúnach le soláthar uisce i dTír an Fhia, Ceantar na nOileán; (10) Deputies Mattie McGrath, Carol Nolan, Michael Collins, Richard O'Donoghue, Michael Healy Rae and Danny Healy Rae - to discuss the need to open places of worship to limited numbers of people, especially for Easter; (11) Deputies Rose Conway-Walsh and Pauline Tully - to discuss the loss of disability payments as a result of people taking up PhD and other scholarships; (12) Deputy Michael McNamara - to discuss the disabled driver and passenger scheme; (13) Deputy Fergus O'Dowd - to discuss a review of the classification of school clothing and school supplies under the Living with Covid plan; (14) Deputy Duncan Smith - to discuss a clear and accessible process to assist families with identification of unidentified remains; (15) Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan - to discuss challenges faced by businesses in accessing funding from banks and Microfinance Ireland; (16) Deputy Dessie Ellis - to discuss 58 vacant properties at a Prospect Hill, Finglas apartment complex; (17) Deputies Jennifer Carroll MacNeill and Neale Richmond - to discuss exceptional needs payments for families with additional rental bills due to shutdown of home renovations; (18) Deputy Holly Cairns - to discuss replacement of persons on the Skibbereen CE scheme during Covid restrictions; (19) Deputies Kathleen Funchion and Chris Andrews - to discuss mental health supports, including supports during and after the public health emergency; (20) Deputy Thomas Gould - to discuss the continued closure of Southdoc Blackpool and Listowel; (21) Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú - to

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discuss delays in reimbursement to patients with ministerial licences for medical cannabis; (22) Deputy Kieran O'Donnell - to discuss plans to reduce the current backlog of driving test applications; (23) Deputy Matt Carthy - to discuss the impact of the closure of 103 Bank of Ireland branches on rural communities; (24) Deputy Claire Kerrane - to discuss the issue of people losing disability payments due to taking up PhD and other academic scholarships; and (25) Deputy Louise O'Reilly - to discuss the CAMHS service in north County Dublin.

The matters raised by Deputies Aodhán Ó Ríordáin, Gary Gannon and Pauline Tully; Jennifer Carroll MacNeill and Neale Richmond; Holly Cairns; and Duncan Smith have been selected for discussion.

Covid-19 Vaccine Roll-out Programme: Statements (Resumed)

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: Everybody in this Chamber, all of our Deputies and all of our Senators desperately want this vaccine roll-out to be delivered as soon as practically possible to our people across the State. We are all in this together. We really desperately want this to succeed. Therefore, the Minister should take my comments in the time ahead constructively.

When I saw the list of vaccination centres across the country, I saw one vaccination centre in Letterkenny, and the Minister knows the geography of Donegal. We then learned there would be two vaccination centres in Kerry, which has a similar population, in Tipperary, in Westmeath and in the Minister's own county of Wicklow, and five in Cork. When I questioned this, I was told that GPs and pharmacists will be delivering this. Why is just one vaccination centre in Letterkenny enough for the entire county of Donegal when there are two or five in other counties? That is the first issue.

The next issue is that I am told the GPs will be delivering this. The GPs in Carndonagh, a town on the Inishowen peninsula which I represent, were without the vaccine to deliver to their patients in recent days. We understand the vaccine is on the way soon, but it has caused great distress. I got a telephone call today from an 89 year old woman. Her vaccination was booked and then cancelled. She does not know when it will happen. GPs are speaking out across the State. As we speak, there is a real problem with the logistics, whatever about the supply issues. Will the Minister reassure the people of Donegal? The Minister will appreciate that people are looking across the nearby Border, which is obviously under the different regulatory system of the UK, and seeing that the North might open months ahead of society in Donegal. What assurance can the Minister give them?

Minister for Health(Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The Deputy's questions are absolutely appropriate to the people he represents. The short answer on the vaccination centres is that they were operational decisions of the HSE based on population analysis. If it is the case that a second, bigger vaccination centre is appropriate for Donegal, it will be set up. I will give a commitment to the Deputy that I will ask the HSE after this debate to take a second look at Donegal specifically and see if it is warranted. The point the Deputy made in his question, however, is the answer. Every GP clinic and every pharmacy will have the opportunity, and they might not all opt in, to be part of the vaccination programme. Nearly every GP clinic is part of it. Every town and most villages across the country will have options. Most of us will never go to one of these mass vaccination centres. We will simply go to our local pharmacy or GP, get one or two jabs in the arm and then go home. That will be it, and particularly through April as we seek to

scale up to approximately 250,000 per week. That will be much more common, so it will not be the case that people will have to travel from Inishowen to Letterkenny or further south.

With regard to the GPs, I know they have been contacting Deputies and have been on the media. There is frustration. Part of the frustration is because it is a three-week programme. Some GPs got their vaccines in the first and second week while GPs quite close to them are only getting them this week. That was due to various operational reasons. It caused a certain amount of frustration, and that is partly unavoidable. There has been repeated contact with the entire GP cohort across the country, but I understand why a GP would say that the GP down the road got the vaccines two weeks ago while that GP's patients are still waiting.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: I only have 30 seconds left. The Minister mentioned pharmacists. All the Deputies in Donegal have been contacted by the pharmacists in Donegal. They say they need to get the vaccine for their workers. They are front-line health workers and have been carrying major responsibilities. The pharmacists want to deliver and play a big role in the roll-out of the vaccine, but they are asking if their staff can be vaccinated as well.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard Durkan): The Minister has only three seconds.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: I will get the Deputy a written response.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: Could I get it verbally?

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): We are out of time now.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: It is just ten seconds.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard Durkan): The Deputy should think about that beforehand. However, I will give the Minister ten seconds.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: First and foremost, the pharmacists are being vaccinated because they are front-line healthcare workers. It is more complex when it comes to other people working in the pharmacy, but if they are deemed to be within the cohort of front-line healthcare workers based on a detailed set of protocols put together by the HSE, they would be included.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard Durkan): Deputy Shortall has six and a half minutes.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: I will put my questions quickly and, hopefully, get the Minister's response. I agree with the point made by earlier speakers about the need for transparency. That is very important. All the information relating to the number of vaccines that are delivered here, the number available, the number being held back and the number administered should be public information. Everybody understands that the supply is volatile. The more open the Minister is about that, the better. People can then understand the situation. We had to wait until the last few days, when we received a reply to a parliamentary question from Deputy Catherine Murphy, to find out how many vaccines had been delivered up to the end of February. We should have that information on a daily basis. Instead it is weekly. Every time the Minister has come to the House I have asked him to make that information available, and I am asking him yet again. Will he issue the daily figures for the vaccines? Everybody would know where we stand. We would also be in a position to assess the performance of the programme, which we all should be entitled to do. Data is essential for that.

On that basis, an interesting and concerning figure has emerged. More than 40,000 doses

of the Moderna vaccine have been delivered, yet up to the end of February only 9,300 of those were administered. Does the Minister know the explanation for that? Why are we using only one quarter of the Moderna vaccines?

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: Can the Deputy give me those two figures again?

Deputy Róisín Shortall: Yes. With regard to the Moderna vaccine, the Minister said that 40,200 doses have been delivered to this country up to the end of February, yet before 28 February only 9,300 were administered. I do not know if the Minister can give me an answer today, but perhaps he will provide it to me as soon as possible. It is puzzling why that is the case.

My next question relates to what will happen when we get large quantities of vaccine. We know that 1.2 million to 1.3 million doses should be coming into the country in each month of April, May and June. We are currently administering an average of 12,500 doses per day. If 1.2 million to 1.3 million vaccine doses arrive from April, we will have to ramp that up to approximately 40,000 vaccines per day. That is a huge step up, and it is due to happen only four weeks hence. I and others would like to know what centres will be used, who the staff will be and if they are ready to roll as soon as April. Will the Minister publish a plan for the centres to be used and the staff, so we are in that position from 1 April?

The next question relates to representations we have received from the Irish Cancer Society regarding the reordering of the priority groups. In that reordering, the position of people under 64 years of age who are at high risk of severe disease has not changed. They remain in category 7. The Irish Cancer Society is concerned specifically about people with haematological cancer who have not been brought up to category 4. The society says that there is a comparable risk of death for those patients. Perhaps the Minister would clarify that. If he could send me a note on it, I would appreciate it.

The next point relates to messaging. About three weeks ago, the Minister said the vaccination of people over 70 years of age was starting. He referred to that programme again today. When the Minister says it will start with people over 70 years of age, those people expect they will be getting the vaccine shortly. However, there are sub-categories within that. It would be much more helpful if the Minister just broke it down and said vaccination was starting with people over 85 years of age or with people over 80 years of age, because it will be some time before people between 70 and 75 years of age get their vaccines. Again, the Minister should be clear about the messaging and not raise people's hopes that they are going to get it soon. There should be a little more clarity about the time the different age cohorts or different cohorts generally are likely to get the vaccine. It would be helpful if those types of forecasts could be provided.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: The deliveries to date have now been published. The Deputy will be able to get them on her telephone now or after the debate. I have asked the Department to provide regular updates. I believe daily updates could lead to a great deal of anxiety. One could see 80,000 arrive in on a single day and if one just took that day, and there are some people who will use the information to try to undermine the programme, it would like there was a huge gap. Let me just think through that. I certainly agree that regular updates would be very useful. I ask for the co-operation of the House if that is possible. I gave the September figure and when the AstraZeneca figure changed people were saying we may not meet the September figure. I was accused in the Chamber of over promising. I was accused outside of the Chamber of making false promises, which essentially is being accused of lying. In fact, all I was doing

was providing exactly what everyone is very reasonably asking for, but in the context of the fact that these figures will change. All I ask, if possible, is for the co-operation of colleagues in that.

With regard to Moderna, I believe those are not the figures. I understand that quite a significant amount more than that has been given out. I will double check and get a detailed note on it for the Deputy.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: It is on the data hub.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: Let me take a look. The last time I checked the majority of the Moderna doses had gone out. We will look at that.

On the April date, there is absolutely a lot of focus on this. We are going from 86,000 this week up to, hopefully if the supplies come in, 250,000 in four weeks' time.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: What about the plan-----

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: The plan has been published. We have the 40 vaccination centres, which are the 37 centres and the three GP hubs, and the pharmacies and the GP practices. I will get a more detailed note for colleagues on exactly that. I will also revert to Deputy Shortall in writing on the rest.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): Next is the Government slot and Deputies Cowen, O'Connor and Alan Farrell will share 11 minutes. Do the Deputies wish to divide it up into three separate sections for reply of two and a half minutes? Is that agreed?

Deputy Barry Cowen: It can be nine and two one minutes. No, four and-----

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): Whose mathematics is that? We will play it by ear.

Deputy Barry Cowen: It is not very often I get an opportunity to speak on this issue. I want to use the brief time available to me, on behalf of myself and my constituents, to convey again my great thanks and appreciation and to commend key workers across the country for their ongoing dedication and commitment to their roles, which has allowed us to be in a position to respond effectively and to deal with the recent onslaught. I am especially mindful of the healthcare workers in care settings, in homes and in our hospitals and of the doctors, nurses, care assistants, cleaners, porters and everybody associated with that mammoth effort that has saved many lives and who helped and assisted those who passed on to the next life in the absence of their families. We commend these workers and appreciate them. I hope in a post-pandemic atmosphere that the Government will be in a position to build on the alliances and relationships it has had with the private sector in its bid to help and assist in meeting the demands of the non-Covid setting and the non-Covid care that is required thereafter and the huge waiting lists.

Data on vaccines, and the scientific evidence from those countries with more advanced vaccination programmes to date, is encouraging. Of course it is a great source of help and hope to many of us and our wider population. That is despite the great frustration, anxiety and fear that exists. It is despite the acknowledgement of the mistakes and mixed messaging associated with our programmes over the last months. They accept that in the knowledge and expectation of learning lessons from those mistakes.

I specifically want to comment on and question the result of the huge and profound commit-

ments made by the Minister, the Taoiseach and the Government, which of course we welcome, that 80% of the adult population can and will be vaccinated by the end of June. The commitment, the expectation and the belief on foot of those commitments that up to 250,000 vaccinations per week will take place in the coming weeks and months is of course to be welcomed. It offers hope and light at the end of a very dark tunnel, which was a lot longer than we expected when we stood in the Chamber one year ago with this problem in front of us.

Those commitments were surely made against the backdrop of knowledge and information via NPHE, via NIAC, around supply issues, vaccination roll out and logistics. Yet, we see some problems in the GP roll out. I hear the explanations emanating from the Minister and others and I hope that is resolved soon.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): I am sorry for interrupting, but does Deputy Cowen wish the Minister to reply to his individual-----

Deputy Barry Cowen: If he can, or if not in writing thereafter.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): There are seven and a half minutes left in the slot and there are two more speakers.

Deputy Barry Cowen: Yes, but the Acting Chairman has interrupted me for a minute there.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): I could not resist the temptation.

Deputy Barry Cowen: There is a commitment on the other cohorts, one of which was mentioned by the Minister today, which thankfully we will see next week. All I ask is for consideration to be given, considering that huge and profound commitments have been made, to a means and mechanism by which indications can be given on start dates for the 15 different cohorts. All that I and my constituents want, when they contact me or anyone else in government or any Member, is for us to be able to say to them their cohort is due to commence vaccination on such a date. If it has to be amended, then so be it, but that is the sort of simple and easy to relate information that we would like to see emanating from the processes we engage in, such as this.

Deputy Alan Farrell: I thank the Minister for coming before the House. I welcome the move by the Department and by NIAC for immunosuppressed individuals across the State. That was the right decision. I do not want to perpetuate some of the doom and gloom from the course of this debate, but I thank the Minister for that because it was absolutely necessary. Deputy Shortall referred to the issue of providing clarity for persons under the age of 70, for example. The scenario at the moment is that people between the ages of 65 and 69 who have no conditions are in cohort No. 6, while some younger people who are high risk are in cohort No. 7. Will the Minister please clarify that?

I did a straw poll in my constituency on how GPs felt about it. From the feedback of seven or eight surgeries we contacted today, all but one had a complaint. That was about their administrative staff not being vaccinated. It was my understanding that they were to be vaccinated. We will provide them with clarity on that and perhaps the Minister will comment. In general terms they stated that their position on the information that was made available to them was a qualified "Fine". I think that is a compliment so I will take it as such.

I appreciate all the responses given by the Minister to my colleagues over the last hour. As

Deputy Cowen said, it is necessary for us to recognise that when we have this vaccine in stock it is provided to citizens across the State and that there is very little vaccine sitting in fridges. That is to be welcomed. More than 9,000 individuals have been vaccinated in the State, presumably in addition to other personnel. I do think we will be able to hit those targets of 250,000 per week a month from now. This is welcome.

The Minister may wish to comment on the fact we are being constantly benchmarked with the UK, which is very unfortunate. Are there lessons to be learned from the UK procurement process about when the vaccines were ordered versus other nations such as the US and the UK, who we have always looked to? It is only right that we should address that.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): Does the Deputy want answers now?

Deputy Alan Farrell: If I could have an answer to the question on cohorts Nos. 6 and 7, and then maybe a general comment.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): There are three minutes and 45 seconds left in the slot.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: How long have I got to answer?

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): The Minister has not very long. There are three minutes 39 seconds left in the slot now.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: I will be very quick.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): Do the best you can.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: I will first address the query on cohorts and I will revert in writing on the rest. The short answer on cohorts 5, 6 and 7, and it is a fair question, is that they are in that sequence because NIAC has determined, using the clinical evidence available, that that is the prioritisation of risk in terms of vulnerability. For example, the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, has just pointed out that 93% of fatalities in Ireland to date were people aged 65 and older. Unfortunately, age is a very strong determinant.

Deputy James O'Connor: I thank the Minister for being here. On the issue of vaccinations, I want to use this opportunity to highlight the extreme frustration being felt by many people who were expecting to be vaccinated in the past number of weeks. Our office has been inundated with calls from people who want to know the status of their vaccination and when they will get the vaccine. I understand there was some concern in the east Cork municipal district - the Midleton local electoral area to be precise - about that. I ask the Minister to focus on that area. Out of respect for the officials who I know are under enormous pressure I did not want to put down parliamentary questions as per the request from the Department.

We spent a lot of time developing the Covid app which people could use to indicate if they were or were not symptomatic but that app could be utilised much more than it is currently now that we are trying to figure our way out of Covid over the coming months. Hopefully, we will be in a situation by the end of the year where the worst of the pandemic will be behind us. We could utilise that app and put proper planning in place in the next number of weeks when a larger quantity of vaccine will be available to people to inform them exactly when they can expect to be vaccinated. We have seen that being done in other countries and there is a real and interesting opportunity for Ireland to do that, as the leading technology country in Europe.

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Some of the largest multinational companies in the technology sector are located a couple of hundred metres from where we are sitting in this Dáil so there is no reason we could not lead the fight here on that. I would like the Minister to comment on that.

I want to pay tribute to the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, who is doing an enormous amount of work in her portfolio. She deserves great credit because she has been a shining light in this Government. I wish her every success in her role, which is critically important to the older people in our community.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: I thank the Deputy for his very constructive ideas. I will engage with him. If he would like to meet up or send me something on exactly how we might use the app that would be great. We were a world leader in terms of the app. I believe it was the first multijurisdictional app anywhere in the world and I would love to see it used more. As he knows we have put the number of doses administered onto the app so if the Deputy has ideas about how we could expand its use I would love to hear them.

In terms of those aged 85 and older, there is no question that there has been anxiety because some GP practices got their doses in week one and some of them got them in week three. It was always going to be a three-week programme and there is a minor spillover of about 65 practices that will get them next week. We have to acknowledge that that has caused anxiety. There is no question about that. All I would say is that while we must listen to and respect the anxiety of those who did not get the vaccine exactly when they thought they would get it, we should also bear in mind that the silent vast majority in this case have got it and it has gone very well. However, we must make absolutely sure that we get it right and that we listen very carefully to those criticisms and constantly do better.

Deputy Gino Kenny: I am sharing time with Deputy Barry. We all acknowledge that the roll-out of the vaccine is logistically extremely challenging so we wish those who are on the front line of the vaccine roll-out well because this will get us out of the pandemic.

I raise an issue with regard to the revision of the vaccine schedule which was conducted last week. That was very welcome to those who are immunocompromised, particularly in terms of underlying conditions. Many people had great hope that the revision of the schedule would put them in cohort 4 of the vaccine strategy. I speak about those who have cystic fibrosis in this country. Unfortunately, a distinction has been made between severe and stable cystic fibrosis. Those who have severe cystic fibrosis have been put into cohort 4 rather than cohort 7 but those who have stable cystic fibrosis are still in cohort 7. That does not make sense because there are 800 adults in Ireland who have cystic fibrosis so splitting them into two different cohorts does not make sense. I call on the Minister, NIAC and the powers that be to consider reviewing the position of those who have cystic fibrosis because there seems to be a type of apartheid approach to that condition. Those who have the condition are very keen to get access to the vaccine as soon as possible. I call on the Minister to use his power, as Minister for Health, to review that position.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: How much time have I got? Is the Deputy sharing time?

Deputy Gino Kenny: There are two minutes for Deputy Mick Barry.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: I fully appreciate where the Deputy is coming from on those with cystic fibrosis. As he said, it is a relatively small cohort. NIAC looked very carefully not just at conditions but at the range of conditions and it had to make clinical judgments based on

the impact that Covid appears to have on those groups. It did that with cystic fibrosis. It has identified different severities of cystic fibrosis and put them in as very high risk or high risk. It has done the same on obesity, diabetes and across different diseases and underlying conditions. It was trying to identify those at very high risk. When Professor Butler and I were presenting some of this, she was asked a very similar question to the one the Deputy has asked. From memory she said that the international evidence was that the severity of those with cystic fibrosis in the high-risk group was less than one might have originally thought, which is good news. The only reason the group was split was on the basis of how vulnerable they are to the disease. I can assure the Deputy that NIAC will keep that under constant review and if new evidence emerges on cystic fibrosis or other underlying conditions we will be updated accordingly.

Deputy Mick Barry: I was sent up to this place by the people of Cork North Central to give voice to their opinions and concerns, which is an important part of my job. The people on the ground feel that they are doing a hard shift. For many, lockdown number three is the toughest of them all but the vast majority of people are sticking with the guidelines and to the plan. There is some scepticism about the vaccine and there are some people who say that they will not take it but my sense of it is that the vast majority of people will decide to go with the vaccine. They are hoping in their hearts that the vaccine programme will work and deliver. I believe it can and I would encourage everyone to take that vaccine because it can save their life.

People heard the Taoiseach saying that the only delay factor or problem that we will be dealing with is on the supply side. AstraZeneca did not deliver last week. I was concerned to hear the Tánaiste say that we will get it back at the end of the month. I was hoping that it would be next week or the week after but I will leave that to one side. There are issues now with communication.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): Does the Deputy want the Minister-----

Deputy Mick Barry: No. I am making a statement. We all heard the story today about the Connemara GP racing around in the dead of night getting the needles and syringes because he was informed of the delivery at the very last minute. Leaving that aside, the story that is heard across the country and that I have heard in Cork North Central is of the old people who were asked to go to their GP surgery. There is excitement about the big day, they arrive in the morning and the vaccines are not there because the GP surgery has been told at the very last minute. Then there is upset and disappointment. People were hoping for better from the situation. There is room for improvement here. We are not talking about AstraZeneca; we are talking about communications for which the Government and the HSE are responsible.

I have 12 seconds left so I do not really have time to ask a question. I wish to register the point that people are watching this situation in desperation in some cases. People are willing to make it work, but it is a two-way thing and there has to be improvements in that regard.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): Next is a Government slot of four Deputies sharing time. This goes back to whether Deputies want to have a question-and-answer session in each case or whether we will take all four Deputies and then have one reply. Which do the Deputies want to go for? We will play it by ear then and see what happens. The Deputies have two and a half minutes each and are into borrowed time after that if they want a reply.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: The Minister is in a really difficult spot. He is listening to everybody here today and everybody has the exact same concerns. We are trying to

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get answers for constituents, people such as family carers and people who are not quite sure whether they are in cohort four or cohort seven. Completely reasonably, we are coming with these questions. If there is anything the Minister can do to help us have a single point of call to be able to get reasonable answers for such people reasonably quickly, I think it would alleviate an awful lot of concern, so I urge the Minister to do that. In addition - this is really more a general question than one that requires an answer now - I ask the Minister to help us to communicate with people as much as possible in that way. Today's debate is very helpful. We have good questions and we have Deputies present, but there are people coming through the doors wanting to have their vaccinations.

It is probably worth the House's time to take just one second to recognise two things about this vaccination that we did not know would happen. First, the vaccinations work. They work better than we had expected or hoped they could. That was absolutely not a given, and it is important just to recognise that. Second, it is so clear that the overwhelming majority of Irish people really want to get vaccinated, and indeed here we are arguing about when they will. That was not a given either. A couple of months ago we were talking about how we would convince people of the safety of vaccinations. It is just important to note those two really positive things about the vaccine experience so far.

I have a real degree of empathy - sympathy is not the right word - with the Minister's position. He is dependent on manufacturers to produce vaccines and to get them to us in a particular way. We have no real control over such manufacturers when they do not do so yet we are dependent on them to get a public health response to our people and to meet the commitments we have made to people. I want to acknowledge that that is not an easy position. The Minister has people such as me coming in and reasonably demanding a vaccination schedule from him, but I acknowledge that it is a difficult position.

Deputy Fergus O'Dowd: I have a question for the Minister about Drogheda. Drogheda is a town of 40,000 people and surrounding it live another 40,000. At the moment, insofar as we are aware, the HSE is insisting that the vaccination centre for Louth will go to either Navan or Dundalk, which is very difficult for a great many people. Will there be enough vaccinators to ensure that a centre is opened in Drogheda or, alternatively, will the vaccinators be rotated around large centres of population such as Drogheda, Dundalk, Ardee and so on? It is hugely important that the Minister answers that question. I appreciate that we have 8,629 vaccinators trained at the moment. How many more are needed to make sure that Drogheda can have its own centre?

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: The decisions on the locations of the larger vaccination centres were operational decisions of the HSE. To Deputy O'Dowd's point, by no means does this have to be the final and definitive list. If it is the case that a large vaccination centre is required in Drogheda, that will be provided. I wish to give the Deputy some comfort in the fact that people in or around Drogheda do not need to travel to Navan or Dundalk. As we scale this up, every GP practice and pharmacy in Drogheda will have the option to opt into the programme. Obviously, it is expected that a number of people will go to the larger vaccination centres, but people living in Drogheda will be able to pop down to their local GP or pharmacy to be vaccinated. I assure the Deputy that we can stay in regular contact, and if there is a need for an additional large centre in Drogheda itself, I will talk directly to the HSE about that.

Deputy Fergus O'Dowd: The HSE is aware of offers of suitable premises in Drogheda and tells me it can open one if it gets the vaccinators. I appreciate that my time is up. I thank the

Minister and I will correspond on this through his office. If the HSE has the vaccinators, we have the centre. I think the Minister is saying he has the interest and the intent to facilitate this.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): The Minister will reply in writing in due course.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I too acknowledge the Minister, Deputy Donnelly, and the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, for their huge work to date. The roll-out in nursing homes in particular has been hugely successful, particularly given the story of Covid in nursing homes. That was based on communication and on a partnership. We need to make sure that the roll-out through GPs is based on the same principles: communication and partnership. The reason so many of us have been critical in the past few days is the lack of communication. GPs have been left without information. I acknowledge the work the Minister, the Minister of State and the HSE have put in with the relationship managers in the past week but I ask the Minister to focus on whether those relationship managers are working. This is the first time we have gone into the community and this is the way most people will get their vaccines: through their GP or their pharmacist. It has to work. We have to iron out the difficulties that have been picked up in the past three weeks. The criticism these past few weeks is to make sure this works.

I have a couple of questions. Why is there a difficulty in delivering consumables? Why are the syringes etc. not being delivered in alignment with the vaccine? In a number of cases there has been a few days' delay in delivery of vaccine consumables. Second, there are external supply issues absolutely beyond the HSE's control, but I presume we have visibility of supply on a Monday. Surely a portal could be established on a Monday to tell each GP what is available each week and to make preparations. One cannot set up a vaccine clinic at the hours' notice some GPs have been given. Based on internal supply, can we not give more notice to GPs of availability? Finally, will the Minister clarify the situation of those who are housebound? Are arrangements in place or are we still putting those arrangements together? I welcome the commitment today on family carers and bringing them up the list. Will the Minister confirm that as well?

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: Regarding general practice, we are all aware that a number of GPs have contacted many politicians and have taken to the airwaves to express their frustration. It was always a three-week programme. In week one 255 GP clinics were involved; week two added another 500; this week the number is 542. There is a number. I am told that in about 65 practices where for various reasons it has not been possible to buddy up they are engaged directly with the IMO and the HSE and they will get their deliveries next week. Of course we would love all 1,300 practices to have got exactly what they needed exactly when they needed it but, as I think the Deputy has acknowledged, this is complex. A lot of changes, the House will remember, were required at very short notice when NIAC advice changed. It should be remembered that the plan had been to use the AstraZeneca vaccine, which was a much more straightforward logistical operation. At very short notice the plan and the recommendation changed to mRNA, which is much more complex. However, these issues do need to be ironed out and the Deputy is absolutely right that consumables in every case should be arriving with the vaccines.

3 o'clock

On the visibility of supply on a Monday, believe it or not, in the past seven days, AstraZeneca has substantively changed its supply three times. Therefore, even on a Monday, there is not full clarity because of what is happening with AstraZeneca. The Deputy has aired the concerns

of many GPs. We are taking them on board and we will endeavour to continue to do better.

Deputy Emer Higgins: The mood of the nation is understandably low. We have all been living under a dark cloud for a year now, we have all been bombarded with negativity everywhere we turn, and we have all had our fill of doom and gloom. What we need now is hope, and that hope comes in the form of a vaccine. The vaccine roll-out programme cannot happen quickly enough. We all feel that way. However, it is also important to acknowledge the progress that has been made. Many of us know front-line healthcare workers who are now fully vaccinated, and gradually, our older family members, friends and neighbours are also receiving their vaccinations. The best bit of all is the proof coming from our nursing homes and healthcare workers that the vaccine works.

Citywest has played central role in our response to the pandemic since day one. It has been a mass testing centre, a self-isolation centre, and a storage centre for the first vaccines. Soon, it will play a key role in the mass vaccination of our general population. I ask the Minister the consider opening a section of the Citywest vaccination centre now, ahead of schedule, so it can service the over-70s in west Dublin, south-west Dublin and south Dublin. This would mean those who have been isolating in their homes for almost a year would not have to travel to the far side of the capital city for their vaccine. It is a quick fix and an easy solution to an issue that is really upsetting older people in areas like Saggart, Rathcoole, Newcastle and Clondalkin, where they are being told to drive past Citywest and travel almost 30 km to the Helix for their vaccination.

Hope is something our most vulnerable and their carers need the most. While I welcome last week's revised vaccination allocation list, there are still many vulnerable people who have not yet been prioritised. Those on immunosuppressants and people with stable cystic fibrosis - a brand new term - have not been prioritised. There are many vulnerable people for whom the slightest illness can set them back severely in life. It does not bear thinking about the threat Covid-19 could pose to these people. If a person's condition is such that for the past year he or she has been afraid to leave their front door, that person must be considered for cohort 4.

Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne: We know progress has been made with the vaccination programme, albeit not at the pace the public had hoped for. We have heard of many logistical challenges that have arisen in the roll-out. I would like to begin by mentioning some of the logistical issues with the roll-out of the vaccination programme in my home county of Clare.

There was a bit of a debacle in Shannon Medical Centre last week, when vaccines were delivered on the Friday but, unfortunately, the equipment to administer them was not. According to a GP at the centre, it resulted in the unfortunate situation where those on the reserve list were not able to benefit from the leftover doses. It seems like such a basic thing to make sure the necessary equipment arrives with, or in advance of, the vaccines. It is surely an avoidable error. The vaccines are precious and simple errors like that cannot be afforded. Does the Minister know why this happened and what is being done to ensure it does not happen again? It must be said, if it was not for the resourcefulness of the staff at the Shannon Medical Centre, it could have been a huge disaster. I thank the staff at the clinic for the work they did that day, under pressure, to ensure the vaccines did not get wasted. They were amazing and showed great dedication and conviction.

I also mention the vaccination centres, as many people have been left wondering about access since the announcement. Those who live in rural areas, for example, are wondering how

they might get to the centres if they do not have access to their own transport. I know we are still at the early stages, but it is important things are planned properly to avoid any last-minute chaos. Is there a plan for a dedicated bus service for areas not covered by the normal transport system? Is the organising and planning of that happening now?

My final but very crucial point concerns family carers. Carers are the forgotten healthcare workers of Ireland. They are treated differently from healthcare assistants who work in hospitals or nursing homes, yet they provide similar care, often in more challenging circumstances. They do not get to clock in and out; they are there 24-7. Family carers have not been recognised on the vaccination priority list, despite the fact there are some 500,000 family carers in Ireland, who are providing 19 million unpaid hours week in, week out, at a saving of €20 billion to the State. They have, of course, continued to care for family members throughout the pandemic, and it has been a tough year. They often have to wear full PPE at home while doing everything they can to keep their vulnerable family members safe. They are also often sourcing their own PPE, and at a costly price because the equipment is in high demand.

Many have said they feel like prisoners in their own homes, and despite repeated requests, they have not been prioritised for the vaccine. They are constantly worried and anxious, wondering what will happen if they get sick, and who will step in to take care of their loved ones. As my Sinn Féin colleague, Deputy Cullinane, and others have asked: who cares for the carers? It is quite clear the family carer's role in this pandemic is being undervalued. Many are at their wits' end, waiting for some relief which they thought would come from the vaccination programme. They have kept going and are doing everything to protect their high-risk family members from Covid-19 infection, only to be told they will have to wait at the back of the queue like everyone else. I urge the Minister to reconsider his position on this and give carers the priority on the list they deserve.

I was so disappointed by the Tánaiste's response to my colleague, Deputy Doherty, on Leaders' Questions earlier. This is not the time to be deflective and dismissive. I urge the Minister not to take the same stance.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: I thank the Deputy for the various points she raised. On the question of consumables arriving with vaccines, they should arrive with them. There have been small number of cases where this has not happened, and it is not good enough. The HSE is looking at that and we must demand better. It is common sense the right consumables and syringes to get the sixth dose out of the vials need to arrive with the vaccines. I can assure the Deputy that a lot of work is going into finding individual solutions for those who are housebound. For example, a number of those aged over 85 are simply housebound. In some cases GPs will call to the houses, and in others the National Ambulance Service will be involved. The key principle here is nobody will be left behind. I will respond in writing to the Deputy's other points.

Deputy Peter Fitzpatrick: I welcome the opportunity to take part in the debate today. I would like to start by commenting, once more, on the failure of this Government the HSE to reach its vaccination target for the second week in a row. It is unacceptable this has happened, and to make matters worse, it has happened two weeks in a row. As the Minister knows, the people of this country have been in lockdown for the best part of a year. Their only hope of getting back to life as they once knew it is with the vaccine. It is soul-destroying for them to see on the daily news the continued failure of the Government and the HSE in respect of the vaccine roll-out. Will the Minister confirm to the House what plans are in place to get the vac-

cine programme back on track? Has he made the point to the HSE the approach currently being taken is simply not good enough? What actions will be taken to ensure the vaccine roll-out programme is brought up to speed?

It is not only Members of the Opposition who are deeply unhappy with this roll-out programme. Members of the Minister's own Government have also called it into question. The bottom line is we are falling behind in this. I constantly hear from GPs there is very little communication with the HSE. They are very frustrated. It is not good enough. The HSE must be more accountable. The Government has stated everyone will be vaccinated by the end of September. I find this very hard to believe given our the experience to date. GPs have told me they are not receiving vaccines when promised, and they are being forced to tell their elderly patients their vaccine appointments must be cancelled. This causes undue stress and worry for those in this age group, which is not fair.

In Northern Ireland, anyone over the age of 60 and those aged over 16 who are classed as vulnerable can now book their vaccine appointments. The North is way ahead of us. The authorities there have vaccinated 96% of people aged over 80, 91% of those aged between 75 and 79, 86% of those aged between 70 and 74, 72% of those aged between 65 and 69, and 45% of those classed as vulnerable. They will have vaccinated their population way ahead of us and they will have their economy and society open before us. That will cause chaos, particularly in the Border counties.

I want to bring the Minister's attention to the situation of dentists and their staff. I have spoken to a number of dentists in Dundalk and they are all having the same issues with the HSE and the vaccine roll-out. Despite being told to register with the HSE's online portal, they have still not been called for the vaccine. In fact, they have not received any correspondence from the HSE. Dentists and their staff are front-line workers and are dealing with a large number of HSE patients. They are being treated unfairly in the roll-out programme. It is simply unacceptable that they are not receiving any correspondence from the HSE. I spoke yesterday to a dentist in Dundalk who informed me that no dentist in the area, apparently, has received a vaccine appointment through the HSE's online portal.

Will the Minister confirm what action he is taking to ensure the vaccination programme gets back on track and remains on track until everyone who wants a vaccine gets it? What date has the Government set to roll out the vaccine to everybody in the State? Finally, can the Minister address the issue I raised in respect of dentists and their staff not receiving a date for vaccination?

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): There is approximately one minute left for the Minister to respond.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: It would take more than a minute or a minute and a half to respond adequately to the Deputy's questions. No one is saying that everything is going perfectly with the roll-out. It is not going perfectly and there have been issues, as discussed here today, in terms of some consumables not arriving and some vaccination dates for GPs having been changed. Nobody is suggesting that it is going perfectly. However, the language the Deputy used is complete and absolute nonsense. It is that kind of loose talk and nonsense that erodes confidence in what is the most important thing that is happening in our country right now. To suggest that there are continued failures is nonsense. To suggest that targets are constantly being missed is also nonsense. In fact, had the Deputy been here earlier on, he would have heard

a very reasoned debate between Government and Opposition on exactly that point.

The HSE's target is to vaccinate people as soon as the vaccines come into the country. To that end, at the start of this week, approximately 520,000 vaccine doses had arrived into the country. By the end of this week, approximately half a million vaccine doses will have been administered. That is the target, and the HSE and the thousands of men and women around this country, including doctors, nurses, school vaccination teams, community vaccination teams, the Defence Forces, the National Ambulance Service and many more, are working night and day to make sure this programme is a success. If the Deputy wants to check, he can look at the European league tables and what he will find is that Ireland is consistently among the top few countries in terms of the percentage of the population that has been vaccinated.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): The Minister's time is up.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: I will finish on this point. On top of that, we have correctly prioritised those who are most vulnerable.

Deputy Verona Murphy: I begin by reminding the Minister that we are also top of the European league table for the number of days for which businesses and society have been closed under Covid restrictions. We are up to approximately 172 days now, compared with Denmark on 15 days.

Yesterday it was announced that we have missed yet another vaccine target, when last week's goal of administering 100,000 vaccines was not achieved. This morning in the House, the Tánaiste admitted that there are problems. The issues are reportedly due to the change in AstraZeneca's delivery schedule for last week. It is very concerning that targets are being routinely missed and it is too easily accepted that they can be missed. The French and Germans have decided to allow over-65s to be given the AstraZeneca vaccine, as we predicted more than three weeks ago that they would. Is this the real reason that we have received fewer vaccines?

The vaccination programme is one of the most important mass healthcare events ever to take place in this country. Our fastest way back to normality is through vaccination, but we do not appear to be treating the vaccination programme with the urgency it deserves. Why are we not sourcing vaccines from anywhere we can? It is very patronising of the Government to suggest that calling on it to source an increased vaccine supply would mean bringing in vaccines that have not yet been passed by the European Medicines Agency. By refusing to go out and source our own vaccines, the Government is, in effect, saying to the Irish people that more Covid deaths are an acceptable price to pay so long as we do not upset the EU. Germany and Denmark have done it. Some 29% of people in Northern Ireland have been vaccinated, compared with just 6% here. Denmark is a country similar in population to Ireland and it has vaccinated virtually everybody. The Minister must tell us what is causing this imbalance and what the Government intends to do to address it and speed the process up.

The position of family carers on the vaccine priority list needs to be reviewed. Currently, family carers are being told that they will receive no prioritisation and will be vaccinated whenever it is their turn, based on age and underlying conditions, with no recognition of the work they do. This is totally unacceptable. Family carers work in close contact with our most vulnerable people. It is beyond belief that the vaccine roll-out strategy does not recognise the importance of protecting them in their vitally important work. For the purposes of vaccination strategies, family carers should be classed as front-line healthcare workers, not treated as an

afterthought. The 500,000 carers in this county, 8,000 of whom are in Wexford, do not accept the Government's position that this is solely a decision for the National Immunisation Advisory Committee. As they see it, the Government does not appreciate the millions of euro they save the State in residential care costs and they, rightly, believe that this should be a deciding factor.

Another issue being brought to my attention daily over the past month is the situation with people aged 80 to 84 and the over-85s, who are supposed to be top of the list in terms of prioritisation. Many colleagues have mentioned this today. A total of 200 doctors have not received the vaccine, which is not by any means a small number. Will the Minister clarify exactly what is happening? It is completely unclear to both doctors and their patients.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): The Minister will give a written reply to the Deputy. We are running short of time and there is a sos coming up. There are four members sharing the next slot, which is a Government slot: Deputies Murnane O'Connor, Dillon, Pádraig O'Sullivan and MacSharry. The Deputies have approximately two and a half minutes each.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: I thank the Acting Chairman. I have three minutes. I thank the Minister, Deputy Stephen Donnelly, and the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, for answering our questions. Last week, we were told that there were operational issues in the vaccine roll-out to over-85s to do with ordering and the delivery schedule. That problem was identified but I am concerned that such operational issues will continue and that every cohort will see some GP surgeries, in the same town, getting their vaccines while others do not. That has happened in Carlow, Tullow and other rural towns throughout the country. My understanding, according to what we heard today, is that 200 GP surgeries have no vaccine. Will the Minister clarify that? My mother, who is 85, was contacted on Monday and is receiving her vaccine today. I contacted the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, and the HSE at the weekend because, last week, there were surgeries whose elderly patients were told they would be getting their vaccine but there was no vaccine to give them. There is a problem with communication. We are delighted that the vaccine is here and it is the story we all want to hear. However, we must be very careful in our communications and the information we give. That is the most pressing issue.

Will the Minister indicate whether a new GP order support team is being put in place? I welcome that the HSE has identified several mass vaccination centres. I have raised the issue of transport with the HSE and was told that the Community Call initiative will be in place to manage transport and communications. However, I had a call this morning from a person who has no means of transport to the GP surgery to receive the vaccine. There was no one there to help that person. We have great services in this country, with GPs and other front-line staff doing excellent work. We must ensure there is really good communication between the Community Call initiative, the HSE, doctors and nurses. I ask the Minister to put in place some kind of communication map that will ensure people have somebody to contact if they cannot access the vaccine because they do not have transport, whether to a vaccination centre or their GP's office. There must be effective communication with people in that situation. Is the Minister hearing about many people refusing the vaccine?

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): We are really tight on time so I ask the Deputy to conclude.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: I ask that carers be moved up the list. It is so important that family carers get the vaccine.

Deputy Alan Dillon: I welcomed the clarity last month on the location of the vaccination centres, including the one in Breaffy, Castlebar. Mayo is one of the largest geographical constituencies in the country. One centre is insufficient based on journey times and the lack of public transport. Considering the high incidence rate of the virus in some parts of the constituency, especially around north Mayo, there is deep scarring in local communities. This has particularly been the case since Christmas. I have raised this issue with the HSE and it has pointed out that the situation is reviewed as necessary. However, I would really appreciate clarity at this point. It is more important for the communities of both Bellmullet and Bangor. I appreciate and understand that vaccination centres are but one part of the infrastructure but they are a critical part, along with general practitioners and pharmacists.

I welcomed the publication last week of the updated vaccine allocation strategy, which brings some relief to people with underlying health conditions. However, there is room for refinement so I urge the Minister to review the strategy as further vaccine supplies become available, especially for home carers.

An aspect of vaccine roll-out that is causing great concern relates to the lack of information on what is happening locally and the potential for misinformation. It would be worthwhile publicising more information to create a transparent overview of where vaccines are being distributed and, if they are not being distributed, when they can be expected to arrive and be administered. We need a county-by-county breakdown in this area. I fear that, in the months ahead, neighbours will be peaking over garden fences to report people who get a vaccine ahead of them. As we wait for supplies to become available, there is a need for a major public information campaign on the vaccine allocation process, the science behind it and even a rough timeline as to when people can expect to be vaccinated. There is a mammoth logistical task, with some vaccines being more difficult to transport than others, but there is an onus to inform people. Public representatives are critical in this regard and in helping people to better understand the complexity of the vaccine roll-out and how it is progressing. I appreciate that the data hub provides a large amount of information but I do not see that information being distributed or circulated on social media. I would appreciate it if the Government ensured it did not drop the ball in its communications on the vaccine roll-out. I hope the position will change over the coming weeks as people need something to be hopeful about.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: I am going to be brief and allow the Minister one and a half minutes in which to respond to my question. Initially, it needs to be acknowledged that we are administering the vaccines as soon as they come in. That is lost here as Members play politics with the matter. Most of the vaccines that have arrived in the country have been distributed and are finding their way to patients. That needs to be acknowledged. I welcome the NIAC review that was undertaken in the past few weeks. It has given great comfort, including to cystic fibrosis patients, those with underlying health concerns and people on dialysis. It was welcome. I ask that it be reviewed constantly over the coming weeks.

My first question is on the Covid app. It is a great piece of technology. I use it myself but it is underutilised. Only 100,000, or a maximum of 170,000, check it every day. I would welcome a review and the readvertising or revamp of the app. We need to use the technology in the best way we can.

To follow on from Deputy Murnane O'Connor's question on vaccine refusal, I have a query. Are refusals being logged by general practitioners, the HSE or the Department? Is the information being kept? On housebound patients, could the Minister expand on the facilities for those

who cannot find their way to a general practitioner or vaccination centre?

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: I thank the Deputy for his questions and suggestions. I agree on the app. It was a great success. Particularly now that we have moved into the vaccination phase, we could probably do with a review to determine whether there is a bigger role for it. The Deputy will be aware that the vaccination numbers are on the app but I would be very happy to ask my team to conduct a review and determine whether there is more that can be done.

On vaccine refusal, my understanding is that it is not logged. By a process of elimination, the rate would be reasonably easy to work out given that we know the various cohorts, be they in nursing homes, long-term residential care or healthcare settings, or among certain age groups. My understanding, although I may be incorrect because the system may have been updated, is that the number is not logged. That was the case the last time I checked.

On individuals who are housebound, I assure the Deputy that the principle we are pursuing is that nobody should be left behind. Therefore, individual solutions are put being put in place where there are housebound people who cannot get to a GP or one of the vaccination centres.

Deputy Marc MacSharry: I have been raising the issue of vaccine supply publicly since 2 January and, indeed, privately before that with the Taoiseach. I am glad to see the rest of the Oireachtas is now raising it. I am well used to Governments not listening to me but at this stage we are hearing about the matter from every quarter, party colleagues and every Deputy across the House. I hope we can begin to listen. Our supply procurement has been an abject failure. Where we stand by comparison with the next worst in the league is of no interest to me. I am interested only in putting an end to the current misery faced by our people, including those in the Minister's constituency and mine. The question of how well we are doing compared to some of the other countries that were asleep at the wheel is of no interest to me.

We know the EU has made a balls, quite frankly, of procuring vaccines for its nations. It went in and played hardball on price thinking it was dealing with office supplies and now we are what the Taoiseach has described as suffering the consequences of bumps in the delivery schedule. It is not lost on me that there are no bumps in the delivery schedule in Tyrone, Fermanagh, throughout the rest of the UK and Israel, but there are bumps in the road for us. I have suggested many times that we procure from others and do a side deal but we are obsessed with being goody two-shoes Europeans. Austria has done a deal with Israel to secure some of its vaccines. I have suggested this directly to the Minister and Taoiseach but they said we cannot do it as it might spook the horses. They implied that we must not offend anybody. Even at this late stage, we should ask the UK whether it can give us a number of million vaccines today on the grounds that we will replenish its stocks when ours increase in several months.

What is the position on extending beyond three weeks the period between the first and second? I am not a physician but it seems to be working for the people of Scotland, Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK. Does it not stand to reason? Is it not reasonable to pose the question as to whether it could also work for us?

On logistics and the management of this whole strategy, it galls me to see hard-working people such as three Ministers having to come in here to defend mediocrity dressed up as efficiency. How they manage to do it I will never know. We have the high-level task force on vaccination, NIAC, NPHET, the individual members of NPHET, who have their own media careers, the HSE, the Department of Health and the Government. We have used the wrong

structure from the beginning here. We should have embraced the structure that has a proven track record, namely that of the national emergency co-ordination group, and we should not have been dealing with five or six silos. The co-ordination group had experience in a caretaker role under a previous Government and adopted a different approach. We just rowed in and we are suffering the consequences now.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I demand of the Chair that we receive answers to our questions in writing. I never got answers when I asked questions here. I have asked the Minister five times here about the roll-out of the vaccine for the flu. Only 1.4 million of the 2 million available could be accounted for. I want an answer in writing.

The UK has 20 million vaccinated, including 600,000 vaccinated in Northern Ireland. What are we doing wrong here? Could the Minister please answer the question as to why gardaí, who are on the front line, and our carers are not vaccinated? Surely to God gardaí should be vaccinated considering that we expect them to deal with every situation. The Garda Representative Association has been on to me and, I am sure, every politician in this House asking why they are not a priority, and the family carers also. I want written answers, please.

On 23 October 2018, something peculiar occurred. The European Commission minutes show a meeting on the organisation and delivery of vaccination services to 28 countries. There was an update on that in March 2019, a year before there was any virus in Ireland or a pandemic. What was going on? Is this the great plan? I want the Minister to answer that. There was also a feasibility study by the European Commission on the development of a common EU vaccine card-travel passport. Is the genie out of the bottle here? This happened in 2018 and 2019 and we have no accountability. The Government wants to be the good boys in Europe. I have asked the Minister to go out and source vaccines, as Deputy MacSharry has, but no. It is an absolute shambles. The clinic in Cahir was to give clinics to 37 elderly people two weeks last Wednesday. They will get them this Saturday, we hope. It has been an absolute shambles.

Deputy Michael Collins: I will be making statements. I would appreciate it if the Minister would come back to me with the answers. The vaccine roll-out did not get off to a good start. We all know that and I hope things are ironing themselves out. I raised with the Minister several times the issue of home helps being offered a vaccine throughout west Cork. This took some pleading but it seems that many got the vaccine last week, which they greatly appreciate.

I will never play political football with the vaccine roll-out. I will come in here and press for vaccines for those who ask me to do so. I would like all politicians to do the same. I saw some comments about me and the vaccine leading to letters to editors of papers misrepresenting my views. I did not waste my time with an answer as it was all politically orchestrated, in particular by the Fine Gael Party. Politics should not be played on this issue. If people want the vaccine, by all means they should get it.

Some concerns have been expressed to me by the elderly on the islands of west Cork - Cape Clear, Sherkin, Long, Whiddy, Dursey, Heir and Bere Island. Some of our elderly are being requested to go to the nearest health centre on the mainland. Many may be genuinely infirm and unable to go to the ferry. Most of these could be vaccinated in one day if the helicopter service could be used. Is this possible?

When will workers and patients in CoAction in west Cork be in line for vaccination? As Deputy Mattie McGrath said, our gardaí are pressing that they are front-line workers in their

own right and they deserve to be vaccinated if they want it.

While Covid-19 is of the utmost importance, we have to look at life after Covid and the other health crisis we will face. My concern is about Bantry General Hospital and improved services to meet demand. I have raised in the Dáil a number of times the promised endoscopy and rehabilitation units in Bantry hospital. I was informed by the Minister, Deputy Harris, on 25 February 2020 that a decision had been reached to appoint a design team to progress both projects this year. Bantry General Hospital serves up to 80,000 people in west Cork from the Beara Peninsula to Bandon. Will the Minister get back to me and tell me when the project team was appointed and what progress has been made on both projects?

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: Childcare providers are still in limbo and feeling vulnerable. Insurance is a huge issue for them, bouncing from Allianz at €7,800 to a broker for €5,170. That is just two quotes. These workers want to be escalated to level 6 and reclassified as essential workers because they are minding the children of front-line staff. In Ireland, there were 4,500 childcare facilities; there are now 1,923. They are at only 20% capacity, which is not sustainable. There needs to be proper consultation between the Government and early years providers on the early childhood care and education scheme. Will they be getting paid on 8 March? Is this only for children until September? What happens kids after school?

Retired nursing staff have been requested nationally to register with agencies for Covid-19 vaccination roll-out. CPL and Nurse On Call are two agencies used by the HSE. How many retired nurses have been called up to do the vaccinations? Why am I hearing that nurses are being brought out of hospitals where they are badly needed to do vaccination centres when we have nurses who have put themselves out there and have not been called? I thank the Minister.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): There is one minute and ten seconds left in that slot but presumably-----

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: Is that for an answer?

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): Does the Minister want to reply to any of that?

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: On Deputy Mattie McGrath's statements regarding the flu vaccine----

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: The answer was for me.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): We cannot have a debate. The time is 40 seconds now. We cannot have a debate. There is no space for that. We are up against the clock. Will the Minister reply in writing to the queries raised?

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: I have 30 seconds.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): Can the Minister reply very quickly? There are 25 seconds left.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: I will do my best. I was making the point that Deputy Mattie McGrath has continued to make false statements and he is seeking written answers to false statements around flu jabs which obviously we cannot give him.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I want an answer.

(Interruptions).

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): I thank the Minister. That is all the time there is. We are up against the clock and we can do nothing about that. We cannot have a debate here. We have two more speakers. From the Independent Group we have Deputies Joan Collins and Catherine Connolly. They have six and a half minutes starting now.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: You are nothing but a coward.

Deputy Joan Collins: Dr. Peter Sloane, who is a GP, was on the radio this morning saying he is dying on his knees because his patients have not received the vaccine as yet. He said there has been huge communication issues and inconsistency in delivery schedules. We are only dealing with 70,000 over-85s, so we should be much slicker in delivering the vaccines and getting them into the arms of people who need them. GPs have the expertise to do that. We will see over the next couple of weeks over-70s, over-80s and the second vaccine for the over-85s. The HSE has to get its finger out and make sure this works effectively.

The transparency of the vaccine programme has been raised here a few times. Can we not see every week included in the data the date we received the vaccines, how many of each vaccine we received and, on the other side of the table, how many cohorts are in each grouping? For example, we could be told how many over-65s have underlying illnesses and or are at high risk with underlying illnesses. How many of each those groups is getting vaccinated and when? That should be put up every week so people can see things moving on, particularly when we reach 250,000 per week, as we have been told we will.

On international vaccination, I put a question in to the Minister last week in relation to the World Trade Organization, asking the Government to support the Indian call for the vaccinations to be produced in their own country. I got a disparaging answer: "Specifically, the TRIPS agreement allows compulsory licensing which is when a government permits someone else to produce the patented product or process without the consent of the patent owner." I refute that. We are already seeing how difficult it is to get vaccines and supply is not what it should be in Europe, where they have ordered them. Nearly 80% of the vaccines have been ordered by the wealthiest countries but we have to make sure other countries get the vaccine. Otherwise, even if we have 80% of our people vaccinated and these countries are not vaccinated, it can easily come back into our country. I demand that the Minister support the call for the India-South Africa proposal. It is crucial they get that. AstraZeneca was supposed to help out here. It is supposed to be the non-profit vaccine that would transform the world but it is not happening. The COVAX idea of us giving money to the WHO to get more vaccines when there is a shortage will not work. There is a huge contradiction there.

I have one further question, which the Minister will not be able to answer here. How can a decision be made that there is a higher risk category among cystic fibrosis sufferers? Every cystic fibrosis sufferer is high risk and should get the vaccination and get the call first.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I have three minutes. I could say a lot but I will not. The vaccination is one part of a process and the Government is utterly failing in relation to the overall process to obtain trust. I do not think the Government's messaging and mixed messaging

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is helping to increase trust in the system, specifically with the time available in relation to the vaccine. My colleague mentioned Dr. Sloane, who was on “Today with Claire Byrne” earlier.

Let me take the front page of *The Irish Times* in which Dr. Mary Favier, a GP and member of the National Public Health Emergency Team, NPHE, talked about a problem with deliveries, and Dr. Denis McAuley, chair of the GP council of the Irish Medical Organisation, talked about delivery in a very mild, moderate manner. Then we have Dr. Sloane at the end of his tether on behalf of his patients. What he describes is simply unbelievable. I do not know if the Minister or the Minister of State is going to answer me, but perhaps he or she could take one minute and then allow me one minute to come back in regarding that debacle.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: I thank the Deputy. She has used very strong language. Her criticism is essentially a criticism of the thousands of women and men who are working seven days a week to deliver what has been one of the fastest roll-outs in the EU, prioritising our most vulnerable, changing at very short notice from AstraZeneca to the much more complex mRNA vaccine and changing at short notice to the reprioritisation of people with underlying conditions. It is deeply unfair criticism, not of me - the Deputy can criticise me all she wants - but of the people who have worked night and day.

The facts speak for themselves. At the start this week, we had received approximately 520,000 vaccine doses. By the end of this week, we hope to have administered approximately half a million doses. It is deeply unfair and unbalanced to come in here and suggest that is a shambles. I accept that there are-----

(Interruptions).

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: I will finish on this.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: This is my minute. It is my time. The Minister has abused that time. I did not criticise anyone. I commented that Dr. Sloane was at the end of his tether on behalf of his patients. It is totally disingenuous of the Minister to twist those words.

I am not asking the Minister any more questions. I am using my 30 seconds to say that what he has said is utterly disgraceful. We want to work with the Minister. It is impossible when he is being disingenuous. I had three minutes and I wanted to use them to elicit clarity. Perhaps, if the Minister of State had answered, we might be further along the way. I now have 13 seconds left. It is simply unacceptable to deal with elected Members in this manner, to personalise matters and not answer a practical question regarding the operational difficulties that one doctor, in particular, who is only representative of others, has on the ground. The criticism is with the Minister.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): Will the Minister reply in writing, and address the criticism?

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: The Deputy said it was a shambles.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): It would be a good idea because we are up against the clock.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: I would be more than happy to debate it at length and respect-

fully. I really would. I know we are out of time.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): We cannot do that.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: I will be more than happy to engage with the Deputy at length on this at a later date. I was simply responding to the Deputy's charge that the programme was a shambles. I was trying to answer the questions raised.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): I know.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: If the House would allow it, I would be more than happy to spend more time with the Deputy.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): We cannot prolong the debate.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: On a point of order, it is totally unfair for the Minister to abuse his time in this manner.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): The Deputy knows we cannot have a point of order in the middle of this. I thank everyone for their co-operation, in general. We have managed to come to the end of our time. We will have a sos for 20 minutes.

Sitting suspended at 3.44 p.m. and resumed at 4.05 p.m.

Land Development Agency Bill 2021: Second Stage (Resumed)

Question again proposed: "That the Bill be now read a Second Time."

Deputy Bríd Smith: Before the debate adjourned, I spoke about the question of cost-rental. Many Members who spoke before me pointed out the significant gaps in this Bill as well as the dangers inherited from the gutting of local democracy to the huge reliance on the private market to deliver.

In addition to that, I want to highlight one section which alarms me. It is typical of the gap between the Minister's rhetoric and what is actually in the Bill. I am sure he will clarify it later. Section 55, on the disposal of land by the agency itself, means that the agency can, without the consent of the Minister or the Government, dispose of any land or any housing unit it has acquired if it is doing so for the purposes of rent or purchase. However, there is no mention of public housing, social housing, affordable housing or any criteria. It looks to me like a blank cheque for the agency to do as it sees fit and to enter into any arrangement with any entity in order to provide houses. These are not necessarily social or affordable houses. They are just houses. It is in effect a gift to the developer with a few pious declarations thrown in to give it sweeping powers and access to State lands but with no definitive aim to provide housing for the citizens of the State who need it.

I have no doubt that the Minister will dismiss this criticism and claim the agency is governed by the highest ideals and aspirations. If I were to give the benefit of the doubt to the Minister and to the Land Development Agency, I would have to see a board, a chief executive officer, a chair and a panel that has a record of advocating for public housing, as well as fighting the nexus of developers, financiers, legal and landed vested interests which, over the years, has allowed this housing crisis, with which we live, develop.

Who is going to steer the Land Development Agency? Overwhelmingly, it is a cohort deeply embedded in the very firms, companies and sectors which have sat at the top of society overseeing and helping this entire housing crisis. From Mr. Austerity himself to various personnel from legal firms enmeshed in the developer-led building industry to ex-NAMA officials and so on. One high-ranking official is on record as saying that every house is affordable to the person who purchases it. Is that the type of thinking we need in an agency meant to be the solution to our housing crisis? Are these the high movers who will usher in a new generation of public housing on public land? Are they now, as we speak, thinking of the homeless on our streets, of those in emergency accommodation, of those in unsuitable housing sleeping with their children on a friend's sofa, or with their sisters, doubling up in their mammy's bedroom, or worrying about rent increases when the Covid crisis passes, or of being evicted when level 5 restrictions are lifted, or are they thinking of what will make sense to the real estate investment trusts, REITs, the corporate landlords, the likes of Johnny Ronan, the mates of Johnny Ronan, the financiers, the legal firms and all that they hail from?

I draw on the example of the last wonderful plan that was supposed to get us out of the crisis of housing, that is, the strategic housing developments, SHDs, which the Minister cancelled at Christmas. The Minister gave notice of at least a month to the developers to say we are going to-----

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: The Deputy is getting mixed up. She is talking about co-living. The statutory period is four weeks. The Deputy ought not let the truth get in the way of a good story.

Deputy Bríd Smith: It is co-living, okay. The Minister gave them notice that there was a month to call this off, and within that month, there were eight new applications for co-living. I reference it because it is a significant problem in my constituency. The residents in the area of the Player Wills development, which takes in Player Wills and other sites around it, are themselves having to pay for a judicial review of the strategic housing development because more than half of the 490 units will be for co-living and high-rise will be going up 19 storeys on one site and 16 storeys on the other sites. They have had no input whatsoever into this plan. Their voices are not being heard. The type of accommodation that is being developed there, clearly, in a post-pandemic world, has to be totally unsuitable. It is unsuitable for sustainable communities. It is unsuitable for family accommodation. Rather this will be about transient communities moving in and out of a settled area and the sort of accommodation that is not what is needed for the cohort of families who are desperately living on the waiting lists. Instead, we need sustainable communities where families can be accommodated. The cancelling of co-living is merely another example of how previous Ministers made a bag of what they thought would get us out of the crisis. It did not work and now we are going to cancel it.

This latest Land Development Agency will be the moneymaker. It will be the one we need that is essential to getting us out of the crisis and yet it is not what we need. It is not what the thousands of people who are ensnared in this crisis will need and it will not deliver just and decent housing for all. This Bill is not what we need and I argue against it. I look forward to the debates we will have on Committee Stage to answer the sort of problems we see. The Land Development Agency is a giveaway to developers and builders and will not address the crisis we face daily.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I am pleased to have the opportunity to speak on this Bill to establish the Land Development Agency as a designated activity company, DAC, and to

transition it from its current iteration into a fully fledged entity capable of borrowing, capable of developing and capable of leading Ireland over the next number of decades into a better planned set of regions and country.

I totally reject the assertion of my friend from People Before Profit, who has left, that this is about supporting developers or being engaged with developers. When I look at the people who were involved in developing the Land Development Agency, such as Mr. Niall Cussen, who is now the planning regulator and was the chief planner, and staff from the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform and the Department of Finance, who were behind this both intellectually and conceptually and in terms of delivery, I see deeply committed public servants who wanted to achieve a mechanism by which the national planning framework could be realised and by which Ireland could have a proper role in land development and a real commercial stake in the value of Irish land and how that evolved. I do not believe it has anything to do with the friends of Johnny Ronan or the friends of anybody else. I genuinely believe this is about the State taking a solid step into the management and development of its own land, and not only that which it holds but also an interest in how it can acquire strategic pieces of land generally.

The purpose of the Land Development Agency is to give the State a vehicle to rebalance the boom-bust cycles we had seen for so long around development which had been genuinely developer led. Where before the State had no real capacity to manage land prices, to operate countercyclically and to plan land for not only housing but also the development of towns and cities in any sort of strategic way, the Land Development Agency gives us that new opportunity. We have been speaking about it as a housing delivery entity, and at a time of housing crisis that is understandable, but it is not only that. The Land Development Agency gives the State an ability to plan for whole quarters of towns and villages. It gives the State the opportunity to combine the technical and financial firepower available at the centre with the very best of local knowledge and decision-making where the Land Development Agency and local authorities can work together to deliver master plan projects.

Local authorities have 50,000 things to do every day, only one of which is land development. It is reasonable in any modern democracy that there would be a centre of excellence in strategic planning backed by finance that would be able to provide assistance to local authorities and other State entities to deliver their land in a way that is of benefit to the community and that is remunerative potentially to semi-State agencies. None of the HSE, the Department of Education or CIÉ is a land development body. The local authorities are to a part, but it is only one part. We have in this State taken centres of excellence in other ways because we know that idea works. We have seen it working in healthcare and other sectors. It is about providing technical assistance to local authorities to be able to deliver their land.

The purpose is to provide a countercyclical way to drive State lands for regeneration and development, open up key sites not being used effectively for housing delivery to date, remove the barriers for that and provide support to local authorities. Its purpose in the long term is to drive strategic land assembly, working with both public and private sector landowners to smooth out barriers to development and, crucially, as we have seen as being so important in the housing crisis, to stabilise land values.

This entity has often been linked to IDA Ireland. In a way, that is a little facetious and there is no reason for it to be. The IDA, when one thinks about what it did many decades ago, tried to partner with local authorities to develop banks of land that could be used to build business

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parks in strategic locations to drive employment, particularly around the regions. It was everybody coming together collaboratively to put on the green jersey to develop land in these ways to provide regional employment and regional development. The Land Development Agency can operate in the same way by partnering with local authorities to make sure they have the support they need. Any time one sees a house, the steps that led to that house being built came together five or, more likely, ten years previously and the programming building element of the Land Development Agency is a key part of that.

In the Bill, there is a significant focus on housing and housing delivery, and that is appropriate for now. However, the purpose and vision of the Land Development Agency goes way beyond that. It is about consolidation of land. It is about ensuring we deliver compact growth, especially on brownfield sites. It is about managing State surplus lands where they exist, of which housing will be prominent in the initial stages, but there is plenty of other work to do. There is no point in building rows and rows of houses if the business parks and employment are miles away. It is about building places. It is about supporting parks, amenities and places to live, and not just housing delivery. It is much more strategic than that, although it encompasses it.

We can see that in five or ten years from now we will have a different and new set of forward-looking priorities to make sure Ireland is operating in the best way it can, which I hope will go beyond housing because we will have realised there is so much more for the Land Development Agency to do. It is not only about housing. It is about living smartly. The IDA was the cornerstone of Irish economic policy that got us out of such a difficult state of unemployment and an inability to develop to genuine world success. In a slightly similar way, the Land Development Agency, LDA, may be an instrument to build on what we have but may be transformative in reshaping our cities and towns in the way that we need to. In this focus on housing delivery, we risk losing our discussion of that vision for the Land Development Agency and, indeed, much more importantly, that vision for Ireland, if we forget what it is capable of beyond housing delivery.

We have sprawling cities and doughnut towns. The LDA can be a stimulus and new mechanism to turn that around, building with the local authorities. How does a local authority, county council or any other entity come up with a master plan and go through all the procurement in order to have a financial tap to the millions of euro that are needed to regenerate whole quarters and do all of the other things? It is completely appropriate that one has a centre of technical expertise that can come in and provide support.

I will address some of the criticisms of the Land Development Agency. The first is that it is a sort of new NAMA but that is not the case. When one looks back at NAMA, it was dealing with a whole set of unknowns, unknown site values and exposures. With the Land Development Agency, we are dealing with known site values but what we have not had is the firepower to develop them.

I refer to the point on section 183, which has been raised by councillors. I have a great deal of sympathy for the argument they have made. From the LDA's perspective, it is completely understandable that it wants to de-risk the development of different sites. One can look at Dublin City Council and the Oscar Traynor Road project, which was ultimately pulled, or at my area of Shankill, where the project went back to the local authority for a vote and went through. Up to that point, however, much work had been put into developing and coming up with a master plan for the site. It was being developed nearly to the point of tender. One could see how one

would want to de-risk it at that point. The danger with that, having worked collaboratively with the council, is that if one has this hanging over councillors or, indeed, council management at the end it somehow damages the relationship in an important way. This is one issue to reflect on. This issue has not really arisen except for that one situation but the potential for harm with local government may outweigh the ancillary benefits of being able to de-risk. Is another approach possible? If it was evident that there was a problematic local authority, where councillors or management were being obstructive or ineffective or had identified plots of land which were not developing them, either by refusing or not being able to do so or not co-operating with the Land Development Agency in the way this House will hopefully set out, the Minister may have powers under different Acts, whether the planning or housing Acts, to intervene and give direction in those circumstances. For this to fall into the LDA Bill risks damaging the relationship between the LDA and local authorities.

I will address the issue of transparency. I believe it was said by Deputy Ó Broin, although I do not wish to be unfair to him, that the LDA will not be subject to the Freedom of Information Act and be transparent. I understand he has set up LDA-watch. That is not a fair criticism. The Land Development Agency is subject to the Freedom of Information Act, as will all of the subsidiary DACs it will establish. The setting up of LDA-watch is to suggest this agency is being set up by quasi-criminals or something to that effect. It is a body of this State being financed by the State and being given powers by this House. We need to be careful about that.

There is also a criticism that this agency is going to take land and flip it for private development. That is not the case either. The whole point of this is to develop the State as a strategic long-term player in the price of land.

On the mix of affordability, it is clear that it is appropriate to have a measure of flexibility. It is a totally different situation in Shankill and Dundrum, where affordable housing is desperately needed. I heard the Minister say that the mix will go up very considerably in social and affordable housing. That may not be the case in other areas where there is already a very high provision of social and affordable housing. It is already a strong tenet of planning and social policy that one has a good social mix of different forms of housing. It is essential that there is a measure of flexibility.

My last point is on cost-rental housing and how welcome it is as a new housing concept. It has been difficult to explain and to sell as new housing ideas are and can be. Cost-rental offers a huge opportunity for people either on fixed incomes or on incomes that are unlikely to change. If one was working as a primary school teacher, one's income would put one beyond social and affordable housing but one's income is never going to grow exponentially or go beyond a certain point. However, one is always going to have a housing need. Cost-rental gives people the opportunity to fix their costs in an affordable way and it gives the State a long-term set of assets and a role that can be adjusted for social policy over time.

I support the Minister in the development of the Bill, congratulate him on bringing it forward, thank him for the opportunity to speak on it and wish him well in the next Stages of it.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Teachta agus bogfaimid ar aghaidh anois leis an Teachta Shanahan, ón Regional Group. Níl sé i lathair. Rachaimid ar ais mar sin go dtí an Rialtas agus glaoim ar an Teachta O'Donnell.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: I thank the Leas-Cheann Comhairle and I welcome the Minis-

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ter, Deputy O'Brien, to the House. I have had a chance to look through this legislation on the Land Development Agency. The basic objective of the agency is very good one. I will make a number of observations on it. The Minister will appreciate that I am from the constituency of Limerick City where we have had Limerick regeneration. It was, in way, a form of mini-LDA. From the experience we have had with the Limerick regeneration, I will make a number of observations.

First, it is critical that this is a partnership model between the LDA and the councils. That did not happen with Limerick regeneration and, as a consequence, it was not as successful as one would have liked. It is critical that there are memorandums of understanding, service level agreements and whatever is required to specifically deal with this agency so that there is no area of ambiguity in the interaction between the LDA and the local authorities. We had an incident recently in Limerick where those waters became somewhat muddied and it sent out a signal to me that it is critical that these entities are clearly defined.

Second, section 8 of the legislation states that: "Not later than 31 March 2024, and every 5 years thereafter the Agency shall furnish a report to the Minister regarding progress towards achieving the purposes of this Act." Another section states that the LDA must deliver an annual report to the Minister. These should be linked in. My view is that this should be done on a yearly basis. This is critical, in that it will bring a focus if the LDA is required not only to give an update on the work it has done, but on how it is meeting the objectives in the LDA legislation itself. The Minister may have views on this but this is just an observation of mine.

Third, on the interaction which colleagues have made reference to, the legislation is silent on the role of the elected members on the local authorities. It has come up and I am sure the Minister is well aware of the question of exactly what role they have to play. One of the functions that members of local authorities retain is the reserved function on the approval and disposal of lands. How does that fit into the relationship between the LDA and the local authority? This can be overcome in large measure by the partnership model. The members have to have a role but the Bill is silent on this. It is a question being asked by councillors. Can the Minister shed some light on exactly where that role arises?

I will now speak about the role of the LDA. The primary purpose of the legislation must be about delivering housing. It has to be about delivering housing in a mixed-use model. Obviously we want some form of cohesion in the number of units but it must be done in a sustainable way. With regard to overconcentration of development, if we have learned anything in Limerick over the years, where we have had huge volumes of housing in one location, it is that it brought its own difficulties for the people living there. Obviously it is about getting houses built but there is a fine line between something being rushed and something being delayed. It is about getting that balance right.

This must be about social housing, which very much links in with local authorities. It also has to be about affordable housing. The Minister is well aware of my views on affordable housing. I liked the traditional model, which was that private estates had 10% affordable housing and 10% social housing. The social housing element has returned but the affordable housing element has not. It was a very good sustainable model and there was no uncertainty. In such a model, people know what is physically going into an estate. It is hugely important that in a housing estate of 200 houses, people know that 20 of them will be affordable to young people. This is something I feel very strongly about. I would prefer this model to having all social or all affordable or all private housing. It is about trying to find an integrated model that people

can work with, without overconcentration.

The Bill mentions enabling measures to supply housing. It also mentions making available housing that is not being utilised. The purpose is to counteract undue segregation with regard to social background when housing people. This is about the mix. It states new and regenerated housing should be well served by schools, public transport and public amenities. There has to be interaction with the Department of Transport. The Bill also refers to developing and regenerating relevant public lands for the purpose of delivery. This is very important

If a local authority is progressive and developing housing in a specific land area that it owns, the LDA does not have a role. It has a role where the existing State authorities are not progressive in providing housing. We do not want turf wars about land between the LDA and local authorities. This is why it is critical to set out these lines of demarcation very much within a partnership model. The devil is in the detail with regard to the role of local authorities and elected members.

The Minister speaks about deficiencies in the housing market. There is a concern at present that Covid is leading to an increase in the price of housing. When we come out of Covid, the price of housing will be beyond the capability of some couples. This is why the affordable model has to kick in in a big way as soon as possible. There should be 10% affordable housing in any new estate being built. There is also the more high-powered model of the LDA itself.

The Bill mentions supporting and consolidating the provision of publicly owned lands for development to expedite the most efficient use of such land. This has to come back to the partnership model with the local authorities. Will there be service level agreements or memorandums of understanding between the LDA and collective local authorities or will it be based on individual agreements? How will it work in practice? The last thing we want are issues regarding who exactly owns such lands or who will get to develop them. We do not want in any way stagnation or stand-offs between the LDA and the local authorities.

It makes absolute sense to establish economies of scale and efficiency. The Bill refers to opportunities for the efficient development of contiguous tracts of land. This absolutely makes sense. The Bill mentions commercial activity, including the generation of the funding required by the LDA to perform its functions to achieve the best possible social and economic return consistent with the purposes of the Bill.

If the LDA is disposing of development land it is required to come back to the Minister to seek approval. However, if it is disposing of houses that have been built it is not required to do so. How will this operate in practice? Under section 8 of the Bill, the LDA is to give the Minister a report. The annual report the agency is to give the Minister could be tweaked to link in with section 8 so it would be required to outline in it how it is dealing with the objectives of the legislation rather than having to deliver the first such report in 2024 and every five years thereafter. This is hugely important because everyone believes the purpose of the LDA is good.

I welcome the Bill. I have made these observations based on practical experience from my experience with Limerick regeneration. The relationship between the LDA and the local authorities must be clearly defined with proper memorandums of understanding and proper service level agreements. If a local authority is progressive there will be no role for the LDA. It is there to deal with situations that are not being developed.

It is critical that local authority members have a positive role. Ultimately, we want to build

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houses to deal with people on housing waiting lists and those who may want to downsize, to provide affordable housing for young people and to make provision for private housing in a way that is sustainable with proper public transport. If the model becomes just about building five-storey or six-storey apartment blocks to increase numbers, it will not be sustainable. The model should be a mix. We need apartments but we also need townhouses and semi-detached houses. We need an integrated model. An overconcentration of any group does not work for society.

We need to define clearly how to determine what is required to be approved by the Minister. Development land being sold must be approved by the Minister but where houses are built approval is not required. Exactly what this means has to be clearly defined so there is no ambiguity. These measures are to ensure we see sustainable development enhancing places such as Limerick city, which I represent. The National Transport Authority will come back to us shortly with a revised Shannon area metropolitan transport strategy, which will link Limerick and Shannon Airport for the first time. It will come back with a model, which was not in the original draft, to set up an urban rail system with the use of existing rail track. This also has to feed into a housing model and an infrastructure model.

We need to move towards a continental housing model. I would like to see the roads going in first, along with public amenities and playgrounds, so that when the houses are built the infrastructure is there. Too often in the past, large housing complexes were built with no social amenities, and suddenly we are doing catch-up. The LDA, in the context of a structured model, can certainly do an enormous amount of good, not only in terms of building houses, but also ensuring that the infrastructure is in place at the same time the houses are built.

When we come back to this House in a short number of years, Limerick city will have an urban rail system up running, playgrounds and parks beside new housing complexes, links to the city centre allowing people to walk, park and ride facilities and commercial activities. The LDA has a commercial remit so there is the question of who it can partner with and where the role of ministerial approval will fit into that area.

The key feature all of the time is working with a common purpose and ensuring there is no ambiguity around relationships between the councils and the LDA in the partnership model, and ensuring that the elected members of local authorities are made clearly aware of their role in the work they do around the provision of housing and local authority lands that are available in an area. The LDA extends well beyond local authorities and it extends to multiple agencies, which clearly will require service level agreements and memorandums of understanding. These other bodies, in the main, are not involved in the provision of housing, and that is the key common and defining feature of the LDA and the local authorities.

I wish the Minister well with the legislation. What I am pointing out is based on my experience. I think the Minister will accept that regeneration in Limerick is probably the nearest micro-model he will get for the work of the LDA. It would not have all the elements of the LDA but it was a body set up to deal with the regeneration of Limerick city, in particular taking control of the building of housing in the area. At the time, I believe insufficient due diligence was done around defining the relationship and the respective roles of Limerick City and County Council and the regeneration itself. Much good work was done. However, there were elements that could have been avoided and it could have been a more enhanced and successful programme. I know the Minister will take my comments in the spirit in which they are given, which is with the aim of ensuring that when the LDA is up and running, it can go about its purpose without any degree of uncertainty around its remit and its respective relationship with the

local authority and its members and the other respective bodies. We will be coming back here with a much more integrated model in a number of years, and we will say that the LDA has been a resounding success.

Deputy John Lahart: Based on some of the criticisms that have been voiced during the week, I want to talk for a moment on what motivates us in politics. I can only talk personally about that. There is the kind of thing we hear when the public says we are all in it for the money, or the lifestyle, whatever that is. Today has been a useful occasion for me, in advance of this speech, to reflect on what motivates me in politics. Obviously, a number of those motivations are constituency-based, or they are probably all constituency-based, and some have a policy focus. I have always had a particular interest in special needs and special needs education. On transport, I was one of the first to, and continue to, push for a metro for my constituency because of the kind of developments that are taking place. I would also like to see a model similar to the north inner city strategy, which was introduced by the last Government, for the disadvantaged parts of my constituency. However, as the Minister will know because we shared this when we were on the Front Bench together, there is one objective, more than anything, that motivates me every day as a politician, and it is that age cohort who have so many burdens in their lives - the burdens of climate action, the unexpected burden of Covid and the burden of not being able to afford either a place to live or to rent. Nothing drives me more, and I know the Minister shares that objective and that ambition, than to address the plight of that generation in our country. I will never stop fighting to ensure that the rights, the expectations and the ambitions we had when we were their age, that many of us managed to realise, are ambitions they get to realise.

They have a finite time in which to realise them. This is the generation forced to live at home. Many of them were forced to return to live at home because they could not afford rent or because the rent was eating into their capacity to save for a mortgage. They are always at the front of my mind. Radical proposals are needed to ensure they can fulfil their potential and realise their dreams in terms of having a place of their own.

No one in this House has a monopoly on ideas and no one has a monopoly on motivation. We are all driven to do the best thing for this generation. That also applies to the thousands in my local authority area and constituency who are on the housing lists, and I will mention the social housing aspect shortly. I am as driven as the Minister is, and as anybody else is in this House, to come up with solutions to this issue.

I want to say a word about the Minister. He has come under some criticism in the last week or so, much of it unfair. Fianna Fáil has not been in office since 2011 and, in fact, when we left office, we were the last Government to have had an affordable housing scheme. The last two Governments did not build an affordable house at all in the space of nine or ten years. In the space of six or seven months, the Minister has gone about his task with incredible energy and dynamism. He does not always get it right and he would be the first to admit it, and he would be the first to take stuff on the chin and take ideas on the chin, and accept that this or that thing could be tweaked. However, he has ensured that the Covid time is a time he has used to put in place, if the House will pardon the pun, the building blocks that are necessary for when the economy, please God, opens up, and when we can drive housing delivery and home delivery for our young people. I will always defend him publicly. As a former, now deceased, Fine Gael Taoiseach said on the passing of a former Fianna Fáil Taoiseach: "He did more than his critics ever did." I would stand over that, and I would say to the Minister that he knows that too.

I want to say a word too about Fianna Fáil, my party, which came in for much criticism

this week. We built this city. We can look at any of the iconic landmarks around us, and we are sitting in one, the Convention Centre Dublin, or look at Terminal 2. We can see the Aviva Stadium, we can see Croke Park behind us, we are adjacent to Dublin Docklands, we are down the road from the International Financial Services Centre, and we are only a stone's throw from Temple Bar and from the Grangegorman redevelopment company and all the incredible work it has done. We are about half a mile from the Port Tunnel. Every iconic development in this town was built or initiated when Fianna Fáil was in government. We did more than our critics have ever done. That is not to mention the green and red Luas lines and the motorway system that serves Dublin so well. I ask the critics: what have you done and what have you built? To the public, I ask who they would put their store in. Is it in those who have a record of delivering, and of delivering iconic developments?

How do they propose to activate the 10,000 or 15,000 planning permissions that are sitting there? How does Deputy Eoin Ó Broin propose to activate them? What are his proposals for them? I am not going to talk about the shared equity scheme today because it is only a tiny part of this strategy, and I know the Minister has taken on board the criticisms.

I wish to speak on the Land Development Agency itself. The Minister has made himself incredibly available to colleagues. We have been teasing this out and squeezing the pips out of all the different pieces of it. The Minister is listening. I hope he will recognise that the Bill as presented will not be the same as what it will be when it is eventually signed by the President. First, the LDA has an investment of €1.25 billion by the Ireland Strategic Investment Fund. It is a huge investment and a great deal of confidence behind it. I took the initiative and had a long conversation with the very accessible CEO of the LDA. He gave myself and a colleague 40 or 50 minutes and answered all our questions. I recommend Opposition politicians to engage in that.

However, I have queries. I will go through some of the issues. We took the example of a site that is not a million miles from me. There is one query, and the Minister has heard this, with regard to having to go to the Minister about each site in respect of what proportion of it will be affordable. In darker times, that is a power that could be abused. I ask the Minister to examine this and consider if it is the best manner in which to proceed. We asked questions of the CEO about the levels of affordability and defining affordability. I have issues with the median value in a particular area. That must be teased out on Committee Stage.

This is a radical affordable rents model. Ireland has never had this previously. I came away from the meeting with great enthusiasm about that aspect. People who earn up to €42,000 per annum can qualify for social housing. However, the stereotypical bank official, nurse, garda, teacher, technician or plumber earns between €45,000 and €80,000 per annum. These people do not qualify for social housing and they are getting squeezed because they do not have sufficient space to save for a mortgage. This is pitched at them. We looked at one particular site and that income bracket. This is for people who, as a couple, previously were always able to afford a home between them, and that home only took a third of their net income. What we are talking about here in terms of affordable rental is one third of a couple's income. If one were to rent privately in Dundrum, for example, the rent would be €2,500. In this affordable model a couple could rent, and hope to rent, for €1,250 to €1,300. A single person could rent a one-bedroom apartment for €1,000 to €1,050. That leaves them space for saving to buy a home at some stage in the future. Critically, however, it affords them space to live, spend and enjoy life. It is 30% of the net income. When did we ever think of that? We have lost sight of it, so that is a very exciting element of this.

The Minister will have heard about the market value part, so I will not go into it in detail. I understand why he had to introduce it in the Bill and that it is all connected with state aid, but it has opened the door for others to say the Land Development Agency is going to buy land from State bodies at market value. The Minister and I know that if the Land Development Agency buys a plot of State land and says 90% of it will be for affordable housing and 10% will be for social housing, that land has little or no market value aside from a nominal value. Affordable land value has no market value. There is no sale value in that land. That is being deliberately ignored by the Opposition. Again, I believe the public would be very excited about that.

With regard to state aid, let us get a little cheeky with the European Union. What we have seen in the past year is billions upon billions of euro in state aid. Other European countries contravene state aid obligations. On the market value aspect, I am satisfied it is just being manipulated and used. I am satisfied the Minister will push, and it will arise on Committee Stage, to get as close to 90% as possible in terms of affordable and obviously the 10%, at least, that is already there for social housing. It is important. The market value part needs to be addressed. I think the Minister has done it, but it has been exploited.

Why do we need an LDA? Local authorities do not own all the State land in the country. That is obvious. They also sometimes do not own the adjoining land and so forth, so an agency to manage that is vital. My question is: what is the delivery vehicle? How do we propose to get these housing units and homes onto the ground? What is the delivery mechanism? I know this is part of a group of Bills, including the affordable housing Bill. However, I will discuss that when it comes before the House. I listened to some of the contributions this morning regarding the composition of the board. I ask the Minister to take on board some of the positive suggestions in that regard. I am not referring to just the previous speakers in this session. Deputy Hourigan had particularly positive suggestions in this regard. I urge the Minister to take that on board as it helps to build public confidence. Its composition will be critical in reassuring the public, and I will be watching that aspect closely.

When we were talking about the project with the CEO, the vehicle he envisaged for the particular plot he was discussing is the strategic housing development, SHD, model. The Minister knows I opposed the programme for Government on the basis of strategic housing developments and other things. I still oppose them. They do not do what they said they would do. They do not provide fast-track planning. From 10% to 15% of them get judicially reviewed, and only people and communities with money can afford a judicial review. Those who cannot afford judicial review cannot seek it. Most of all, however, the units are all build-to-rent. None is build-to-own. There is no hope of anybody owning one of them. They also bypass local area plans and county development plans. They override densities and heights. While that can be positive in some cases, the fact the SHD process lacks any real democratic input is what is most alarming.

Citywest is an area in my constituency. A local area plan, LAP, was designed in 2012. It envisaged residential development in that area. It provided for libraries, schools and the like. South Dublin County Council now ticks boxes and says those amenities have been provided. However, the LAP never envisaged the densities that are now being sought under the SHD process. The last one applied for was for 15 storeys. These developers provide for the amenities that are necessary for their particular developments, and they might argue they pay development levies for the others. However, what we have in Citywest is a hopelessly underprovisioned amenity, cultural, sporting and artistic horizon because the LAP and the county development plans were not redone. The SHDs came in and drove a coach and four through the local

community's rights and expectations.

I have mentioned the market value. Section 83 has been clarified. The Minister clarified that if local authorities own land, they will develop that land and the LDA will not be doing a smash-and-grab on it. Did the Minister give consideration to the LDA taking a role in regenerating old Dublin, in places such as Capel Street, the quays and Camden Street? We saw what Covid-19 did. It shut down Airbnb lettings and we saw, in summary, that Dublin is a tourist-dominated city. Nobody is living in the city. It is empty. I believe there is a role for the LDA here, even though the buildings are privately owned. For a landlord or owner of one of these Georgian buildings with three or four storeys the issue is the investment and cash necessary to bring it up to some type of habitable standard. While some extraordinary work has been done on Georgian buildings in Dublin, it takes a great deal of money. I read in the newspaper recently about two houses that were taken together. The people were able to get through the conservation issues and created three incredible apartments. They are extremely expensive. However, I believe the LDA could have a role with regard to old Dublin.

I have another concern. It is not about the move to the cost rental and affordable model.

5 o'clock

I welcome that. The Bill envisages mass cost rental. The cost of rental will be the median market rent. In my constituency the median market rent will be quite expensive and much more expensive than what the CEO of the LDA was talking about. Again, we need some clarification on that.

I also raised with the Minister previously the issue of the LDA purchasing semi-State owned land that is on the semi-State body's books where a value is reflected on the balance sheet. Why would the LDA get involved in that at all? Why not just let the private sector develop that and condition in the 10% social and a certain amount of affordable units? Why would the LDA get involved in master plans for that?

For me, and fundamentally in a positive way, the Land Development Agency represents the State entering the housing market, which I welcome. We are looking at a State-provided housing model versus a market-driven housing model. Something in the back of my head says that this has to be a positive, and if it works, it must result in an outcome where private house prices are driven down. It is not the only thing we need to look at. Deputy Hourigan referred to amenities and that people with experience of designing and building communities are represented on the board to ensure that what happened with the strategic housing development process does not happen with LDA master plan developments.

I broadly welcome the Bill. I believe it can be more radical and I want it to be more radical. The Bill's weakness lies in the market value language, but the Minister has covered that and explained it. It is just being exploited. We must never lose sight of the young people who want to own an affordable home in Dublin. This has different applications throughout the State but I am referring to the aspiration to own one's own home in Dublin. Consider the couple or the single person who rents one of these affordable apartments with a long tenure of 12, 14 or 15 years under the LDA plans, which is terrific. What happens when they want to buy a home? What do they do if they have a child and the apartment is no longer big enough? Ultimately, the only way to really drive down the price of housing land is to drive down the price through a cap on the price of land.

A housing referendum is mentioned in the programme for Government. That referendum must be a referendum on the capping of the price of development land. That referendum must finally recognise that it is the State which confers the value on development land. Windfall taxes will make absolutely no difference to the price of development land. It is about the recognition that it is an action of the State on behalf of the citizens only that confers significantly more value on land that has an agricultural price of €100,000 per acre. We need to put a cap on that. A referendum based on the Kenny report, which is coming up to 50 years old, should be the referendum we have on housing to finally drive down the cost of housing land, and ultimately drive down the cost of housing to benefit those for whom we all aspire to be able to realise the ambitions we had to own our own homes and to raise our families in them.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: If the Ceann Comhairle will indulge me for 30 seconds, I want to go on the record of the Dáil with regard to the previous debate. I had asked the Minister for Health to answer a question and we left him one and a half minutes in which to answer the question. The Minister sat in the chair with his head down. When he got up to answer my question, he started talking to another Deputy, completely ignoring the childcare workers in Ireland and the retired nurses who were asked to come forward for the vaccination programme. I just wanted to put this on the record.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy will have to take that up directly with the Minister.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: I am delighted the Minister, Deputy O'Brien is here. The Land Development Agency is a way forward for building houses. The LDA, however, must work with the other agencies. Every city and small town in Ireland is looking for houses to be built. This cannot be random house building but a vision for a long-term view of the cities, towns and villages. Population is increasing and there is a demand now more than ever for green spaces for children and families where they live.

We need the experience of the LDA, and I see the agency filling a role along with the councils and, in Limerick, with the Limerick Twenty Thirty plan. Limerick is fortunate to have an active council. There are 40 councillors within Limerick's county and city councils, with 21 on the city council and 19 on the county council, but the Land Development Agency is only looking at lands in the city. This is my concern. I represent County Limerick. On many occasions I have raised the lack of infrastructure within our towns and villages. As I have said, there is a space for the Land Development Agency but it must cover all of our counties. It must work with Limerick city and county councils. It must work with groups such as the Limerick Twenty Thirty plan, which has started to build houses in Mungret, with families going into properties where they can afford to live. When I look outside the city and see the lands the LDA has said it will not look at, it is because there is no infrastructure.

My job as a public representative for Limerick is to work for all of Limerick. I understand that to have a vibrant county, we need to have a vibrant city, but the last agency we had in Limerick was for the regeneration, as referred to by Deputy O'Donnell earlier. That did not work. If anything it caused mayhem within the city and the county. We are dubious about what the LDA will do. If a commitment can be put in place whereby the LDA has to work with our local authorities and must work with the likes of our Limerick Twenty Thirty group and other agencies to bring houses for the city and the county, then I would welcome that. What is being put out there at the moment, however, is that the Land Development Agency says it does not have to talk to the local authorities and that it does not have to talk to any other agencies, that it is an agency itself.

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I have been in construction all my life and I have seen the pitfalls. From sitting on the council and from being in construction I have seen the pitfalls of how things happen. I am referring to Limerick. We need to make sure the vision caters for the young, the old and the vulnerable, and that it covers all of those. We do not want high-rise apartments. We do not want people crammed in. Consider the Colbert Station development in Limerick where it is hoped to build 2,000 units. This plan was recommended to the LDA by Limerick City and County Council. The executive of the LDA has a good relationship with Limerick City and County Council but it is being put out that one is fighting the other. Yes, the councillors in the area have concerns with the plan because of its amalgamation between city and county. They see it as very city oriented.

I raised the issue recently of the water services between city and county. Some 60% of the people in our city and county have inadequate water, with 73% of the city and county - but mainly the county - with inadequate sewerage. Not everyone wants to live in the city. My biggest concern with the LDA is that it would be completely city-based. We need to make sure our towns and villages have the connectivity and the sewerage so they can be part of this plan and that it would be an overall plan, and if it is to be in a rural development, that the councils would work to get in the services to the county areas. It cannot just be about cities.

It has been proven time and again that the councils cannot get through the bureaucracy to get the required 60,000 houses per annum built. If we look at the dereliction in our cities and towns, a lot can be achieved in them if we rebuild the streetscapes. It was said here in the Dáil that even in Dublin 60% of properties over the main floor are empty. That is because of the regulations and stipulations that have been put in place for years through planning laws. If we look in the county, the situation is similar. For the LDA to work, it cannot be city-based. It needs to invest in the counties. It needs to invest in infrastructure and that includes bus and rail services. There are old railway lines running through the county that can be brought back in play similar to what we are looking for with regard to Foynes, but we have to make sure it covers all of the county. Anything that comes from industry and infrastructure in the county of Limerick is moving west. We cannot allow that to happen. It has to cover the entire county.

We need to look also at people who are hoarding land and properties. We need to make sure they are either incentivised to bring them out of dereliction and use them or they are penalised for not doing that if there is a need in that area.

I have said previously that Irish Water is a failed identity but we need to work to put a management in place to ensure Irish Water delivers in terms of infrastructure for our areas. I call on the agencies to get the builders and developers to build houses because, as I said earlier, so much bureaucracy has been put in place the councils cannot build houses. There is a role for the LDA to build houses. We need houses built but we also need a vision for our city and for the county. That vision is that anyone in the area should be entitled to live wherever they want within a town or village. Everyone in this country has their culture. I am from the county and they call us culchies. I am proud to be one. I am delighted to have the room and the clean air that allows me do what I have to do. I look at places where connectivity is badly needed. From the point of view of the LDA, if this happens on a city basis only, it will destroy the towns and villages for more than one reason. For any town and village to survive it needs footfall. If they want to invest in putting in a shop or a butcher's, it has to have footfall and connectivity to attract people to live there. It has to have infrastructure.

I spoke to the council yesterday and I was told the only projects it is looking at are ones where the infrastructure is already in place. Only a couple of towns around our county have the

infrastructure in place to allow them build, that is, Kilmallock, Croom and Newcastle West. All the other places do not seem to have any infrastructure. Patrickswell and all those places have it. However, investment is needed in areas outside of those but it must be long term. People want to see their GAA, soccer, football and camogie teams, but all of those cannot be sustained if they do not have the proper infrastructure in place and the proper investment.

We do not want the LDA to be a runaway train. We had regeneration in Limerick and it created havoc in the city and county that took years to straighten out. We need a vision, infrastructure and collaboration involving the LDA, the local authorities and, in my own case, agencies such as the Limerick Twenty Thirty that have a vision for each individual county. That will make it a complete package for each individual county and we can all grow together.

Deputy O'Donnell mentioned section 8 earlier. We need to make sure that when the Land Development Agency is disposing of land, it has to consult the Minister, but if it disposing of houses it does not have to do that. We need to make sure that whatever the Land Development Agency does, the Minister has to be at the forefront of it to ensure it is protecting individual areas. He has to make sure the local authorities and the councillors who have a vision and are elected to represent their areas are represented.

I am looking forward to seeing what can be done. I am looking forward to seeing everything being put in place and amendments made to this Bill that will make sure we do not have another runaway train in Limerick. We need somebody who will work with the agencies and the local authorities collectively to make sure we have a vision for Limerick that is sustainable not only for the city but for the county.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: Like other Members I am delighted to have an opportunity to speak on this particularly important legislation. I was almost moved to tears when my colleague, Deputy Lahart, waxed lyrical on the entire subject. He missed out on one aspect, although I thought he was about to come to it. He did not claim responsibility for the fine summers we had over the years but he claimed responsibility for everything else. I mean that in the best of ways. I was reminded of a line in a poem which states:

And even the ranks of Tuscany

Could scarce forbear to cheer.

As the Ceann Comhairle and I well know, having served together on the same local authority, we learned most of what we learned about housing at the coalface. A number of aspects need to be set straight. Incidentally, I felt that Fine Gael was being held responsible for everything bad that happened, not by Deputy Lahart but by other speakers who seem to think they would not expect Fine Gael to be involved in anything other than what helped the larger householder or the more affluent sector of society. I would remind people there was a housing crisis in the 1970s and Fine Gael and the Labour Party between them in government resolved that problem. There was a housing crisis in the 1980s and again they resolved that problem, so they are not without some experience in dealing with the housing issue.

Over recent years a new issue has arisen in respect of housing. The young generation have been excluded from the housing market by one means or another. Various reasons have been put forward for that, and I disagree with my colleague, Deputy Lahart, on this one. The Kenny report is meant to be the be-all and end-all of everything. It is not because there were a number of reports around that time. There was the Kenny report, the Myles Wright report and the McK-

insey report, all of which attempted to deal with the same area. The Myles Wright report was the one that proposed to develop a number of towns, including a number in County Kildare, to draw the population away from the Dublin area. The other one was the two cities report which developed Tallaght as it is today. It provided housing for a large number of people who would not have been housed otherwise. It was the manner in which it was done that caused the greatest angst. The other one was the Ballymun housing solution, which again was in response to a crisis. The solution removed one crisis and replaced it with another, so to speak, by virtue of plunging into something that was not too well investigated.

I believe the Minister is trying to do the right thing and I hope it is the right thing. I have some concerns about it because I have had the same conversation with Ministers for housing of all parties over the past 20 years. It is about trying to make housing affordable and to bring it within the reach of a new generation and within the reach of people who would not be catered for by the local authority housing system, which, incidentally, does not exist any more anyway, in order that they might be able to buy houses for themselves for now or for their lifetimes, depending on what they want. I disagree strongly with the notion that rental accommodation was an answer to the problem. We all have had experiences over the past five or ten years of people promoting what they wanted to promote at a time because it suited them, and fellas coming on “Morning Ireland” to say that they were in favour of renting and that it was much better because one did not have an investment in bricks and mortar. It was all rubbish. The Ceann Comhairle and I know it was rubbish because there is nothing as good for the individual as to be independent. The independence starts, rests and remains with the ownership of the individual’s house. They then control that house. They control when they can come and go. If they are not able to pay for it, they know beforehand. One thing is certain: it is in their hands, and they relish that and will always do so. I therefore do not accept the notion that Irish people are “preoccupied” with the notion of home ownership. They are right to be so. Home ownership is their right, and no system should exclude them from that right.

A strange thing is happening now. We are back to where we were in the sense that a young person now deciding to buy a second-hand house - or any house, for that matter - will be asked to make an offer. As the market is tested over the following week or ten days or so, that price will escalate by up to 20% or 25%, which is a massive leap. That means the deposit which was required in the first instance is no longer relevant and the person has to wait or wait for more so he or she is still in the market. However, as other speakers have suggested, paying €450,000 for a two-bedroom house is absolutely ridiculous, and there is no sense in trying to justify it on any grounds, whether the house is in a trendy place, for want of a better word, or whether the purchase is made out of necessity. It should not be. Another issue arises from that: how does one climb down from a position of overpriced houses to reasonably priced houses without people going into negative equity subsequently? This issue has been dealt with before - well, it has not been dealt with but people have suffered it. People’s houses have been repossessed because they were in negative equity. Some of the same institutions are coming back still for the rest of it and the customer, of course, is always wrong.

I mentioned the Kenny report at the beginning because I have been interested to see whether land at an affordable price is the determining factor in the cost of housing. The answer is that it is not. In order to prove this, along with a number of our councillors, I formed a group a few years ago that had the opportunity to acquire serviced sites. The approved housing bodies could buy the sites for a single euro. We discovered when we tried to do so that it was not on; we had to pay for them. We paid either €20,000 or €25,000 per site - I cannot remember which

- with ten sites to an acre. For the acre, €250,000 was not too bad. It was not a site for nothing anyway - that is for sure - and we built the houses. I have spoken to the Minister previously about this. The strange thing about it was that we got a price from a builder to design, put in the earthworks or whatever the case was and deliver, which he did. The day the keys were handed out to the loan applicants the houses ran from €140,000 to €170,000. This was 2008 so not a million years ago. On the market at the same time the same houses were being marketed for €410,000. Therefore, somewhere along the way there is a markup that people do not seem to see and that we cannot seem to nail down. I know where it is, of course. Everybody jumps on the bandwagon, everybody gets their 5% or 10%, everything costs more and, as a result, there is a markup that everybody has to get and suddenly the house is priced out of reach.

The strange thing about it - well, it is not so strange at all - is that during the crash in the economy, when house prices collapsed everywhere, not one of those house loans went into negative equity. They were still good value. They held their face value all the time. The point I am making is that we are paying too much for houses and it is caused by an ability on the part of the developer to say on the day he or she buys the site, "I can put X number of houses here, I can reduce the quality of the houses, I can have multiple houses, hubs or whatever you want to call them on the site and I can make more out of it." That is what happens. I was looking recently at a proposed development locally to superimpose three or four storeys on top of an existing development at a sensitive location in terms of traffic. That was to be the answer. The result would be 30 or 50 houses - that is what it would achieve. The fact of the matter, however, is that 30 or 40 houses do not justify the extent of the damage to be done to the environment through bad planning, so another means must be found. The point I wish to emphasise is this: even if the land were available for nothing - absolutely zilch, zero - once it went through the system it would be multiplied in price every time by everybody. As a result the price goes up again and again. Let us not forget this. We can have all the referendums we like but if we think it will reduce the price of houses, forget about it, it will not. It has nothing to do with it whatsoever but it creates the impression that it could reduce house prices. It will not. I am sure the Minister in his own heart knows this because he has been in the business a while like us and he knows full well what will and will not happen.

Some Members spoke as if it were like in the old days, when the local authorities employed plumbers, plasterers, bricklayers and so on. That does not work. That is not the way the building system works any more. The local authority needs to get capable builders in to design and build, get planning permission, provide the road structures and the services and walk off at a price, that price being known beforehand. That can be done and is being done all the time. That is the way the building industry is structured now. That is the best value for money. It does not help to go back to the old days, when the local authority was stuck with the ongoing cost of having to retain on their books a whole army of building and construction workers. It does not work that way.

We should now look at what we have. There is a difference between what we had and what we have. When the economy went down there always used to be emigration, and that in turn had an effect on the housing market because we did not need as many houses. Well, we needed them all right but we were not here to get them. We therefore have to plan for the future and plan on the basis that a successful economy that is well managed will carry long into the future an ongoing annual demand for a certain number of houses, and they need to be houses.

Another thing I want to refer to is meeting short-term housing need. I do not agree with it at all. It is a waste of money. One can put as many people as one likes into a room and put

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independent corridors between them or whatever the case may be and say, "This is housing". It is not housing. It is emergency housing. That is all it is for, that is all it can do and it should never be treated as anything else. If we want proper accommodation, quality housing, we need to be absolutely certain that we meet the market requirements. The market requirements are that every young person wants to have a house. They want to be able to have the key to their own door and they do not want to have somebody looking over their shoulder saying, "You should move on now. You have been independent for long enough and we will move you into something else." Every time something like that happens, we damage the structure of society all around us. We should not be doing that, encouraging it or allowing it to happen.

I will move on to how we might proceed into the future. If the Bill and the proposals work, which we will watch carefully, and we hope they will work, they will eliminate an awful lot of hardship that is being suffered right now and has been suffered for several years by one or two generations that have not been able to acquire homes of their own. Even where they did so, when the economy collapsed they found themselves and their parents who guaranteed their loans in many cases in a serious position whereby they owed money to the banks in many cases for a property that no longer existed or was worth way less than what they built it or bought it for. We need to look at that.

I also want to briefly comment on the housing bodies. We were all members of the special housing committee four years ago and we spent some considerable time looking at the ways and means of addressing this issue. At the time, I opposed the use of the approved housing bodies as a means of meeting the demand of the general housing market. I believe I was right. Without a shadow of doubt, these bodies are good in the specialised housing area. They are excellent at meeting the housing needs of people with particular disabilities or those who have been unable, for one reason or another, to get on to the housing market and who have some requirements and need some encouragement and help. Without doubt, the approved housing bodies are way beyond any credit that has been thrown in their direction over recent years. Those bodies are still in the best position to deal with the specialised areas of housing. I believe that they are.

I have gone into a number of local authorities over recent years and have asked how quickly it can build 1,000 houses. I have asked that simple, straightforward question. I have been told that it could take five years or more. That is absolutely crazy. I cannot understand it. A person can go wherever they want and request the price for the building of a bridge or a motorway - anything they want. We have seen it all over the country. It has been done successfully and projects have been delivered on time. Good and internationally accredited products have been delivered. However, we do not seem to be able to do that with houses. Why is that? Why is there that reluctance?

I have blamed various people in the past as to why it happens. I do not know whether I am right or wrong. I felt there was a reluctance in the local authorities to accept responsibility and to drive projects to achieve results. Perhaps it was true and perhaps it was not. However, until and unless we resolve that particular issue, we are not going to solve the housing problem. We need houses delivered, not on large sites but in large numbers throughout the country at the same time. That can be done. I brought various people who had the capacity to deliver that to the local authorities and to various Ministers over the years and I pleaded with them. I am still pleading at this stage in the hope that the Minister has his eye on the same target that we all have and that it is his intention to drive this thing through to achieve the result.

I wish to make a point and to issue a warning. It concerns shared equity schemes. I must

say the Ceann Comhairle and I have had some peculiar experiences with these. There used to be what was referred to as the shared ownership loan system, which was the shared equity scheme at the time. The problem was that after a year or two, some genius decided to change it and add on 4% of an increase on the rental part of the equity on an annual basis. The effect of this was to drive the people out of the houses they were hoping to buy over a longer period of time and to force them into rental accommodation, which was available through the private sector because it was not available elsewhere. It was almost as if somebody had a look at the system and decided they needed to intervene because people were getting it too easy, so things should be made more difficult for them.

We also need to realise the younger generation must be given hope. We must let them know that, within a reasonable time, they can achieve their hearts' desire, that of owning a home.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Durkan, I am really loath to interrupt you when you are in full flow and talking about a subject that is dear to the hearts of all of us here, but I am afraid we must ask you now to propose the adjournment of the debate. You will have a few minutes left to conclude when next we return to this vitally important issue.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I so move.

Debate adjourned.

Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

Qualifications Recognition

Deputy Aodhán Ó Riordáin: My time is short, and I do appreciate my colleagues, Deputies Gannon and Tully, joining me in this debate.

Nothing really brings shame to the Department of Education more than its treatment of special needs assistants, SNAs, who we send into the war against Covid in classrooms throughout the country without basic provision for their own safety and without any sense of when they will be vaccinated. It is quite clear that when it comes to actually paying them, however, the Department will do everything it can resist that temptation. What we are talking about here is proper accreditation for the certification which they receive. We are having difficulty in getting that accreditation. The suspicion is the Department does not want to sanction such accreditation because it would mean SNAs would have to be properly paid. On that basis, I am interested to hear the Minister of State's response. I am also interested to hear the contributions of my colleagues.

Deputy Gary Gannon: Over recent months, we have rightfully heard how truly essential our SNAs are. This was never not the case. However, it has never been reflected in their remuneration and conditions of employment. Right now, more than 500 SNAs are taking an extraordinarily difficult course at UCD, where some of them have worked in excess of 60 hours since January trying to improve their skills, knowledge and awareness. At the end of that, they will not be given an accreditation comparable with any other course of a similar difficulty being offered in the country. That is simply unacceptable. Why does the Department and the Government not put their money where their mouth is in relation to SNAs to ensure they are accredited

properly for the work that they are doing and, beyond that, ensure their pay and conditions are commensurate with how truly essential their contribution is to schools throughout this country?

Deputy Pauline Tully: For far too long, SNAs have been treated as the poor relation within education. They deserve respect, and where they undertake training, it must be properly accredited and recognised. The Minister of State encouraged SNAs to take part in the first national training programme for SNAs at UCD. However, no clarity has been provided on the accreditation of this course. SNAs are going around in circles trying to get this clarity. While SNAs are spending a huge amount of time studying and putting the work in for this course, they deserve to know what qualifications they will come out of it with. They deserve to know what impact it will have on their employment, their rights and their entitlements. At the minute there is dithering, delay and confusion as to what the Department of Education is going to do about this and how it will be recognised. It is not good enough. The Minister, Deputy Foley, and the Minister of State, Deputy Madigan, need to resolve this with the Minister, Deputy Harris, and the institution involved. SNAs who are working hard and trying to upskill through courses like this deserve to know what status the qualification will have, and it must be clarified urgently.

Minister of State at the Department of Education(Deputy Josepha Madigan): I thank the Deputies for raising this matter today. I assure the House that the education of children with special educational needs is a key priority for this Government. The Government will invest in the region €2 billion this year in supporting children with special needs, which is over 20% of the total education budget. By the end of this year, there will be 18,000 special needs assistants employed in our schools. As the Deputies have pointed out, the SNAs play a huge role in supporting the inclusion of pupils with significant care needs in education and in school life. This was acknowledged in the Comprehensive Review of the Special Needs Assistant Scheme, published by the National Council for Special Education, NCSE, in 2018.

The review made a number of recommendations regarding SNAs and the need for a more broadly based set of supports, including therapeutic supports for pupils with complex needs. The review also referenced the training needs of SNAs. In this regard, the NCSE recommended that a new national training programme at level 5 of the national framework of qualifications be developed for existing SNAs who do not have the requisite level of training and for new SNAs on appointment. The NCSE also recommended that training tailored to the specific complex needs of some students being cared for by SNAs should be provided.

The policy advice has been considered by the Department and the value of an accredited programme is recognised. The Department is committed to the development of a strategic framework for SNAs that will identify need and provide quality training in a timely manner. In order to begin providing a foundation for this, it was decided that initial priority should be given to the development of a training programme for SNAs who may not have had a recent opportunity to access a training programme tailored to their role. The initial aim of the new programme is to provide training, not a professional qualification. This might provide some clarity to the Deputies on that specific question. This is the first national training programme for SNAs employed by the State and it is tailored to their needs. I assure the Deputies that the programme will be evaluated and the outcome will inform the approach to the training of SNAs in the future.

The Department recognises that a more strategic approach is required for the training of SNAs. This would deal with a number of matters, including the identification of need and the provision of appropriate training programmes. The issue of programme accreditation will be

considered further in this context. I look forward to its development. A public procurement competition was held for the development and delivery of a new national training programme for SNAs. A detailed specification of need and learning outcomes was developed and published for the competition. Following evaluation of the tenders received, the contract was awarded to University College Dublin's school of education, in conjunction with its school of nursing, midwifery and health systems.

A total of €2.5 million has been allocated to this programme over the next four years on the basis of a full uptake of 3,500 SNAs. My understanding is that some 2,500 SNAs have applied for the training, which meant this phase was oversubscribed, and the first cohort of 500 were enrolled in January. The programme consists of five modules delivered online over a ten-month period, with a two-month break during the summer period. Flexibility is a key part of the approach to the delivery of the programme. It is important to stress that it is a voluntary programme and something SNAs have been seeking for a considerable period of time. I stress that as it is a new programme, it will be evaluated and the outcome of that evaluation will inform future policy, including policy on accreditation.

Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin: The Minister of State knows, I know and, indeed, the cat knows that teachers would not be treated as SNAs are being treated because the Department would not get away with it. It is clear that the Department has a long-standing issue or policy when it comes to dealing with SNAs in that they are not treated with the same level of respect as teachers. We have seen that throughout the pandemic, from announcements being made without the sign-off of the union representing SNAs to the absolute debacle of the redeployment process last year.

Now we have a situation where the Minister of State has given a speech to the House that is very well-meaning but which shows that she will not do what we require her to do, namely, afford SNAs the credit and respect they deserve for the training they do. I suggest to the Minister of State that she should work harder to put in place the accreditation that SNAs are seeking for the training they do. This would show them that the Department recognises that theirs is a profession of which they can be proud, instead of leaving them always to feel that they are being undermined by the Department.

Deputy Gary Gannon: I thank the Minister of State for her response. It was an honest contribution, but contained within that honesty was clarity as to just how unhelpful it is. A total of 500 SNAs are undertaking a course that will not be accredited. We are supposed to alleviate the concerns of those 500 people by telling them the training will be assessed in the future and that other groups of trainees, perhaps, will be accredited for doing the same training. That seems quite insulting. If I were undertaking that course, I would be fairly demotivated.

The Minister of State said that the course has no cost for participants but that is not true. The effort involved for those SNAs in doing their day's work and then coming home and trying to provide childcare while they do a course online is a cost in itself. For that, they will not receive any accreditation. Even worse, they are being told that taking this course may be of assistance to them in pursuing further education. Equally, however, it may not be of any such benefit.

We need some urgency around this issue. I fully appreciate what the Minister of State is telling us but it is not good enough. All we are asking for is clarity as to what level SNAs will be accredited at for completing quite a difficult and worthwhile course. The Minister of State needs to do better on this matter.

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Deputy Pauline Tully: Like the two previous speakers, I am somewhat disappointed with the Minister of State's reply. SNAs are professionals and they want to do their job as well as possible. They are willing to undertake this training to improve their abilities. Without SNAs, many students would be excluded from education. Their work is imperative to ensure inclusion. I ask the Minister of State to go back and revisit this matter. There must be an incentive for SNAs to improve the work they do through this training programme. Members of other professional bodies would not be asked to do work for which they do not receive some sort of accreditation and which could be reflected in their employment conditions and pay.

Deputy Josepha Madigan: It is not a fair assertion that my Department and I do not care about treating SNAs well. This course provides the very first opportunity for many SNAs to engage with the theory and research-based practice which underlies their role. I accept that the training is not yet accredited, which is not to say that it never will be accredited. We have to start somewhere and this is very valuable training. It is testament to its value that there have been so many applicants. It is a very well-considered course with excellent modules contained within it. It will provide a really good grounding and training, which, as I said in my initial response, is what the NCSE has recommended. The aim, in the first instance, is to provide really good training as opposed to a professional qualification. The Deputies will appreciate that we cannot suddenly go from a zero base to accreditation without evaluating the outcomes of particular courses. I reiterate that the outcome of the course will be evaluated and will inform the approach that is taken into the future.

We have 70% more SNAs now, at nearly 18,000, than we had in 2011, when there were 10,500. As the first Minister of State with a dedicated remit of special education, I certainly have, at all times, tried to look after SNAs, whether that involves the provision of PPE or taking care of other aspects of their well-being. We have written to the Department of Health to see whether we can get them moved up the vaccination schedule. We are doing everything we can to support them. This training is a stepping stone for SNAs and it will result in much better training in the future.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputies for raising this important matter and the Minister of State for coming to the House to respond to it.

Social Welfare Benefits

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: My colleague, Deputy Richmond, and I appreciate that the net issue around construction is a matter for the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage. However, we want to deal with a specific issue relating to the financial impact of the shutdown of the construction sector. There are families who have been engaging in home renovation projects and who are renting other accommodation for the period of the renovation. The unforeseen additional shutdown of construction activity in the private accommodation sector has left them facing very considerable additional rental bills. Some families can absorb that additional cost but many of them are under severe financial pressure to bear it for three, four, five or even six months. They also need to plan two months in advance in order to give notice to their short-term landlord.

I want to flag this as a significant cost burden to the families affected which, in some cases, they are simply unable to bear. I am asking that the Department of Social Protection make additional needs payments available to them, whether under the supplementary welfare provisions

or as exceptional needs payments. It is a question of ensuring that if the families approach the Department or Intreo offices, the Department will be aware of their circumstances and the burden on them. The families would not necessarily present to the Department or Intreo in other circumstances but they are under particular pressure now.

We are aware that renovations and private home construction cannot be progressed at the moment. People understand that, although they look with frustration at the construction activity that has been going on, including in respect of housing adaptation and social houses, as important as these are. When it is one's own house that is being renovated and the works are subject to the vagaries of the wind and rain, meaning that jobs cannot be completed, and one is bearing an additional burden, it is very difficult. In my constituency, for example, there is an affected couple who recently purchased a private home in a new development. The home is at the final snagging stage but the deadline of 31 January could not be met. Had everything gone to plan, the couple would have moved in last month. They had been saving for a really long time but they just cannot afford the additional rent. I thank the Minister of State, Deputy Joe O'Brien, for hearing us on this.

Deputy Neale Richmond: I am very grateful to my colleague, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, for allowing me to contribute on this important Topical Issue matter.

We are all aware that throughout this pandemic, people have sadly slipped through the gaps in terms of the supports available from the Government. We discuss these at length. Supports are available under the Covid restrictions support scheme and there are workplace supports for many employers and businesses, but a group that is really getting caught comprises those who have been having work done on their homes, as alluded to by Deputy Carroll MacNeill. The fact that much of the work was not counted as essential has left them in circumstances in which they must rent accommodation. They have to meet the cost of rent as well as pay a mortgage. They have to rely on borrowings and savings and they face a very difficult situation. We all know of the difficulties and uncertainties in the rental market, and we do not know exactly when the works can continue.

I am struck by two cases in my constituency. The first concerns a family who contacted me in January. They are having pyrite remediation works carried out on their home. The home has been stripped to the foundations and it is completely uninhabitable. The works have not continued and the family has to rent accommodation. They do not have family they can live with. Now the landlord is asking how much more time they want, and they are asking how they will be able to afford both the rent and the mortgage.

In the second case, a family in Stillorgan has taken off the back of their house to adapt it and construct a wet room for a child with severe special needs. They are living in temporary rental accommodation and the lease is up. The costs are mounting and the builders cannot do the work. The family is really starting to worry about how they will make ends meet, make rent payments, pay the mortgage and pay for the important work that needs to be done. It is not a case of people making a choice or opting for a luxury item; these are vital works. Those affected are in a quandary in that they are falling through the cracks and facing double payments in a very difficult situation. They absolutely need an emergency payment of some kind.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputies for raising these really human dilemmas.

Minister of State at the Department of Social Protection (Deputy Joe O'Brien): I thank

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the Deputies for raising this issue. I will give some context first. On 6 January, the Government announced that additional public health restrictions would apply under level 5 of the plan for living with Covid-19. The additional restrictions required all construction activity to cease from 6 p.m. on Friday, 8 January, with a number of exceptions. These measures are set out in the Health Act 1947 (Section 31A - Temporary Restrictions) (Covid-19) (No. 10) Regulations 2020, as amended.

With regard to private housing developments, the regulations provide that housing and construction works that were ongoing on 8 January could continue where the works required to render the property capable of occupation were scheduled for completion by 31 January 2021. The regulations also provide for the supply and delivery of essential or emergency maintenance and repair services to businesses and homes, including electrical, gas, oil, plumbing, glazing and roofing services, on a call-out basis. On 23 February, the Government announced that the current level 5 restrictions would remain in place until 5 April 2021.

People who cannot occupy their new or renovated home can apply for mortgage payment breaks. The banks have been asked to exercise, and generally are exercising, forbearance with regard to mortgage and loan repayments. In September the Central Bank reported that over 90,000 people were availing of mortgage payment breaks and that the overall number of people in arrears had reduced. Banks are obliged to follow the Central Bank's code of conduct on mortgage arrears, which involves a four-step mortgage arrears resolution process, MARP. Accordingly, in most circumstances a person who does not have the financial wherewithal should not have to face the challenge of covering both rent and mortgage or loan payments while awaiting the completion of a new home build or renovation. In addition, people can access the Money Advice & Budgeting Service, MABS, which is funded by the Department of Social Protection under the aegis of the Citizens Information Board, for support in utilising the mortgage arrears resolution process.

Protections are also in place to support tenants during the lockdown. A moratorium on evictions has been in operation throughout the country since 31 December 2020 and it is to last until 15 April 2021, with limited exceptions. The Department of Social Protection provides a range of supports to help people during the Covid-19 pandemic, most notably the pandemic unemployment payment, the employment wage subsidy scheme and the Covid-19 illness benefit, and it has introduced flexibility with regard to access to rent supplement. In addition, it provides supplementary supports where a person is experiencing financial hardship. These are, of course subject to a means test to ensure supports are targeted at those who need them most. For example, the exceptional needs payment scheme is available to provide supports to people who may be experiencing exceptional needs as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. Payments are made at the discretion of the officers administering the scheme, taking into account the requirements of the legislation and all the relevant circumstances of the case. In considering whether to make a payment, officers consider the income of the household and the ability of the applicant to meet the need from his or her own resources. Exceptional needs payments are not subject to the habitual residence condition and payments can be made to those who do not qualify for other social welfare supports. Accordingly, any person experiencing financial hardship as a consequence of Covid-19-related constraints can and should access the community welfare service. Where a need can be established, we are there to help.

I thank the Deputies for raising this matter.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I thank the Minister of State for his response, which

is very welcome. I will be sure to bring it back to my constituents who are suffering in the way I have described. They have faced an unexpected burden. Many of them have not had contact with Intreo services before and just may not be aware of the supports offered by the Government at different stages. I will, of course, refer to the Minister of State's speech when advising them. I will advise them to refer to it when they make contact with the Intreo offices.

As the Ceann Comhairle said, these are the very human dilemmas and cases related to the Covid experience that one just did not expect. They relate to the sorts of changes that had to be made under public health guidance. I encourage the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage to ensure that construction of the kind in question will be among the first categories of construction, if not the first, to recommence when possible. We recognise the reason construction had to stop but the human impact is quite considerable. The stress and strain of not knowing whether an extra month or an extra two or three months are needed is quite a burden when it is about family accommodation.

Deputy Neale Richmond: I thank the Minister of State. I welcome many of his comments. This is about the practicalities of individuals carrying out vital works that are unfortunately not classified as essential. I am referring to family circumstances that most of us in this House deal with every day simply through representations but we do not experience them on a personal level. The families do not have the time to go through a labyrinth of forms and various schemes.

I was a little concerned when the Minister of State referred to means testing. To what extent will means tests take into account factors such as having a mortgage in addition to having to pay rent? There is scope for expanding the rent supplement. I ask the Minister of State to work with the Minister for Social Protection to consider this expansion. To the Minister of State and me, this matter involves a short-term measure but for the families who are locked out of their homes on which they are doing vital work and who do not know how they will pay their bills at the end of the month, it is very pressing and concerning.

Deputy Joe O'Brien: The exceptional needs payment scheme is available to provide supports to people who may be experiencing exceptional needs as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. I appreciate that current restrictions on construction have had a significant unforeseen impact on households that began renovations on family homes prior to the introduction of the current level 5 restrictions, and particularly on those who had to vacate their homes to seek alternative accommodation once renovation started. Those affected can access MABS, which is funded by the Department of Social Protection, for support in utilising the MARP. It is unlikely that financial support from the Department of Social Protection will be available in all cases where there are additional unforeseen rental costs associated with the ongoing shutdown of construction, which has prevented renovation work on family homes from being completed. The Department may be able to assist some low-income or welfare-dependent households affected in meeting these costs through the exceptional needs payment scheme. Any person experiencing financial hardship as a consequence of Covid-19-related constraints can and should access the community welfare service. Where a need can be established, we are there to help.

6 o'clock

The exceptional needs payment cuts through a lot of red tape and form filling and is a relatively easy payment to apply for as it is generally accepted that it is needed quickly. That side of things should not cause a major problem for people. I thank the Deputies again for raising the matter.

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Community Employment Schemes

Deputy Holly Cairns: The community employment, CE, programme is invaluable. Workers gain experience and develop skills. Communities gain from the work and society gains from the programme. In west Cork, CE workers are vital. Without them, many rural services and organisations would close.

Skibbereen Education and Environment Project recently shared with me a selection of the roles CE workers fill. There is the care and repair service, set up with support from one of my predecessors, former Deputy Jim Daly, which carries out small repairs to keep elderly and vulnerable people in their own homes and is staffed entirely by CE workers. Support staff in Lisheens House, a suicide awareness and counselling charity, are CE workers. Community halls, Tidy Towns committees, sports clubs, and charity shops have all gained substantially from this programme. It is the type of Government policy we need. Community employment is targeted at the needs of people and communities and meets our shortfalls in local services. Every Deputy in the House knows its value and supports it.

There are three issues that projects and sponsors have highlighted to me. The first is the situation regarding workers aged over 55. Rural areas have proportionately more older unemployed people. Rural and coastal communities need the CE scheme to recognise this reality. Prior to 2017, workers could remain on the scheme for up to five or six years depending on their circumstances. However, the previous Government greatly reduced this period and community employment schemes generally last one year now, with the possibility of an extension if the participant is working towards an award. This is beyond frustrating for workers and sponsoring services. Individuals doing good work and helping their community have to leave their role because the Department changed the conditions. They are forced to leave the programme, are made unemployed and the vacant role is not filled. I do not know where the joined-up thinking is in this.

The second issue raised with me is that projects and sponsors are calling for the qualifying period of unemployment to be reduced from 12 months to six months. This would enable a whole cohort of people to participate in the programme, upskill and actively contribute to their communities. I do not know what sense there is in making people spend an additional six months unemployed rather than giving them the opportunity and dignity of taking up meaningful work. This issue is even more relevant during the pandemic, when employment prospects are bleak. The people affected and all communities need the Government to respond pragmatically by allowing people to access this excellent programme earlier.

The third and most urgent point, to which I ask the Minister of State to give priority, is the clear need for a further extension of contracts for community employment workers. While I welcome the extension the Minister of State announced during the week, it was only until 2 July. Over the past year, sponsors and projects have not been able to recruit and retain effectively. Training, which is a requirement of the programme and part of the contract, has not been adequately delivered, particularly during the pandemic. It is only fair that all existing contracts be extended well past July. The Department has acknowledged that an extension is needed; it just needs to follow that through to its logical conclusion.

There is precedent for this. On the islands, an exception is made for lifelong learning due to the restrictions caused by living on an island. Those same restrictions are apparent in many rural areas as well. These roles cannot be filled, particularly in a pandemic. For example, social

welfare officers would normally look for new people to fill community employment roles after 12 months. However, these officers are in desk work now so the roles are not being replaced. Leaving vacant roles such as those I highlighted will have a detrimental effect on communities, even more so in a pandemic. If community employment positions in west Cork are not extended very soon, the number of CE workers will fall from 30 to 11, which could cause the service to be discontinued. We would then lose services we desperately need, especially at the moment.

Skibbereen Education and Environment Project and other organisations have asked me to bring these matters to the Minister of State's intention to help preserve their schemes and the service they provide. What answers can I give them?

Deputy Joe O'Brien: I thank the Deputy for raising this matter. Community employment is an active labour market programme designed to provide eligible long-term unemployed people and other disadvantaged persons with an opportunity to engage in useful work within their communities on a temporary, fixed-term basis.

Since the start of the pandemic, we have approved the extension of CE participant contracts that would have come to an end during level 5 restrictions on a number of occasions. To date, more than 5,000 community employment and Tús participants have benefited from these arrangements. These participants will now benefit from a further extension up to 2 July. This will benefit an additional 2,000 CE and Tús participants whose contract would otherwise end between now and the start of July. I reassure the Deputy and the community employment scheme in Skibbereen that these contracts will not suddenly end on the final date of extensions, whenever that will be. Subsequent to the final extension date, there will be a planned ending of contracts on a phased basis and over a period of time to ensure continuity of local services. Department officials will work on the ground with CE schemes to support them in managing this process.

We also announced on Tuesday that a new forum comprising representatives of community employment and Tús schemes and officials from the Department of Social Protection will be established shortly. The purpose of the forum is to discuss and exchange views on operational issues impacting on both schemes. These recent changes that have been announced will mean the schemes in Skibbereen will not have any participants exiting until 2 July at the earliest. One participant employed in one of the two CE schemes in Skibbereen will also benefit from the changes announced for those affected by the 2017 rule change.

The Minister and I are fully committed to the future of this programme, as is evidenced by the announcement of 3,000 additional CE places. We also secured approval to support community employment and Tús schemes as part of the July stimulus package. We will continue to support and improve the programme for the benefit of CE participants and the valuable contribution being made to local communities through the provision of services.

Deputy Holly Cairns: I thank the Minister of State and welcome his interest in the scheme. Communities now need that interest to be lived up to with commitments.

The programme is incredible value for money. For almost 20 hours of work a week, participants get only €22.50 more than their social welfare payment. While my critique of this small amount is a discussion for another day, the Government and Department must recognise that the cost of the programme is vastly outweighed by its impact on the ground and it needs greater flexibility to meet the needs of workers. The Minister of State said he was aware of the recruit-

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ment issues. It is hard to recruit new CE workers who have been unemployed for longer than 12 months during this time, and particularly, if there is an extension to 2 July. There is precedent to provide for lifelong learning for island communities. We know it is possible to do that. It is necessary during the pandemic, not to mention the fact that many rural communities have the same restrictions and barriers as island communities. I ask the Minister of State to look into that and to please, if he can, extend that special measure for islands into other areas during the pandemic, because we all know 2 July is not long enough. I will leave the rest of my time for him to respond to that specifically. It will give people much ease. Programmes such as the care and repair service set up by former Minister of State, Mr. Jim Daly, allowing vulnerable people to stay in their homes and be looked after, are entirely staffed by CE workers. In west Cork, we are looking at a situation where we could go from 30 CE workers to 11. I know the Minister of State said 2 July but people need more reassurance and longer-term assurance that they will be able to stay in their positions, not just for themselves, but for the people who rely on them.

Deputy Joe O'Brien: I thank the Deputy for raising this matter. I also place a major emphasis on the importance of CE schemes. I am aware of the CE recruitment challenges arising from the current restrictions, which has had an impact on the ability of some CE schemes to recruit new participants.

Community employment is an active labour market programme designed to provide eligible long-term unemployed people and other disadvantage persons with an opportunity to engage in useful work within their communities on a temporary fixed-term basis. CE schemes make a valuable contribution to local communities through the provision of services and my Department will continue to support them with this.

I reassure the Deputy, and the CE scheme in Skibbereen, that there will be no sudden ending for this number of contracts on whatever the final date of extensions will be. Subsequent to the final extension date, there will be a planned ending of contracts on a phased basis, over a period, to ensure continuity of local services. My officials will work on the ground with CE schemes to support them in managing this process and they will be in touch with the Skibbereen CE scheme over the coming weeks.

I will take away the Deputy's suggestion on lifelong learning exemption for the islands. I was not aware of it. I will take that back to the officials and hear what they say, however. We might need something beyond 2 July. We are, I suppose, moving in sync with the new plan and so we will review on an ongoing basis. There is a chance there may be a need for another extension.

The other issue to keep in mind is that there will also be larger cohort of long-term unemployed people who could very well benefit from CE schemes. While I understand many sponsors have many good people doing good jobs and who want to stay, there is also pressure in the other direction for many people who are and who will be distant from the labour market. We need to be conscious that they also need to be given a fair shot and a fair opportunity over time.

Missing Persons

Deputy Duncan Smith: I thank the Minister, Deputy O'Gorman, for stepping in for this Topical Issue matter. The Minister for Justice's office contacted me. I understand she is at a Brexit meeting. I know, however, given his interests and his past, Deputy O'Gorman may

have a personal interest in this as well. He might bring this matter up to the Minister, Deputy McEntee.

I am going to discuss a matter of the upmost sensitivity. It is an issue of which I have no personal experience; the vast majority of people do not. However, for those living with someone in their lives who is missing, it is a matter of all-consuming trauma that is compounded by the lack of co-ordination and leadership between various Departments and State agencies. It can, however, be resolved with some political will, which is what I am hoping to start and engender today.

Today is National Book Day, and I am currently reading *Missing* by RTÉ journalist, Mr. Barry Cummins, who has been a tireless worker and advocate for families of missing people and the rights of those whose remains are unidentified. On 31 December 2020, he penned an article, which indicated there are 18 unidentified remains for which there is DNA analysis. That number is now down to 17 because in early February, there was a breakthrough in a case regarding Denis Walsh, the young Limerick man who went missing in March 1996. His remains were found in Inis Mór about a month later but were not identified until earlier this year due to DNA. His poor family searched for 25 years, even though an organ of the State had found the remains. However, no one was able to put two and two together and provide the truth for his family. That is a tragedy in itself. Ultimately, they have found the remains and he has been identified.

This could happen for many cases out there, however. We do not know how many unidentified bodies are interred in cemeteries or remain in morgues because there is no compellability upon coroners or cemeteries to report that. If coroners cannot find out the “how”, they do not have to find out the “who”. With 823 current live missing persons cases and an unknown number of unidentified bodies in our State, there is scope for more bodies to be identified and matched with people who are missing.

This must be done as it is the right thing to do. One relative of a missing person said to me this week that having to go to many different coroners offices and cemeteries throughout the country trying to seek information is similar to going to multiple lost and found offices, which I thought was such a tragic thing to say. It is so unbearably sad to not be able to get any information and for there to be no compellability on anyone to provide information.

A Department or organisation should be given responsibility and resources, and it will take time and resources, to do an audit of all the unidentified bodies out there. We could then match them and carry out DNA analysis to see if we can provide truth for many families who live with this unbearable trauma, through silence from the State, every day.

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman): I thank the Deputy for speaking with such passion on this issue. The stark figure he raised of more than 800 active missing persons cases in the country reminds us why this issue is so critical. I spoke to the Minister, Deputy McEntee, about this earlier this afternoon. She said she would like to be here but cannot because of the Brexit meeting. I will, however, engage with her further and I know she is giving this issue her attention.

As the Deputy will appreciate, the investigation and prevention of crimes are operational matters for the Garda Commissioner and An Garda Síochána. The Minister for Justice does not have a direct role in that operational element. I assure the Deputy, however, that she is in ongoing contact with the Commissioner and his management team with regard to the policy and

policing response to crime incidents generally.

The Garda missing persons unit, local Garda stations and the network of family liaison officers around the country all perform crucial roles in investigating missing persons incidents and supporting families and friends of missing persons. The missing persons unit is the linchpin in the investigation process, carrying out investigations, assisting local gardaí on complex cases, liaising with governmental and non-governmental agencies involved in this area of work, co-ordinating DNA retrieval from family members of persons on the missing persons database and assisting in the identification of unidentified human remains.

Forensic science and the retrieval of DNA from close family members has made substantial contributions to missing persons cases over the past number of years, and indeed, Ireland's DNA database contains valuable close family samples alongside profiles of persons whose identity is not yet known. The database can match missing people, sometimes via their close relatives, to unidentified bodies, helping to bring some element of closure for families searching for their loved ones. The database can also serve to eliminate a missing person if an unidentified body is found matching their description, again assisting the gardaí with their investigations. The population of this database, in conjunction with the work of Forensic Science Ireland and An Garda Síochána, has enabled increasing numbers of missing persons to be identified in recent years. These successes provide hope for those families who are still seeking answers about the disappearance of their loved ones.

I can confirm that some preliminary work was carried out by An Garda Síochána in 2019 to record unidentified remains that may be located with individual coroners across the country. Department of Justice officials are examining ways to update and take forward that work while fully respecting the independent role of the coroners as set out in the Coroners Act 1962. That identifies that particular real difficulty that relatives face with having to engage with individual coroners rather than just one agency. The Minister and the Department have identified this and are initiating work in that area.

Ambiguous loss of a loved one is a devastating experience for affected families and friends. As a Minister and member of the Government, I offer my deepest sympathies to family and friends who have been affected profoundly and sadly by these losses.

Deputy Duncan Smith: I thank the Minister for his reply.

I take some encouragement from the fact that some preliminary work has been done and this will be built on. Will the Minister give a commitment that the Department will examine some recommendations of what the best way to proceed would be and report them back to the suitable parties, be it the justice spokespeople or the House itself?

The missing persons bureau and Forensic Science Ireland do fantastic work. The science is there to bring resolution and truth to many people and families. There are many different reasons people go missing. Some are the victims of crime while others are victims of tragic circumstances. The majority of those in question meet lonely ends in this world. Many would have lived the last few months or years of their lives on the margins of their communities or, perhaps, their families. If the State does not do its best in identifying them, give them a resting place and reunite their remains with their families, then forever in death they will remain marginalised, outside and excluded. That is not something that we can stand over.

There are two choices for the Government and subsequent Governments. The first is to

accept the *status quo* and rely on the combination of disconnected State bodies, imperfect infrastructure, the work of journalists and families to solve these mysteries and bring some truth. That is unacceptable. The second is to come up with the recommendation that will resolve this, provide a pathway for those families, as well as offering some kind of system and organisation in which they can trust and believe. It will not resolve or find the truth for all the cases. However, it will for some and, maybe, for most. That is something for which we should strive. I look forward to raising this further at the appropriate times in the House. I thank the Minister again for his response.

Deputy Roderic O’Gorman: I will bring that request to the Minister for Justice, Deputy McEntee. While I do not want to speak for her by any means, I am sure the Government will look at examining recommendations. As I acknowledged in my own statement, the loss of a loved one in unknown circumstances is tragedy. The pain associated with such loss is carried and felt by families and subsequent generations. When we hear of a body being identified, there is the mixed emotion of the absolute tragedy for the family. There is also, I suppose, a slight sense of relief and some final answers being provided to that family. This is what the Deputy is seeking to achieve.

The Minister wants to focus on the importance of national Missing Persons Day as part of a commemoration that the Department of Justice runs every year. It complements the existing international Missing Children’s Day. It has several objectives including that it commemorates those who have gone missing and it also recognises the lasting trauma for their families and their friends. It also usefully draws attention to open or unsolved missing persons cases and creates an opportunity to provide information on available support services.

Forensic Science Ireland and An Garda Síochána have worked in partnership over the past number of years to develop a DNA testing facility for families of missing persons at the national Missing Persons Day ceremony. This partnership has served to enhance the ceremony from that of a commemorative event to one that is actually contributing to raising awareness of the significant contribution that DNA testing can bring to the conclusion of a considerable number of missing persons cases over recent years.

This year Missing Persons Day 2021 will continue in the same vital vein and will seek to raise public awareness of the crucial work undertaken by a range of justice and State agencies, as well as that carried out by community and voluntary organisations.

Impact of Covid-19 on Women for International Women’s Day: Statements

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman): I thank Members for the opportunity to speak today about the impact of Covid-19 on women. It is important that we have these debates to keep the issue of gender equality live but also to better understand the experiences of women in order that we as legislators can continue to make great strides towards achieving gender equality. I am particularly pleased to have this opportunity in the context of International Women’s Day.

The theme chosen this year for International Women’s Day by UN Women is Women in Leadership: Achieving an Equal Future in a Covid-19 World. This theme encourages us to celebrate the tremendous efforts by women and girls around the world in shaping a more equal future and recovery from the pandemic. The Covid-19 pandemic, and all events that surround

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it, have had a profound impact on women in Ireland and worldwide. We are experiencing a crisis with health, social and economic dimensions that is having different impacts on women and men. There is an urgent need to understand this gender dimension and factor it into policy responses.

The greatest risk is that it has left us in a situation that could reverse advances for gender equality that have been decades in the making. The pandemic has exposed and exacerbated many existing inequalities in society including inequality that disadvantages women.

Ahead of International Women's Day, it is important to recognise the courage shown by women during these past 12 months, the bravery of women in speaking out about their experiences of Covid-19, as well as demanding better from society and from the Government. Women have campaigned, and continue to campaign, and valiantly draw attention to the inequalities in our society. They do so with great determination and success. However, it is not women alone who should be striving for gender equality. We are in privileged positions in the Dáil. We must all use our voices to elevate the struggles of others and advance the rights of women and the more marginalised people in our society. As a Government, we cannot merely choose to be feminists when it suits us or when it looks good. Feminism needs to be at the core of everything we do and every decision we make if we are truly serious about achieving gender equality through our actions. Importantly, our feminism must be inclusive and recognise the unique struggles faced by women of colour, trans women, Traveller women and disabled women.

A patriarchal society still exists. Sexism still exists and women still face misogyny in everyday life. There exist some who are trying to make cracks in our feminist movement as we strive further for equality. There are some who are attempting to exploit perceived weaknesses in order to exclude marginalised voices. The fight for inclusive feminism is a battle that still continues. Activists have worked too hard for inclusive spaces for them to be taken away. Not only do we need to be able to identify these exclusionary tactics but we must also choose to challenge them.

The past year has been particularly difficult for women and families who have experienced pregnancy. Many women have had to experience important milestones, like the 12-week or 20-week scans of their pregnancy, alone or even the birth of their child, moments which would have in normal circumstances been shared with a partner or a close friend or family member. The strength shown by pregnant women during this pandemic has been remarkable. It is important to recognise this today.

Many women have spoken out about their experiences of reproductive healthcare during this pandemic. It is imperative that we listen to these voices in order that we can ensure women are empowered to make their own decisions around reproductive healthcare, as well as making sure they are supported in their journey through pregnancy.

As a result of the pandemic, we are also seeing evidence across Europe that women's labour market participation is impacted to a greater degree than that of men. Women are over-represented in the sectors which have been badly affected in the pandemic. Women are more likely to have reduced working hours, suffer job losses or leave the labour market. The reasons for this include women experiencing greater conflict between working and their family lives, and having lower entitlements to benefits relating to employment. This may be a temporary pattern but recovery of the female labour market after earlier periods of lockdown has been slower than that of men. If this pattern persists, it could have long-term implications for the female employ-

ment rate, for women's progression and pay in general, as well as for the gender pay gap.

Women have carried an unequal share of the unpaid work of keeping families going. We know this is the reality, even though it may not be spoken about openly. For example, the burden of home schooling arising from school closures has fallen disproportionately on women.

Both in the care economy and in unpaid work in the home, the pandemic has highlighted how care work is undervalued in our society but is fundamental to how it functions. It has also shown the value of the care infrastructure we have invested in already and the potential for further investment in services.

For women who have lost their jobs during the pandemic, we must ensure that they are supported to retrain and reskill and continue to participate in the workforce.

The Gender Pay Gap Information Bill 2019, which I intend to progress as a priority, will assist with continuing to highlight the pay gap across companies and in the civil and public service. I intend to monitor the implementation of the legislation, once passed, to ensure that we are on track to achieve our aims.

Further work on developing family leave options will also assist with addressing the assumptions that women are always the primary care giver, and will encourage greater sharing of the care load. On Tuesday, I will bring to Government a Bill which will enact the Government's existing commitment to extend parent's leave and benefit from two weeks to five weeks for each parent and to extend the period in which it can be taken from the first year of a child's life to the first two years. This leave is non-transferable and is aimed at supporting working families with additional leave at this difficult time, but also to encourage parents to share the childcare burden and ensure that fathers also get to spend time with their child in the crucial early years.

Included in these proposals are amendments to the adoptive leave legislation which will address the anomaly whereby married male same-sex couples are excluded from the leave. It will do so by removing the presumption of the gender of the person who will take the adoptive leave, and will give the adoptive family the freedom to choose who is best to provide that primary care. The other parent will be entitled to a paternity leave equivalent.

My Department will also continue to work on examining policy on flexible working and on the implementation of the work-life balance directive to ensure that the opportunities that the changing work environment has presented are fully capitalised on and that remote working does not become gendered and become a barrier to career progression.

I am delighted to have this opportunity today to address these crucial issues - the specific impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on women, particularly in the context of International Women's Day - and I look forward to hearing the points colleagues make across the House. At this point, I will hand over to my colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte.

Minister of State at the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): I wish I could say that women have always been treated fairly and equally by this State but it is important to acknowledge that this country has curtailed progress on women's rights at various points. We need only look at last night's "RTÉ Investigates" programme about illegal adoptions for yet another unearthing of discrimination. It is maddening to see how the State, and particularly Governments of the past, failed to protect and advocate for the rights of women. This, of course, follows on from the hurt and pain already

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detailed by survivors of the mother and baby homes. This showed how the State turned its back on women and children of this country and left them to suffer behind walled institutions.

In 2021, I would hope we do not face the same the level of discrimination and misogyny but I know this would not be the full truth. We are only coddling ourselves if we think we have achieved full equality. However, I know we are making progress and while it is taking longer than I would like, I am confident we will get there.

When we look at how Covid has impacted women, there has undoubtedly been added strain on mothers. On top of their full-time job, many have had to take up the role of teacher, carer, cook, cleaner and counsellor.

I also want to recognise the unbelievable contribution of carers, many of whom are women. Carers have been particularly stretched over the past year. For most, the essential work they do as carers is their sole job and it is not an easy one. Sometimes carers do not receive the thanks they should but I would like to take this opportunity to thank them for the Trojan work they do looking after some of our most vulnerable.

I must also acknowledge the intense pressure that disabled women have faced over the past 12 months. In some ways, the impact Covid has had and the way it has halted access to many elements of our society, has highlighted some of the obstacles women with disabilities, and indeed the wider disability population, faced in pre-Covid times. It brings to mind an interview that was done with the parent of a child with a disability last summer. She said that what Covid gave the rest of the society was an understanding of the world they lived in. Having a lockdown did not really impact on them because they themselves had their challenges even when we did not have a lockdown. It was to give wider society an understanding of what is laid out for families with persons with disabilities and challenges.

This Government is committed to full implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The draft initial State report has been published. I would encourage everyone to make a submission, whether it relates to women with disabilities or any of the provisions of the Convention. I am keen for the State report to capture all stakeholder voices.

The Minister, Deputy O’Gorman has noted the risk of unemployment for many women during Covid-19. Women also make up the majority of front-line healthcare and retail workers who have kept this country running during the pandemic. Figures from the European Institute for Gender Equality indicate that a majority of workers delivering essential services in Europe in the crisis are women, including 76% of doctors, nurses, midwives and staff in residential care homes, 82% of cashiers, 93% of child care workers and teachers, 95% of domestic cleaners and helpers and 86% of personal care workers.

I pay tribute today to those women – doctors, nurses, care assistants, cleaners, cooks, shop assistants and teachers – who have gone out to work every day for the past year, often at great hardship to their own families, and have allowed us to maintain the restrictions needed to keep everyone in the country safe.

The pandemic has highlighted to us that we need to do more to support women in the workforce and encourage them to take on leadership positions and let their voices be heard. We know that women must be part of decision making on the issues which affect us all, and the response to the pandemic is no different.

This is a timely debate and one that needs to continue as we find our way through this pandemic and into our economic and social recovery. Gender equality is more important than ever as we navigate this crisis and we must be vigilant to ensure that it does not compound existing inequalities in our society. A recovery will not be a recovery if there are those who are not feeling the benefits.

I also would like to take the opportunity to acknowledge the importance of the roles women play in leadership within politics. In fairness, in 2020, we had our general election and it was fantastic to see new female representatives joining me and Deputy Butler, who had not been here previously. We need to encourage female participation, be it at local level or national level. We need to have that voice there. We make up 51% of the population but, unfortunately, that is not reflected at local level or at national level.

If I would fault one area in the past 12 months where we have had decision making going on, it would be that we have not had that female voice when we needed conversations around how, at the National Public Health Emergency Team, NPHE, health was being discussed. Women need to be at the table. In all fairness, lessons need to be learned from Covid. Anything that was wrong in society before the onset of Covid was exacerbated during Covid and the only way we can learn is to reset the dial on economic and social issues as we come out of it.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): I thank the Leas-Cheann Comhairle for allowing me time to talk about the important issue of the impact of Covid-19 on women to mark International Women's Day on Monday, 8 March. As we stand here today I want to think of all those we have lost in the last 12 months due to Covid-19 and especially the women who will not see International Women's Day next Monday.

I will focus specifically on the mental health impact of the pandemic on women and young girls in Ireland. Mental health difficulties experienced by women are well known, with an increased prevalence of depression, anxiety, eating disorders and self-harm among the female population. A proportion of women will also experience perinatal mental health difficulties. While the mental health impact of Covid-19 is yet to be fully understood, the pandemic has had an adverse impact on the mental health of women and girls. CSO data shows that in April 2020, more than one in three female respondents had a low satisfaction score for overall life, up from approximately one in ten in 2018. In addition, the percentage of respondents reporting that they felt "lonely", "very nervous", or "downhearted or depressed" was much higher for women than for men.

An increase in eating disorder presentations in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic is being reported both in Ireland and internationally. There were significant increases in referrals to the three existing specialist eating disorder teams in Ireland in 2020 compared to 2019. Four in every five assessments last year were female. Some €3.9 million has been made available to the national clinical programme for eating disorders and as Minister with special responsibility for mental health I am fully committed to ensuring this funding is spent in full in 2021 to complete the three existing specialist eating disorder teams and establish three new teams.

Gender has a significant impact on mental health and the risk factors for poor mental health outcomes among women include a range of socio-economic indicators including precarious employment or the absence of work. There is no doubt that the pandemic has adversely affected many women's mental health as they are disproportionately represented as frontline health workers, where 80% of all healthcare workers in Ireland are women. Furthermore, retail,

domestic and caring job roles are predominately catered for by women. A higher proportion of women are caring for a dependent family member or friend because of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The mental health of women in abusive relationships who have been in lockdown with their abuser has also been negatively affected. Of course, other vulnerable and marginalised women have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic. According to reports from the Garda, domestic violence increased by almost 25% since the lockdown period began. Women's Aid has reported a 43% increase in responses to its 24-hour helpline between March and June 2020.

Older women cocooning have faced considerable challenges in terms of isolation and feelings of loneliness.

Of course, a negative mental health outcome for our population from this pandemic is not inevitable if we set about responding to the challenges in a cohesive manner. In line with WHO guidance, the HSE published a psychosocial framework in January 2021. This builds on a range of supports introduced in 2020 in response to Covid-19, including self-help and psychosocial first aid supports for staff. The framework acknowledges the impact of the pandemic on mental health in all areas of society and identifies priority groups, including health care workers and people bereaved due to Covid-19. The framework provides a cohesive, co-ordinated, consistent and collaborative approach to the provision of mental health services and supports across five key levels from mental health promotion to specialist supports.

Our new national mental health policy, Sharing the Vision, includes a specific recommendation to establish a dedicated project to ensure that mental health priorities and services are gender sensitive and that women's mental health is specifically and sufficiently addressed through implementation of the policy. The national implementation and monitoring committee, tasked with driving implementation of Sharing the Vision, has been established and work, while at an early stage, is progressing. This includes collaboration with the Department's taskforce on women's health to advance the specific recommendation on women's mental health.

To address issues of isolation, there are a number of supports that people can avail of including the Community Call which provides local helplines through local authorities to deliver practical supports and befriending; the Keep Well campaign which provides valuable information on supporting people through the difficult months ahead; and the ALONE national support line which is run in collaboration with the Department of Health and the HSE.

To conclude, a cross sectoral, interdepartmental approach is required to improve the mental health outcomes of women and girls during and beyond the Covid-19 period. I am fully committed to the development of mental health services and supports that are gender sensitive and which effectively address the needs of women across society. I thank the Minister for sharing time with me. Gabhaim buíochas.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I thank the Minister of State, Deputy Butler. Sinn Féin has three speakers and I call Deputy Funchion.

Deputy Kathleen Funchion: I thank the Leas-Cheann Comhairle and given that we are on the subject of women, I start by acknowledging the Leas-Cheann Comhairle herself, as our first ever female holder of that position. It is an important role, is not an easy task and is not one that I envy. I was thinking about this point as we were speaking earlier.

Women, in general, play a crucial role not only in their communities but in every household

and most people agree that women are the backbone of many households and communities. This has been shown up even more so during the Covid-19 pandemic. We know that integrating gender-focused Government policy and a focus on women's self-reliance and empowerment leads to better humanitarian outcomes for all and leads to a better society.

A recent research report by UN Women found that when women are provided with direct financial or resource assistance, they enjoyed greater control over household spending decisions and improved results for all family members. It found the benefits of gender-focused action by industry and Government far outweighs the cost.

Ironically, 2020 was the 25th anniversary of the Beijing Declaration which set out to advance the goals of equality, development and peace for all women everywhere in the interest of all humanity. However, what unfolded due to the pandemic was a deepening of pre-existing inequalities and women's workloads increased where our frontline workers are mainly women. As has been mentioned by some of the Ministers, the homeschooling and childcare burden, in general, falls to women and this has happened to an even greater extent during the pandemic.

There are endless reports, research papers, books and academic research into inequality among men and women and while many of these examine historical and continual inequality across society, there is a growing consensus that greater gender equality has taken a big step back during the pandemic.

Women, due to their high numbers in caring and nursing roles, are suffering the effects of what is being called "long covid" at a greater rate than men. A recent report suggested that 76% of our healthcare workers are women. It is clear that women are at increased risk of infection and loss of livelihood where existing trends suggest that they have less access to health supports. The rise in domestic violence during this public health crisis, which we have spoken about on a number of times in this Chamber, is very worrying. Women who are struggling and living in unbearable domestic violence situations or in an environment of severe coercive control are doubly affected as all normal social outlets have been closed.

I have also been alarmed by the impact of Covid-19 and of the restrictions on women who are caring for vulnerable children and children with additional needs and I am glad to hear that was also mentioned in the Minister of State's speech. They have carried an unbearable burden during the lockdown.

An interesting study was carried out recently by BMJ Global Health into how various leaders around the world have responded to the pandemic. In particular, they looked at the different approach taken by men and women leaders. The results found, which would not be a surprise to any woman, that female leaders were really aware and talking about a wider range of impacts on social welfare, mental health, substance abuse and domestic violence issues within the context of the public health emergency.

As the end of Covid-19 is hopefully in sight we must be cognisant that any recovery must lead to a more equal Ireland and one that is more resilient to future crises. Government policy and future emergency measures must address public health gender gaps. It is crucial that all policy responses place women and girls, their inclusion, representation, rights, social and economic outcomes, equality and protection, at the heart of our policy response. Going forward, women's equal representation in all public health emergency response planning and decision-making must be paramount. A priority for Government must be that we address the inequality

of pay in the care economy.

One sector in which women fill the majority of roles is the childcare and early years sector and I have consistently called for equality of pay and better working conditions for these professionals.

I strongly believe that Covid-19 has not only been a challenge for our healthcare system but also a test for us as a wider society. Our future response will be significantly weakened if we do not factor in the ways in which inequalities have made all of us more vulnerable to the impacts of the public health emergency. We cannot choose simply to repeat past policies and fail to use this moment to rebuild a more equal, inclusive and resilient society for all.

If anything positive is to come from Covid, I hope it is that we learn something. We have greater awareness now of domestic violence and the potential supports that are there but these services need to be supported. In general, we need to look at how unequal our society is and ensure that gender equality is at the heart of policymaking and that we do not pay lip service to it.

The Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, mentioned that it is very difficult for women to make it into this forum. It is very difficult even to make it into local politics let alone national politics and then to remain involved. It is important that we have these ongoing discussions and that it is not a box ticking exercise because we are all thinking about International Women's Day. This is the last item on the agenda on a Thursday evening. We have to wonder how important it really is, even though it is extremely important. It is important that it is not a case that we have had the discussion and we all move on but that we learn, not only from our discussions but from all of the negatives of Covid-19 and how it has shown how unequal society really is for women, particularly those in low paid sectors and those on the front line.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I want to use the brief time I have to pay tribute to the many women who are struggling through the pandemic. They are getting by and the women in the Chamber, and some men as well of course, will know what getting by is like. They are getting by but they are struggling and it would be remiss of us to pretend that people are breezing through this, particularly women, because they are simply not. This is a tough time and it is a particularly tough time for women.

We are having this discussion on International Women's Day, and my colleague, Deputy Funchion, is correct that this debate is late on a Thursday evening. I recall other occasions in the previous Dáil, and the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, will recall the same, when we had debates of this nature, and they were always late on a Thursday evening. Perhaps we could have a prime time slot for the next International Women's Day. I will not hold my breath but it would be a very good idea and would send a very positive and clear message to women.

We know we are not over-represented in here. Look around us. We are not over-represented at the decision-making tables in big companies. We are not over-represented in the boardrooms. However, we are over-represented when it comes to low pay. We are over-represented when it comes to precarious work. We are over-represented when it comes to doing the lion's or, indeed, the lioness's share of the caring responsibilities in the home. This needs to change.

We need to re-evaluate and the pandemic gives us this opportunity because all of a sudden we find ourselves in a position whereby our front-line heroes are not just gardaí, nurses or doctors but porters, cleaners and people in supply chains. They are the people who have kept us fed and kept us going through the pandemic. They are the heroes of the pandemic. They are our

front line. We know that women comprise a large chunk of these people. What these women ended up doing was not just their job, which we really need them to do, but also two more jobs. They had to take on the job of teaching and the job of child minding. They already had an important job to do and they then get additional jobs to do.

The opportunity exists for us to reframe and reimagine the contribution made by women, which is not always recognised. The contribution they make to the informal economy and to the formal economy can often be ignored. I am reminded of the words said to me when I got my first job in the trade union movement, and my colleague, Teachta Funchion, will be familiar with this. I was told I could work twice as hard as the men for half the credit. This is not right but everybody knows it. Effectively, this is what happens. We collectively say things such as that it is very hard to be a woman in a man's world but actually what we should do as women in positions of political leadership is use our platform to promote women, and not just women for the sake of it but to promote women who will not pull up the ladder, who will not cut supports for lone parents, and who will not ensure women are left to the end of the queue but who will promote women and who will do the job of supporting other women to come along. This is the only way we are going to get women involved in political life and get women involved in positions of leadership. I can tell you, sisters, it will not be given to us. It is up to us to create these conditions so we can take these roles and assume the responsibility that we are well able for.

Let us mark this International Women's Day and look forward to the next International Women's Day by when, I hope, we will have learned some lessons, we will have closed the gender pay gap and we will have some progress towards true equality. This means promoting women who will promote other women and work with other women. We need to do this as women in positions of leadership.

Deputy Sorca Clarke: In previous years, we have rightly lauded women whose achievements have been remarkable or the women we might personally aspire to be like. This year, as we celebrate International Women's Day I want to honour and show appreciation to all of those women we have in our lives who make it just that little bit brighter and that little bit better just by being there. They are the people we relied on most, personally and professionally, over the course of the past year. Women have been to the forefront of our medical services, a service of which we have never asked as much as we did over the past year.

We will never forget the contribution of all the women who worked through Covid, be they in medical roles, childcare, carers, Defence Forces and An Garda Síochána, and the women who stood behind the counters in our supermarkets and smiled, something I very much doubt they wanted to do but it made the rest of us feel that little bit safer and that little bit more normal. While doing this in the grips of a global pandemic, with the world off centre, these women stepped up again. They formed childcare bubbles so other women could go to work. They homeschooled and shopped for elderly and vulnerable neighbours. They became teachers, speech and language therapists, occupational therapists and physiotherapists for those in their care.

I prepared a speech about striving for equality and the theme of leadership and what it means but what I would rather do is read some excerpts of emails I have received from women in counties Longford and Westmeath over the past year. Their words show resilience fitting of true leaders in our communities. One woman wrote that lockdown hit her home very hard, especially this time around. She said she found that during this lockdown her role as a carer has become all-consuming. Most days she cannot see life outside of the walls. The alarm rings at

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5.45 every morning and the gruelling day begins. The last time she checked she had one pair of hands but she is expected to grow another three just to get through the day. She states she has always known women were super but the last time she checked she was not Superwoman. She writes that she cannot keep it up and she is frightened. She states that Covid is awful and that herself and her family are fully aware of the dangers and consequences so they try their best to remain at home unless it is absolutely necessary. She says Covid have changed their lives so much that she is genuinely struggling to hold it together. Back when the world was normal, she worked full time in an office and now she works at home with her kitchen table surrounded by her children. Each morning, she surrounds herself with props to keep her children occupied with anything she can think of to buy five minutes to finish a piece of work. She states her daily view is a laptop, a box of cereal, juice, a plethora of cups and bowls and bread. One day she actually plugged the toaster in beside her. She states that just when she thought she could do no more she started to work full-time teaching her children who are different ages and at different levels, which means that effectively she has to be three teachers rolled into a single human being. She states she feels like a failure and doing nothing right but four things badly. She states there is no longer a clock in and clock out. She says she does not think she can keep it up but with ICUs full, they have to keep going, which is why she said “Yes” when she got the call to go back into work.

At our time of need these women met this need and did so in the most difficult of circumstances.

7 o'clock

The research published this morning by Eurochambres is welcome. It is deeply concerning, but it is welcome. It evidences what I have heard throughout the past year, that is, women are carrying an unfair and disproportionate amount of responsibility. That is wrong and it must change.

The gender pay gap is wrong. We simply cannot continue to facilitate such exploitation of women, where they effectively earn over 14% less than men on average, equal to two months' salary. The day of 9 or 10 November marks that symbolic day but that symbolism must now turn into action. Those women escaping violence and abuse need wider supports. Given the 30,000 women waiting for gynaecological appointments and the backlog at CervicalCheck and BreastCheck, the very least women's health needs this year is a clear strategy to address what is a perfect storm brewing. The additional parental leave previously announced must come into practice.

We owe a debt to these women that will never be repaid through applause and nice words. What they need and what they deserve is a society that reflects their true worth, values them as equals and treats them as such. For that to happen, it starts here in this House.

Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin: I have a daughter. I worry about her because she is a girl and because she is Irish. She has been born into a country with a record of treating women with disdain. She was born in May 2018, when the country finally put to rest a constitutional article, the eighth amendment, that forced 4,000 women a year to travel to England like criminals and others to order abortion pills over the Internet. That was in 2018, a full 50 years after the UK had determined that reproductive healthcare was a basic right for women. She was born to a grandmother who was forced to leave her public service job as soon as she got married. She was born in the year of the 100th anniversary of the first time some Irish women were permit-

ted to vote but to a country whose Parliament is still only 22% female, and too many of these Deputies are subjected to vile online abuse.

I have a daughter. I worry she is a second-class citizen because Irish education still, too often, wants to separate her from boys. Some 17% of Irish primary school children are educated in single-gender schools. One third of our second level schools are gender-segregated. That is totally outside of the European norm, embedding gender stereotypes and restricting non-traditional subject choices, none of which has any basis in contemporary education research or best practice. In addition, 90% of all of these schools are under the patronage of a church that considers women to be second-class citizens.

I have a daughter. I worry she is a plaything for commercial interests. I worry there are highly-paid executives sitting in boardrooms, plotting and planning how best to sexualise her at an early age so they can make money out of her. I worry that this pressure will pile on top of her before she has the tools to deal with it, through the music industry, through the fashion industry, through the make-up industry. I worry that society will demand of her to have a smartphone, and that opens her up to a world of danger. I worry about the corporate determination to make her focus on her sexual power before she can access and appreciate her societal power, her community power, her civic power, her democratic power and, yes, even her commercial power.

I have a daughter. I worry she cannot see what she can be. What if she was to enter the business world? She lives in a country with a 14.4% gender pay gap, where female executive directors only account for 8.5% of the total and only one in nine CEOs are women. What if she chooses a career in academia? A 2018 Higher Education Authority report showed that while half of all lecturers in universities are female, these numbers fall dramatically at higher grades, such as associate professor, 32%, and professor, 23%.

I have a daughter. What if she was to take an interest in sport? Despite the success of the 20x20 campaign, how can I explain to her that the Irish women's soccer players get paid one fifth of what the Irish men get paid - that Katie McCabe's blood, sweat and tears are worth only 20% of Seamus Coleman's? How can I explain to her that national broadcasters still, for the most part, do not believe a woman can give an expert opinion on major sporting fixtures or, at a local level, that men's teams will still always be prioritised.

I have a daughter. Like all parents, I pray she will never be a victim of discrimination or hate, but I know life is tougher for female Travellers, female migrants, female prisoners, women with disabilities and women in recovery from addiction. I know that low-paid, vulnerable work is disproportionately carried out by women.

I have a daughter. She may herself have all the worries I have some day. She may herself one day be pregnant. She may still have to be treated in one of the outrageously dilapidated maternity hospitals in this city. She will have to deal with the fact that basic medication for Irish women in pregnancy can cost twice what it costs in the UK, that she will get no work leave for a miscarriage or medical complication related to reproductive healthcare, that free availability of period products is something that has to be battled for through a barrier of red-faced, male-oriented officialdom and that the provision of childcare is a national scandal, a scandal that persists because it disproportionately affects women, and poorly paid because it is disproportionately staffed by women.

I have a daughter. I want her to realise the power of girls around the world. I want her to

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know that a village can only change, a town can only change, a country can only change and the world can only change for the better when girls have access to education. The most powerful image in the world is a girl with a book. That image terrifies those who want things to stay the same.

I have a daughter. I want her to be proud to be Irish. I want her to learn of the generations of Irish women who made this country better for girls just like her - Countess Markievicz, Máirín de Burca, Eileen Desmond, Mary Robinson and Ivana Bacik. I want her not to be defined by the failings of others but to stand on the shoulders of these giants, and to take her place as an equal in this country and an equal in this world.

I have a daughter. I want her and girls like her not always to be thought of last. I want her to live in a country that has been designed for women and designed by women. I want her to redesign her own country for her, for us, for girls and boys that come after her, for my daughter and for all daughters to come.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: I welcome this opportunity to discuss the disproportionate impact that Covid-19 has had on women and to reflect on where women are in Irish society today as we celebrate women on International Women's Day on 8 March. In the 100 years since women won the right to vote, there have been millions upon millions of stories of strong women forging the way ahead, fighting for equality. Wives, daughters, aunts, mothers, grandmothers and sisters are still fighting because, in Ireland today, women are not equal. They are called "love", "darling" and "sweetheart" and often talked over, talked down to and sometimes taken for fools. This inequality is reflected across society.

Celebrating International Women's Day on Monday should serve as a reminder of how far we have actually not come and the mountains we still have to climb. We look at the Mother and Baby Homes Commission report, we look at the "RTÉ Investigates" programme on illegal adoptions, and we see that women were treated terribly in the recent past. As long as we try to silence them, we continue to treat them horribly. It was vital that the records from the commission were protected so we can build on the opportunity to give access to survivors. As we celebrate International Women's Day on 8 March and Mother's Day on 14 March, we must recognise women are half the population and, without them, we would not be here.

According to *catalyst.org*, globally, in 2020, less than half of all women participated in the labour force and women represented 38.8% of all participants in the labour force. The National Women's Council of Ireland states that women continue to be more likely to work on a part-time basis and almost 70% of all part-time workers are women. Covid-19 made all that much more challenging. The majority of healthcare workers are women, and women in Ireland continue to provide the vast majority of care for children, elderly relatives and those living with disabilities. Men do a lot, but women do the most. According to the Central Statistics Office, women accounted for 94% of those looking after the home or family in 2019. During this pandemic, women took sick leave or annual leave or offered up their job to care for children due to school closures and childcare facilities being closed. These women had the extra responsibility of home schooling while the women who still held onto their jobs and worked from home had to home school while also managing work commitments. Healthcare workers suffered more than most, facing the front line and holding things together at home. They were, and are, broken and they deserve more than a clap for their efforts. Women in every home in Ireland carry the burden of Covid-19 more than anyone else. They get no grants for that. There is no fund for their stability. They continue to be disproportionately affected by the negative impact of the

coronavirus pandemic.

From mental health and well-being to economic disparity and domestic violence, women are suffering. Now is the time to provide a women's refuge in every county in Ireland. I know this is the responsibility of various Ministers, but it is important to raise it. I have been asking for a women's refuge for Carlow for the last few years, but given the current statistics there should be a refuge in every county. Early evidence is showing signs that women, children, migrants and refugees, persons with disabilities and the elderly have been hit hardest by the pandemic. This is compounded by a widespread increase in domestic violence. There were and continue to be issues for those experiencing domestic violence arising from the Covid-19 pandemic. In Carlow and Kilkenny there has been an increase in reported incidents. The increase in domestic violence incidence in the past year is not exclusive to my constituency, as more than 3,000 extra incidents have been reported during the pandemic.

It is important that supports are made available across the board. I am aware an audit is being undertaken to review the overall responsibility and co-ordination for domestic violence services in this country compared with other jurisdictions. This is most welcome. According to the Centre for Women's Global Leadership, "In the absence of targeted measures and investments by governments, we will see major rollbacks in gender equality and profound challenges for women workers in a post- COVID-19 world". Those measures are needed in this country.

Women are significantly outnumbered by men in both local and national politics in Ireland. If women are not at the table; they cannot voice female concerns and inform female-friendly policies. I applaud the brave Irish women who take a stand to represent people. I encourage more of them to walk these halls, speak loudly and clearly, represent women and men, old and young, fight injustice, root out inequality and be taken seriously. We should not have to create a female-friendly society in which women can run for office. A woman should be able to run for office because she would be good at the job. Cultural barriers must be addressed through the education system, civic education programmes and voter education initiatives.

A review of fathers' rights and paternity leave should also be undertaken to ensure that children will not always be seen as an issue only for mothers. We must look at ways to support family time and a better work-life balance. We must support the most vulnerable to live their best lives.

Deputy Pauline Tully: "The pandemic is deepening pre-existing inequalities, exposing vulnerabilities in social, political and economic systems which are in turn amplifying the impacts of the pandemic". That quote is taken from the UN policy brief published last April. While everybody might be susceptible to the virus, those who suffer poverty and inequality are much more likely to fall ill with the virus, and while there are many at-risk categories in the world, women are the largest category.

Women are at the front line in this pandemic. In the EU, 76% of healthcare workers are women. In addition, the vast majority of workers in other front-line, essential services are women. We know that women play a much greater role in the home, caring for children or older relatives. These roles put them more at-risk of contracting the virus. My party leader, my colleagues and I have been highlighting the issue of carers during the pandemic. Carers are front-line, essential workers. They are looking after the elderly, people who are unwell and some people with disabilities. They are already chronically underpaid and frequently under-protected. Caring roles are predominantly held by women. In the initial part of the pandemic

they were not provided with PPE or other necessary protection from the virus to try to keep themselves, the persons for whom they were caring and their families safe.

Many women have had to make the decision to leave the workforce to care for a vulnerable family member full-time because they were afraid of bringing the virus home to that member from their workplace. They received little or no support. Schools and day centres for people with disabilities were closed. Little or no respite care was offered. Now, they are not being considered for prioritisation when vaccines are being rolled out. The concern of most carers is the question of who will provide care to their loved ones if they, their carers, are sick.

The coronavirus crisis is not only a medical crisis but also an economic crisis. As I said, women are on the front line in many ways, but they are more likely to be involved in part-time or temporary employment. People in these positions are at higher risk of being laid off or losing their jobs during an economic downturn. In addition, the majority of workers in the tourism and hospitality sector are women. The majority of workers in retail are women. These are the sectors which have been forced to close for the longest periods and have received the least support. Many people involved in those sectors may end up not returning to employment, which means the gender pay gap will widen.

Women in the home were carrying the burden of the work before the virus hit our shores. On average, they did double the amount of unpaid work in the home that their male counterparts did. Since the start of the crisis and the closure of schools, it is mainly women who are taking on the role of teacher as well. This has been particularly difficult for single parents, the majority of whom are women. Women have been put under huge stress due to working from home, home schooling and doing in-house work.

Prior to Covid-19, domestic violence was highly prevalent, affecting approximately one in every four women in Ireland. Restrictions introduced to protect people from Covid-19 have unintentionally had the effect of increasing the incidence of domestic violence, with women's organisations and service providers recording a sharp increase in reports of domestic violence and requests for assistance. Safe Ireland reported that nearly 2,000 women and more than 400 children received help from a domestic violence service each month in the first six months of the pandemic. According to figures released under freedom of information, there was an 88% increase in the number of domestic violence cases dealt with by the Director of Public Prosecutions, DPP, last year, with 495 cases sent forward for trial. That is an increase from 249 in 2019.

While the reasons for the increase in domestic violence have yet to be determined, experts on this issue warn that Government-imposed measures deemed necessary to suppress the spread of Covid-19 have had the unintended, negative consequence of compounding risk factors for domestic violence, including unemployment, poverty, social isolation, relationship conflict and alcohol abuse. At the same time, service providers report that victims of domestic violence have diminished access to help and support, be it from family, friends, colleagues, doctors or social workers, as a result of the stay-at-home and social distancing measures. Victims report that these same measures are increasing the level of control their abusers exert over them. Long-term underfunding from successive Governments has meant that the services necessary to respond to women and children experiencing domestic abuse are lacking and not fit for purpose. For example, it has been reported that in the final four months of last year 800 requests from women to be taken into a refuge so they could flee domestic violence at home were turned down due to lack of space.

There is no refuge for women and children in my constituency of Cavan-Monaghan. I acknowledge that Tearmann Domestic Abuse Service does sterling work there, but there is no refuge for women and children.

Deputy Holly Cairns: International Women's Day is about celebrating achievement – the achievements of women who are scientists, artists, sportswomen as well as healthcare professionals, caregivers and parents. Every role is important in this year of pandemic. The pandemic has brought much suffering, hurt and fear and a terrifying amount of domestic violence. There was an increase of 26% in reported cases of domestic violence in west Cork and a 35% increase in calls to the west Cork women against domestic violence service. Safe Ireland has called this the “shadow pandemic”. We knew this was coming. It continues, but why?

There is currently an advertisement on television showing a ladies football team playing a match on an uphill pitch. It does its job. It makes us imagine what it must feel like for those players to be constantly up against it, to have the odds stacked against them and to keep pushing for equality anyway. It has been a long time since I toggled out for Ilen Rovers but it helps to remember that feeling. It helps us to imagine ourselves in those women's football boots, playing with the odds stacked against us, playing in the shadows.

I want Members to imagine something else for a second. Imagine walking into a bathroom in a public place and being delighted to see toilet paper. Imagine standing at the sink, washing your hands, and thinking to yourself: “Well now, wasn't that a lovely thing to do, to provide free toilet paper. What a thoughtful gesture.” This sounds ridiculous, yet that is exactly how it feels to come across free sanitary products in a public bathroom. I could count on one hand the times it has happened to me. Why do we see toilet paper as a basic necessity but not tampons?

I got my first period on a school tour in primary school. There was no chance I was going to ask my teacher for sanitary products. It was the stigma and I would not have known how. So, like many girls before me and since, I had to resort to toilet paper. Studies by Plan International and the Anytime of the Month initiative show that many women find it incredibly hard to pay for sanitary products. This means they end up wearing pads or tampons longer than is comfortable or hygienic. It means that those in disadvantage, homelessness or direct provision must resort to stuffing their underwear with toilet paper. How is this acceptable?

Scotland has become the first country in the world to make period products free for all. Similar legislation is being introduced here by Senator Rebecca Moynihan and we need to make sure it happens to make period products available in all schools, colleges and in every public service building. They should be provided to NGOs and community groups, too. This may seem revolutionary but it is not. It is a basic requirement. Period products are just as necessary as toilet paper. Let us take period products out of the shadows.

Now I want Members to imagine turning on Irish radio and flicking through the stations. I want Members to imagine that they are five times more likely to hear an Irish female artist than an Irish male artist on Irish radio. This sounds ridiculous and downright unfair. It sounds like someone needs to do something about that. Of course the reality is that it is the exact opposite. We are more than five times more likely to hear an Irish male artist than an Irish female artist on Irish radio. On streaming and downloading services these musicians hold their own but when it comes to radio airplay talented Irish women artists are not given the chance to be heard. When similar research was conducted in the UK, stations changed their practices and confronted their bias. Some Irish radio stations have begun to consciously support Irish women artists and we

need the rest to follow. We need the industry and the Government to work together to give these talented artists airplay. Let us bring these brilliant Irish recording artists out of the shadows.

The “Level the Playing Field” ladies football advertisement is so effective because it makes the inequality visible. It helps us to see the situation from the players’ point of view and maybe from a different angle than we are used to. None of this is about pitching women against men, but to show that these shadows are real. When we see bias, unfairness and the odds stacked against women we need to act. The shadows will linger for as long as we let them. Let us level that playing field. Let us cast away the shadows. Let us act.

As Deputy Funchion has said, it is also important to note that this year we have our first female Leas-Cheann Comhairle, and that finally the Seanad Standing Orders will recognise the existence of women who sit as the chairperson. I am a new member of the Sub-Committee on Dáil Reform. I looked through the Standing Orders and it transpired that “Chairman” was in the Standing Orders 137 times, “Chairperson” was in the Standing Orders twice, and “Chairwoman” was in the Standing Orders zero times. I thank the Ceann Comhairle who chairs the Sub-Committee on Dáil Reform. At this week’s meeting we saw the newly published Standing Orders that acknowledges women sitting in Chairs, which will be brought to the Dáil soon.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank Deputy Cairns very much. I express the private hope that the next permanent occupant of this seat will be a woman, please God.

Deputy Emer Higgins: As International Women’s Day approaches, I welcome that today we are dedicating some time to celebrating the work of women over the past year and also highlighting the struggles that women have faced during this pandemic.

Covid-19 has brought to light so many of the structural, financial and societal inequalities that still exist within our country. The fact is that gender equality has suffered in the face of the pandemic. We know that many women are the primary caregivers in many homes. Women have taken on the majority of the household work, childcare and home schooling, all the while balancing their own professional commitments.

It is not just in our homes. It is on the front line too where 76% of our healthcare workers are women. They have not just been juggling the pressures of Covid-19, they have been out there on our front line saving lives during this pandemic. We have gained a new level of appreciation for our healthcare workers in the past year. I know I speak for everyone when I say how thankful we are for the men and women who have literally kept our country going. They kept our health service going, our shops open, our public transport running and our emergency services going when everything else ground to a halt. The same can be said of our carers who played such a vital role for our most vulnerable at a time they needed it most.

With women taking on a larger proportion of the caring roles, both personally and professionally, gender equality has taken a massive step backwards in the last year. A recent study found that despite women making up 39% of global employment, they have accounted for more than 54% of job losses in the last year. By those calculations, women’s jobs are almost twice as vulnerable to this crisis as men’s jobs. Within Ireland young women are also being financially and professionally affected by the pandemic. The Central Statistics Office tells us that 60% of 15 to 24-year-old women are now unemployed due to the pandemic. I ask Members to think about that for a second. More than half of the young women in our country are unemployed. There is a whole cohort of women leaving school and college who are stepping into the world

of work for the very first time, a cohort of young women who are completely unsure of their future and their place in the world. Now more than ever we need to start investing in the future of young women and safeguarding their place in the workforce. We should not need to be reminded of why gender equality in the workplace is so important, but the sad truth is that when push comes to shove, it is still women who bear the brunt of job losses and it is still women who suffer in times of economic uncertainty. In many ways, in 2021, it is still a man's world.

We are of course making progress in many sectors and women are becoming better represented in lots of industries, but they do not often reach the top level. Ireland is currently ranked 15th in the EU for our representation of women on boards and globally only 17% of business board members are women. We are making progress but it is just not fast enough. I come from the corporate world and I have seen at first hand the value that women bring to management and executive roles. I know the benefits of having gender balance in the workplace. I have had the pleasure of working for four vice-presidents of PayPal, who are four strong, inspiring female leaders. I saw at first hand how diversity of thought around a senior leadership table delivers results. I saw at first hand how having females in senior leadership positions inspires other women to fulfil their career ambitions. I saw at first hand how women making it to the top of their game changes the *status quo*. Inspiring, enabling and equipping women to develop their career is something I want to play a key role in. That is why I have been a big supporter of the Network of Enterprising Women in South Dublin. That is why I was involved in the roll-out of diversity and inclusion training and women's networks in my previous career. That is why I have always worked to mark International Women's Day in my constituency. This Monday, I will be hosting a virtual event along with Roberts Physio, Laura Jordan and The Holistic Lodge in Lucan to mark the day locally. That is also the reason I will work on ways to encourage and empower women in business.

It is often said that if you can't see it, you can't be it. I am privileged to have grown up in a world where because of the women elected to these Houses before me I saw it and I believed it. I am talking about women such as Mary Harney, Mary Robinson, Mary McAleese, Nora Owen, Olivia Mitchell and Olwyn Enright. They were just some of the women I saw on television while I was growing up. They were just some of the women who proved to me that women can achieve anything.

Women from all sides of the political divide helped break down gender barriers and smash the glass ceiling. I had the pleasure of getting to work with one of those trailblazers – Frances Fitzgerald. She worked at every level of politics. She sat in the council chamber, the Seanad Chamber and the Dáil Chamber. She sat in the Tánaiste's seat and today she sits in the European Parliament. Women like her set a precedent in politics.

As an MEP, Frances has published a very interesting report on the gender perspective in the Covid-19 crisis and the post-crisis period. She states:

... the COVID-19 recovery represents a significant opportunity to advance women as we seek to rebuild our economies and our societies in a different way. A true COVID-19 recovery can only be a success if we seek a greener, a fairer and a more [equal society].

That is why she has recommended in her report key recovery funds that are gender mainstreamed to ensure that women can fully benefit from them in terms of employment and also entrepreneurship. It is the reason she says we can harness this opportunity to ensure that women are better represented in sectors where they have been traditionally under-represented such as

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in digital, artificial intelligence, AI, ICT and science, technology, engineering and mathematics, STEM.

We must continue to set precedents in every single industry. It is not just an equality issue; it makes better business sense. In 2018, a study of 1,000 global companies found that those in the top quartile for gender diversity on their executive teams were 21% more likely to have above-average profitability. The research speaks for itself; balanced boardrooms make for better business.

If the last year has taught us anything it is that we need to safeguard the future of women. Sometimes one needs to get one's foot in the door to get a seat at the table. That is something we all have to be reminded of from time to time.

As we celebrate International Women's Day next week, I take this opportunity to commend the many brilliant and capable women with whom I work on a daily basis and I am proud to share this floor with. I would like to thank the many men who continue to be champions and supporters of the women in their lives. Their stories are a reminder of some of the trailblazing women who have come before us and laid the path for many of us working in politics but there is still so much work to be done. We need to shout louder and make gender equality in all areas of life a big-ticket issue. Covid-19 has already taken far too much from us. We must not let gender equality become another victim of this pandemic. We must do better. I want to be part of the movement that makes life for women better, that gives women better opportunities and empowers them to grasp them and that gives women the credit they truly deserve.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy for those inspiring words. Our next contributor is Deputy Martin Browne.

Deputy Martin Browne: I wholly welcome the fact that the House is dedicating time to the issue of the impact of Covid-19 on women ahead of International Women's Day but it is a source of regret also because it confirms that there is still a lot to be done to address the issues of inequality and recognition.

I was talking to somebody recently ahead of today's debate who summarised the challenges faced by women during the Covid crisis as follows: emergencies deepen inequalities. Inequality does not have to be a conscious decision made with effort. It is something that can be caused and increased through ignorance of hidden situations, taking the work of some for granted or through the failure to make provisions for individual circumstances. I want to speak of the latter to begin with.

It has been widely reported that the pandemic has resulted in an increase in incidents of domestic violence, which is perpetrated predominantly towards women. During the pandemic we have had increased public awareness campaigns on domestic abuse. I welcome that an increase in funding for services has also been provided but there are still shortcomings in overall policies across Departments that could deal with some obstacles faced by those seeking to flee domestic violence.

Our housing crisis, for example, limits options when it comes to fleeing abuse within the home. I came across an incident in which a woman had to leave her local authority house because of domestic abuse. It emerged that she was considered as having given up her local authority home, which has an affect on that person's ability to get back on a very lengthy housing waiting list. Having inquired about this in a parliamentary question, I was told of a guidance

document that had been issued to local authorities concerning domestic violence. It states:

The guidance document outlines that victims of domestic violence that had been in a joint local authority tenancy can be eligible for re-entry to the waiting list where a deed of separation is in place. Where such a deed does not exist housing authorities may use discretion to allow applications ...

This fails people on two fronts. First, the act of pleading domestic violence generally does not allow for deeds of separation to be organised and signed off on. Second, relying on the discretion of the local authority, while positive, also involves a workload and a level of uncertainty that the person who is fleeing abuse may not have the time or the ability to deal with.

Another issue I came across in the case was that the council had again to use its discretion to provide the housing assistance payment, HAP. The failure to have a streamlined programme in place to deal with people escaping domestic abuse does not recognise the immediate needs of the person involved. Finally on this matter, even if a person were to get back on the housing list or be approved for a HAP package the lack of housing, both private and social, makes it nearly impossible to find a suitable alternative to the home they are fleeing. Our housing crisis is failing people who are the targets of domestic violence while guidelines for local authorities when it comes to the housing needs of victims of domestic abuse are too vague and need attention.

The prevalence of the pandemic has also brought into sharp focus the value placed on certain sectors of our society and the extent to which we are willing to recognise the contribution of those sectors. Care and informal or unpaid care and parenting are particular issues here. Informal care can also be described as silent care as it seems to go unnoticed and under-resourced. Last year, the National Women's Council stated:

Before COVID-19, care was not equally distributed, with women providing the majority of care for family members and loved ones and for the household. As Ireland entered the first COVID-19 lockdown, the closure of schools, childcare facilities and reductions in home and social care led many women to provide even more care.

As we know, the restrictions have continued since and the demands on women have increased. According to the National Women's Council report on women's experience of care during Covid-19, respondents stated:

During the lockdown they were playing many roles: teacher; cook; cleaner; counsellor; and home nurse. With children home full-time during lockdown, women were minding children and home-schooling. With a heightened awareness of hygiene to combat the virus, cleaning around the house increased. As many older people around the country cocooned, the work of checking in, collecting their medicines and doing their shopping fell predominantly to women.

In the same report, 85% of women said their caring responsibilities had increased since the outbreak of Covid-19 and 52% said their caring had increased an awful lot. Many women living with another adult reported that caring was not shared equally in their household, with the lion's share falling to them.

As legislators, we have to ask ourselves what we can do to address this while men need to consider their role in those findings. Respondents suggested improvements in the provision of childcare, especially for front-line workers; supports for new mothers; State supports for carers

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of older people; social care supports for disabled people; access to affordable counselling; and increased support from their partner.

We must also be aware that more than 60% of one-parent families are headed by a woman parenting alone. Data from the Central Statistics Office, CSO, show that in 2019, 45% of one-parent families were experiencing enforced deprivation. Covid has added to that, which has been highlighted in parts of Tipperary by those in need of food parcel deliveries. I pay tribute to the likes of Ruth in Knockanrawley and other places and to all those engaged in this type of work. Yet in February, the Government rejected Sinn Féin's motion to help people struggling with increased fuel costs and ensuring that those on jobseeker's benefit did not have to wait more than 15 months for fuel assistance.

Before I end, I wish to note that many of the informal carers I am speaking of are also front-line workers who have had to deal with the unthinkable since this time last year. This pandemic has brought into sharp focus the failings women have had to live with. Covid will be here for a while. We must act now to correct these failings, and when the pandemic ends we must not forget what we have learned.

Deputy Bríd Smith: It is worth reminding ourselves that International Women's Day, 8 March, grew out of the labour movement, the workers' movement, when thousands of women in New York in the early part of the 20th century - 1908, in fact - marched through the city demanding a shorter working week, better pay and the right to vote. The tradition continued right up until the Russian Revolution, when in the same period the women of Russia took strike action for bread and peace in the middle of the First World War. That strike forced the abdication of the Tsar. There have been pretty powerful memories attached to International Women's Day then, and one of the songs that goes with it, "Bread and Roses", really strikes me as arguing not just for fair wages and conditions but also for decent and dignified conditions in our lives and the right to be treated in a dignified way as human beings.

What also strikes me, however, is that the Dáil every year finds one day on which we consider it important to discuss gender inequality and for the other 364 days it does not really matter all that much. That has to stop. We have to find consistent, persistent and sustained ways of putting gender inequality at the top of the agenda. It is only when some crisis forces it to be discussed that it is discussed but, unfortunately, such crises, such as that of the mother and baby homes most recently, are more frequent than we care to know. Before the mother and baby homes crisis came CervicalCheck, and quite frequently we debate domestic violence, which often results in tragic death. During the Covid crisis domestic violence has really escalated, leaving women - men too but mostly women - in danger, in isolation and without the supports and the ability to receive shelter. It is outrageous that this country spends more annually on the horse racing industry, which is not exactly dignifying itself at the moment, than on the question of domestic violence.

As other Deputies have repeatedly said throughout the course of the discussion so far, women take on the majority of childcare, home caring, nursing, care work in hospitals, cleaning and shop work. They are the front-line workers in the main and they have done us a heroic deed. We need to stick together with our social solidarity to honour the role they have played in trying to bring this public health crisis into check. On 8 March the Debenhams workers, whom I have to mention for their absolute bravery and consistent fightback, will mark International Women's Day as the 333rd day of their strike. They will be outside their local stores for anybody who wants to show them solidarity.

One cohort of women is being left behind disgracefully. We have recognised that most political leaders are not women. Most of the leaders on NPHE are not women. This is problematic because I think women bring with them a particular sense of compassion and a particular view on the world order and how to treat and get out of our problems inside that world order. Here I will mention the public health doctors, the vast majority of whom are women and who have been totally sidelined in a public health crisis. They had to take a vote for strike action but, because of their compassion, they never used that muscle during the pandemic. Here are fully trained public health doctors who have been sidelined by the system. It is outrageous. The same could be said of our laboratory scientists and technicians. We need women's voices as leaders, we need to be consistent and persistent and we need sustained discussion of the issues of gender inequality that face us every day, every year, not just on 8 March annually.

Deputy Mick Barry: The Debenhams workers will organise socially distanced pickets and protests across the country next Monday outside their stores to mark and celebrate International Women's Day and to mark day 333 of their dispute. In Cork they will be joined by Arcadia workers. These two groups of women workers will speak with one voice when they ask the Government where the legislation it promised to protect workers' rights in liquidations is. Perhaps the Minister, Deputy O'Gorman, might tell them tonight.

Across the world the issue of gender-based violence will feature strongly in International Women's Day protests. It is no surprise when worldwide six women are killed every hour by violent men. Gender-based violence is the shadow pandemic. Here in Ireland nearly 3,500 women contacted domestic violence services for the first time between March and August of last year. The last Sexual Abuse and Violence in Ireland, SAVI, report was published in 2002, 19 years ago. Will the Minister agree that it is a disgrace that this has been deprioritised for so long? Will he guarantee that a new SAVI report will be started more or less immediately, once public health restrictions permit?

An Ceann Comhairle: In her very important contribution Deputy Bríd Smith made reference to our recognising the role of women on International Women's Day and then ignoring it for the rest of the year. I feel I should say that if Deputy Smith or any other Member has a view as to how we could more effectively represent the concerns of more than 50% of our electorate and of our population here, I certainly would be very glad to hear from them.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I am very glad that my colleague, Deputy Higgins, mentioned Frances Fitzgerald, MEP. Deputy Higgins worked for Frances Fitzgerald, I worked for Frances Fitzgerald and the Minister, Deputy Harris, worked for Frances Fitzgerald. She was the very essence of opening the door and providing encouragement rather than closing the door or pulling up the ladder. That deserves mention. I am also glad Deputy Higgins mentioned the fantastic report, led by Frances Fitzgerald, of the European Parliament's Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality published in November of last year on how Covid-19 has impacted women specifically. I wish to take this opportunity, if it is in order, to use my contribution to read elements of the report into the record because it summarises better than I could the range of experiences women have had and the distinct effect Covid-19 has had.

According to the report, it is clear that the Covid-19 crisis has had "clear gender perspectives" as it affects women and men differently. The report states that "women and girls will be affected disproportionately in the short, medium and long term" and that the pandemic "has exacerbated existing structural gender inequalities, in particular for girls and women from marginalised groups". The report states that "whereas official mortality figures show that men have

a higher death rate from the virus than women”, “women are more at risk of contracting the virus due to their disproportionately high representation among frontline workers in essential sectors during the current crises”.

As for health, “as a result of the cancellation or postponement of ‘non-essential’ health services, a delay, and sometimes barriers, arose in accessing critical care for urgent complaints”. In particular, for women “access to sexual and reproductive healthcare and services were hampered with serious consequences, and some legal attempts were made to limit the right to safe and legal abortion in certain [EU] Member States”. There have also been limits to “IVF services, and provisions for clinical management in the case of rape”.

Reports and figures not just from here but from several EU member states “during and following the confinement period revealed a worrying increase in domestic and gender-based violence, including physical violence, psychological violence, coercive control and cyber violence”. We have spoken about that in this House several times. The report states that “violence is not a private issue but a societal concern” and “lockdown measures make it more difficult for victims of intimate partner violence to seek help as they are often confined with their abusers, and limited access to support services such as women’s shelters and hotlines and insufficient support structures and resources can exacerbate an already existing ‘shadow’ pandemic”. The report continues:

whereas confinement and isolation measures may have led to a higher risk of female genital mutilation, FGM, with cases going undetected [including in this country] due to the interruption of schooling; whereas economic and social stresses are exacerbating factors which could lead to an increase in domestic and gender-based violence in the long term and make it harder for women to leave abusive partners;

whereas the greater use of the internet during the pandemic increases online and ICT-facilitated gender-based violence and the online sexual abuse of children and especially girls; whereas human rights defenders, women in politics, female journalists, women belonging to ethnic minorities, indigenous women, lesbian, bisexual and transgender women, and women with disabilities are particularly targeted by ICT-facilitated violence.

That is what it is. The report states:

whereas a majority of workers delivering essential services in the current crisis are women, including 76% of healthcare workers..., 82% of cashiers, 93% of child care workers and teachers, 95% of domestic cleaners and helpers, and 86% of personal care workers in the EU; whereas it is thanks to them for whom physical distancing is often not an option and who thus bear the increased burden of possibly spreading the virus to their relatives, that our economic, social and healthcare systems, our public life and our essential activities are maintained;

whereas wages in many essential and significantly female-dominated sectors can be low, with often only the minimum wage being paid; whereas horizontal and vertical labour market segregation in the EU is still significant, with women overrepresented in less profitable sectors; whereas 30% of women work in education, health and social work, compared to 8% of men, and 7% of women work in science, technology, engineering and mathematics compared to 33% of men; whereas the International Labour Organisation warns that certain groups will be disproportionately affected by the economic crisis, including those entering

the labour market, thereby increasing inequality...; whereas there is reason for concern about job losses in women-dominated professions due to the crisis; whereas male-dominated sectors are likely to recover earlier than typical female-dominated ones;...

whereas women are more likely to be in temporary, part-time and precarious employment than men (26.5% compared to 15.1% of men), and have therefore been, and will be in the long run, significantly impacted by job losses...

In my own words, I wish to highlight that the motherhood gap has never been properly recognised in this State. This has been shown to be particularly relevant during this pandemic. It is not a matter for the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth; it is absolutely a matter of labour market optimisation and must be recognised by the financial Departments of this State as such.

The report continues:

whereas research from Eurofound shows that the Covid-19 crisis poses a serious risk of rolling back decades of gains achieved in gender equality in labour market participation, particularly if activity is further hampered in sectors overrepresented by women; whereas research shows that the reduction in the gender employment gap has stagnated over the past few years...

whereas Covid-19 has exposed a long-standing problem in care provision in many EU Member States; whereas care needs to be viewed holistically along a continuum, from childcare to after-school care, to care for those with disabilities and to care for older persons.

I say this for every woman in Ireland tonight:

whereas the closure of schools, care centres and workplaces has increased the unequal distribution of non-paid domestic and care responsibilities within the home for women who, often in addition to balancing working from home, were left without sufficient support for child and elderly care; whereas remote working is not a substitute for childcare; whereas women usually spend 13 hours more each week than men on unpaid care and housework [except in my house, of course. My husband is wonderful]; whereas the Covid-19 crisis has been an opportunity for men to become more involved in care responsibilities, yet has also revealed how uneven the share of care and housework still is, which will most likely affect women and girls more severely; whereas balancing telework and family responsibilities adds additional strain, and women therefore face an increased emotional, mental and social burden; whereas this could result in fewer achievements at work and have an impact on their professional development compared to their male peers;

I know that what I am saying here rings true to women listening tonight. The report goes on:

whereas a disproportionate and extreme burden has been placed on single parents, 85% of whom are women amounting to 6.7 million single-mother households in the EU, almost half of which are at serious risk of social exclusion or poverty;

whereas survey results show that Covid-19 had a heavier impact on women with young children than on men with the same household situation; whereas almost one third (29%) of women with young children found it hard to concentrate on their work, compared to 16% of men with young children; whereas twice as many women with children (29%) were likely to

feel too tired after work to do household work, compared to 16% of men; whereas in April 2020 women with children aged 0-11 were more likely to feel tense than men with children in the same age range (23% vs 19%), or to feel lonely (14% vs 6%) and depressed (14% vs 9%);...

whereas women are not as equally involved as men when it comes to decision-making in the recovery phase, due to the existing glass ceiling; whereas women, and their representative civil society organisations [such as this House], must play an active and central role in decision-making processes to ensure that their perspectives and needs are taken into account in the decision-making, design, implementation and monitoring of the recovery phase...

It is clear that these issues persist across the EU, and that this State is not alone in its failure to include and respect women and their abilities in every walk of our State and society. It is crucial that we address the under-representation of women in this House, the representative Chamber of our democracy.

Women and men are different. There is no reason to pretend otherwise or to want it to be otherwise. This week, I looked at the research published by Women for Election, showing the overwhelming proportion of women in politics who needed to be asked to run, rather than putting themselves forward. Is this a reticence or a mark of a lack of confidence, as some have perceived? Or is it actually just an inherently different female trait that needs to be anticipated and accommodated as just as valid an approach as any other? I include myself in this apparent strike against women's advancement, having had to be asked to run. Perhaps this difference in approach reflects that women and men are different, and it is this very difference in approach and their range of approaches that is a strength to society. The pressure for women to behave in any way that is other than what they are naturally, is itself a strike against their natural participation. We need more women in this House. We need more women bringing their brilliant, natural selves and the depth of their personal and professional experience and skill. We need more women being themselves, participating in their own way in their own style, with their own style, without fear of the stupidity of most of the comments to which they can be subjected for doing so, which silences them. We need it everywhere else too.

Deputy Réada Cronin: During the Covid crisis, I hear from shattered women everyday. If they are working, it is likely that they are in receipt of the pandemic unemployment payment or on the frontline. If they are caring for children with special needs, they are terrified. They feel imprisoned and are terrified of catching Covid. They worry who will mind their children if they die. If they have a problem with alcohol or food, it is magnified. If they are working from home, they are doing the times tables and spelling with their children between Zoom meetings. If they are living with a violent partner, they feel that there is no escape. In overcrowded housing, they are moving piles of people and piles of stuff - physical, emotional and psychological. Globally, the Covid crisis is hammering everybody, but it is hammering women in particular. Ireland is not immune from this.

Last Saturday there was a violent attack on the Garda at an anti-lockdown demonstration. My father was a Superintendent in An Garda Síochána, so my thoughts were immediately with the families of the gardaí. I remember, as a child, sitting on the pillar in my front garden on the day of the Dublin and Monaghan bombings, waiting for him to come home. It was long before the days of mobile phones. Saturday's demonstration was a threat to public health and a right kick in the teeth to all of us, but it was a particular insult to our healthcare workers, cleaners, supermarket workers, teachers and SNAs, women who have been heroes this year.

Beyond the violence, there were ordinary women and girls, mostly not well-off, and many misinformed, misled and manipulated by two sides: first, by some elements of the media who riled them up one week and excoriated them the next; and second, by the far right, who have nothing to offer these women but fear, hate and lies, and the possibility of a fine, or worse, a criminal record. They create trouble for them and trouble for all of us. These women do not matter to the populist politics of the right, where “welfare cheats cheat us all”, and migrants are left to drown in the Mediterranean. These women do not matter because they are outside of the tight, patriarchal circle of power, influence, leaks and access.

On International Women’s Day, the challenge for us, as democrats and parliamentarians, is to ask how these and other women are being manipulated in this dangerous world of division and disinformation.

8 o’clock

Ireland is a tiny island where practically everyone knows everyone else. Excoriating each other as “deplorables”, as people did in the US, would destroy our communities. We are too small an island to allow that to happen and, if we did, it would be democracy itself that would pay the price.

Will we make the effort to reach out to women and girls in difficult situations and, instead of mocking them and pointing fingers at them as we did in the past, can we listen to their worries? Women without money and security are terrified in this Covid crisis. Most are not spending lockdown in airy villas looking out on views of the sea or a Victorian square. The women who contact me across north Kildare are barely breathing with fear and loss. They have hardly any money, inadequate supports and are coping with overcrowding. On International Women’s Day, and every day, we need to listen to women in this country. In particular, we need to listen to their experiences during this pandemic.

In my first year as a Teachta Dála, I have been involved in all kinds of debates affecting women and dealing with the legacy of this conservative State. It is not enough to have more women in politics; we need more women who reject the politics of the patriarchy, which is the politics of austerity, cuts and poverty. Throughout this island, women are at the heart of every community group and local project. Could the Covid-19 crisis and other issues have been handled differently if we had diverse, progressive women at decision-making tables? I believe the answer is “Yes”. It seems to me that we have been facing a reckoning in this State over the recent period and it is now time truly to listen to women. As we plan for life after Covid, the women of Sinn Féin will give our all to changing and challenging the residual elements in the patriarchal State apparatus that are trying to hold back the change that is so badly needed.

Deputy Verona Murphy: I welcome the opportunity to speak as we are about to celebrate International Women’s Day on Monday, on the effect of the Covid-19 crisis on women. Often, when we stand to speak on a particular issue in this House, we do so to raise a criticism, grievance or problem. Today, however, I am going to take the opportunity to talk as much as I can about the positive advances in the lives of women that have been made over recent decades.

I begin by pointing to the position of women in politics in an Irish context. Forty years ago, in 1981, we had eight female Deputies, which equated to 5.4% of all Deputies. Today, we have 36 female Deputies, making up 22.5% of the total. In a society where women account for a majority of the population, it is appropriate that female voices be heard in this decision-making

Chamber. Many colleagues may not be aware that I am only the second female to be elected to Dáil Éireann for the Wexford constituency. The first was Avril Doyle, who served as a Deputy and Senator for 20 years and as an MEP for ten years. In the space of 100 years, just two female Deputies have been elected in County Wexford. I am not for one second suggesting that a female Deputy is better than a male Deputy, but it must be of benefit that a wider diversity of views are represented in this House. When making decisions on legislation that impacts people's lives, it is of great benefit to be able to make those decisions with input from people with different perspectives.

In an Irish context, the idea of educating boys and girls to the same level is taken for granted. Educational attainment levels for both males and females have increased massively over the past 30 years. In 1991, just 13.6% of all Irish people had a third level education, whereas that figure now stands at 42%. The data suggest that a greater number of women than men achieve a third level qualification. At second level, girls regularly outperform boys in language subjects, while boys regularly outperform girls in the maths-based subjects. Overall, comparisons between the results of males and females suggest that achievement levels are largely similar, with girls, on average, achieving slightly higher leaving certificate results. This suggests that we have an education system that gets the balance right.

Unfortunately, not all countries in the world can claim to support women in education to the same degree as they support men. UNICEF claims that only 66% of countries have achieved gender parity in primary education. At second level, the gap widens, with 45% of countries achieving gender parity in lower secondary education and 25% in upper secondary education. Poverty and child marriage are cited as two of the main factors in this disparity between boys and girls. For example, poor families often favour boys when investing in education. In the lowest income brackets worldwide, only 47% of women are literate. Turning back to education in an Irish context, the statistics and figures show that we are moving in the right direction. This is positive news.

When compared with 40 or 50 years ago, the number of women who play sport in this country has gone through the roof, as have the number of sports clubs catering for women. There has never been a better era for women to play sports than the current one. There has never been as much women's sport on television or as much sponsorship for women's sports. All of these things illustrate the fantastic advances that were made over the past 40 to 50 years. Progress will, no doubt, continue to be made in this regard. Thinking of some of our best female sportpeople, I can point to the fantastic camogie team my county has had in recent years. Players such as Kate Kelly, Ursula Jacob, Mags D'Arcy and many more have inspired a whole generation of girls to play the sport, while Rianna Jarrett is currently doing likewise for hundreds of young female soccer fans. On a national level, we have some world-leading sportswomen, including Katie Taylor, Ciara McGeehan, Fionnuala McCormack, Rachael Blackmore and many others, who continue to inspire young girls to take part in sport. In recent months, Lisa Jacob, an Enniscorthy native who has been capped 139 times for Ireland, was made the Irish women's hockey team Olympic team coach. These are all reasons to celebrate.

Up to this point, I have referred to the positives in an Irish context. It would be remiss of me not to draw attention to the many atrocities being carried out worldwide against women. One that immediately springs to mind is the ongoing kidnappings of schoolgirls in Nigeria by Boko Haram. Hundreds of girls have been kidnapped and subsequently disappeared in that country over the past five years. Only last week, 317 were abducted in the latest attack. The situation of Princess Latifa, currently being held captive by her father, the Prime Minister of

the United Arab Emirates, is another example of the consequences of an attitude that seeks to suppress women at every opportunity. We also recently saw a member of the Qatari royal family refusing to acknowledge female football officials in that country, which is the venue for the next FIFA World Cup.

We can often dwell too much on cosmetic solutions. It is easy to apply a gender quota to a political party at election time. It takes more guts, however, to deal with the bigger issues. We must not ignore the real and significant anti-female discrimination that is going on in the world. While I have so far focused on the positives in Ireland, we are still far from perfect. I have been vocal in my support for carers in this country, most of whom are women. A pension solution was committed to in the programme for Government, but after a year in office, there appears to be little progress made on this matter by Government. These are the types of policies that help the lives of women in Ireland in practical terms. Sharing hashtags on International Women's Day will not solve the problems they face. Only committed and determined action will do that. Fortunately, Ireland has made great progress over the past 40 to 50 years and, overall, we must be positive. Progress is being made and I hope to continue to be part of that progress for women and for society.

There is much more awareness now of menstrual health and the importance of the provision of adequate supplies to woman who are impoverished and homeless. The UN and Human Rights Watch have repeatedly recognised menstrual hygiene as a human right, as has the Oireachtas women's caucus. We need to ensure that no woman in this country is unable to access menstrual products due to poverty or is reluctant to ask for provisions due to embarrassment. We need to ensure that the shackles of Catholic guilt no longer prevent women or men from talking about so-called private things. Gender equality should be for everyone. Issues affecting women affect everyone. The values of the women's caucus are equality, solidarity, democracy and diversity, values that we all believe in as men and women, for men and women.

I hope we will never again see women treated as they were treated in the mother and baby homes. We must do what we can to support men and women such as those whose stories of illegal adoption we watched on "RTÉ Investigates" last night.

I do not subscribe to the notion of identity politics. It seems to burrow its way into almost every political debate, with the aim of pitting certain sections of society against each other. We must celebrate the good in every section of society. Should I be fortunate enough to get the opportunity to speak on International Men's Day, I will use it as an opportunity to speak about all that is good about men, but, for today, let us celebrate all that is good about women and remember the great progress that has been made over recent decades.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank Deputy Verona Murphy for those words of wisdom.

Deputy Michael Collins: I am delighted to get a chance to speak on the impact of Covid-19 on women for International Women's Day. I have been lucky to know some great and gifted women in my lifetime. We have seen in the past 12 months how our medical professionals, most of them women, have been to the fore in tackling the Covid-19 crisis. Some are doctors and others are nurses, carers and home helps. They have suffered bravely to save the lives of so many. It saddened me to see how student nurses, many of them women, were treated by our Government. It refused to give them a pay rise.

On International Women's Day, we must remember all the great women who have gone

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before us. I read recently of Margaret Collins-O'Driscoll from west Cork, sister of the great General Michael Collins. She left west Cork and won a seat in Dublin North and still raised 14 children. It is women like her who shaped this country.

My own childhood heroes were Mother Teresa of Calcutta and Lady Diana of Wales. These were two people who shaped the world differently. While the life of the latter was cut short, she, in her short life, touched the world with kindness and care. Mother Teresa saved tens of thousands of lives with her steely determination to help and care.

I have always looked up to modern-day female heroes. Consider the massive fight that Vera Twomey has taken up not only for her daughter but also for every other person who suffers intolerable pain in this country and who is in need of medicinal cannabis. Vera has moved mountains to overcome intolerable, nonsensical blockages. While she has still to climb over more hurdles, it looks like the State has woken up and is now standing up to its responsibilities. This would never have happened but for Vera Twomey, this truly great woman. I saw today on social media that, four years ago, she had to walk from Cork to Dublin in protest to try to fight for the cause for many of the ordinary people of this country, including her daughter Ava.

When I talk about great women, I should refer to one of west Cork's greatest business-woman of all time, namely, Colette Twomey, famous for Clonakilty black pudding. She has overseen the growth of Clonakilty Food Company with her family. The food product is well known and second to none, as well I know because I sample it every morning. Although Colette been part of the building of her great company and creating good jobs in Clonakilty, she still devotes her time to the community and voluntary sector. Down through the years, she has done so for the people of Clonakilty and beyond.

I have been lucky to see great sportspeople like Lily de la Cour from Bantry, a kick-boxing champion who has given joy to so many spectators down through the years. The discipline she has shown in her sport is staggering. This leads me on to the greatest sportsperson Ireland has ever produced, namely, Katie Taylor, from Bray. One could not get enough time to speak about this astonishing sportsperson and her focus on her sport. The respect she has for others is staggering. She has to be one of Ireland's greatest female sportspersons of all time. Of course she is loved by the people of her native town, Bray. Her return to the Martello Hotel, Bray, a hotel of excellence, when the pandemic ends is greatly anticipated.

Another woman who deserves greater recognition in this country is Kathy Sinnott. Kathy is a long-term advocate for children with special needs. She has spoken out and focused on these lovely children and their needs.

These women, many of whom are from west Cork, are but a few who have changed the course of Irish history and who have not sought too much limelight for doing so. The approach to Covid-19 and the treatment of women leave a lot to be desired in this country. I hope that, in time, people will respect the women for the way in which they have respected the people of this country.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: Since the outbreak of Covid-19, up-to-date data and reports from those on the front line have shown that all types of violence against women, particularly domestic violence, have intensified. It is hard to believe that one in three women in Ireland is affected by domestic violence. It is not confined to class, age, sexuality, religion or disability. It has been named as the shadow pandemic. Some 243 million women and girls worldwide have

experienced violence by a partner in the past year. Some of the contributing factors are health and money worries, cramped living conditions, being isolated with abusers, movement restrictions and deserted public spaces.

With International Women's Day in mind, I appeal to everyone to look out for the signs that we often miss and to be alert to domestic violence. In an earlier debate, I said all employers have been asked to recognise the three Rs: recognise, respond and refer. On a separate point, in the words of Vicky Phelan, we should keep asking questions and for clarification regarding women's health.

It is on record that the State has a long history of not treating women as equals. This has to stop. We are responsible for this. So many major issues have arisen in which women were not considered by the State, including the issue of cervical cancer screening, the issue of mother and baby homes, and lower the rate of promotion of women in the Dáil. I am happy that history was made when Deputy Connolly was made Leas-Chathaoirleach. I was one of the people who voted for her. There have been major concerns over the waiting time for cancer screening. I urge Departments and the Government to accelerate the process. What is the healthcare plan for women? Do we really want a repeat of the cervical screening affair?

I would not be here today only for my mother. I would not be here today only for my wife and family giving me support. Some 75% of my office staff are women. I always have treated women as equals, and that is the way it should go. I am from a farming background. All women were treated as equals in our household. That is the way I was brought up. I am happy today to support women in whatever way I can as they have supported me throughout my life.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank Deputy O'Donoghue. Last but by no means least is Deputy Catherine Connolly.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I am tempted to start with a joke. The content of the debate reminds me of a joke that is doing the rounds. A woman goes forward for a full-time job that she really wants but in the course of the interview, the interviewers, who obviously have a man in mind for the position, tell her the job is really very onerous and that it involves the work of two men. She asks: "Oh God, is it part time, so?"

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy did not do too badly herself at the last interview.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I thank the Minister and the two Ministers of State for remaining here and I thank them for their thoughtful contributions. I was struck by all three contributions. I doubt that any Minister other than the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, Deputy O'Gorman, has acknowledged that a patriarchal society still exists, sexism still exists and women still face misogyny in everyday life. He stated women are over-represented in the sectors that have been badly affected by the pandemic. The Ministers of State, Deputies Rabbitte and Butler, also made very interesting contributions, which I welcome. I, too, have all the statistics here. We have heard them and I am not going to repeat them. I am going to use my five minutes to ask the Minister and Ministers of State, considering that they are now in leadership positions, what they are going to do about the issues that arise.

Let us consider domestic violence. Covid has put the spotlight on inequality in Ireland. As somebody who has the privilege of coming from a large family, equally balanced with seven boys and seven girls, I am all for equality. We are putting the spotlight on women and women's rights today simply because women have suffered and continue to suffer at a rate that is com-

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pletely unacceptable. Let us look at domestic violence. We know what the figures are and we know we do not have enough refuges. It is a simple, practical matter to make them available. It is not that hard. We have been talking in terms of Monopoly money, amounting to billions of euro. I do not mean to be dismissive but in the midst of providing all that money, we did not say we needed more refuges and that we would build them and make them multipurpose in the hope that they would not always be necessary and could then be used for something else.

The pandemic put the spotlight on childcare. What is the answer? It is that we look on childcare as an essential service and that the State should provide it on a non-profit basis. There is always room for the private sector in every sphere of life but the State must be seen to provide childcare because it is an essential service. The State must also be seen to provide housing, not as a commodity, something to be traded on the international market or something for vulture funds, but as a home where we can provide security so children and parents can take part in society. These are basic things and we can do something about them.

The theme for this year is women in leadership. It is a worthy theme but it is not something that jumps out at me. What jumps out at me over the last year are the women and men on the ground who have struggled gallantly so that the health service could continue and children with disabilities could be minded at home. I might come back to what the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, said about that in a minute. I know people in my area who are minding loved ones with Alzheimer's disease 24 hours a day. The Tánaiste's comments, made when he was Taoiseach, distinguishing people getting up early in the morning still grate on me because some people do not get to bed at all. They are up all night minding others and saving the State a fortune.

The Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, made a comment, with which I agree, about parents of children with disabilities and how they have always been sort of locked down. The difference this time was that we could have made a decision as a society to designate services for children with special needs as essential. We can still do that so that never again will we repeat the mistake of leaving children at disabilities at home regressing. That is a practical step that could be taken.

Public health has been utterly ignored. The Crowe Horwath report was published in December 2018, well before the pandemic. It was a moderate report, not a very radical one, which highlighted what was needed. Public health is a profession that is dominated by women which was utterly ignored, leaving us ill-prepared for the pandemic and the other pandemics that will come our way.

We also ignored student nurses in the pandemic. We could have done something practical very quickly. We did not do that either. Then we set up NPHE and left off women's voices. I see the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, nodding and I know her heart is in the right place but she is in power and can make decisions that change things. I am not giving out about NPHE but it was never fit for purpose. I know its members worked into the night and were up early every morning but NPHE was not representative. Its did not have eyes to see the consequences of its decisions. That was and remains fatal. That, too, can be changed. There was a structure in place for emergency preparation but it was not used. It was simply ignored.

On top of that, as it happens, because politics are dominated by men, we have the three wise men, as I call them, at the top and we sometimes see a great lack of wisdom. The challenge is for women to take power, stand up, take courage in our hands and show the way. I do that as best I can in opposition because that is the role I have. We all perform our role as best we can.

It is time to recognise the work on the ground that is underpaid, unpaid and undervalued and which keeps our economy going.

There is something we can do, as the Ceann Comhairle asked. Instead of having statements once a year, we could gender-proof and poverty-proof all our budgets and policies to ensure we have an equal society because that would be better for all of us in the end and would lead to a thriving and sustainable economy.

An Ceann Comhairle: It is superb that the House has responded positively to the request from the Oireachtas women's caucus to have this debate to mark International Women's Day and to acknowledge the fact that we have our second Oireachtas women's caucus, it having been initially established with the driving force of the Minister, Deputy Catherine Martin. I commend those who have participated in the debate. It has been interesting, challenging and, at times, profound. As the Leas-Cheann Comhairle said and as Deputy Bríd Smith challenged, notwithstanding that, I hope to be in a position, on behalf of Members of the Thirty-third Dáil, to announce an initiative in the next week or two that would demonstrate practical moves this Dáil can take to ensure that in the future we have far more women present in the Dáil and Seanad and a more family-friendly and inclusive - and I mean "inclusive" in all its manifestations - Parliament. That is something I am determined we should do.

The Leas-Cheann Comhairle has been paid tribute to in the course of this debate and rightly so. As someone in my last term in this office, I look forward to being able to vote for a female candidate to occupy this Chair on a full-time basis come the next election. I just hope the Leas-Cheann Comhairle does not want me to go beforehand.

Go raibh míle maith agaibh. Leis sin tá gnó na seachtaine tagtha chun deiridh. Tá an Dáil ar athló go dtí an 10 Márta seo chugainn ag 10 a.m.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: Do I have-----

An Ceann Comhairle: I am afraid not.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: Okay. I was misinformed. I had a speech and everything. Apologies.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Minister will have to get his team to brief him better. We would love to listen to him but I am afraid we cannot.

The Dáil adjourned at 8.27 p.m. until 10 a.m. on Wednesday, 10 March 2021.