



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

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

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Dé Céadaoin, 10 Márta 2021

Wednesday, 10 March 2021

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

*Paidir.
Prayer.*

Civil Registration (Right of Adoptees to Information) (Amendment) Bill 2021: Second Stage [Private Members]

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

I am delighted to be able to have this debate today. The mother and baby homes report has reignited a crucial conversation in this country around adoption, illegal adoptions and, in general, adoption practices that date right back to the foundation of the State.

The recent “RTÉ Investigates” programme, “Who Am I?”, raised serious questions around how we treat adoptees, how badly adoptees have been treated in the past and how we continue to perpetrate these injustices. It also raised very serious questions around illegal adoptions and the part the State has played in facilitating them.

On that note, we need a full investigation into illegal adoption practices. I understand some work is under way by Dr. Conor O’Mahony in that regard. This is welcome, as we need to get to the bottom of this once and for all. Moreover, any inquiry or investigation carried out must take a different course of action than the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes and Certain Related Matters, in that there must be accountability at the end. People should not be allowed to conduct an investigation and then sail off into the sunset without crucial questions being answered.

The State and its agencies have continued to take a punitive and reprehensible approach to providing adopted people with access to their birth certificates. It can literally come down to who a person gets to speak to on the day. Recent events have begun a crucial conversation on how we afford some in our society access to their birth certificates but others not. Many adopted people have been denied this basic right for far too long. Everyone has the right to know who he or she is, where he or she was born, what name he or she was given at birth, on what date and at what time he or she was born and his or her birth parents’ names.

I have stated previously that many of us probably take this for granted. I include myself in

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that. It is incredible to think that in 2021, some people are still being denied access to this very basic information. Access to this information is a human right and one I have always taken for granted. The impact of the obstacles, legislative or otherwise, used by the State and its agencies to impede attempts by adopted people to access their personal data has been devastating for adopted persons and it must stop now.

I recently spoke to a lady who was adopted. She was born in a regional hospital and then sent to a mother and baby home from where she was adopted out. Her adoptive parents were very open about her adoption and from a very early age she began writing letters looking for information on her birth parents. While this lady later went on to connect with her birth mother, it was in the pursuit of her birth certificate years after this initial meeting that she came up against official Ireland, which was determined to put every obstacle in her way. Social workers retrospectively attempted to build a fortress around her adoptive file and the information it contained. This was after she had met her mother. Unbeknown to her, unfortunately, her father had already passed away as a relatively young man in his early 40s. This woman, in her late 30s, a mother herself at this stage, sat down at her kitchen table with a social worker who knew she had already met her birth mother and that this was a consensual meeting for both parties. The social worker then set to assessing the lady's suitability to be given her birth certificate. This lady's privacy was not important in this meeting and her rights were irrelevant.

At this stage, one must ask whose rights are being protected. The lady in question was asked by the social worker how her adoptive parents treated her, what kind of childhood she had, did she get on with her adoptive siblings and what would she do if her half siblings arrived at her door. She was then asked a series of questions about her mental health and how she had coped over the years in the knowledge that she was adopted. These were extremely intrusive and invasive questions. So many times when we speak about this topic, we are told that people want to protect the privacy rights of certain individuals. In this case, the lady had met her birth mother. Her rights and her privacy were out the window. We cannot keep having this sort of a double standard and a different approach for certain individuals.

The social worker knew this lady's birth father had already passed away but she left her house that day without telling her. This is the reality and cruelty that have existed in such cases for many years. I have heard many stories of adopted people being pushed to the point of becoming emotional wrecks in order to obtain simple information about themselves. Anyone who has been adopted in this country and comes up against the State and its agencies talks about hitting successive brick walls, being made to feel like a criminal and a nuisance, being met by indifference and in many cases being outright ignored.

There are some decent people along the way who have helped people. Much has to be said for those individuals but that is not what we should be relying on. The State's agencies should be upholding people's rights and ensuring everybody is treated with a bit of decency and fairness.

The State has continued to perpetrate the myth that mothers were guaranteed secrecy. This falls apart when one considers that the State has never produced any paperwork which would hold up this argument. It is ironic that while the State has not allowed adopted people access to their birth certificates in Ireland, those sent to America were given theirs.

The issue of GDPR continually gets thrown into the mix. One person's right to privacy cannot trump another person's right to know who he or she is. Adoption rights advocacy groups

have long argued that GDPR does not and should not stop the State providing adoptees access to their birth certificates. While the State has gone to extreme lengths to protect the rights of mothers, it is time it went to extreme lengths to facilitate adoptees' right to know who they are.

I am cognisant that this is a first step and that wider and more comprehensive information and tracing legislation needs to be introduced. While we need to deal with people's access to their wider files, we must also provide their medical information. That is an issue which comes up for people just trying to get basic medical information about various illnesses. We take it for granted when we go to a doctor and are asked about our family background medical history. We just answer those questions, never thinking about it. A whole cohort people, however, have been cut out of this.

In the previous Dáil, an information and tracing Bill was to be introduced. The Minister has said he wants to bring forward his own Bill in that regard. I hope that happens. However, if we pass this Bill today, it can be used as a first step to allow people access to basic documents. Every Member has an important role to fill in this Chamber. Every Member comes from different walks of life and backgrounds. On certain occasions, such as today, we actually have the opportunity to make a really positive difference and change some people's lives. We really need to take that opportunity and not just pay lip service to it and say that we will not oppose it. I welcome the latter but I want to see the Bill acted upon and not left on a shelf somewhere forever and a day. I ask every Deputy - I believe Members will support this - to ensure that he or she not only says it here today but also fights to ensure that it happens.

I also want to mention a few people I have had the pleasure of dealing with. I have dealt with so many different survivors. I thank all of them, particularly the various women I telephone on a regular basis. They are just incredible. In the week of International Women's Day, I pay tribute to them. I have dealt with Aitheantas, an adoption rights group, the Adoption Rights Alliance, the Clann Project and many individual women and groups. I also had the pleasure of dealing with a group in America comprising some really genuine people who trying to find their roots. I ask every Deputy to ensure that we take this first step in order to get some justice.

Deputy Chris Andrews: I am honoured to be able to speak in support of this Bill that is being introduced by my colleague, Deputy Funchion. I commend the work done by the survivor groups, the adoptee groups and Deputy Funchion in bringing it before the Dáil.

The purpose of this Bill is simple and straightforward, namely, to give every adopted person the right to access his or her birth certificate. The vast majority of Deputies who will be voting on this Bill and on whether to give adoptees access to this most basic of human rights will undoubtedly have always had access to their own birth certificate and many will have taken that for granted throughout their lives. It is so often the case that only when we see the suffering and lack of equality for others that we realise how fortunate many of us have been and we can then start to address where the State has failed so many people.

Access to the most basic of personal information about who you are should be a fundamental right that cannot be denied. For far too long, the survivors of mother and baby homes have been denied this basic personal information. Survivors feel that time and again they have been lied to, tricked and made to feel like criminals for seeking out their most basic personal information. Enough is enough. It is time that the State stands with those who have endured so much and give them the respect they deserve. This Bill is a small but important step on the journey to give survivors that respect and the support they deserve. It is time to listen to survi-

vors and start righting these wrongs. Let us not bury this legislation in the process. I urge all Deputies to support the Bill.

Deputy Réada Cronin: Our birth certificate is the fundamental document that testifies to our arrival into this world. Having automatic access to that fundamental document must be a fundamental and automatic right - a right that is both claimed and fulfilled without obstacle, qualification or hindrance. Quite simply, the days of adoptee apartheid in our civil and public life must be over.

This morning I was contacted by a woman who was adopted in 1961. She is still looking for her birth certificate - imagine 60 years and no trace of it. I commend my comrade, Deputy Funchion, for her work to right this wrong. That we in Sinn Féin have to propose this Bill shows that our work in modernising our State is not over. The work is not done when a person's right to have and to hold his or her birth certificate is dependent on a patronising, patriarchal politics and system of government, one that, when it came to documenting its children, saw some as more equal than others, with greater equality signified by a gold ring on the hand or a papal blessing on the wall. Our national obsession with respectability saw us create a subclass of person who was entitled to less information, less respect, less dignity and fewer rights. No word has done more damage to our society than that of "respectability".

None of this is the Minister's fault. This is my third or fourth time talking to the Minister about this matter. The greatest trick Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael pulled on the Green Party in the negotiations to form a Government was to land the toxic, misogynistic, woman-and-child-hating legacy of their century of patriarchal rule in this State at the Minister's feet. They have the Minister trying to guard the door to the skeletons in their closet. They are not going back in, yet he is expected to stand here week after week trying to defend the indefensible. It might not be the fault of the Minister but it is his now responsibility to do the right thing. I urge him and all parties in the House to put politics aside and put our people first, the people this State put away and put down. In our postcolonial delirium the respectable always needed a group at which they could point as being less so that they could feel they were more. I ask the Minister to do the truly respectable thing now. Not only should he not oppose the Bill but he should support it and the rights of our adoptees to their birth certificates because they deserve nothing less.

Deputy John Brady: Irish adopted people are uniquely discriminated against in comparison with other Irish citizens because they have no statutory right to their birth certificates or adoption files. Apart from vital information, these files contain early care records, details of illnesses, vaccines and placement with foster families, correspondence from natural mothers or family members and consent forms. Since 1952, the legislation has been amended eight times but none of the Adoption Acts to date has legislated for information rights for adopted people. There have been a number of attempts to legislate in this area. However, instead of repairing the harm done by Ireland's closed, secret adoption system, the Government's efforts to legislate for adoption information have compounded the situation even further. This important legislation brought forward by my colleague, Deputy Funchion, will immediately provide access to birth certificates for adopted people in the short term before comprehensive information and tracing legislation is brought forward by the Government.

The Minister is aware that under Irish law, birth registrations have been public records since 1864. Adopted people can have and have been given their birth certificates. They can access them by going to the General Register Office on Werburgh Street and carrying out a search through its books. It is a simple enough process. It costs money for the search and can be time-

consuming. Over the past 30 or 40 years, many adopted people have been forced to take this route and have been made to feel they are doing something wrong or even illegal. The only thing wrong is that they are being discriminated against by the State and are forced, because they are adopted, to take this route simply to get a document that is readily available to all other Irish citizens. Why is this? It is because they have no automatic right to their birth certificate. Thousands of adopted people have been forced to go this route to get their birth certificates. They have established where they were born, their original names and their natural mothers' names and, guess what, the sky has not fallen in. It is time to end the discrimination, treat everyone equally under Irish law and provide in legislation the statutory right for adopted people to their own birth certificate.

That the Minister is not opposing this legislation is important and welcome but he needs to act on it and actively support the Bill through all Stages to end the discrimination that Irish adopted citizens face.

Deputy Paul Donnelly: I thank Deputy Funchion for introducing this motion and welcome that it will not be opposed. However, as previous speakers stated, we need to go further.

When I was thinking about writing this speech I went to the person I know is an expert in this, my wife Angela, who was adopted in Dublin in 1968. These are her words:

I always knew I was adopted. I was told before I really knew what it meant. I couldn't have asked for better parents. I loved them and my sisters dearly and was loved unconditionally by them.

Despite this, I always felt there was something missing! Something I couldn't see, smell or touch but something very tangible all the same. I didn't feel my parent's ancestors were mine. Their family tree didn't feel like my history.

I first approached the adoption board when I was 22 following my father's death. I had felt that requesting my original birth cert would be disloyal to my parents, but following my dad's passing I realised that we all only have one life to live.

I had a meeting with a social worker who gave me three pieces of non identifying information about my birth mother. There was no information on my file about my birth father.

What followed that meeting was years of intermittent contact with the adoption board. I'd try to put my adoption to the back of my mind and all the unanswered questions associated with it. But it kept creeping back into my consciousness.

When pregnant with our first child I was unable to answer background questions asked by the hospital. [That was always very difficult for Angela.]

When our first child was born, it was like I had been granted the greatest wish imaginable. I was acutely aware that Seán was my first biological link with the world.

After several years and several requests, the adoption board agreed to give me my original birth cert.

I have no idea how these decisions are made. Why I was granted my birth cert whilst many adoptees are not.

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Seeing my birth mother's name meant so much to me. Knowing I was a member of the O'Donnell family allowed me some knowledge of my ancestors and a sense of belonging

I have since made contact with my birth mother and three new sisters, it has been a very positive experience for me. I would not have been able to achieve this without my birth cert.

For me it didn't matter how much I was loved and cherished. I always knew I was adopted and so always felt deep down that someone hadn't wanted me, always felt something was missing. Not knowing your biological history doesn't seem like a big issue to those who have it but those who don't feel its loss.

Being told that you don't have a right to your own information is very difficult to accept.

Children placed for adoption signed no contracts, relinquished no rights, agreed to nothing.

Information on who you are is a very basic need and the absence of it is not without consequences for those affected by it.

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman): I thank Deputy Paul Donnelly for giving his wife's words and reminding us of the stakes at play in respect of this issue. I welcome the opportunity to speak on the extremely important matters involved here and I acknowledge Deputy Funchion for bringing forward the Bill.

Access to birth information has been to the forefront of my agenda since I became a Minister and is a priority for me and for the Government. We have been fully aware of the significance and urgency of the issue of birth and identity information since the Government was formed. Recent developments, such as the final report of the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes and Certain Related Matters, the recent "RTÉ Investigates" programme and the sampling review on illegal birth registrations, which I published yesterday, all underline the huge importance of this particular issue.

The Government will not be opposing the Second Reading of this Bill, although we have some concerns regarding the particular legislative approach that is being adopted in it. I will deal with why the Government is not opposing the Bill. I will then outline the related legislation I expect to advance in the next number of weeks and how it differs from this Bill.

The chief purpose of the Private Members' Bill is to allow adoptees to apply to the General Registrar's Office for copies of their original birth certificates. The Bill sets aside the restrictions that currently exist in legislation, which cover the index linking the adoption certificate of an individual to the original birth certificate of that individual. Consideration would be needed on how the Bill would impact upon the range of complex legal issues which have been flagged in the past during previous attempts to legislate for a right of access in this area. Nevertheless, the intention behind the Bill would be to grant an adopted individual access to the information in the adoption index held by the General Registrar's Office. This, in turn, would facilitate them to identify their original birth certificate.

This intention is consistent with Government policy in terms of legislating to provide access by adoptees to their birth certificate. This is why the Government is not opposing the Private Members' Bill. At its heart, it is a mechanism to unlock access to one part of birth information for adoptees. I want that, the Government wants that, stakeholder groups want that and,

most importantly, adoptees and survivors want that. However, access to birth certificates for adoptees, as provided for in this Bill, is only part of the solution, albeit a crucial part. The Bill does not cover other important pieces of the jigsaw to ensure full accessibility of identity rights. This Bill will not help adoptees whose birth certificate does not record a father's name, where that name may be on other records. It will not help those whose births were illegally registered or those who were boarded out and whose identities may have been obscured. It will not help those who are seeking medical information about their birth families and it does not address the need to provide for an effective and robust tracing service for all these categories of people.

On foot of the publication of the final report of the mother and baby homes commission of investigation, the Government made a commitment to bring forward fresh legislative proposals on information and tracing. This work is well under way and I expect to have heads of Bill ready for pre-legislative scrutiny in the coming weeks. These heads of Bill will be comprehensive and will constitute an integrated set of necessary proposals to provide for access to information, including but not restricted to the birth certificate. The heads will address a set of long-standing legal arguments that have served to prevent a right of access by adoptees in the past. Furthermore, they will provide for a right of access not only to adoptees but also for boarded-out persons and those whose birth was illegally registered, such as those whose cases were addressed in the "RTÉ Investigates" programme.

It is vital that these groups are included in any legislation. For example, I know that some boarded-out people took the name of the family they lived with and got identity documents in that family's name, and they may not have sufficient information to get their birth certificate. What they need is access to their files, access to documents and reports that may indicate birth family history or give reasons why they were boarded out. Other boarded-out people are seeking to trace family members, to have questions answered or to seek reunification.

Tusla and those working in the area of tracing have long known that persons who were boarded out often had particularly difficult experiences. The commission's report details stories of the appalling neglect that some of these people experienced. Their needs must be recognised by including them in any provisions for release of information. Likewise, persons whose births were illegally registered need access to information on files. For illegal birth registrations, the birth certificate does not show their true identity. The only place where correct birth information might be would be on a relevant file.

I am particularly concerned that those affected can access information about their origins. I know it is shocking to us all that the legal landscape at the moment means that, while they know they are not the person they thought they were, in some cases, due to the current legal constraints, they cannot be told the names of their birth parents. I think we would all agree that this cannot be allowed to continue and that the legislation needed to unlock this information must be a priority. I am committed to ensuring that these people's identity rights are acknowledged in the legislation I will soon be bringing forward.

Persons seeking to know their origins also want their birth father's name. I understand that, in historic adoptions, it was often the case that no father was recorded on the birth certificate. However, the adoption file might note the putative father's name or make reference to him, such as his age or occupation, or note comments that the mother may have made about him. This would be the only information available regarding the putative father and, therefore, access to that type of information is key to any hope of identifying the individual concerned.

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The House will know that access to birth relatives' medical information is another key concern for those affected. In this regard, we know that the historical files may not contain much information but I believe that whatever is recorded should be provided. I have heard from survivors that not having access to this information is not alone very upsetting but can have practical and sometimes serious implications for them. My intention is that my legislation will address this issue and will engage with the GDPR issues which apply.

My legislation will also provide for a robust and effective tracing service, which is available to adoptees and individuals who were boarded out or the subject of an illegal birth registration. The statutory basis for the current service is restricted in that it applies only to adopted persons and, as it predates GDPR, there are now significant obstacles to processing and sharing personal data. There is an urgent need for an explicit legal basis to allow other data controllers, such as the religious congregations and Government Departments, to share information with Tusla and the Adoption Authority that would help to identify and locate a person for the purposes of tracing. Baptismal records can be key to unlocking a trace, as these records show the child's name at birth and the mother's maiden name. I believe the best way of providing for the interlocking issues of the release of the birth certificate, access to birth, early life and medical information on files, a robust statutory basis for tracing and the safeguarding of relevant records is through a single, integrated and comprehensive legislative measure that enables all the issues to be addressed together in a manner which is constitutionally and GDPR compliant.

Deputies have spoken with conviction and empathy on these matters in the past months and it is true there is great understanding of the urgent necessity for comprehensive legislation to be passed and enacted. We know about the shame and stigma which the church and State placed on unmarried mothers, and that women had little choice in the Ireland of the past. One of the legacies of the secrecy that prevailed is the hurt and pain that are deeply felt when people cannot access information related to their origins. A void is created for the individual when he or she cannot piece together his or her identity. I have spoken to many survivors and I listen to them. It is clear in my mind that the most effective thing the Government can do is to implement comprehensive legislation to provide the right of access to all types of information sought and to cover all groups of people impacted by historical practices.

To conclude, I reiterate that this Private Members' Bill is not being opposed. It seeks to deliver on one aspect of the legislation that the Government is committed to progressing. I will bring forward my proposals, which will encompass this element, and I sincerely hope we can put our political differences to one side and work together to bring forward the best possible legislation. This comprehensive legislation is necessary and will acknowledge the wrongs of the past by vindicating the right to identity into the future. Yesterday, I had the opportunity to meet online a group of approximately 20 survivors, primarily from the United States and some from the United Kingdom. All had been taken from mother and baby homes across the country and adopted by couples in the US and UK and raised there. Each one shared his or her story with me. Some had been able to get information and some were lucky enough to meet the birth mother and, in one case, the birth father as well. However, others shared their stories about the barriers that had been put in place. That meeting, along with many other meetings I have had with survivors, similar to the meetings Deputies have outlined today, show us what we are trying to achieve here and the importance of passing comprehensive legislation in this area.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: Ar an gcéad dul síos, molaim mo chomhghleacaí an Teachta Funchion as an mBille seo a thabhairt os comhair na Dála. Is leasú simplí é seo ar an Acht um Chlárú Sibhialta, 2004, a thabharfadh cead d'uchtaithe a dteastais bhreithe a fháil nuair atá siad

os cionn 18. Leasú simplí atá i gceist ach is leasú fíorthábhachtach é dóibh siúd a bhí uchtaithe.

Céard atá i dteastas breithe? Tugann an teastas seo eolas do dhaoine faoin am a rugadh iad, an lá den tseachtain a rugadh iad agus fiú an meáchan a bhí siad nuair a rugadh iad. Sonraí fíorbhunúsacha iad seo agus is scannal é nach bhfuil an t-eolas sin le fáil acu siúd a uchtaíodh faoi láthair. Tar éis a foilsíodh an tuairisc faoi na hárais máithreacha agus leanáí bhí go leor caint ag Teachtaí faoin tábhacht atá ann dóibh siúd a tháinig slán as na hárais sin a bheith in ann teacht ar a n-eolas pearsanta féin. Is éard atá sa leasú seo ná an chéad chéim sa phróiseas, ach is céim fíor-suntasach é. Tá sé in am againn stop a chur leis an rúndacht agus an cur chuige teoranta a ghlac an Stát agus é ag déileáil le huchtaithe agus iad ag iarraidh teacht ar a dteastais bhreithe. Is ceart bunúsach daonna é an ceart aitheantas a bheith ag duine, agus tá sé thar am dúinn éisteacht leo siúd a tháinig slán agus an ceart bunúsach seo a thabhairt dóibh.

I commend my colleague, Deputy Funchion, on bringing forward this amendment. It is a simple amendment which will have a profound impact on all those who have been denied access to their personal information for far too long. The State has fallen short in many ways when dealing with adopted people. By withholding birth certificates, the State has withheld a piece of these survivors' identities. They deserve the basic dignity of accessing their personal information. This is a fundamental human right that can no longer be opposed. These are matters that many of us take for granted, such as information about the day we were born or our birth weight. This is just a first step on this road but it is a vitally important step. This legislation provides an opportunity to make that impact.

Deputy Johnny Mythen: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this Bill.

I thank both my colleague Deputy Funchion for her hard work in bringing the Bill forward and all those people who fought for their natural birth right to access their own birth certificate when set against the cruel backdrop of cover-up and distortion of their personal information. We can bury a lot of things, but we cannot bury the truth.

I watched the “RTÉ Investigates” programme on illegal adoptions entitled, “Who am I?” To say it was disturbing is an understatement. It showed a sickening letter sent back to a couple in America who were asking for their adopted child’s medical file, in which the charity stated that it only dealt with 100% healthy children and if the couple were not satisfied, they could replace him with another one. If this Parliament cannot recognise the cruel, dysfunctional and disorientated people behind this thinking and behind these acts of turning citizens into chattels, then we are no better than the signatories of those who signed the illegal adopted papers and all those who redacted documents. The time has come to stop hiding behind flawed legislation and the misuse of the instrument of the GDPR to block the right of a person to the knowledge of the very origin of his or her being. The time has come through this Bill to right that wrong. The time has come to give clarity, justice and, above all, the right to a person’s natural human instinct to know where he or she belongs and most importantly, to know who delivered him or her into this world.

We cannot bury the truth, nor can we allow this grave injustice to humanity to continue. As a nation we can rectify this wrong. As a Parliament we can rectify this wrong. We must allow the right of adoptees to full access to their natural birth certificates. I ask that each Member search his or her conscience and heart and do the right thing by fully supporting this Bill and to contribute to restoring people’s faith in truth and justice.

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Deputy Pat Buckley: I congratulate Deputy Funchion on bringing the Bill forward. I welcome that the Minister is not opposing the Bill but, unfortunately, he is not supporting it either and is sitting on both sides of the fence.

What this Bill does, and why it is so important, is that it would immediately provide access to birth certificates for adopted people in the short term before comprehensive information and tracing legislation is brought forward by the Government. This is so important because the history of adoption in Ireland is fraught with decades of State-initiated interference where it operated a closed, secret system that attempted to erase the identities of thousands of people who were adopted.

Everybody is entitled to their information but here we are in 2021, heading to 2022, and we are still talking about people's rights. One reason this Bill is important is that Tusla still is making it extremely complicated for survivors in this regard. I spoke to some survivors over the past weekend. It is downright cheek on Tusla's part to ring survivors on the phone to tell them it is aware they asked for their information and that while it cannot give it to them, it can summarise that information and give it to them over the phone. This is about doing the right thing but while we have been debating this and the other six or seven reports over the years, it is still ignoring the wishes and the rights of people. I put it to the Minister that it is extremely disingenuous that Tusla is not only making it difficult, it is making it impossible, for survivors to get their rights. I had a little conversation with the Minister outside to make him aware that the most important thing is that illegal adoptions did happen. I want this on the record. We have black and white proof that they did happen. This is why it is so important to get to the bottom of this.

I call on the Government and on all Deputies to support this Bill and to support everything as it goes on to Committee Stage. Those who need our support are the people outside of this House. These people have been absolutely and totally ignored by the State and by the powers that are supposed to help them. The agencies we are talking about here are supposed to be assisting them but are not. It makes me angry that we come in here, week in and week out, month in and month out, trying to do the right thing. These are human rights issues and yet we are still coming up with barriers because we are trying to do the right thing. I appeal to the Minister to support the Bill when it goes to committee.

Deputy Martin Browne: I also thank Deputy Funchion for bringing forward this amendment Bill and I acknowledge the involvement of survivors in that effort. The legislation we are seeking to amend is representative of how the ways of the past are slow to change and shows that we cannot rely on the Government's leisurely attitude to address the wrongs of the past.

The history of adoption in this country is similar to the history that has been exposed in the course of the national conversation on the mother and baby homes. It involves interference from that arm of the State that was involved in creating a secretive and closed system that had long-term impacts on any people. Legal adoption, which was first introduced on 1 January 1953, meant that an adopted child passed as the natural offspring of the adoptive parents, with no interference from the natural mothers. Under Irish law, birth registration has been a matter of public record since 1864. The index of the adopted children's register is also a public record yet the practice is very different. In practice, adopted people have no automatic right to their birth certificates or adoption files. Why has that been allowed to continue? It is because there were no explicit statutory rights confirming the right of adopted persons to access those records. This has resulted in *ad hoc*, unprofessional and often discriminatory practices and policies. The

Bill addresses these by inserting a simple one-section amendment to the Civil Registration Act 2004 to allow adopted persons over the age of 18 to make an application to obtain significant information in order to obtain their birth certificate.

We must ask why different rules apply to certain people in this country and not to the rest of us. Why are adopted people treated as though they cannot be trusted with their own birth records? It cannot be justified that an adopted person is denied his or her identity because of the perceived right to privacy of the birth mother. The State has never produced any documentation to back up the guarantee of secrecy while adopted people see it as an infringement of their rights. That is the reason an effective Opposition is needed to ensure that is challenged and addressed in the way Sinn Féin is doing today.

I hope the Minister, Deputy O’Gorman, will provide regular updates on the work of the special rapporteur on child protection on the registration of illegal births. We need full clarity about the various processes that are under way to resolve the issues of the past. This is just one of them.

There is no other group of people in Irish society who are discriminated in the way adopted people are. The implications are far-reaching and unnecessary. The wrongs perpetrated on people in the recent history of this State are fresh in our minds. That is why we must strike while the iron is hot and address the injustices immediately. Let us begin that process now by supporting this Bill.

Deputy Sean Sherlock: The Labour Party will be supporting the Sinn Féin Bill. It so happens that the Labour Party also has a Bill on this very issue which is winding its way through the Seanad as we speak. The Labour Party Bill, which is very similar to the Sinn Féin Bill, comes with a proposal by the Government to issue its own Bill so, in effect, we will have three Bills on this very issue before long. That speaks volumes about the intent of the Houses of the Oireachtas to legislate for this issue. We would hope that, ultimately, common ground will be found on the three Bills in order that the issue can be properly dealt with.

Our Bill seeks to carry out the expressed wishes of survivors of mother and baby homes and other adopted persons. My colleague, Senator Ivana Bacik, has spoken to this very issue in the Seanad. I am using her words when I say there is an urgent need to legislate for robust and effective information and tracing rights for adopted persons. Successive Governments have spent years examining how best to formulate such legislation.

Our short Bill, similar to the Sinn Féin Bill, would enable adopted persons to obtain the information necessary to access their birth certificates. There has never been an absolute ban on providing this information enabling a link to be made between the register of births and the register of adoptions. The adoption authority and the courts have always been entitled to order the production of records that enabled an applicant to trace the link. We are aware of the arguments made about the need to balance the right of adopted persons to access their birth information with the privacy rights of birth mothers but current State policy is skewed towards privacy rights. Currently, unless a natural mother has indicated her preference for contact, her presumed wish for secrecy overrides the adopted adult’s right to know his or her identity. In essence, I think we all wish to legislate for that, hence our supporting the Sinn Féin Bill. We hope for reciprocal support from Sinn Féin and indeed Government support for our Bill as it winds its way through the Seanad. We await the Government’s proposal and hope the Minister will make haste on that. I know he is very active on this issue.

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The important point to note is that these Bills cater only for validly adopted people who can access the information held in the register. The Minister spoke to that issue. This will do nothing for the recently highlighted cohort of illegally or invalidly adopted people because there are no accessible records in the register or with the Adoption Authority of Ireland relating to them. I want to use my time to speak to that very issue. I listened to the Minister on “Morning Ireland” earlier and I note his intention in respect of the publication of the Independent Review Report into Illegal Birth Registrations and his proposal, as I understand it, that he call on the special rapporteur, Professor Conor O’Mahony, “to consider and propose next steps”. The question on our minds is this: what does the Minister envisage this process will yield? The Minister also stated:

Neither AAI nor Tusla was able to identify a unique marker which was suggestive of incorrect birth registration, similar to that found in the St. Patrick Guild’s cases. While the sampling review of the files did identify some potential markers or wording suggestive of markers, both agencies reported that they were unable to establish ‘clear evidence of incorrect birth registrations’.

If based on a sample taken now or recently the Adoption Authority of Ireland and Tusla were unable to find clear evidence of incorrect birth registrations, what is the point - I am not suggesting there is no point - of moving towards an independent review by the special rapporteur if it yields the same end result?

We welcome the Minister’s thinking on this matter because it is important to do it, but I am thinking beyond that now. There is no doubting the bona fides of Professor O’Mahony, let me put that on the record, and we certainly welcome the process. It is to take six months, as I understand it. Beyond that, however, if, at the end of the process, Professor O’Mahony comes to the same conclusions, where will we go from there? I am left thinking that the only solution is a full public inquiry whereby potentially all the files, not just a sample, can be audited. There may be an argument against that. If there is, I certainly would like to hear it. However, in light of the report on the mother and baby homes and in light of a clear wish on the part of the Houses of the Oireachtas to deal with all these issues in an open and transparent way in order that they are not left to be dealt with by future generations of Deputies and Senators, why not have a public inquiry in respect of the independent review into illegal birth registrations and open it all up in a transparent way such that every file is examined in order that everybody can be satisfied and there can be no doubt about the State’s reaction to this very important issue? It is something that has crossed my mind. I am fearful that if Professor O’Mahony comes to the same conclusions as the independent review, it will leave many people extremely disappointed. Time and tide waits for no man or woman and people are getting older. Therefore, should we not now consider the idea of a full public inquiry into this in order that all of the files can be examined fully, not just a sample? I do not profess to have the wisdom of Solomon on this issue, but I fear that it may not be concluded thereafter. Will we end up telling people that there is absolutely no way that the State can interrogate every single illegal adoption and there is no mechanism open to the State to do that but that we should hold a full-scale public inquiry into this issue in order that we can satisfy ourselves, as well as everybody who has been impacted by illegal adoption, that the State has done everything within its wherewithal to examine and interrogate every single issue related to it? I am not calling for it; I am merely suggesting it as a potential course of action. We will await and see the results of the process put in place by the Minister in respect of the appointment of the special rapporteur to consider and propose the next steps. However, it would be good to hear from the Minister as to what those next steps will

be. The Minister and his officials will have some view as to what the next steps will be. The Minister will not be whole dependent on the special rapporteur; he will also have his own views on this issue. I suppose that is where we are going with this.

Deputy Holly Cairns: On Sunday night, in Cahir, County Tipperary, a women's history group put up 24 temporary plaques to celebrate the forgotten women of the town. They dedicated one plaque to the banished women of Cahir and placed it at the spot on the square where women and girls were picked up to be sent to mother and baby homes. It reads:

Banished Women

We waited here to be taken to Mother and Baby Homes

The shame was not theirs - it was ours.

They reminded us that this happened in every town and village. Church and State colluded to incarcerate women for being pregnant at a time without access to contraception, sex education or reproductive rights and sometimes for being pregnant as a result of rape and abuse. More importantly, this plaque reminds us that this is not in the past. The pain, the shame and the injustice is still with us. Survivors, adoptees and their families are living with the pain, suffering and doubt. The actions of the Irish State and church still have a real living impact today. This is not the past, it is the present.

Regrettably, the Government and religious orders are too quick to assign these matters to history, to say it was a different time, to make apologies and wait for the news cycle to move on. Last week's "RTÉ Investigates" programme on illegal adoptions clearly demonstrated how this is not just in the past. The same system which locked women away, covered up the mass deaths of babies and children and facilitated the illegal adoptions and the falsification of birth certificates. Just as the rights of the mothers were trampled on, the rights of adoptees were ignored from the day they were born. These human rights abuses continue to this day, by virtue of them still being denied access to their identity, that is, access to the most basic and profound information about themselves.

On the "RTÉ Investigates" programme, the people affected explained how their worlds were turned upside down when they were told. Brave adoptees shared their stories with us. They described being refused information about themselves and receiving redacted files. In the words of one of the adoptees, Brian:

It's very simple for somebody to just get a piece of Tippex and white something out, but they don't actually realise that what they're whiting out is vital information for somebody.

This cruel and obstructive response to adoptees needs to end.

My gratitude to Deputy Funchion for bringing forward this Bill is only surpassed by my disgust at the Government for failing to do so for so long and for again failing to give justice to survivors. Since 1864, all birth certificates have been publicly available, except in one case. Adopted people are the only people in Ireland who are denied the ability to retrieve their own birth certificate. Agents of the State continue that discrimination. This is happening today, not just in the past. Institutions and individuals in control of adopted people's files, including Tusla and the Adoption Authority of Ireland, refuse to inform adopted people of their name at birth or provide them with their unredacted adoption-early life file. It is outrageous and a further

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example of a callous State determined to cover up and deny the rights of survivors.

The continuing refusal to tell adopted people their name at birth and provide them with their publicly registered birth certificate is, in the view of human rights experts, unconstitutional and contrary to the GDPR. Under EU law, which is supreme over any conflicting Irish law, a person's name is his or her personal data. People have the right under Article 15 of the GDPR to access that information. There is no ambiguity. The only way that right can be restricted is by clear legislation that is a necessary and proportionate measure in a democratic society. The withholding from adopted people of their name at birth does not meet that requirement. It is arbitrary, discriminatory, unnecessary and cruel.

Successive Governments and Departments have continued to perpetuate what Claire McGettrick, co-founder of the Adoption Rights Alliance, labels adoption myths. These myths attempt to undermine the cases made by adopted persons and even try to pitch adoptees against their biological parents. The most common myth is that adopted persons cannot be provided with their birth certificates because doing so would infringe on their natural mother's privacy. This presumes that it is only adopted people who want their personal information and mothers are fearful that their adult children may try to contact them. It does not recognise that mothers often seek out their adopted children or that some adopted people have no interest in or desire to find out about their natural parents. Only 5% of natural mothers who registered with the National Adoption Contact Preference Register indicated that they wish to have no contact with their daughter or son. The reality is that most natural mothers have not been given the opportunity to express their views on this issue. When Philomena Lee spoke out in 2013, she inspired others to come forward and find the strength to overcome decades of secrecy.

Successive Governments have had no interest in this nuance and some religious orders obstruct mothers who seek out their children. Church and State are still deciding what is best for the people affected, without asking them, and they continue to prevent access to information. A culture of secrecy and shame still surrounds these adoptions. The same secrecy and shame of the 1940s and 1950s continues today. It is seen in the Departments denying access to information, the treatment of adopted people and the lives of the mothers still scarred from abuses decades ago. This is not in the past; it is happening in the present.

There are solutions, if we want to find them. Legal opinion from leading experts in this area, including Dr. Maeve O'Rourke, Máiréad Enright and Professor Conor O'Mahony, outlines potential mechanisms to balance the rights of adopted people and their parents and the right to privacy with the right to access one's information. This is standard practice in other countries and the issues in this regard can no longer be used as an excuse by the State not to act. We need processes that provide personal data access without unnecessary and arbitrary State coercion. We must put adoptees, natural mothers and survivors at the heart of this conversation. The overriding priority of the State should be to pursue justice based on people's lived experiences. Instead, we have the Government paying lip service to survivors but continually ignoring their pleas.

We know adoptee rights groups, survivor groups and their allies are seeking the passing of this legislation. We have all received messages from constituents in support of it. The writer of one such email said:

We have failed adoptees for too long, we need to make it right. This is not about party or politics. This is about doing the right thing by people long denied the most basic of knowl-

edge of themselves.

As this Bill progresses, it must be informed by further engagement with those affected and their advocates. I am confident that Deputy Funchion will pursue that engagement. My colleagues in the Social Democrats and I will continue to work with those groups to do our best to represent them.

The Bill helps to address one injustice arising out of the systematic abuse and illegal treatment of so many Irish people. It is one step to right the wrongs of the past, which have very real impacts in the present. Adoption in Ireland was generally forced and frequently illegal.

This cruel system mistreated the mothers and obliterated the identities of thousands of adopted people.

The Government and church leaders are eager to tell us we have moved on and that circumstances are different. Unfortunately, the treatment of survivors and adoptees in recent months tells a different story. The Irish State is obliged to remedy these abuses rather than continue to unjustifiably and unlawfully deny adopted people their identity.

With regard to the “RTÉ Investigates” programme, it is important to note that although the stories echo those of so many adopted people in Ireland, this legislation does not apply to those adoptees. The falsification of birth certificates is a separate issue. As the individuals were not legally adopted, there is no possible argument that the law prevents them from being given their files. There is no need for legislation to give these people their files.

The Minister’s announcement yesterday is nothing more than an unnecessary delaying tactic, something of which we have seen enough. People do not need someone to examine the issues arising and propose the next steps. The adoptees in question do not have birth certificates, only false ones. It is not complicated; these are crimes and the records need to go to the Garda and courts so as to engage an inquiry immediately. There should be no more delays. People need their full records now. After they receive them, there can be an inquiry.

The Minister is saying the Government will not be voting down the Sinn Féin Bill today but quite likely will not be acting to proceed with it quickly. We saw this last week with the Social Democrats’ motion to extend the life of the commission. Playing politics with issues is cynical and people do not appreciate it at all. Particularly with an issue such as this, we need to put politics aside. The Government is playing with people’s lives when it plays politics. Cynically not voting the Bill down but then doing nothing about it just adds further insult to injury. It is completely unnecessary, particularly regarding issues like this.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I am sharing time with Deputy Barry.

I thank Deputy Funchion for introducing this important Bill, which I obviously fully support. It should be acted on immediately. I am very conscious of how important this Bill is, particularly because as an adoptee, I am lucky that I did not have to wade my way through all the barriers and difficulties that many adoptees have faced in trying to secure access to their history, identity and the basic facts of who they are. In my case, my mother actually came and found me although she encountered extraordinary difficulties and closed doors in a process completely mediated by the church, which decided what information one could have. Institutions of the State essentially shut the door and said my mother was not entitled to the informa-

tion she was seeking but, luckily for me, she managed to wade her way through all the barriers. I cannot imagine what it is like for people who seek out their identity to have such barriers and difficulties put in their way and, even worse, for those who had their identities and histories criminally stolen from them. This is shocking beyond belief. What was revealed in the “RTÉ Investigates” programme about the role of Mr. de Valera’s son in Holles Street was stunning beyond belief. It involved the faking of pregnancies and the taking of children from individuals, in most cases from less well-off sections of society, in order to give them to respectable families. This was done in a criminal way involving the stealing of people’s history and identity from them and, potentially, blotting that out forever.

On the sampling review, 260 out of 1,500 in the sample had the markers which suggested the possibility, at least, of illegal adoptions. That is approximately 16% of that small sample of people. We could be talking about 20,000 with those markers. There has to be an investigation and a forensic examination of all of that in order to uncover the criminal actions that were perpetrated and discover, to the best degree possible, the culprits involved and the mechanisms and so on by means of which those actions were perpetrated. Beyond that, as others have stated, it is not just about birth certificates and so on, it is about all the information, everything about people’s history and identity, the circumstances surrounding their adoption, etc. People have to have access to all of that. For adoptees and for mothers whose children were taken from them by the twisted morality of church and State, there is no doubt that the legacy of that continues to block people individually and society as a whole from getting to the truth we deserve in terms of that history for the individuals involved and for our society. This is a basic thing.

The fact we need comprehensive legislation, as the Minister indicated, in respect of a range of matters should not be a block to processing this measure, which will at least give people basic access to their birth certificates. Too often, what we are going to do in the future becomes the excuse for not doing what we could do right now.

Deputy Mick Barry: We are discussing a Bill which would give the right of all persons to a birth certificate, which would mean that adopted persons in this State would have the right to their birth certificates. That is clear, straightforward and reverses an injustice that has been visited upon people for many years. This legislation should be passed, and we will vote wholeheartedly in support of it.

The other issue at stake today is being discussed by the Cabinet. It is the question of an inquiry into illegal adoptions in this State. There are indications that there may have been as many as 20,000 illegal adoptions in this country. We are not for delaying an inquiry for six months, as the Minister suggests. We are for that being agreed today. We are for it being done with sensitivity to survivors but we think that inquiry should get the green light today. In his book, *Banished Babies*, Mike Milotte says that in the 1950s Ireland was a centre for illegal baby trafficking. He quotes a civil servant who talks about Ireland being a hunting ground with people coming into the country looking for babies to adopt. *The Irish Times* ran an article in 1951 in which it was stated that in the previous year almost 500 babies had been flown out from Shannon Airport for adoption. A German newspaper at the time said that the price being paid for these babies was \$3,000, approximately €24,000 in today’s money. There was outrage about this article among sections of Ireland’s diplomatic corps and contact was made with the Department to raise the idea of legal action against the newspaper. The diplomats were very firmly told there would not be a basis for the legal action because what the German newspaper had printed was largely true. It is reckoned that approximately 15% of these illegal adoptions were organised from mother and baby homes. The commission of inquiry said there was no

proof as to whether this was or was not the case. This is a matter on which we need more information.

An inquiry needs to shine a spotlight on what happened, on what was known at the highest political levels in society and on the idea that the State, the Government and Ministers of the day were unaware of illegal adoption practices when hundreds of babies were being flown out of Shannon Airport and when the son of a Fianna Fáil Taoiseach, who later became President, was at the heart of these events. Of course, Éamon de Valera Jnr. did not sell babies but he charged fees for the work he did in setting up adoptions that were illegal. That should be a matter for investigation and inquiry as part of a wider picture that answers the question about the potentially 20,000 illegal adoptions which took place in this State through the years.

Deputy Verona Murphy: Deputy Tóibín and I will speak for five minutes each. I am glad to have the opportunity to speak on the Bill. I thank the Deputies who brought it forward. I will be supporting it.

When dealing with such sensitive issues, it is of the utmost importance to listen to those who are affected most by whatever the issue happens to be. In this case, I have listened to adoptees and read numerous emails from them since being elected. They outline the difficulties they face in their lives due to the absence of their biological family history, particularly when it comes to healthcare and health-related issues.

Most of us will be familiar with the procedure of going to a doctor or dentist and having to fill out a medical history form. Quite often, these forms ask if any hereditary conditions are likely to or have already developed. Unfortunately, we all know too well that a cohort of people in this country are unable to answer such questions due to an absence of information about biological parents.

Let me share with the House two examples of testimonies from people who have contacted me on the issue. Gerry is 57 years old. He said:

I am now 57 years old and have had some major health problems. I cannot get any medical history which has greatly impeded my progress. I have been out of work for nearly 20 years due to the above. The lack of right to my records has had a detrimental impact on my life. We had to sell our house in Dublin and move to try and make ends meet.

I have battled alcoholism, depression and health problems a lot of which were stress related. The constant battle with various State agencies have worn me down and unfortunately I don't think the passing of the Bill will have much effect on my situation. It may help younger people to avoid the pitfalls I have encountered and hopefully give them a better life.

Seamus wrote:

The past few weeks have been very difficult for adoptees, birth parents and survivors. Following the publication of the final report of the Commission of Inquiry into Mother and Baby Homes, there has been revelation after revelation about how adoptees in particular are denied access to their own identity. We have failed adoptees for too long, we need to make it right. This is not about party or politics, this is about doing right by a cohort long denied the most basic of knowledge of themselves. Please support this Bill so we can begin to address the wrongs of the past. Thank you.

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I intend to support the Bill. The two testimonies from which I read outline the need for this Bill much better than anything I could have said. These are stories from people who have had to live with the present situation. These people know that the legislation needs to be passed for the system to change.

We must also recognise the links between adoptees and the issues surrounding the mother and baby homes. I understand that not every adoptee was linked to a mother and baby home but there is a crossover to a great extent. Suffice to say, adoptees played no part in the decisions that put them in this position. If we want to right at least one of the wrongs perpetrated on adoptees and their mothers, we need to start by allowing access to birth records.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: An féidir leis an gCathaoirleach Gníomhach m'ainm a chur síos le haghaidh Questions on Promised Legislation?

It is absolutely outrageous that after all the debates, documentaries, reports and commissions that have happened people still do not know who exactly they are and cannot access their birth and medical records. People are growing old wondering if their mother is still alive. They are being asked daily by doctors about their family health histories and are facing into serious health issues, and they simply do not know. There are small matters such as people accessing insurance or bank accounts being asked for their date of birth. They do not know the answer, and each time they are asked, the reality of what the system has done to them hits home. For many people, Tusla, the HSE and the State bodies know the answers to their questions but will not share this information with survivors. Under any understanding of this, that is absolutely outrageous. The major question for the Government is why this has happened.

I will be honest. I am worried that the Minister with responsibility for children has been captured by his Department. I believe that there has been significant resistance within the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth to do the right thing by these people who have suffered so much. I understand that some individuals within the Department do not want to investigate these illegal adoptions. I also understand that the Department has had in its possession many files on illegal adoption but, in the past, has not shared these files with previous Ministers.

Many people are frustrated about the report of the commission but fail to see that the commission was not asked properly to investigate the illegal adoptions. The issue of illegal birth registrations was omitted from the terms of reference of the mother and baby home commission investigation in 2014. Why was this? If we seek to find out the source of the problems here, we need to answer this particular question. The terms of reference were dealt with within the Department at that time. It took six months to draft and yet it did not directly seek to investigate this issue. My understanding is that the Government has, perhaps, finally woken up to the resistance within the Department. I further understand that the Minister is outsourcing the drafting of this legislation. Why is that the case? This is very unusual. It is not the norm. I believe it will cost €250,000 for the Government to do this. Why is it being done? Perhaps the Minister could answer that question.

The issue of outsourcing is important. To whom is the drafting of this legislation being outsourced? Even after all this, the Minister was on the radio this morning and he equivocated on the question of whether the new legislation would actually give people access to information. The Minister has the adoption orders. I understand that he could release those adoption orders to these individuals. People have said that perhaps it is not constitutional. If, however, the new

Bill the Minister is drafting seeks to do roughly the same thing and is constitutional, it will be possible now to give those adoption orders to these individuals who so desperately seek them.

I welcome that the Government has published a review into illegal adoptions. The fact is not lost in anybody that this was commissioned in 2018, however. The idea that the review was completed but not brought to Cabinet or published at the time, and was only published after RTÉ ran an expose on illegal adoptions last week, is not lost on anybody. What is the driving force behind that timeline? Is it the Government, the Minister or the Department? No. The key driving force is the media's exposé of these shocking occurrences. Either the Minister is a driver in the context of directing his Department, seeking to make sure that these issues are resolved for people, or he is a passenger in that particular vehicle. The Minister has a serious question to ask himself in this regard.

It is our job to hold the political establishment to account. It is also our job, as elected representatives, to hold Departments to account. There are many fine people in the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth. There are many individuals who want to achieve what is being slowly achieved in Leinster House. There is no doubt that the new political space we are in with regard to this issue is helping to drive that agenda within the Department. We also have to hold Departments and senior staff within them to account on these key issues, however. In many ways, they are the permanent government. It is radically important that those who comprise the permanent government do what the elected representatives of this country ask and tell them to do. If it is the reverse, we are never going to get to the bottom of these scandals. We will never be able to resolve these key human questions for the many people who still do not know exactly who they are. Will the Minister make sure that he is involved in driving that agenda in the future?

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: I thank Sinn Féin and, in particular, Deputy Funchion for facilitating the debate on this important matter. In May 2017, the Adoption (Information and Tracing) Bill was introduced in the Seanad. The debate on it focused on the competing rights of the desire of adoptees to have the knowledge of who they are and their background information and that of mothers to retain confidentiality regarding their own details. Of course, a balance had to be struck. The concern of adopted people - this is why Deputy Funchion is to be complimented - is that information on them is withheld. This obviously must be deemed to be wrong. Any person should be entitled to the information of where he or she came from and the who his or her people are.

There are all the other reasons, such as health issues, that could arise and why people might need to have necessary information. Of course, we have to be kind, considerate and respectful to the mothers who, at a particular time in their lives, were going through a difficult situation. We have to respect that. In trying to strike a balance in this debate, the one overriding measure that should be in place is the protection of an individual to know his or her background. That is a human, ordinary, fundamental thing that a person should have. Whatever way we as legislators can make amendments and changes to ensure those people get what they need, as well as the groups representing them, is important. That is why I support Deputy Funchion.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: I thank Sinn Féin and Deputy Funchion for bringing forward this Bill. Under the Data Protection Act and the GDPR, data being held by the State relating to persons should be given to adoptees. The Government must explain why this data is being held. Copies of information the held should be given to adoptees. This would be their entitlement under Article 15.3 of the GDPR.

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In 2019, some 71 requests from adoptees looking for their birth certificates were confirmed by the Adoption Authority of Ireland. This Bill is badly needed. It will facilitate the provision of information to and tracing access for adoptees. Ensuring that adoptees can access their own birth certificates is a vital first step to meeting their basic rights. The right to access such records is already in place in the North and Britain. Why are we always last to do something? For people to know their family and birth information is a basic right. Again, we are on the back foot. It is time that this Bill is passed for adoptees. I have many friends who were adopted. They have families of their own. They only want the basic information that their own children and families have. It is a basic right. I commend Deputy Funchion on bringing this Bill forward.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I thank Sinn Féin for facilitating this debate. I will be supporting the Bill. As I have said before, adoptees are entitled to know who they are and where they come from. If their parents do not want to meet with them or whatever, that is fine. That is their business and they are entitled to do that too. These human beings are entitled to know who they are, however.

I have to say to the Minister that the Government has behaved very badly over the past few months on the issue of mother and baby homes. It was trying to hide records by storing them away for 30 years. Was that to make sure that all those affected would be all dead before they could access them? There are records where details are crossed out with a marker. It is said that it was the same marker used throughout. We need to know who did that. I thank RTÉ for its wonderful programme on adoption recently in which people told us their personal stories. It was really heart breaking to see what had happened. Several people were involved in the sale of these babies. It looks to me that they were sold and their names and their mother's names were crossed out to ensure nobody would know who they were. It was done by the same marker. This is a shame and disgrace. I will support Sinn Féin's Bill.

Deputy Michael Collins: I support this Bill. One issue officials are wrestling with is how to protect the privacy of birth parents who do not wish to be known or to be contacted by children who were given up for adoption many years ago. The change that is almost certainly coming is that their rights of privacy will no longer trump the rights of adopted people to know their birth identities.

For people who were illegally adopted at birth, either without the full consent of their birth mothers or who had their birth certificates falsified, there is another potentially insurmountable barrier to the discovery of their natural parentage and the access to their documents where the records are intact. However, a right to access in law is now proposed, although previous Governments cited constitutional difficulties. The Minister said he will have the heads of legislation prepared by early April. This will establish the right to use the GDPR avenue to access birth and early life records.

We all know the debacle of the mother and baby homes, the survivors and the need they have to know their stories. We know how the mothers involved want to know where their babies were sent and where the babies, now adults, want to know their history and from where they came. For decades, successive Governments have chosen to ignore the needs of adopted people. We are running out of time to heal the damage done. This Bill would mean adoptees can access their birth certificates, something for which they have been fighting hard. It is an issue which large numbers of my constituents in Cork South-West have asked me to support. I will certainly be doing so.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I too compliment Deputy Funchion and Sinn Féin for bringing forward this badly needed amending legislation. I wish the Minister well. He is open-minded and fair-minded regarding this, in spite of what has gone on in the past six months.

I compliment RTÉ - I do not do so often - and the “RTÉ Investigates” programme for the brilliant exposure it did in bringing it out in the open and the facts being laid bare to people of what went on. It was horrific what happened.

Obviously, there are two sets of rights here to be protected - the birth mothers and the individuals who were adopted, most of them against the will of their mother back in the time. We are in the modern era now. We must catch up with the other European countries. Northern Ireland and England have dealt with this issue, and dealt with it properly. It is so vital that we move forward with legislation.

I note Deputy Tóibín’s critique of officialdom. If there is any semblance of truth in that, that they are dragging their feet it needs to be addressed. Elected politicians have to come in here and be accountable to the Opposition and to the public, and the public decide our fate in the next election. If people, faceless bureaucrats, are in any way holding this up or delaying it it needs to be addressed. We know that they were involved over the years. There was a plethora of official Ireland involved and all the aspects were covered up in every sector. Families, as well, have to take the blame, but now it is time to wash the linen and allow the people the right to know. It is so important for health reasons. It is so important if they have children and for themselves as well.

I know there are two sets of rights to be protected and we must strike the right balance. This Bill is measured in that way. Sinn Féin is to be complimented. It is important that we support it. We in the Rural Independents support the Bill. I hope the Government will embrace it and will be able to have legislation brought in quite soon. It is so badly needed and it is so much delayed.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh): Casaimid anois go dtí Grúpa Neamhspleách. Deputy Joan Collins is sharing time with Deputy Connolly.

Deputy Joan Collins: Yes, five minutes each.

I urge all Deputies to support this straightforward legislation. I ask the Government side not only to not vote against it, but to vote with us, because this is too important an issue for the people who are facing this awful situation. I also commend Deputy Funchion, who introduced this Bill.

It is now 20 years since this legislation on adoption information and tracing was first announced and there has still been no action taken. Professor Conor O’Mahony, the Special Rapporteur on Child Protection, commenting on the “RTÉ Investigates” programme, “Who am I?”, said, “We need to enact comprehensive adoption-tracing legislation which would give adopted persons an unconditional right to access their birth and adoption records and we need to do that without any further delay.” He went on to say:

Many adoption records are scattered around private agencies and adoption societies. If an adoption tracing system is to work effectively, the State needs to put in place the necessary legal and other measures to secure those records and ensure they are under the control of a centralised State entity so that people can easily access the records necessary to estab-

lish their identity.

“RTÉ Investigates” was yet more shocking evidence of the callous mistreatment of women and their babies to go alongside the Magdalen laundries, the mother and baby homes, the county homes and, in this instance, the illegal and criminal falsification of birth registration of children born to women outside of so-called “wedlock” - what a word. The Adoption Act 1952 made this practice illegal yet it continued for decades.

The programme showed elite and powerful individuals regarded themselves as above the law. One of these was Professor Éamon de Valera Jr., a high profile consultant gynaecologist at the National Maternity Hospital in Holles Street. In one case, he facilitated the adoption of four children by one family. The adoptive mother feigned pregnancy and was called for a false prenatal appointment where the baby of a so-called “unmarried mother” was handed over merely days after its birth. He also arranged antenatal appointments for women who were not pregnant to maintain the impression that the child was her biological child. Registering a child falsely, as he did, of someone who is not their mother has been illegal since 1880. This has to be held to account somewhere along the line and it has to be done as soon as possible. There were probably thousands of these cases carried out by medical professionals, religious orders such as the misnamed Sisters of Charity and adoption agencies such as the St. Patrick’s Guild.

Many of the children involved have only discovered in later life that they are not who they thought they were. They were celebrating their birthday on wrong dates. The trauma is unimaginable. The least we can do is that whatever can be done to help them fill in the blanks is done now without further delay.

The Minister has promised the heads of a Bill in three-to-four weeks and is in talks with the Attorney General. This is a process, with pre-legislative scrutiny etc. which will likely take months. A Bill is here now. The Minister can propose amendments on Committee Stage if he feels it is necessary. I urge support for the Bill. The people who need this have waited too long.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I support this Bill. I should point out that this is the third Bill. I and my colleague, Deputy Pringle, have one at lunchtime today. That is four Bills now. It shows the measure of pressure on all of us to do the right thing.

Page 46 of the report that was published yesterday, A Shadow Cast Long, states, “A great wrong has been done to those robbed of their right to identity and family, as the Taoiseach acknowledged...” Indeed, I will come back to Dr. Conor O’Mahony. As far back as 5 November 2015, presenting to the then Joint Committee on Health and Children, at that stage in relation to the pre-legislative scrutiny, Dr. O’Mahony stated:

the right to access a birth certificate is a minimum core of the right to identity. In order to comply with our international human rights law obligations, this should be an automatic entitlement of every adoptee, with no exceptions or qualifications.

I could go back to 1984, when there was a committee on adoption making recommendations for the future. At that point, in 1984, the majority recommended, from the future onwards, every adopted person should be entitled to his or her basic information. I could go back anywhere.

It would be remiss of me not to mention the *Irish Examiner*, and particularly Conall Ó Fátharta. We are here today as a result of pressure from people on the ground who are forcing us as Deputies. These are ordinary people struggling to get on with their lives and trying to come

to terms with what is necessary. Again, we are being led, and led by some of the very good media which take the trouble, and I come back to a comment this morning when the Minister was being interviewed by the journalist in relation to the report and the time it took. On Wednesday, 30 May 2018, Mr. Ó Fátharta gave a detailed account in the newspaper in relation to the delays. Things jump out at me, including, of course, St. Patrick's Guild and the knowledgebase.

I feel sorry for the Minister. Just like Deputy Tóibín, I believe that there is a difficult situation for the Minister in his Department. When we talk about protecting mothers, we are not protecting mothers at all; we are protecting a system. We know that from what we saw on RTÉ last week. We know that from the TG4 programme. This is all about protecting the system. I have said to the Minister repeatedly that I and my colleagues will work with the Minister and support him, if he shows leadership.

The Minister is bringing in a Bill. We need comprehensive legislation but in the meantime, we need the Bill that Sinn Féin is bringing in here today, the one that we are bringing in at lunchtime and the one that Labour is bringing forward. I do not want all of these Bills. We want to do the right thing and in the meantime, we need to do something urgently.

Going back to Conall Ó Fátharta, the Adoption Association of Ireland knew at that point and was very familiar with problems and issues that had arisen. So was Tusla. There is a quote here in relation to Francis Fitzgerald MEP. Mr. Ó Fátharta writes:

It seems the revelations made little or no impact at the time [this is going back to 2013, 2014, 2015]. Just five months after the meeting, then children's minister Frances Fitzgerald told the Dáil she "had no plans to initiate an audit of all [adoption] files".

Then there is a quote from the former Minister for Justice and Equality, Deputy Charles Flanagan.

I will not waste my time in relation to different parties. The point I am making is there was collusion - it might be a strong word but I am using that word - to leave the *status quo* as it was, not change it and not ask any difficult questions. That is what has come out of every single report, the latest of which was from the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes and Certain Related Matters. It was insulting in the way it stated it was going against the prevailing narrative when it was in fact reinforcing the prevailing narrative, namely, that mothers themselves did this and just walked in without analysing the situation in which the mothers found themselves. I found that particularly upsetting.

As to the report that was published yesterday, can the Minister give the House a clear answer as to why that report, which was completed in May 2019, was only published yesterday? I and other colleagues have repeatedly sought its publication. Why was it not published and why has it taken up to now to get it into my hands? I have read as much as I can, have read the full introduction and am making my way through the Tusla and the Adoption Authority of Ireland part. The narrative is already being rewritten. This morning, when the Minister was asked a question, the answer was framed by how this report has taken three years and how the Government is only giving Professor O'Mahony six months.

This report did not take three years to complete; it took one year. The delay was in its publication. This point must be answered and it should have been pointed out to the journalists this morning that this did not take three years. This is an excellent report. It is well written, well set out, the conclusions are clear and the recommendations are clear. Regardless of whether

one agrees with them, this report is an example of how a report should have been done by the commission of investigation. It is excellent and sets out the facts. The narrative is now being written, however, that there is no evidence of falsely-registered adoptions. That is utterly false. I do not have time to go into all of the detail but repeatedly, on pages 40, 45 and 51 to 53, inclusive, concerns are highlighted by Ms Marion Reynolds as to further investigation on the serious concerns raised on all of those pages. When Tusla and the Adoption Authority of Ireland state there is no evidence, that is a narrative that is utterly false. What they should be doing is reading what is here and then asking where they should be going with this information. At the very least, Ms Reynolds has said that we need further investigation and inquiry. At the very least, I ask the Minister for a debate on this report in the Dáil. Let us not have an hour or two debate but let us put this down on the agenda in the spirit of openness and accountability.

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I welcome the debate in the House today and acknowledge all of the Deputies who have contributed, particularly those who have shared personal family stories. I also thank Deputy Funchion and Sinn Féin for bringing forward this Bill.

We all recognise the background to the issues giving rise to this initiative. My colleague, the Minister, Deputy O’Gorman, has already set out the Government position, which I endorse. I add my own views given that responsibility for the General Register Office and Civil Registration Service and systems fall under my Department’s remit. As the Minister, Deputy O’Gorman, has already outlined, the Government is fully committed to allowing adopted persons and others to have access to information about their births and early childhood. The Minister has already indicated that both he and the Attorney General are working to present the House with a set of proposals that will comprehensively address the issues of access to birth and early life information.

I find it difficult, if not impossible, to adequately appreciate the significance of this issue for people who are adopted. From my engagement with those who have approached me, I know the depth of hurt and alienation that many have suffered in the way that we have attempted and failed to deal with these matters heretofore. It is time to change. We must acknowledge the pain suffered by birth parents, often young vulnerable women who had little or no choice. We will never be able to fully appreciate the horror and pain endured by these women. I do not care what the cultural or social environment was at the time, what happened to those women was and will always be wrong.

I join with Deputies on all sides of the House today in condemning the activities of certain agencies and people in authority and in positions of trust that operated outside of the legal framework and safeguards of the adoption laws. They have left a trail of hurt, concealment and loss.

As the Minister, Deputy O’Gorman, indicated earlier, the Government will not oppose the Bill and wants to provide adoptees with full access to their birth certificate. I am aware that there has been extensive engagement between the Minister, Deputy O’Gorman, and the Attorney General on the issue of access to birth information. Intensive work is currently ongoing on the development of draft heads of an information and tracing Bill which the Minister, Deputy O’Gorman, hopes to bring to Government in the coming weeks.

In that context it is important to point out that the mechanisms set out in the Private Members’ Bill will not assist persons other than adoptees who are seeking their birth certificate.

While the Bill is well intentioned, it will not assist those whose births were illegally registered or those whose original identity may have been obscured as a result of being boarded out. I am also conscious that the legislative proposal in the Private Members' Bill only deals with those who have an adoption recorded since 1953. This legislation will not deal with others who have been telling their compelling stories for years. These are the people who were adopted before legal adoption was passed in 1952. We know of people in our communities who had family care arrangements made before the Adoption Act came into operation. There are also those who benefited from informal care arrangements made after the Adoption Act was commenced. There is also a group of people whose true birth registration may not have been recorded accurately or where their origins were obscured by informal processes where no records were maintained.

I agree with Deputies when they call on the Government to provide long-term solutions to those who are the victims of incorrect birth registration and for whom only false or misleading historic documentation is available. It is the intention of the Minister, Deputy O'Gorman, that his legislative proposals on information and tracing will include these and other related matters.

Those of us who are not adopted will never fully appreciate the significance of knowing our true identity or that of our birth parents. It is just something that we take for granted. I can only imagine how difficult this is for people and the emotional journey that a person engages in before they seek their birth information. It is important that we reflect on the importance of adoption and ensure, by our words and comments, that we do not sunder the confidence society has in the work of the Adoption Authority of Ireland. There will always be a need to enable a child to be placed with loving and caring adoptive parents. Let us remember that adoption provides families and children with security and opportunities that might not otherwise be available. We must be careful to ensure that parents of today and in the future are encouraged to provide adoptive opportunities.

As the Minister, Deputy O'Gorman, has outlined, he is committed to working with the Attorney General to bring forward comprehensive legislation in the coming weeks to address many of the issues that have been raised. We all agree that it is absolutely vital that we get the legislation right to give people certainty and ensure that full and comprehensive access to birth information for all adoptees is provided.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The "RTÉ Investigates" programme, "Who Am I?" catalogued trauma and distress. While this generated some shock among the public, those who were not shocked by all of this are those who have lived their lives seeking the answer to that profoundly simple question, "who am I?". Those also not shocked were the State and its agencies, which have known that illegal adoption and the illegal placement and trafficking of children was an essential part of the tapestry of misery and of the brutal system to which Irish women, unmarried women, poor women, young women, vulnerable women, pregnant women, mothers and their children were subjected for generations. The scandalous abuse of women in Magdalen laundries and in mother and baby homes is matched only by the mistreatment of their babies and their children. The remains of infant children in a septic tank in Tuam, or in the clay of Sean Ross Abbey and in other institutions is screaming testimony to this.

Illegal adoption was not accidental. It was not done in error. It was a calculated course of action and it was a criminal course of action. The State facilitated and colluded in robbing children of their most basic and fundamental rights. Acknowledging this reality brings us face to face with the ingrained misogyny and the cruel reactionary DNA of this State. The nature of the

State is very eloquently summarised in the ministerial review just published, where the rationale for actions in the 1950s in illegal adoptions was described as, “the desire to protect young mothers from the censure of society and its epitaph of ‘*being fallen women*’ who had conceived their children ‘*in sin*’ and their children from the taint associated with illegitimacy”. It should be recalled that the taint of illegitimacy was not removed from the Statute Book until 1987.

The churches, the Roman Catholic Church in particular but other churches also, the religious orders and private institutions have cases to answer and must be held to account but by far the greatest burden of accountability rests with the State. The State had full knowledge of and oversaw the mass incarceration, indeed the enslavement, of women and girls. The State and its agents stood aside as babies and children were illegally adopted, placed and trafficked. To this day, the State actively frustrates and prevents the efforts of adopted people to access their records, files, stories, history and birth certificates.

The State, which is yet to fully acknowledge, investigate and uncover the full story of illegal adoption, must act. This must be done. This means the establishment of a full public inquiry. It means a full and complete audit of every record. I and we are calling for this. The State is obliged to carry out this inquiry as a matter of absolute urgency. Delay is not acceptable.

Neither is delay acceptable in the provision of access to birth certificates for all adopted people. This is the purpose of today’s legislation brought forward by my colleague, Deputy Funchion. As is readily acknowledged, it is only to be a first step in putting things right but it is important to take that first step. The need for wider information and tracing legislation, which by the way has been promised for decades, is of course unanswerable but that does not change the need for immediate action now with regard to access to birth certificates.

The Minister’s position not to oppose the legislation but also not to support it is cynical and wrong. The legislation will be voted on tomorrow. I believe and hope it will be passed by the Dáil tomorrow. It must thereafter move to Committee Stage quickly without hindrance or delay. The Minister’s job and the job of the Government is to work with the rest of us to ensure this then becomes law on the Statute Book without further delay. Anything short of this will simply mean more suffering for those who have suffered too much for too long all over again.

Every important journey begins with a single step. The first single step for those who have been so wronged is to allow access to birth certificates for every adopted person and thereafter we must move quickly to have a full public inquiry and to have information and tracing legislation that places the rights of the adopted person at the centre and first and foremost in that law. We have the opportunity to take this first step and I ask the Minister to take that step with us.

Deputy Kathleen Funchion: I thank everybody who has contributed to the debate for their supportive words. I was struck by the fact that everyone, with the exception of the two Ministers who spoke, really seemed to understand this is a first step. This is what we have said from the minute we launched the Bill a number of weeks ago. It will not solve all of the problems but, as my colleague, Deputy McDonald, has just said, we have to start somewhere and every process has to start somewhere. This is a really good start for people who have been failed time and again by the State, beginning with incarceration in one of these institutions, after which the subsequent list of the failings is endless, particularly most recently with the report, which was a total disgrace. It did absolutely no justice to survivors. People are constantly being failed and are being made promises.

We are led to believe by the Government that it will not oppose the Bill because it is well intentioned but it has much better all-singing all-dancing legislation that will come forward very soon. This is great and welcome. Everybody wants to see that legislation and to have wider access to medical files and adoption files but this Bill is here now, ready to go and it is a first step. What we really need is not just to pass Second Stage today, which obviously we do want to see happen and we want to see the Bill supported, but we also want to see action on it. Then we will have the other legislation, which we will welcome and on which we will work with the Minister and anybody else bringing forward proposals on this issue because it is about doing the right thing. It is about taking action. We have to match all of the sympathetic words we have heard recently and match with action all of the apologies that people have heard. Today is an opportunity to do this and demonstrate to people that everybody in the House is serious about finally listening to people and doing the right thing. There is no difficulty with having it supported further down the line in a number of weeks, or whenever the Government's legislation is ready. Obviously we will have to wait to see it but we will openly welcome anything that gives people access to their information.

This is a first step. In 2021, to say there is a cohort of people in Irish society who do not have access to their birth certificate is a disgrace. We have the opportunity today to ensure that does not happen anymore.

Question put and agreed to.

Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Last week, two things happened in the world of high finance which caused understandable public outrage. First came the announcement that the Government will again allow the payment of outrageous bonuses to elite staff at AIB, *12 o'clock* a bank bailed out by the Irish people, as the Taoiseach will recall. Then, we had the news that 16 employees at Davy, many of them senior executives, had broken the rules, broken the regulations, for personal financial gain. The toxic culture that brought this country to its knees a decade ago, it seems, is truly alive and well. People now ask themselves, correctly, are we back to the beginning. Here we go again.

Let us look at the facts. This Davy scam was uncovered in 2014. It has taken six years to get to this point and still no individuals have been held to account. Those who were responsible continued to play a dominant role in the financial sector throughout those six years. Tá an Banc Ceannais ag lorg cumhachtaí breise ionas go bhféadfaidh sé déileáil leis seo le breis agus trí bliana anuas ach ní dhearna Fine Gael ná an Rialtas aon rud chun freagra a thabhairt ar na glaonna seo. The Minister promised legislation to allow senior executives to be held to account before the summer of 2019. We are two years on and still nothing. Let us face it: this recent scandal is not an isolated event. Look at the tracker mortgage issue. That impacted on 40,000 people yet nobody has been held to account.

Perhaps there is little wonder at that when we consider the revolving door between the financial industry and politics, a door that just keeps on spinning, where we see Ministers of State seamlessly move from politics to jobs in high finance. One day, their job is to hold the financial industry to account and, the next day, they are in fighting the corner of that industry as lobbyists. Indeed, it is only when a record fine was issued by the Central Bank against Davy last week that

things moved on a little bit. It was only public anger that brought about resignations at Davy.

At the weekend, we had called on the NTMA to drop Davy as the primary dealer in Irish Government bonds, and I welcome that that has happened. However, this decision and the fine are corporate sanctions. Not a single individual from the 16 executives has been held to account. The Minister for Finance, Deputy Donohoe, said yesterday that all those responsible have left the firm but that is not really accurate. They have left one cog in the corporate structure but they remain directors in key parts of the overarching organisation. Last week, the Taoiseach told the Dáil that the fine would impact on behaviour in the financial sector. Does he still hold that view, given the Central Bank has stated and set out how Davy frustrated its investigation at every turn? We still do not know who most of the 16 rule-breakers are. I am not asking the Taoiseach to name them but we need to know where they are now and where they work now. Do any of those involved hold positions in Government Departments or in banks in which the State has a stake? Does the Taoiseach know? Has he looked into this? Can he tell the Dáil what legal consequences those involved will face? Does he accept that they should be independently investigated?

For years, the Tánaiste and the Minister for Finance have sat on legislation to hold individual financial rule-breakers to account. This has to end. Will the Taoiseach commit to enacting such legislation?

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising what is a very important issue. The behaviour by Davy executives was absolutely unacceptable and, I think, reveals an appalling culture of greed, and has damaged the reputation of the financial services sector in this country. Executives in business or in financial services should never put personal gain above their duties and responsibilities. I think the NTMA made the right decision in regard to its relationship with Davy and in severing that in respect of the issuing of bonds. I would say, in the context of the NTMA decision, that is exactly the consequence that I had in mind when I made my comments. A Central Bank investigation will have an impact but it is absolutely unacceptable, first, that this has been ongoing since 2014 and that the executives sought to frustrate the efforts of the Central Bank and of the regulator to get to the truth of this issue, and to bring this issue to a conclusion. I agree with the NTMA in terms of withdrawing Davy's authority to act as a primary dealer for Irish Government bonds. That was the correct decision and the NTMA will no longer be doing business with Davy.

On the issue of individual accountability, the Central Bank does have extensive powers to sanction individuals who are involved in the management of financial services firms and who breach financial services legislation. That said, we believe the existing financial legal framework to hold individuals responsible for their behaviour needs strengthening and, in the programme for Government, provision has been made for the introduction of legislation in regard to a senior executive accountability regime, SEAR, to deliver heightened accountability in the financial sector. The Government will be publishing the heads of that Bill soon. That, in itself, will drive further positive changes in terms of culture in the financial services industry and enhanced accountability, while simplifying the taking of sanctions against individuals who fail in their financial sector roles.

Davy has said it no longer employs any of the 16 individuals involved in that 2014 transaction and that it will appoint a third party imminently to conduct a review of the findings of the Central Bank. Clearly, Davy has an awful lot of work to do to rebuild public trust.

Deputy McDonald's party is making a point about strengthening regulation and I agree with that but the Deputy needs to practise that as well. She has been unwilling to answer questions about the party's own financial culture. She has accepted it is the wealthiest political party in this country. It accepted a €4 million donation from the estate of Englishman William Hampton into the party's accounts in the North of Ireland, when it was bequeathed to Sinn Féin in the Republic of Ireland. This donation was more than 1,600 times the maximum allowable donation under Irish electoral law. That was a shady enough transaction to make even a stockbroker blush. These are issues that the Deputy needs to deal with too when we are talking about wider financial probity and accountability. Seanad Éireann has spoken in that regard.

With regard to further actions in terms of Davy, it is open to the Office of the Director of Corporate Enforcement, ODCE, to become involved here and also, potentially, other bodies as well. I do not want to prejudice further developments in regard to either the individuals concerned or this issue in terms of any further investigations that might or might not take place. Obviously, that is a matter in the first instance for the Office of the Director of Corporate Enforcement. We are committed, in the programme for Government, to the introduction of a senior executive accountability regime. Over the last decade alone, there have been 100 pieces of legislation and regulation introduced to underpin and strengthen the regulatory framework insofar as it pertains to financial regulation. The culture has been one of unacceptable greed, manifested in this deed, which I strongly deplore.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Anyone who hoped that the toxic culture of greed and personal gain had been banished from financial services - from the upper echelons and the elites of financial services - had their eyes opened again last week. Davy has made it clear that this culture is alive and well. People who imagined that the culture of acquiescence in all this on the part of Fianna Fáil and successive Governments had been banished have had their eyes opened by the Taoiseach's response this afternoon. The fact is that this behaviour has been acceptable to successive Governments, which is why it has happened time and again. That is the reason there is no mechanism, as has been called for by the Central Bank, to hold senior executives to account. It appears now that it is only when there is pressure on the Taoiseach that he will concede that it is necessary. Where are these wrongdoers?

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Do they work in banks or in Departments? Will the Taoiseach join me in stating that Davy bringing in a third party to carry out an investigation of these matters is wholly unacceptable and insufficient and that it ought to be the Central Bank that sets the terms for such an investigation and oversees it? We need full transparency here.

The Taoiseach: We absolutely do. There is no acquiescence. This Government has been in office for nine months. It made it clear in the programme for Government that it would introduce legislation to strengthen this area, particularly regarding accountability for senior executives in the financial area. That will happen and heads of a Bill are being prepared in that regard.

The Deputy's party cosies up to high finance as well. There is only one party here at this stage that travels the world cosying up to high finance and big construction companies to raise funding and so forth. The Deputy is eager to brand other parties in this regard.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Jesus.

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The Taoiseach: We had not been in power for ten years. We came into office with other parties in this Government about nine months ago. Those are the facts.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: We all know the facts.

The Taoiseach: The bottom line is that the Deputy cosies up to high finance, in the United States and elsewhere, when it suits her. She sells and tells a different story there. It is likewise in terms of accountability in respect of issues pertaining to financial matters in the North and so forth.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Taoiseach. Your time is up.

The Taoiseach: She tells a different story. She does not deal with it or account for it. She can be absolutely sure that nobody in the Government in any shape or form-----

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: Ding dong, the time is up. Wrap it up now.

The Taoiseach: Everyone in the Government condemns what has happened here. We are absolutely determined-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Please, the time is up.

The Taoiseach: -----that the proper regulators deal with it in as effective and strong a manner as possible.

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

Deputy Denis Naughten: On Monday evening, Professor Philip Nolan said there had been indications in the previous ten days of accelerated progress in suppressing the virus. This resulted in a collective sigh of relief across the country and, in particular, among front-line healthcare workers. These people are mentally and physically exhausted as a result of the third wave of Covid-19 infection, which far exceeded the previous waves in hospitalisations and deaths. Now that the third wave is being suppressed, we must consider two actions for all front-line healthcare staff.

First, we must provide staff with time off because exhausted healthcare staff are a recipe for mistakes. We must recognise that this time off is imperative for their health. Second, we must give proper recognition to staff at the front line in the battle against Covid-19. For example, the Scottish Government is paying every NHS worker a bonus of £500. When I raised this with the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputy Michael McGrath, last month, he stated that the Taoiseach noted on 10 February that the Government would respond to the extraordinary efforts of front-line healthcare workers once the pandemic is behind us. All front-line workers, including those in other essential services, should receive an acknowledgement of their work throughout the pandemic from their employers. In particular, I believe that now is the right time for the Government to recognise the work of all front-line healthcare workers. Many doctors, nurses, healthcare assistants, cleaners, porters and others place themselves at risk by going to work every day to keep us safe and to care for those who are seriously ill. These healthcare workers have worked long hours in extremely difficult circumstances through three waves of this pandemic. They have been selfless and the country owes them a debt of gratitude.

On Leaders' Questions last July, I said to the Taoiseach that if it was not possible to reward healthcare workers with pay increases or some form of bonus system, the minimum we should

offer them is additional paid leave. It would be time to spend with their families, with whom they may have sacrificed precious family time, or time to recover from the physical and emotional tiredness they undoubtedly must be feeling. The Taoiseach was generous in his response stating:

The Government will examine the Deputy's suggestion and proposal. ... I am conscious of the point the Deputy raised and the importance of recognition of people who went to exceptional lengths to help people on an individual basis and, by so doing, helped the country at large to get through this crisis.

In the spirit of the Taoiseach's response last July, I sincerely ask him not to postpone this much-needed recognition until the end of the pandemic, but instead to move on the need for the recognition of healthcare workers now.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising an important and worthy issue. I too acknowledge the extraordinary work done by front-line workers, in particular, in the battle against the pandemic. That was vividly illustrated in a recent RTÉ programme through the stories and journeys that both patients and front-line healthcare workers went through in the latest wave of the pandemic, which was a severe wave that impacted very significantly on health, the severity of illness and mortality. We are very mindful of that, and the Government intends to recognise the front-line healthcare workers in respect of the extraordinary contribution and commitment they have made to the fight against the pandemic.

The precise mechanisms and manner in which this will be determined will have to be worked out in consultation with the social partners, while also bearing in mind some key workers in the private sector who have made an outstanding contribution as well, particularly in periods of severe lockdown. We want to do this in a non-divisive way and to consult the partners, perhaps through the Labour Employer Economic Forum, LEEF, to discuss this further and get it right. I acknowledge the point the Deputy is making and the Government is on the record as saying that this is something it intends to do. We want to acknowledge the very strong contribution that has been made, particularly by front-line healthcare workers.

I caution that we are by no means out of this pandemic. Already, I detect that people are getting a sense that because the numbers are coming down, we are somehow emerging from it immediately or something similar. The hospital numbers are still higher than they were at the peak of the second wave. The variant is the big problem. Community transmission is still at between 11% and 15%, which is high. Close contacts and the spread of the disease are much more prevalent now. It is more transmissible because of the presence of the B117 variant. We cannot lose sight of that because if we let this go, the virus will continue. We must be very careful. We are making very good progress against the pandemic in terms of the strategy of getting the numbers down, especially the hospital numbers. They are coming down. The number in intensive care units, ICU, is coming down, as are case numbers. Remarkably, the vaccination impact has been extraordinary in hospital and nursing home settings, but we must stick with it, especially in the coming weeks, to get the numbers further down.

Deputy Denis Naughten: The Taoiseach is correct that we are not out of the woods yet and that we have to stick with it, but we also need to plan for post-Covid times. While we all hope that the current wave of infection that is now dissipating will be the last, we also know that it will take years for the country, and the health service in particular, to recover. Waiting lists are, quite understandably, at record levels. We need practical measures to relieve pressure on elec-

tive procedures and on accessing tests and diagnoses quicker.

Now is our opportunity to reconfigure our health service. This must be done using Sláintecare as the template and by directly engaging with staff at the front line who know what the problems are and how to relieve them. Simple measures can be taken such as replacing clapped out CT scanners in the likes of Portlincora University Hospital and other diagnostic machines across the State at a time when we have an underspend within our capital investment programme, or by providing expanded sterilisation facilities in order that we can utilise the fully staffed surgical theatres such as those at Roscommon University Hospital. These simple steps can make a real difference to our waiting lists.

The Taoiseach: We should also acknowledge that the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform has secured with the social partners a public service agreement in the past few weeks that further reflects our acknowledgement of those working in the public service and the commitments that have been made. Very significant resources have been made available to the health service by the Government in the budget. Up to 16,000 additional staff are now targeted for recruitment over the pre-pandemic levels to embed reforms in our health service that would outlast the pandemic and in order that the lessons learned in our health service during the pandemic will be sustained in the time ahead. The deal with the private hospitals, for example, will continue to make sure that we can catch up on non-Covid care with regard to diagnostics, procedures and operations that had been affected negatively as a result of the pandemic itself. Embedding and implementing reform across the health system, and ensuring it aligns with the Sláintecare programme, is key and is provided for in what has been an unprecedented budgetary allocation, for Covid-related issues and for non-Covid issues.

Deputy Carol Nolan: In 2017 the Rural Independent Group brought forward a motion calling on the Government to honour the commitment in the programme for Government to reform the fair deal scheme by removing discrimination against small businesses and farming families and to introduce a reduced charge on the farm or business assets. The purpose of the motion was to remove the uncertainty for farm families and the self-employed and to protect the future viability of the farm or business asset for future generations.

Since that date almost four years ago, there have been endless and empty commitments made regarding the introduction of this urgent legislation to ensure these reforms happen. Not a single one of these commitments has materialised to date. Farming families and small business owners are being led up the garden path. Among the most recent of these commitments was a commitment from the Taoiseach in the Dáil last summer. At that time, the Taoiseach said that legislation would be brought forward in the autumn session around September 2020. I continuously followed up with this, such as in July and September last year. At that point, I was told by the Tánaiste that the legislation would be brought to the Dáil before Christmas. Since then nothing has been done. There is delay after delay. It is unacceptable and is causing a huge amount of worry and distress for farming families and small business owners.

Within the past few days I have received a reply to a parliamentary question from the Minister for Health, who told me that he has met with the Attorney General to discuss this very issue. Yet, no date or timeframe has been set and people are being left high and dry. Yet again, it is a disconnect between rural Ireland and urban Ireland and this Government, which does not stand over a commitment it made to rural Ireland.

While there is ongoing and active engagement, it is just not enough. These reforms need to

see the light of day. They need to be done urgently. I stress this point to the Taoiseach. I reiterate it is almost four years since commitments were made. This is the reason, as the Taoiseach might understand, there are suspicions among people. People may believe there is a legal or financial roadblock. We need honesty here today. We need to let people know what is happening in order that they can plan accordingly. We also need to set a date. Will the Taoiseach tell us, specifically, if there are obstacles? Will he identify what they may be?

I am sure the Taoiseach will appreciate that the repeated failure to bring forward this legislation is creating a frustrating level of uncertainty for farming families and small businesses to endure, particularly as it was the recognition of inequalities within the current system that drove the need for these reforms in the first place. Four years is too long and I again appeal to the Taoiseach to make sure a date is set, that these reforms happen, that he honours the commitments made, including those made in the programme for Government.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising this important issue. Since the Government was formed, the programme for Government contains a very clear commitment for the introduction of this fair deal legislation, particularly insofar as it impacts on family farms and small businesses. The Government is disposed to bringing in this legislation. It is on the legislative priority list for drafting. The drafting is being finalised and I have been informed that it will be possible to bring it to the Dáil before the summer recess. I will go back to double-check this with the parliamentary draftsman, with the Attorney General and with the Minister. I am just as determined to get this legislation passed as anybody. Obviously we want to get it right as well. I understand that in previous years, the delay in the legislation coming in was to do with issues around the precise nature of the legislation and what it would and would not include. We are giving this priority. It needs to happen and we are committed to making sure that it will happen.

Deputy Carol Nolan: I thank the Taoiseach for that response. I welcome that the proposed legislation is on the priority list. At this point, however, when people such as farmers and small businesses are in more financially precarious situations than they were in 2017, there is a need to provide a date. We need a solid date provided at this point. We have waited for far too long. Farming families are under tremendous pressure, between Brexit and everything else that has impacted upon them. They are struggling to pay bills for loved ones in nursing homes. We need to make sure they are provided with a date at this stage. My Rural Independent Group colleagues and I have been bringing this up for too long. We hear that it will happen by autumn recess or summer recess or before Christmas. The people out there are hearing the same thing. It is not good enough. A date must be provided.

People are under huge financial pressure. I know that farming families are also under pressure with new regulations that are coming in with regard to the prescribing of animal medicines. I call on the Government to rectify this and make sure that it listens to the agri-merchants, and that farming families are not expected to carry that burden as well as the current burden they carry due to the delay to reforms on the fair deal scheme.

The Taoiseach: I accept the basic principle the Deputy articulates on the need to bring in this legislation and especially how the ongoing situation has a negative impact on family farms. Farming is under pressure because of Brexit and Covid, as is the general economy. The Government has introduced unprecedented interventions in the economy to support incomes and to support business across the board.

Considerable work has been done on this detailed legislation. I will revert back to the

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Deputy on the timelines for its introduction. We want to have it published and introduced into the House before the summer recess and certainly after Easter.

Deputy Thomas Pringle: With announcements in recent weeks about Ulster Bank withdrawing from Ireland and Bank of Ireland closing branches, there is an opportunity for the thriving credit union and post office networks. In Donegal, Ulster Bank is closing five branches and Bank of Ireland is pulling out of another five towns. I have talked to a number of local credit unions across Donegal and they are seeing an increase in people moving their deposits to those credit unions. However, credit unions are hamstrung by regulations on deposits, which sees them limiting deposits because they are forced by Government policy to make a loss in the context of holding people's money. This was to shore up the balance sheets of banks during the crash and now continues to facilitate the banks to the detriment of credit unions. It is as if the Government has something against people exercising control over their own decision-making, especially when it benefits communities directly. Credit unions need to be able to lend out to communities the money they take in. That is how it works.

Since the enactment of the Credit Union Act 2012, credit unions' cost base has risen dramatically from less than 20% of their total income then to more than 80% now in some cases. There are also reports of increasing and ongoing pressure from the Central Bank to add even more regulatory compliance staff and costs. These costs are unsustainable and will put many local credit unions out of business.

Staff of the Central Bank are not accountable to any body or agency for their actions. I am told that credit unions need legislation appropriate to their members' changing needs. Currently, all responsibility lies with credit union directors and CEOs to develop and deliver services to members, and rightly so. However, the Central Bank then has the authority to block, frustrate or veto any such services or initiatives. I am told that, in effect, credit unions have been given the responsibility to deliver those services with zero authority to do so. The feeling in some credit unions is that the Central Bank favours banks and that it is intent on building up the profits of the banks while embedding regulatory costs which reduce the surplus of credit unions. Apparently, the Central Bank has indicated that every credit union should expect that members will not be paid a dividend or interest rebate for the year 2020. There has been a reported exodus of experienced volunteers from credit union boards because of what is deemed to be relentless, restrictive and excessive governance regulation by the Central Bank. It is feared that if such micromanagement continues many small-medium sized credit unions will be lost in the next few years.

I have also recently highlighted the stark housing problems in Donegal. Credit unions have been offering a viable solution for investment in social housing for years but a decision from the Department is still outstanding. It is not as if there is any urgency in addressing the housing crisis, I suppose.

Bank of Ireland has organised an exclusive contract with An Post. However, credit unions are not allowed to explore the possibilities in this regard. Will the Taoiseach now expand the remit and autonomy of credit unions? Credit unions are member-owned and have been the life-line of a large number of communities over many years. Why would he allow the Central Bank to squeeze some credit unions out of some localities? What will he do to stop that?

The Taoiseach: As a lifelong member of the credit union movement, I am strongly supportive of any measures we can put in place to support credit unions and the role they play in com-

munities across the country. The credit union movement has made a distinctive and outstanding contribution to Irish society and has enabled many working families to progress in life because of the service that credit unions have provided.

I understand the basic thrust of what the Deputy is saying with regard to the perception of credit unions *vis-à-vis* the Central Bank and the regulator. That is not something that began today or yesterday, it is an ongoing perception and sense that credit unions have. On the other side, regulation is important. Regulation is there to protect the public, members of credit unions and people in general. Getting the balance right is the issue.

The Ministers concerned will continue to focus on this matter in order to see if we can facilitate greater capacity for credit unions to provide services over and above those they currently provide. I am very aware of the current difficulties and challenges, with very significant deposits, significant costs, some of which are regulatory embedded costs, and real difficulty in the marketplace in terms of getting a return.

In the context of housing, my understanding is that it has not all been one-sided traffic and that there needs to be a meeting of the ways in respect of this issue and the utilisation of some of the resources credit unions have in terms of their availability for social housing and financial support for the provision of housing more generally. That is an issue the Ministers for Finance and Public Expenditure and Reform have been working on for quite some time.

In the context of Ulster Bank's decision and the decision of Bank of Ireland, there are real issues there for towns the length and breadth of Ireland, for rural areas, particularly in the context of Ulster Bank, and for the Border region and the north west.

In the context of the post offices, a number of Ministers are working together to see what we can do to underpin and strengthen the post office network in terms of the consolidation of Government offline services and determining the degree to which we can utilise that network in towns across the country to support Government. The latter would, in turn, be of benefit to post offices in terms of financially underpinning them and giving greater stability and sustainability to the network.

The world is changing, as is the world of banking. The Government, along with local communities, needs to engage in finding new ways to inject new life, activities and services back into towns. That is something on which we are very focused.

Deputy Thomas Pringle: I thank the Taoiseach for his response. I know he is involved in and supportive of the credit unions. However, it is about getting the balance right. I do not believe we have ever got the balance right. It has all been geared towards the banks. Even in his response, the Taoiseach talked about building up the post offices but it is building them up to provide bank services for Bank of Ireland and Ulster Bank. Why are we not building them up to provide for services for our communities? That is vitally important.

While it is important that the Government has an independent body, namely, the Central Bank, to regulate the credit unions, we can set the agenda in terms of how it goes about that. That is very important and we need to do that. For example, the Joint Committee on Finance, Public Expenditure and Reform, and Taoiseach reported that the common bond structure is essential for the credit union movement. Why can all credit unions not introduce debit card services and build their services in that way?

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The industry funding levy is to be increased in stages up to 50% by 2022 but the Irish League of Credit Unions highlighted in 2020 that this is “a tax on social capital and a levy on volunteers”. We could reduce that also. That is what we should be doing to encourage credit unions to develop.

The Taoiseach: First, it is a valid point to make and to pose the question whether we have the balance right in respect of the relationship between the credit union movement and the regulator and the range of services that credit unions are permitted and not permitted to provide. It is a fair point and one that requires continued focus and reflection, and some action taken on it also. I accept that point and the Government will engage on it.

Second, in terms of the post offices, the Deputy may not have picked up on the final point I made relating to that. It is not just about banking services provided through post offices, it is about Government services provided through post offices and whether there is additionality in that respect, particularly in terms of offline Government services, to allow us to enable and utilise the post office network to provide additional services of that nature to the public in locations across the country. That is something the Government is considering. The Cabinet discussed the matter during the week. As already stated, the world is changing and the world of banking is certainly changing and technology is having an impact. We need to redefine the range of services and the level of Government supportive intervention in towns across the country.

An tOrd Gnó - Order of Business

An Ceann Comhairle: Go raibh maith agat a Thaoisigh, tá an t-am caite agat. Rachaimid ar aghaidh go dtí an chéad phíosa oibre eile, is é sin clár oibre na seachtaine. The House has agreed that, for the duration of the Covid-19 emergency only, the rapporteur’s report of the Business Committee shall not be read out but shall be taken as read. Arising from it there are just two proposals to put to the House. Is the proposal for dealing with today’s business agreed?

Deputy Cian O’Callaghan: It is not agreed to. Yesterday, “RTÉ Investigates” published a report based on inspection reports it has received from the Dublin Region Homeless Executive, DRHE. The report shows that 34% of privately run homeless accommodation has had fire safety issues. It also showed conclusively that the national quality standards are not being applied to private providers of emergency accommodation. I have raised this with the Taoiseach before. The Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage has told the Dáil that these national standards are being applied to providers of privately run emergency homeless accommodation when that is not the case. I asked the Minister to update the Dáil on this and to correct the record. That has not been done. Will the Minister come before the Dáil this week to take questions and to update the record on this? It is very serious that the Minister with responsibility for housing does not seem to know what is going on in emergency homeless accommodation.

The Taoiseach: Does Deputy O’Callaghan want time for this or-----

An Ceann Comhairle: He wants time today for the matter to be discussed.

The Taoiseach: My understanding is that the Business Committee organised the schedule for today and tomorrow, and I do not propose to deviate from that. Deputy O’Callaghan has probably read that the Dublin Region Homeless Executive has confirmed that all the issues

identified in the inspections - and this is in the context of the recent release by the DRHE of inspection reports - were followed up and resolved “swiftly and comprehensively”. There is no issue with having further engagement on this issue at a time that perhaps the Business Committee could organise and facilitate, but there is a set schedule for today which we should proceed with, given the important issues that are on the agenda for today and which were agreed by the Business Committee.

An Ceann Comhairle: Is today’s business agreed to? Agreed. Is the proposal for dealing with Thursday’s business agreed to? Agreed.

Thirty-three Deputies have indicated on the Order of Business.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The HSE is proposing to remove in-school speech and language therapy services from the Holy Family School for the Deaf on the Navan Road and, I think, from the deaf schools in Cork and Limerick. Whatever the merits of the new children’s disability network teams for provision of these services to the general population, it is beyond belief that consideration would even be given to removing speech and language therapy services from deaf children and young people who at some stage or another in their school careers rely very heavily on speech and language therapy. I do not have to tell the Taoiseach that the staff, the parents and the children and young people themselves are very concerned about this proposed move by the HSE. I ask him very simply to intervene and make this stop.

The Taoiseach: I am certainly not in favour of the removal of speech and language therapy services from schools for the deaf on the Navan Road, in Cork or anywhere else. I suspect this is part of the progressing disability strategy, which is nearly ten years old now and which had a different approach to providing speech and language services to children with special needs. My view is that we should move in the opposite direction and provide in-house and in-school multidisciplinary services for children with special needs. In education that initiative was taken on a pilot basis a year or two ago. In my view, that should be expanded because making services available to children in school in a co-ordinated, multidisciplinary way is the most effective way to support the development of the child. I passionately believe in that. I will follow up the matter.

Deputy Alan Kelly: Regarding vaccine supply, could we get a yes-no answer to the following question? Did the Government try to get some of the unused Pfizer vaccines, as Germany and Denmark have done? If so, why were we not successful? In addition, considering we are a world leader in pharmaceuticals, can the Taoiseach tell the Chamber why the Government’s discussions with Merck and Pfizer have not been successful to date, given their presence in Ireland and their production of vaccines here for our people who desperately need them?

The Taoiseach: We have pursued alternative supplies. We got some additional supply. I have spoken to Pfizer and we have made it clear that anything we could do here to support or aid vaccine manufacturing capacity would be done. Pfizer, however, is satisfied that its planned configuration and capacity in Belgium and latterly in Germany in terms of BioNTech and in the United States are sufficient for it to meet its contractual needs. To be fair to Pfizer and BioNTech, they have met all their contractual commitments. There has been some reprofiling, to use that term, of the delivery schedule in that numbers can go up one week and down another at the beginning, but since then they have been consistent in their supply. We have just got notification that we will get an additional 45,000 Pfizer-BioNTech doses in the last two weeks of March. I have been in constant contact with the President of the European Commission.

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She texted me early this morning to say that another 4 million doses are coming from Pfizer for distribution across Europe. We will get about 45,000. The big push in Europe is to get capacity and production up. We have also approached the United Kingdom-----

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Taoiseach. His time is up. I am sorry.

The Taoiseach: I can deal with that later.

Deputy Holly Cairns: I refer to the ongoing restrictions in maternity hospitals. Needless to say, everyone supports necessary restrictions, but mothers and families were understandably shocked when restrictions allowed socialising in pubs but they still had to go through labour alone, fathers could not attend the births of their own children and women sometimes received tragic news alone, messaging their partners in car parks. This is not to mention the fact that this was literally a postcode lottery; there was absolutely no consistency across hospitals. The guidelines on restrictions in maternity hospitals I am continuously given date back to September. The situation has changed significantly since then, especially with the vaccine roll-out for front-line workers. When can families expect new updates? Can the Taoiseach assure them that this time they will be considered a priority for the Government in respect of any restrictions going forward?

The Taoiseach: The first major point I will make is that public health advice is what dictates and determines the approach within hospitals, and clinical guidance has been uppermost in influencing decisions. We have made representations to the HSE. We have made the point that many Deputies have articulated recently in respect of this issue. We understand the trauma involved for mothers and partners in respect of the experience of giving birth, particularly in very difficult circumstances, when the outcome may not be as anticipated. That can be very traumatic. Any changes in the future will be guided by clinical and public health advice. The Deputy is correct that the situation has improved very significantly within hospitals. Infection among health workers has plummeted as a result of the vaccination programme. That will give us greater confidence in doing things in hospitals into the future.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: The Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, is looking for a waiver of pre-legislative scrutiny of the residential tenancies Bill, in which he intends to extend the enhanced Covid protections for tenants in arrears, but it is not clear whether it will keep those protections for other tenants where they face eviction on grounds of sale or refurbishment. I have cited on numerous occasions here the plight of tenants in Dún Laoghaire who have always paid their rent. A ruthless vulture fund is moving to evict them immediately these restrictions are lifted. I am looking for clarity and appealing to the Taoiseach to ensure that the enhanced protections for tenants are not just on the grounds of arrears but are also maintained for others facing eviction in the context of the pandemic.

The Taoiseach: The legislation is very necessary because it will continue, as the Deputy says, enhanced protections for many tenants and has proven to be effective. That protection needs to be extended, and I will engage with the Minister in respect of his capacity to deal with issues Deputy Boyd Barrett has articulated, bearing in mind what is and is not legally possible. We want to get these protections extended, and it is necessary to get this legislation through because it is good legislation and has proven to be effective in protecting tenants in difficult situations.

Deputy Michael Lowry: In February 2017, Tipperary town primary schools were overlooked for inclusion in the DEIS programme. This omission was blatantly wrong. After a determined campaign to highlight the injustice, the Department of Education yielded to pressure and agreed to appoint an inspector to review the circumstances of all five primary schools. After extensive engagement with all relevant stakeholders and a thorough examination of statistics and facts, the inspector filed a comprehensive report. The report concluded that levels of deprivation were extremely high, and that no other town in Ireland of a similar size had as high a level of disadvantage. In response to a glaring deficit in supports, an interim package of resources was agreed by the Department and implemented across the five schools. That package remains in place. However, these schools are awaiting confirmation of full band 1 DEIS status, which, I understand, cannot be granted until the national review of all schools is complete. When will this national review be finalised and published to include the Tipperary schools for full DEIS status?

The Taoiseach: First, I thank the Deputy for raising the issue. I know the Deputy and his county colleagues were extremely disappointed in 2017, when no primary school in Tipperary town attained DEIS status, which on the face of it is difficult to comprehend at one level. The concerns have been made clear in this Chamber regarding the necessity for this provision, given significant levels of social disadvantage and deprivation. I want to acknowledge those concerns and to say that work is under way within the Department. I spoke to the Minister for Education yesterday and she is committed to revising the DEIS programme and to broaden its inclusion. The work on the DEIS identification model is under way and is nearing completion. A detailed analysis of school enrolment data, using the latest data available from the 2016 census, has been carried out by the Department. That work will continue and the Minister is committed to doing it as soon as possible.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: This issue concerns intern doctors in Clonmel, many of whom were employed last year in the teeth of the Covid pandemic. There were 19 of them. Ten of them are to be let go shortly. Last year, in the middle of the Covid pandemic, all the newly-qualified intern doctors were employed in Irish hospitals. This year, in 2021, none of them are going to be taken on, meaning that many of them, both international and Irish interns, will have to go abroad for work. South Tipperary General Hospital, Clonmel is under pressure, and losing these ten interns out of a cohort of 19 is devastating, on top of the closure of St. Brigid's hospital. The Taoiseach gave a commitment in the House five weeks ago, that he would meet Councillor Kieran Bourke, the action committee and some of the staff in Carrick-on-Suir. Did the Taoiseach have that meeting? What is he going to do about the HSE taking away these 10 doctors in the middle of a pandemic?

The Taoiseach: First, extraordinary efforts were made last year in recruiting way above and beyond in respect of interns and non-consultant hospital doctors. It was never envisaged that those levels would be sustained across the country. However, I will ask the HSE about the hospital at Clonmel and the issues there because I accept the Deputy's point that the hospital is under pressure. I have not had any meeting yet in relation to St Brigid's hospital. I will certainly pursue the issue of the interns.

Deputy Joan Collins: A worker, who has been working on the front line and at the coalface of the Covid-19 pandemic since last March, thereby risking her health and well-being, has contacted me. She told me that she and her colleagues had been put on the temporary wage subsidy scheme, TWSS, without consultation. We know that under that scheme, an employer experiencing a minimum of 25% decline in turnover can apply for a worker to be kept on the books

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on the net pay that they were on before. The employer can also claim up to 70% of that waged salary. Like all other workers in the McCauley's pharmacy group, this worker was contacted by the Revenue in January to notify her that she had a tax obligation on that net pay. She has been told that she owes €2,000 in tax to Revenue, which amounts to three weeks' pay for that worker. No worker should be forced to pay this tax liability. It should be paid by the employer within the scheme. I ask the Taoiseach to let employers know that they are obliged to pay this tax for their workers, and it is not for the workers to pay.

The Taoiseach: I ask the Deputy to forward me the details of the case in order that I can get a detailed response in respect of the issues she has raised on that individual case.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: Holy Family National School, Rathmore, is a thriving national school in east Kerry. I am glad that it has got the green light for an extension as it is very tight on room. However, it is seeking 0.16 of an acre from the HSE, which is sited next door. I ask the Taoiseach, the Minister for Education and the Minister for Health to come together and give this required amount of land to the management of Holy Family National School. As I have outlined, it is a tiny school and the numbers are going up and up. They need the space and they need it urgently.

The Taoiseach: I will pursue that issue. I have no doubt but that the Minister for Education will also be dealing with this. I am not clear on the importance of that HSE piece of land. However, I am familiar with cases across the country where the HSE has provided pieces of land to enable school extensions and so on. We would be very happy to see if we can help the national school at Rathmore in respect of this issue.

Deputy Fergus O'Dowd: Allocations for the urban regeneration and development fund, URDF, have been announced this week and Drogheda, the largest town in the country outside of the major cities, got absolutely no support. It got zero marks, practically, in its application. Of the 70-odd applications, Drogheda is in the lowest cohort, in about 66th place. That is entirely unacceptable. There is a huge crisis of confidence in local government, both locally and nationally, as a result of this decision. The assessment of the Drogheda application must be published immediately, today. We will hold accountable the people who are responsible for that. It is most important that the Taoiseach meets the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, the Secretary General of his Department and the CEO of the Louth County Council, Joan Martin, to ensure that the €200 million left in that fund is accounted for and that a fair and adequate proportion of it is spent in Drogheda. What has happened here is entirely unacceptable, shocking and shameful. This is not the first or second but the third time this has happened. People in Drogheda are very angry and are up in arms. The Taoiseach must act now.

Deputy Imelda Munster: This road has been in the planning for 15 long years. Three applications for funding were made and all three applications were refused funding. This week, the Minister refused funding once again. This is the very same Minister who came electioneering to Drogheda in 2019, called a public meeting, called for the road to be funded, said it was a matter of urgency, that it was part of the northern environs plan and was a critical piece of infrastructure. What did we see from him this week? The usual reverting to sleeveen politics and the rejection of the application once again. This decision must be overturned. We will not take it lying down. If the Taoiseach is sick of me raising this issue more than 20 times, he should get used to it, because I am not letting this go. How dare he turn his back on Drogheda once again? We have been looking for this funding for 15 years. Is there an appeals process?

There had better be, because we are going to appeal this decision.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputies for raising the issue. Louth County Council did have a successful €7.5 million application in Dundalk for the St. Nicholas Quarter and Backlands regeneration project under the latest funding announcement for the URDF and that should be acknowledged. The Government is committed to Drogheda, and we understand the disappointment with the application which was not successful. The application was not recommended by the project advisory board, which made the recommendations. That advisory board is made up of civil servants with specialist expertise in the various sectoral areas, and representatives from other Departments and Government agencies, as appropriate. The board used the criteria of the URDF to make its assessment and sent its recommendations to the Minister. The Minister has held back money from the fund to address unsuccessful applications that can be strengthened. It is critical for the local authority to re-engage fully with this process.

The Minister has committed to re-engaging with Deputies O'Dowd and Munster and other local representatives, as well as the local authority, to improve the submission or identify alternative funding routes that may be more appropriate.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Taoiseach. The time is up.

The Taoiseach: The URDF has specific criteria-----

An Ceann Comhairle: We cannot go on any further on this matter.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: We have a vaccine supply problem in this country, across Europe and across the world. We heard earlier today on "Morning Ireland" about the possibility in certain parts of the world that the roll-out could take until 2023 or 2024. With the difficulty that exists in regard to the new strains and the economic damage that is happening, this is utterly unacceptable and could lead to a cost of trillions. What interaction has the Taoiseach and the European Commission had with companies with a view to using the capacity that exists in Europe and elsewhere in the world? What we want to see is for companies to forgo intellectual rights and know-how. That is the best-case scenario. Either way, if we have capacity across the world in the pharmaceutical industry, it needs to be used. This is far too important an issue to do otherwise. It is life and death. I am asking the Taoiseach what interaction he and the European Commission have had with companies on this matter.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Night after night, the people of Ireland are being subjected to the Minister for Health, Deputy Stephen Donnelly, in front of them on their screens, like Comical Ali, saying that the administration of the vaccine is going fine. Everybody knows it is not. A €1 billion per month unmitigated disaster is happening in this country. I know of surgeries in my constituency that will not have the vaccine for over-85s until the end of next week. One surgery has not got a date for delivery as of yet. Every single month that the Government fails on the roll-out of the vaccine is costing billions of euro. It is pushing people into poverty and keeping shops and restaurants closed. What efforts has the Government really made in regard to the procurement of the vaccine, in addition to the European supply chain? Why is there a cap-tipping deference to the European Union in this country all the time? It cost us billions of euro ten years ago and it is costing us billions of euro now.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: The Taoiseach will be talking to the new US President, Joe Biden, for St. Patrick's Day. Will he ask Mr. Biden to help Ireland? We need to get outside of

the EU process and get the vaccines into this country. All of the Irish people in America will help us. All the Taoiseach has to do is open his mouth and say, "Please support the Irish", and they will do it.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: Arising from yesterday's health committee meeting, it would appear that there are obvious fears in the HSE that it will not be possible to meet targets, as already indicated, and that the situation could change dramatically for the worse as time goes by. I support the other speakers in raising the urgent necessity to seek out other ways and means of providing an adequate vaccine supply in the shortest possible time in order to be able, at least, to compete with our neighbours and assure our citizens that we are in a serious position in terms of dealing with this issue.

Deputy Michael Collins: It is quite evident to the people of this country that we have a vaccine supply issue. Every other Deputy is in the same position as me in having issues to raise in this regard. When are gardaí and shop workers going to be vaccinated? What about the people living on the islands off west Cork, including Bere Island, Cape Clear Island, Sherkin Island, Long Island and the many other islands? There are elderly people living there who cannot come off the island. These are people in their 80s and 90s and they need to be shown the respect of at least informing them when they will be vaccinated. Can the Taoiseach give us some clarity in this regard today?

The Taoiseach: A range of Deputies spoke on this issue. First of all, I have to say to Deputy Tóibín that he should withdraw his remark. It is completely unfounded and the level of his invective is just not warranted. It is not proportionate, it is not balanced and it is doing a dis-service. The vaccination programme in this country is working.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: It is not working.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Taoiseach, without interruption.

The Taoiseach: It is having a very significant impact on those who are being vaccinated. We have reached those cohorts who are most vulnerable to severe illness and death. The over-85s, by and large-----

(Interruptions).

The Taoiseach: Come off it, please, Deputy Tóibín.

An Ceann Comhairle: I ask the Deputy, please, not to interrupt the Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy should stop the blackguarding on this issue. I want to make the point that there are a number of strands of thought that have emerged. I will come back to Deputy Ó Murchú's question because he has made a valid point in the global sense. A total of 95% of everything that comes into the country is being injected into people within the week. That is a fact.

In terms of the global supply issue, there are three major continents that are manufacturing vaccines. In Asia, we have China, and then there is Europe and the United States. There is no magic tree out there that we can pick vaccines off. That is an illusion. I spoke to the UK Prime Minister and we talked about vaccines. He volunteered to me that he would love to help

Ireland but his first priority is to get his entire people vaccinated. That is what he said. Yet, we have people jumping up and down saying we should ask Boris Johnson and he will give us his surplus. He does not have surplus vaccines to give to Ireland right now.

An Ceann Comhairle: We cannot get into a lengthy debate on this matter.

The Taoiseach: We have asked the German Government whether it has reserves of AstraZeneca to give, because there were articles written saying that it was not using those vaccines. We got a very quick response from the German Government saying that it will be using all of its AstraZeneca supplies. The key to this, going back to Deputy Ó Murchú's point, is the global situation. If we do not vaccinate countries in Africa and all the other countries, ultimately, we risk the arrival of new variants in the fullness of time.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Taoiseach. We cannot go into this issue any further.

The Taoiseach: The European Union has been very committed in this regard and has provided very substantive funding to COVAX and other initiatives on that front.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I thank the Central Bank for its dogged pursuit of the truth in the case of the Davy scandal, despite the scorched earth policy of the senior management of the company in trying to hide everything from its own compliance personnel and, indeed, from the Central Bank. We have to take steps now to restore the reputation of the financial services industry in Ireland and to protect the remaining jobs in Davy. There are hundreds of people who had absolutely nothing to do with what happened and who depend on the financial services industry. It is very important for Ireland, particularly after Brexit. Will the Taoiseach commit to ensuring that the Office of the Parliamentary Counsel will work to expedite legislation on the senior executive accountability regime, SEAR, in the Department of Finance?

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: Does the Taoiseach not find it extraordinary that 16 individuals in Davy made a substantial gain back in 2014 on the same Anglo Irish Bank bonds on which many ordinary people lost their life savings? The director of finance in the Central Bank told the finance committee yesterday that she could find no evidence of criminal activity in this matter. How do we reconcile a situation whereby if someone goes to a shop and steals a slice of bread, it is a criminal activity, but stealing and making money off Anglo Irish Bank bonds is not? Is the Taoiseach happy that we have the fully story on Davy? Is he satisfied that the law is sufficient to discourage white-collar crime? What measures will he put in place in this regard? The Taoiseach needs to seek a direct briefing from the Central Bank on this matter.

Deputy Neale Richmond: Following on from Deputy Carroll MacNeill's point, we are still waiting to see the legislation on the SEAR. I understand it is with the Attorney General. Does the Taoiseach believe that this scheme, which is overdue to be introduced, should extend to all aspects of the financial services sector, not just front-facing roles? It is crucially important to ensuring that transparency and accountability are restored in the sector and that we can continue developing the sector and maintaining its global reputation.

Deputy Brendan Griffin: On the same issue, I take this opportunity to express my complete outrage at what has happened at Davy. It is particularly concerning, as referred to by Deputy O'Donnell, that what happened in the company came in the wake of financial scandals that rocked this country just a few short years before. It is absolutely unacceptable and it is completely disgusting to the many people who worked hard and lost a lot of money in recent years. I emphasise how important it is that this matter is treated with the utmost importance

and given huge attention at the top level in Government. Such activity cannot be allowed to continue in this country and it cannot happen again.

Deputy Martin Kenny: This is something that goes to the heart of what people have been suffering for the past ten or 15 years. The Taoiseach is well aware of that. We bailed out the banks and got into such financial crisis in this country because of the very type of shenanigans that appear to have been going on in Davy. As well as the investigation that is being carried out by the Central Bank, will there be a criminal investigation into what happened here? Clearly, the individual at the start of this, who engaged Davy to provide a service, was not provided with that service. That is the first point. Second, the 16 people who went off and made this arrangement for themselves clearly did so with some kind of inside knowledge that they were going to make a large sum of money on it. To any ordinary citizen looking in from the outside, there is a clear issue of fraud. In any other circumstances, there would be a criminal investigation. Will such an investigation happen?

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputies for raising the issue. As I said earlier, what happened in Davy's is absolutely unacceptable. It was a disgrace and should not have happened. It has damaged not just the company but also, again, the reputation of financial services in Ireland. No stone will be left unturned in the context of strengthening the legislative regime. The Minister for Finance has made it clear - he presented to the Cabinet on this matter yesterday - that the SEAR legislation will be brought forward and that the heads of it are nearly ready. We will do everything we possibly can. I cannot prejudice in my commentary any further investigations that may take place in respect of this matter. The behaviour was not acceptable by any standard.

Deputy Brian Stanley: I want to refer to the national broadband scheme. A problem arises whereby people are in neither the intervention area nor the blue area. The blue areas are the areas that are supposed to be serviced already by existing companies and networks, such as the metropolitan area networks. The problem is that the maps show households and businesses that are supposed to be in the covered areas, mainly on the edges of villages and towns. I have constituents in Laois and Offaly who cannot get a broadband service from a private provider. I have raised this matter with National Broadband Ireland and the Minister and a stock reply keeps coming back. What I am trying to get across to the Taoiseach is that many of the affected individuals are self-employed and are trying to run small businesses. They have children who are home-schooling and they cannot get a broadband service anywhere. This needs to be resolved. The broadband scheme, as constructed, is flawed and there are flaws with the maps. It is not good enough for National Broadband Ireland to write back to me saying it is tough luck. What we need is action. We need to get broadband to houses, businesses and farms across the midlands, including Laois and Offaly, and the rest of the country.

Deputy Carol Nolan: There is a major problem with the lack of adequate broadband in Laois–Offaly. I have been contacted by many frustrated constituents and farming families who have to do most of their business online. With children at home now trying to engage in online learning, particularly those in examination years, this is not adequate. It is not good enough. There is a serious problem. Bearing in mind that Laois–Offaly is undergoing a very unjust transition, which I have called it from the start, and that investment is needed in the constituency, the problem is setting us back and putting us on the back foot. I call today for Laois–Offaly to be prioritised for the proper, effective and efficient roll-out of broadband as urgently as possible.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: Counties such as Kerry are now rightfully being seen for all the positive things that they can be seen for. Working from home because of the pandemic has

highlighted the fact that so much business can be done at home. Despite all we have to offer in Kerry, however, the one thing we are lacking is proper broadband throughout the rural areas of the county. I ask the Taoiseach to ensure that the Government realises the importance of broadband. It is important now to have proper broadband in one's home or for one's business. It is every bit as important as electricity, water and sewerage facilities. With broadband, people will be able to do their work and business successfully from home, be it in the private sector or any other. We have a lot a lot to offer, but the provision of proper broadband is required.

Deputy Denis Naughten: Deputy Stanley has raised an important issue. The problem is that the homes designated as blue, while officially regarded as being in receipt of a broadband service, are not actually getting it. The national broadband contract is very clear on this. If people cannot get a commercial service, they are entitled, under the national broadband plan, to a service under the national broadband intervention arrangement. This needs to be recorded and reported by the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment so the map can be altered. The difficulty is that there is a lack of information from the Department informing affected individuals and communities that if they report the problem, the map can be altered to reflect the need for intervention in their areas.

The Taoiseach: The Government is very committed to the roll-out of broadband. Obviously, broadband is essential, particularly in enabling people, including the self-employed and businesses more generally, to conduct their work. It is essential for those who are working at home and students who are studying. I am referring to the nature and importance of connectivity. I will relay to the Minister what has been said here by Deputies, including on communication from the Department on areas designated on the blue map.

The Government is particularly committed to very significant investment in Laois–Offaly, not just through just transition but also through other measures, including through the use of State agencies, Bord na Móna and other bodies to channel investment to Offaly and Laois with a view to future economic development.

Civil Liability and Courts (Amendment) Bill 2021: First Stage

Deputy Denis Naughten: I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to amend the Civil Liability and Courts Act 2004 and to provide for related matters.

Insurance fraud should never pay. It has a cost for each and every one of us. The difficulty is that there are no consequences if someone is found out to be making a fraudulent claim. There is no downside to bringing a fraudulent claim. While there have been cases of claims being thrown out of court, there has been no follow-up or penalties as a result. If there is no cost to or consequence of engaging in this practice, it will go on. While the majority of claimants act in good faith, a small minority bring fraudulent claims to court in the hope of receiving a large award of tens or hundreds of thousands of euro. There have been instances where, after a court has dismissed a case that has no basis or foundation, the plaintiff has threatened to appeal unless he or she gets an out-of-court settlement. This practice has to stop immediately.

The Regional Group of Deputies has drafted the Civil Liability and Courts (Amendment) Bill 2021. Its aim is to act as a genuine deterrent to those making false claims by increasing

penalties for such offences, imposing legal costs on the plaintiff and having such matters referred to the Director of Public Prosecutions for investigation at the court's discretion. There is no single measure that can tackle insurance costs but fraudulent and exaggerated claims have increased the cost of insurance premiums and have an impact right across this country. It is a minority of claimants who make fraudulent insurance claims but every single week An Garda Síochána receives reports of such claims. There is a perception that the number of fraudulent and exaggerated claims has been increasing in recent years. Where there are no consequences, significant costs are incurred by individuals and business owners defending such cases in court. Businesses have faced soaring insurance premiums as a result of the actions of fraudsters. Many businesses claim it is not uncommon for insurers to settle dubious claims too easily.

This Bill is based on a Bill published by the now Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputy Michael McGrath, when he was in opposition. The purpose is to increase the penalties for those found guilty of an offence under section 26 of the Civil Liability and Courts Act 2004. It deals with fraudulent actions. It differs from the Minister's Bill in that it intends to amend section 26 to ensure that, in the event of a case being struck out because of fraudulent evidence, the court may direct that the matter be referred to the Director of Public Prosecutions for investigation, but it leaves that discretion with the judge. This is an innovative provision in Irish law.

The Bill is not just about insurance claims but about a core principle of the administration of justice in our society. Insurance fraud should not pay and this message needs to be reflected in our legislation. The Regional Group of Deputies will continue to work with Government and Opposition colleagues to tackle fraudulent claims and to progress another piece of legislation we support, the Perjury and Related Offences Bill 2018 so we can have a balanced approach to addressing fraud in this country.

An Ceann Comhairle: Is the Bill being opposed?

Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Jack Chambers): 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 Denis Naughten: I move: "That the Bill be taken in Private Members' time."

Question put and agreed to.

Adoption (Information) Bill 2021: First Stage

Deputy Thomas Pringle: I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to provide for improved information access for adopted persons in relation to their birth, for that purpose to amend the Adoption Act 2010 so as to provide for access by adult adopted persons to their entry in the index maintained by *an tArd-Chláraitheoir* of connections between entries in the Adopted Children Register and the register of births, and to provide for connected matters.

I would like to share time with Deputy Connolly.

An Ceann Comhairle: Ceart go leor.

Deputy Thomas Pringle: I am delighted to introduce the Adoption (Information) Bill 2021 in conjunction with my colleague, Deputy Connolly.

I note the Private Members' Bill of Deputy Funchion of Sinn Féin, which was debated earlier. I know the Government accepted it but this Bill needs to go in as well to keep the pressure on and make sure it is brought to a satisfactory conclusion. I note also Labour Senator Bacik's Bill in the Seanad.

It seems that many of us were moved to take action after listening to survivors. We are keeping this hugely important issue on the agenda. Late last year there was a huge show of public support and solidarity for survivors of mother and baby homes. Dr. Maeve O'Rourke, Ms Claire McGettrick and others from the Clann Project have been disparaged by some members of Government because of the power of survivors' campaigns. One such campaign is #MyRecordsMyRight for adoptees to have access to their birth certificates and their files that were in possession of the now dissolved Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes.

This is a simple Bill but would mean so much to survivors. The purpose of the Adoption (Information) Bill 2021 is to provide unconditional access to birth certificates for adopted persons. The Bill amends section 86 of the Adoption Act 2010 so as to allow An tArd-Chláráitheoir to provide adopted persons with access to their entry in the index that makes traceable the connection between each entry in the adopted children register and the corresponding entry in the register of births.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: Cuirim fáilte roimh an deis cúpla focal a rá faoin mBille seo. Is Bille thar a bheith díreach agus simplí é. Is é seo an tríú Bille ar an ábhar sin atá os comhair na Dála. Léiríonn sé sin cé chomh tábhachtach is atá an t-ábhar seo. Tá cearta bunúsacha i gceist. Chinnteodh an Bille go mbeadh rochtain ag daoine atá uchtaithe ar a gcuid eolais phearsanta.

My colleague, Deputy Pringle, has laid out the Bill. It is straightforward and provides for access to birth certificates for adopted persons. I struggle for words that something as basic as this remains contentious in the 21st century. We are 20 years from a particular group on the ground asking for legislation. Prior to that, in 1984, we had a committee which reported that, even in 1984, it was a basic human right to give basic information to adopted people who came looking for it, though the majority of that committee wanted it not to be retrospective. It has been discussed in the Supreme Court and teased out in different courts on many occasions, particularly in the Supreme Court in a 1998 case.

On top of that, we have had many reports, the latest being yesterday's report, in relation to illegal adoptions. It was a scoping exercise and I emphasize that. It set out to scope the nature of the problem and of the files. The narrative that talks about no false registrations being found is a false narrative.

On the basic right to information, the rapporteur for child protection went out on a limb in 2015 and said the right to access the birth certificate is a minimum core of the right to identity. In order to comply with our international human rights law obligations, this should be an automatic entitlement of every adoptee with no exceptions or qualifications.

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I have given the Minister, Deputy O’Gorman, the benefit of the doubt and I do not doubt his *bona fides*. I know he will come forward with comprehensive legislation but we need action in relation to this aspect where people adopted as children who come forward looking for basic information should have it as of right. That is what this Bill and the Bill from Sinn Féin earlier today are about. I thank that party for bringing it forward. I presume that is what the Bill Senator Bacik is bringing forward is about as well.

Can we take action now to restore trust? Trust is at an all-time low given the way people on the ground have been treated in relation to the commission’s report, the leak and the failure to give the report, not to mention the language used.

The language yesterday in “A Shadow Cast Long” and the report is excellent. It is respectful, it finds facts, is well-written and is set out very clearly, whether one agrees with it or not. I ask that the Bill move onto the next Stage.

An Ceann Comhairle: Is the Bill being opposed?

Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Jack Chambers): 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 Thomas Pringle: I move: “That the Bill be taken in Private Members’ time.”

Question put and agreed to.

Planning and Development Act (Exempted Development) (No. 1) Regulations 2021: Motion

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke): I move:

“That Dáil Éireann approves the following Regulations in draft:

Planning and Development (Exempted Development) Regulations 2021,
a copy of which has been laid in draft form before Dáil Éireann on 15th February, 2021.”

Question put and agreed to.

Planning and Development Act (Exempted Development) (No. 2) Regulations 2021: Motion

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke): I move:

That Dáil Éireann approves the following Regulations in draft:

Planning and Development (Exempted Development) (No. 2) Regulations 2021, a copy of which has been laid in draft form before Dáil Éireann on 15th February, 2021.”

Question put and agreed to.

Report of Committee on Standing Orders and Dáil Reform: Motion

Minister of State at the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Jack Chambers): I move:

That the amendments to the Standing Orders of Dáil Éireann relative to Public Business as contained in the report of the Committee on Standing Orders and Dáil Reform entitled ‘*Amendments to Standing Orders relating to a Gender-Neutral Chair*’, laid before Dáil Éireann on 8th March, 2021, are hereby agreed to, as recommended by the Committee pursuant to Standing Order 118A(2).”

Question put and agreed to.

Joint Committee on Public Petitions: Motion

Minister of State at the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Jack Chambers): I move:

“That, in relation to the review by the Joint Committee on Public Petitions of its Orders of Reference, the instruction agreed by Order of the Dáil of 22nd September, 2020, is amended by the substitution of ‘on or before 31st March, 2021’ for ‘within three months of its first meeting in the current Dáil’.”

Question put and agreed to.

Ceisteanna - Questions

Taoiseach’s Meetings and Engagements

1. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his recent phone call with the UK Prime Minister. [43180/20]

2. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Taoiseach the engagement he has had with the UK Prime Minister since the UK has left the Brexit transition period. [1325/21]

The Taoiseach: I last spoke with Prime Minister Johnson on Tuesday, 2 March. We discussed plans for a joint bid for World Cup 2030, bringing together the five football associations from Ireland, Northern Ireland, England, Scotland and Wales.

We also discussed the latest situation on the Northern Ireland protocol and during our con-

versation the Prime Minister spoke of concerns he had around the availability of various food products and plants in Northern Ireland. I stressed to the Prime Minister the importance of working within the established structures to explore potential solutions to these problems and the need to reduce tensions more generally regarding the implementation of the protocol.

We also discussed vaccines and the roll-out of same. He volunteered clearly that he would have to vaccinate all of his people first before he would be in a position to help other countries including Ireland and Ireland would be high up in his thoughts. He assured me in that respect but they have some distance to go in terms of their vaccination programme. We discussed that issue and he was clear on that.

I also spoke with Prime Minister Johnson on 29 January, following the European Commission's signalling of its intention to trigger Article 16. I was also in contact with the Prime Minister on Christmas Eve to acknowledge the agreement reached between the United Kingdom and the European Union at that time. We agreed it was in everyone's interest that a deal had been concluded.

While there have been challenges to implementing some aspects of the protocol, I remain firmly of the view that the Brexit agreement reached is very important for Ireland. Unilateral approaches to the protocol or its implementation are not acceptable. The most optimal way of dealing with this is through the mechanisms that have been provided for in the agreement.

Deputy Alan Kelly: I thank the Taoiseach for that. It is somewhat shocking that he had a call with the UK Prime Minister on 2 March regarding the World Cup bid, which we support, and that the Prime Minister did not raise with him in any way, shape or form the proposed plan to breach the terms of the protocol. Did the Taoiseach have any indication? How did it make him feel that the Prime Minister subsequently behaved in this way? Had the Taoiseach any inkling from the conversation that this was going to happen? It seems pretty shocking behaviour, and not very collegiate, that the Prime Minister would act in such a way so shortly after such a call. I presume the Taoiseach has had other conversations with the Prime Minister and that he will continue such conversations with him.

I understand what the Taoiseach said regarding the vaccine supply. We have a real issue here, however, in that 40% of people in Northern Ireland have had their first dose. Northern Ireland is due to receive an extremely large delivery of the AstraZeneca vaccines this week. It has, therefore, got its schedule right. We are going to have a situation whereby a large number of people in Northern Ireland are going to be vaccinated and the position in the South will be the opposite. This will create real issues. Will the Taoiseach have discussions with the First Minister, the deputy First Minister and Boris Johnson in respect of this matter? Britain is going to have a huge volume of excess vaccines. Can we even ask whether, because of this unique situation, Britain may be in a position in six weeks or two months to help us out and provide the AstraZeneca vaccine? Hopefully, the national immunisation advisory committee will have approved it for further use here beyond what has already been approved. Will the Taoiseach please do that on behalf of the Irish people?

Deputy Neale Richmond: I am very grateful to the Taoiseach for that comprehensive update. While it is just over a week since the Taoiseach's last telephone call with the British Prime Minister, I think we all agree that perhaps it is time for another call. The events of recent days, to which Deputy Kelly alluded, are extremely worrying. While many of us in this House have consistently said that Ireland will be the UK's best friend within the EU, the UK is certainly

making it very difficult for us, particularly when it comes to the fragility of maintaining the settled status of Northern Ireland and the Northern Irish protocol.

Anyone watching the questions in Westminster today will have been taken by the very brusque manner of the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland when talking about how its action had to be taken and that it was somehow forced into taking that action by the EU. This is all being tied up, quite honestly, with a very unedifying spat over vaccines between the EU and UK. The UK is trying to summon the EU ambassador to London but, of course, it has not provided the relevant individual with any diplomatic credentials, although the *chargé d'affaires* is a noted and, indeed, very brilliant diplomat.

When does the Taoiseach next intend to speak with the Prime Minister? Does he intend to put Ireland's very serious concerns with the British Government's now second attempt to break international law at the forefront of that conversation? We are dealing with many issues on the Brexit horizon. Our own grace periods are due to conclude at the end of this month. Crucially, this will not be the first, last or only time that issues will remain in the post-Brexit era.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Is it not pretty embarrassing that Boris Johnson's Government has managed to do a better job of rolling out the vaccination programme than our Government? This is the Prime Minister who made an absolute hames of the initial response to the pandemic and who, to put it mildly, has shown incompetence at many levels during this crisis. However, Boris Johnson's Government is streets ahead of us in terms of securing the vaccine and rolling it out. Does the Taoiseach have an explanation as to how we could get it so wrong and even Boris Johnson could get it so right? Serious questions need to be asked. As difficult as I suspect it might be to do so, did the Taoiseach obtain any insights from Boris Johnson on the telephone as to how the British Government got it so right and we got it so wrong and why our vaccination programme is in serious trouble and so far behind the UK? This has potentially serious consequences in terms of there being an all-Ireland epidemiological unit, with high levels of vaccination in the North and pitifully low levels here, with all the possibilities that has of encouraging variants and so on, which could undermine everybody's efforts. In all seriousness, I would like an explanation. Does the Taoiseach have an explanation as to the incredible contrast between what we have done here on vaccination and what Boris Johnson has managed to do?

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I wish to raise two issues. First, I share the concerns that have been voiced here around the slowness of the vaccination programme. It is absolutely imperative we have those conversations, not just with London and the British system, but that we explore all avenues in respect of supply. I believe the issues around delivery of vaccines also need to be straightened out. I raised with the Taoiseach previously the issue of family carers and the fact they have not been afforded any level of priority. I remind him of that issue and ask him again to ensure that family carers will be recognised and given their rightful place in the order of priority relating to vaccination.

Second, I put it to the Taoiseach that last month we had statements on the New Decade, New Approach agreement. We made specific reference to the Stormont House Agreement and reflected again on the importance of dealing with the past and with legacy and on the fact the British Government has failed to honour its commitments in that regard. In fact, it has threatened to bin the Stormont House Agreement and walk away from the very mechanisms we require to deal with the legacy of the conflict. Did the Taoiseach raise the Stormont House Agreement with the Prime Minister?

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The Taoiseach: First, we agreed during our telephone conversation that we will have a more substantive meeting in the coming period in order to look more fundamentally at the British-Irish relationship post Brexit, which is important. My sense is that the politics being played in the United Kingdom are not constructive in the context of the European Union. The issue relating to the protocol in terms of the dates could have been resolved within the joint committee. Broader issues also fall for consideration in terms of the refinement of the protocol, if that is possible. What has happened here is that the British decision has been counterproductive to any response from the European Union, which has no alternative but to take and invoke legal action in terms of the breach that has now occurred. We have made it clear to the United Kingdom on an ongoing basis - I have also made it clear to the Prime Minister - that unilateral action of this kind does not advance or progress these issues but actually retards them and is regressive.

One gets the sense, however, that there is sometimes an ongoing narrative and polemic around the UK-EU relationship. That is not good. It may suit domestic politics but it is not good in terms of a more sustainable long-term constructive relationship between the European Union and United Kingdom. To me, that is of more fundamental concern than the specific breach we are discussing and this ongoing approach towards the European Union. I read a report in *The New York Times* this morning which states the EU could have exported up to 8 million vaccines manufactured in Europe to the UK with open borders. The protestations do not, therefore, stand up in terms of the EU approach to the United Kingdom in respect of vaccines.

To respond to the points made by Deputy Boyd Barrett, the first decision the United Kingdom made was not to use the normal authorisation process in validating the vaccine. In other words, we waited four weeks or so for the European Medicines Agency, EMA, to authorise the various vaccines. The UK did not do that. It authorised its vaccines under an emergency provision. This would normally not be done for vaccines because they are being injected into healthy people. People can weigh that up. The clinical advice was that was not something we should do and that for public safety around vaccines and protecting the public, we should go through the authorisation process. That gave a four-week minimum start to the British vaccination programme.

The second issue was the one-dose approach. Opinion is still divided on this, particularly around variants. Recently, Dr. Anthony Fauci in the United States, who has regular engagement with his UK counterparts, said there is no definitive science on this. He said, for example, he would not approve a one-dose strategy. He and others believe that it can create a vulnerability around the subsequent introduction and spread of variants.

We have decided to stick to the data as presented by the companies. The national immunisation advisory committee advises us clinically on how to dispense the vaccines, particularly in terms of dosage and interval periods. It reviews its advice in the context of data that emerge about the efficacy of the vaccines.

With the Irish vaccine programme, 95% of what we get, we give out within a week. That is not a vaccine programme in trouble. There is a broader global supply issue. As I said earlier, the big three vaccine producers are China, Europe and the United States. They will remain the key vaccine producers and manufacturers right through and beyond the summer.

We have succeeded in this country in vaccinating those most vulnerable to disease, severe illness and death. That is a significant achievement in itself and it should be acknowledged.

We have vaccinated residents and staff of nursing homes, front-line healthcare workers and the over-85s, and we are now progressively vaccinating the over-80s and the cohort with underlying health conditions. The whole strategy is to try to get the vaccines to those who are most vulnerable. That gives them protection and broader society greater opportunities and options in how we conduct our lives once we have that done. We are on target to do that. The HSE revised the figures yesterday from 1.2 million to 1.1 million vaccines. We got notification this morning of an increase in the number of Pfizer/BioNTech vaccines we will get. The EU is scouring Europe to see if we can create additional manufacturing capacity for the production of vaccines. The relationship between the US and Europe is also important in this regard for the avoidance of protectionism around vaccines. Europe has played this straight up to now in facilitating other countries in having contracts that they freely entered into with the manufacturing companies met.

I take the points made by Deputies Alan Kelly and Boyd Barrett on Northern Ireland. I welcome the fact that Northern Ireland is doing well in its vaccination programme. It is good for the island. The more people we have vaccinated on the island, the better. In terms of alignment subsequently, there will be issues. We have to move in accordance with the public health advice we receive. We also have to take on board the impact of the variants. We are getting hospitalisations and ICU numbers down, as well as case numbers. People's adherence to the guidelines is working and having an appreciable impact on the reduction in case numbers.

On the family carer issue, I outlined the cohorts we have vaccinated. We obviously want to move to the next cohorts. Essentially, the principle will always be those who are most vulnerable. We accept fully the case for family carers. The matter is under constant review by NIAC.

European Council Meetings

3. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his attendance at the European Council. [43548/20]

4. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his attendance at the European Council meeting held on 25 and 26 February 2021. [13100/21]

The Taoiseach: I propose to take Questions Nos. 3 and 4 together.

I have participated in several engagements with my fellow members of the European Council in recent months. We met in person in Brussels on 10 and 11 December, by video conference on 21 January and, again, on 25 and 26 February.

At the European Council meeting in December, we discussed Covid-19, in particular the authorisation and roll-out of vaccines which began across the European Union shortly after Christmas. We agreed the circumstances in which rule of law measures in the multi-annual financial framework and the Next Generation European Union recovery package can be invoked, enabling the Council and European Parliament to adopt formally the package worth €1.8 trillion which will play a vital role in supporting Europe's economic recovery.

We endorsed the binding European Union target of a net reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2030 of at least 55% compared with 1990 levels, a crucial step towards a climate-neutral European Union by 2050. We also agreed on the need for co-operation to tackle terrorism

and violent extremism, both online and offline.

On international matters, we discussed Turkey's recent provocative activities in the eastern Mediterranean. It was agreed to return to this issue. We stressed the importance of a strong strategic transatlantic partnership and close co-operation on shared challenges with President Biden's Administration. The European Council President, Ursula von der Leyen, provided an update on the then negotiations with the United Kingdom which subsequently resulted in an agreement on 24 December. That agreement entered into force on a provisional basis on 1 January.

The meeting of the European Council was followed by a meeting of the Euro Summit which welcomed the agreement reached in the Eurogroup on the reform of the European Stability Mechanism.

In our meetings by video conference on 21 January, 25 February and 26 February, discussion focused on Covid-19, including the epidemiological situation across Europe, particularly the emergence of threats represented by new variants. There was agreement that vaccine production roll-out and authorisation should be accelerated where possible. It was also agreed that while travel restrictions are necessary at this time, borders should stay open to ensure the free flow of goods and services within the Single Market. We also discussed work to improve European Union co-ordination to ensure better prevention, preparedness for and response to future health emergencies.

At our meeting on 26 February, there was an exchange with NATO Secretary General, Jens Stoltenberg, following which we discussed EU security and defence matters. I welcome the development of a European Union strategic compass which will identify the key challenges in the period to 2030 in terms of crisis management missions, resilience capabilities and working with partners. The aim is for this to be adopted in early 2022.

The High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell, also briefed us on the situation in the Southern Neighbourhood region. President von der Leyen recalled the strategic importance of partnership with the region and the acute need after Covid to support its long-term socioeconomic recovery.

Deputy Alan Kelly: We are short of time but it is fair to say the European Commission has not covered itself in glory with the vaccine roll-out. I note from his earlier reply that President von der Leyen texted the Taoiseach on the new amount of vaccines coming to Ireland, which is pretty small considering the losses we have had in recent weeks and the shortfall in the vaccines that were meant to be delivered originally.

The Taoiseach did not get time to finish his reply about discussions with Pfizer and Merck. I want to clarify some points. Did we try to get the Pfizer vaccines like Denmark and Germany? Can we demonstrate how we did that? Many of us have asked this question but we have never been given full clarity.

The Commission has also put forward proposals on travel as we come out of this. Cyprus and Greece have said they will accept any visitor who is vaccinated. Where are we as regards a European Covid passport?

Will the Taoiseach explain the reason AstraZeneca supplies to Britain do not seem to be affected? Why are supplies to Europe affected?

On a domestic note, the Tánaiste stated 1.6 million vaccinations would take place in June. It seems everything is getting pushed back but now they are going happen in June. He said that in the past half hour.

As regards mandatory quarantine, I note that people can be flying in, for instance, through Schiphol to Cork. Where will people who come in from Brazil, through Schiphol, to Cork be quarantined?

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Can the Taoiseach clarify whether the British Prime Minister had given him notice of his proposal to act unilaterally and outside of the remit of the joint committee in respect of the protocol? Was the Taoiseach given advance notice of that or any indication that was about to happen? If the Taoiseach was, did he share that information with members of the Cabinet?

It is imperative that we have clarity on all manner of issues but for the purposes of this discussion, on the precise actions that Government has taken in respect of sourcing a wider supply of vaccines within the European system and outside of it. The issue of the Pfizer vaccine has been raised by Deputy Kelly. I am interested to hear the Taoiseach's answer to that. More widely, in respect of other vaccines, what exactly has been done? What exactly is proposed to be done to widen and strengthen our capacities in terms of vaccine supply?

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: It seems the European Union has performed extremely badly in securing the supplies of vaccine that we need and the contrast with Britain is stark. I wonder the extent to which this is because the European Union is deferring to the big pharmaceutical companies that are producing the vaccine because of their desire to make money and so on. I say that because, for example, the World Health Organization is calling for support for the People's Vaccine issue, which will be voted on at the World Trade Organization where Europe is holding out against the waiving of intellectual property rights, the sharing of technology and so on that would be necessary to ramp up supplies. It seems to me that this is because they are kowtowing to the companies, which are securing to maximise profit from the production of the vaccine. Even the contrast with the United States is interesting. Joe Biden has seized the means of production. He has done a socialist thing. He seized the means of production with the Defense Production Act in order to ramp up supply but we do not seem to have the same attitude.

The Taoiseach might also comment on what efforts have been made - I asked a question but I did not really understand the answer - in engagement we have had with Russia and China over their vaccines and why we are not trying to secure supplies of those vaccines. Every day we do not have vaccine rolled out is another day of hardship and sacrifice for the people of this country.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: I want to ask the Taoiseach whether Ireland, at a European Union level, is supporting the waiving of intellectual property rights for vaccines, given that it is in our interests that this is tackled at a global level. Why is Ireland ruling out sourcing additional vaccines outside the European Union framework of supply? What is the reason for that? Are all other avenues to get additional vaccines being exhausted? Why is it the case that other European Union countries have been able to get additional vaccines and Ireland has not succeeded in doing that?

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: The reason this has been raised so often is because of the damage that it is doing to the country. Ireland has had the longest and most severe lockdown of

any country in Europe. According to Reuters a couple of weeks ago, Ireland had 163 days of workplace closures and that compared to Germany, which had 34 days of workplace closures. The reason for the length and severity of the lockdown in this country is because the Government has not got the other tools against this virus right and prime among them is the issue of the vaccine. There is a massive cost to society from this. There are 830,000 people currently on hospital waiting lists. We have heard oncologists telling us that there will be an influx of far more advanced cancers into the system because the health service is not able to deal with people who have non-Covid illnesses.

From my perspective, the Minister, Deputy Stephen Donnelly, has been involved in horizon politics. Every time he sets an objective and a date, by the time we get to that date, the objective slides back into the horizon and we never get to the objective. Deputy Donnelly stated that we would have all of the nursing homes vaccinated by the end of January. They were still vaccinating nursing homes at the end of February. On 14 February, the Minister said that within three weeks, all those over the age of 85 would be vaccinated. In my county, I know of GP surgeries that do not yet have a date for their first tranche of vaccines for those over the age of 85.

Other countries have been proactive. We have seen Austria and Denmark get involved in a partnership with Israel to see can they find vaccines. We have seen other countries in the European Union seek to additionally chase down supply.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: This is my final point. I asked Deputy Stephen Donnelly last week in a parliamentary question what actions he had taken to procure additional vaccines outside of the European supply chain. The Minister said none.

The Taoiseach: There were a broad range of questions. I would say at the outset it would be interesting if Deputy Tóibín followed up that story on Israel. How many vaccines will those countries get in the next month from Israel or the month after that or the month after that? That is the point. There will be no immediate dividend from that particular venture any time soon in terms of additional vaccines, because Israel is vaccinating its own country and will continue to do so. The reality is, as I have stated here repeatedly today, the key to this is increased production and manufacturing capacity.

We have taken on all our full offerings from the European Union in the pre-purchase agreements in respect of the companies that have so far been authorised, namely, Pfizer-BioNTech, Moderna and AstraZeneca. AstraZeneca has not fulfilled its contractual commitments to the European Union. It has fallen very significantly short of its contractual commitments to Europe. That has caused considerable annoyance within the European Union and resulted, as we know, in the decision by the Commission in respect of the protocol and so on, so angry was the Commission at the time at the degree to which AstraZeneca had not fulfilled its contractual obligations. The next company will be Johnson & Johnson but it has been clear that it will be April before it will be issuing supplies to the European Union, even though it will be authorised soon by the European Medicines Agency.

We have approached Pfizer. I approached Pfizer here in Ireland. I made it clear to the Pfizer corporation that Ireland would be willing to support in any way any reconfiguration of any plant in Ireland to generate additional vaccine production. Most of the pharmaceutical companies in Ireland are involved in the production of very valuable medicines, and indeed vaccines, for

use elsewhere in respect of different diseases globally. We made that offer but, as I said earlier, Pfizer has come back and stated that it is concentrating on the Belgian plant. It reconfigured that Belgian plant and has increased its capacity, as well as in Marburg, Germany, in its work with BioNTech, which has also substantially increased production and supply lines and will continue to do so.

In terms of Johnson & Johnson, for example, President Biden brought Merck and J&J together. I immediately spoke with our IDA Ireland people and asked whether we could get that deal in Ireland, that is, could J&J and Merck coalesce in respect of their plants in Ireland to increase manufacturing capacity. Again, the answer was that would not be happening here because of what is going on in Carlow, for example, in the Merck plant, and the commitments the company has there and with other plants. Anything we can do to support the companies in increasing production and capacity, and utilising Irish manufacturing capacity towards that end, we will do. If that means state aid support, we are open to doing that. We have made that clear to all of the companies and will continue to do that.

We should not get into an ideological position on intellectual property and should be mindful of the questions that need to be asked as to why AstraZeneca has found a certain difficulty in fulfilling its contracts. Arrangements have been agreed and we are not deferring to big pharma or anything like that.

One of the great achievements that has been missed in all of the debate and narrative is that within ten months, because of the pre-purchase agreements and the funding upfront that enabled the development of the vaccines, we had the extraordinary situation where we actually had three vaccines authorised in ten months. This would never have happened before in the history of the development of vaccines. That is a plus. The model that was used may not meet with Deputy Boyd Barrett's ideological approach but it actually has worked in the production and development of vaccines that have been very effective in reducing severe illness and mortality and are increasingly showing evidence of reducing infection rates.

I grant that there is an issue with the performance of AstraZeneca in respect of the UK market and the European contract. That is a fair point and the delivery to the UK market from AstraZeneca needs to be examined further as it is in sharp contrast with the fulfilment of its contract with the European Union.

After Johnson & Johnson, we are hoping that CureVac will come on stream and we have not factored that into any figures towards the end of the second quarter. That will be another important additional vaccine.

On the travel proposals, the European Commission has issued a communication on what it is calling a green pass. We are not yet at that stage because public health is cautious regarding the longer term efficacy and utilisation of the passports. There are also civil liberties issues related to the rights of citizens, for example, in making it imperative to have a passport to do various things in society and to travel.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Could we get a brief answer on the Chinese and Russian vaccines?

The Taoiseach: On Russia, the Sputnik vaccine producer has been invited for a long time now to apply for European Medicines Agency, EMA, authorisation. My understanding now is that it is doing so. Incidentally, Russia is a long way from vaccinating its own population. It

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will have huge challenges in that regard. If the Sputnik vaccine is approved by the EMA, we will have no difficulty in using it and, likewise, the vaccine from China if it is approved by the EMA. We must have some authorisation mechanism for vaccines and I hope most people will accept that.

The vaccines were approved late in December and the bulk of our restrictions were imposed prior to the vaccines arriving on the scene. I ask Deputy Tóibín to compare average mortality and incidence rates in Europe or the UK with those in Ireland. There was also a dividend from the restrictions we put in place. They have been very difficult for people but we would all agree that we have to put public health and the health service first in ensuring the latter is not overwhelmed as happened last January and February when numbers were too high.

Government-Church Dialogue

5. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his dialogue and meetings with faith leaders. [43328/20]

6. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his recent engagement with faith leaders. [13193/21]

The Taoiseach: I propose to take Questions Nos. 5 and 6 together.

As part of ongoing dialogue with churches, faith groups and non-confessional bodies, I have met with faith leaders on a number of occasions since my appointment as Taoiseach. On 28 October 2020, I met with representatives of the Catholic Church, Archbishop Eamon Martin, Archbishop Diarmuid Martin, Archbishop Michael Neary, Archbishop Kieran O'Reilly and Bishop Dermot Farrell. Discussion focused mainly on the effect which the Covid-19 restrictions have on the health and well-being of the faith community and the great desire to return to worship as soon as possible.

On 17 November 2020, I met with representatives of churches, faith groups and non-confessional bodies, including the Church of Ireland, the Catholic Church, the Hindu community, the Humanist Association of Ireland, the Irish Buddhist Union, the evangelical community, the Irish Council of Churches, the Islamic community, the Jewish community, the Methodist Church, the Greek Orthodox Church, and the Presbyterian Church. The discussion focused again mainly on the impact of level 5 restrictions and the importance of public worship, particularly at this time, with high levels of anxiety and loneliness within communities. Participants requested that consideration be given to allowing places of worship to open for congregational prayer at level 3 of the framework, stressing that the practice of public worship is paramount to all faith communities and particularly for some during Advent and Christmas.

On 23 November 2020, senior officials from my Department held a further meeting with representatives of churches, faith groups and non-confessional bodies. As Deputies are aware, since these meetings, places of worship reopened for public worship from 1 to 26 December when, due to the increased spread of the virus in the community, it became necessary to move the country to level 5 restrictions. As a result, religious services moved online and places of worship remain open for private prayer only.

On 19 February last, I again met with representatives of the Catholic Church, Archbishop

Eamon Martin, the newly-appointed Archbishop Dermot Farrell, Archbishop Kieran O'Reilly and Archbishop Michael Neary, to discuss the current level of Covid-19 restrictions and the church's desire to return to worship, in particular, during the season of Lent with the approach of Holy Week and Easter. Recognising the huge challenge which the pandemic poses, the archbishops emphasised that they wished to continue supporting the public health message and to encourage all necessary measures, including vaccination, to protect health and well-being, especially of the most vulnerable. They shared their concern that life at present is particularly stressful and difficult for people to endure, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually. Recognising the spiritual comfort and hope that participation in public worship brings, the archbishops asked that public worship resume when an easing of restrictions is considered. They expressed a strong desire that people gather safely this year for the important ceremonies of Holy Week and Easter. They also requested consideration of an increase in the number of the bereaved who may attend funeral Masses. I thanked the archbishops for their support and acknowledged the importance of the church community and people's lives at this time of stress and worry. I outlined the ongoing concerns regarding the spread of the virus, particularly the new variant, stressing that any increase in mobility can have serious consequences for public health and put pressure on the health service. We agreed to maintain dialogue as the situation evolves.

On 25 February, senior officials from my Department held a further meeting with representatives of churches, faith groups and non-confessional bodies to discuss Covid-19 restrictions and related matters. The Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference in a statement yesterday expressed its disappointment in not receiving a response with regard to the easing of restrictions on the numbers at funerals. As I have said at meetings with the archbishops, unfortunately, due to the serious nature of the pandemic, it is not possible to give guarantees of future levels of restrictions. However, next steps will be clarified in the lead-up to 5 April.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: The death of a family member is one of the most raw and emotional times anybody will experience. Funerals are very difficult at any time but during Covid-19, for many, they have been a complete disaster. At the moment, attendance at funerals can be a lottery for family members. We have reports from around the country of local priests refusing access to a church to family members on the death of their loved ones. This is having a devastating effect on families. It is well-known psychologically that the grieving process is very important and if it does not happen at the right time, those issues can remain with people for the rest of their lives. The strange thing about this is that in most towns the church is the biggest building. Ten people would be lost in most churches. People are being refused access to a church for a funeral but can go across to the local Aldi or another retail outlet and queue up for crisps and wine, along with 12, 13 or 14 other people. That does not make sense.

I understand it is not an easy job for the Taoiseach to balance all of the rights in this regard. However, Ireland is an outlier in how restrictive it is regarding religious and funeral services. Only two other countries are as restrictive as Ireland is on funerals. Will the Taoiseach consider allowing churches to open for religious services on Easter Sunday? The Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that the practice of religion is a human right. Even for people without a faith, the importance of faith is very obvious on a human rights basis alone. In recent days, faith leaders have said they were disappointed with the absence of return to them, via the Taoiseach, on the issues they have raised.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: The Sisters of Charity have been again implicated in really quite shameful practices, in terms of the revelations about illegal adoptions and their involvement in St. Patrick's Guild. The order has also been implicated in the mother and baby

home scandal but, incredibly, this same religious order will be running the National Maternity Hospital, against a background where Archbishop Diarmuid Martin said last May that under no circumstances, regardless of the outcome of the transfer to the St. Vincent's Holdings group, which is controlled by the Sisters of Charity, was there a place for abortions in hospitals run by the Catholic Church. This is extraordinary stuff. There are visually impaired and disabled residents near the campus of St. Vincent's Hospital in St. Mary's Telford, who themselves went through mother and baby homes and who are now being evicted by the Sisters of Charity. Elderly women who are blind are being evicted by the Sisters of Charity. This is a publicly funded critical part of the national health service but run by a religious order that is unaccountable to anybody and has behaved in these ways. Does the Taoiseach raise these issues? Is it not way past time that our hospitals and the assets these religious orders own are taken back into public ownership?

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: What conversation did the Taoiseach have with faith leaders prior to and following the publication of the commission's report into mother and baby homes? What conversations has the Taoiseach had with them in respect of the whole scenario around adoptions, including illegal adoptions and the role of various churches and religious orders in all of this? In the previous round, I put a question to the Taoiseach on whether Boris Johnson gave him prior notice of his intention to tear ahead and act unilaterally. Will the Taoiseach clarify whether he was in receipt of that information?

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: With regard to the Taoiseach's dialogue with religious and faith leaders, has he raised issues regarding illegal adoptions and the potential transfer of the National Maternity Hospital to a trust set up by one of the religious orders that reflects their ethos and values? Will the Taoiseach be looking at that again?

The Taoiseach: To respond to Deputy Tóibín, I fully accept that one of the saddest parts of the global pandemic and the impact on society has been the inability of families to grieve, in the way we do in Ireland, their lost ones who have passed away. This has been a terrible loss to those bereaved. That so few can attend a funeral is a further traumatic blow to the families. They do their best in the circumstances to remember their loved ones.

The public health advice has been clear on this. I would say to the Deputy that it is not what happens within the church that is the problem, or attendance at the mass, it is what happened afterwards that has been a problem. There have been well-documented cases of significant spread of the disease at events after funerals in various locations throughout the country. The difficulty is always where does one draw the line. Believe me, I have exercised on this on quite a number of occasions. We took decisions to increase numbers before Christmas at the end of the November restrictions. It is very difficult. We will be guided by public health advice on this aspect.

The variant is something I feel people do not quite get all the time. The variant creates a different situation in terms of the spread of the disease right now in this phase. We need to keep this foremost in our minds. It is not like the second wave or the first wave. The B117 variant spreads much more rapidly than original iterations of the virus. This is what is informing a very conservative and cautious approach to what is allowed and what is not allowed and the restrictions that have been put in place. It still remains a concern. The number in hospital at present is 357 people. This is still higher than at the peak of the second wave. Likewise, the numbers in ICU are very high. If we let the guard down too quickly and this variant gets control again, it will spread very rapidly.

We did say we would engage. I made clear the challenges and difficulties. Today is 10 March. In the week leading into 5 April, we will review the situation. We will take advice from public health and we will then advise on what we believe is the best way forward for the following six weeks after that.

To respond to Deputies Boyd Barrett and McDonald, these meetings were not about any issue other than the Covid-19 restrictions. All of the meetings I have had were in this context. We have written to the religious orders saying they should make a contribution to any redress scheme developed by the Government, which we hope to have ready, or the work of the interdepartmental committee ready, at the end of April. The information and tracing Bill will be published by the Minister and he is making solid progress on what will be comprehensive legislation in terms of access to one's identity and information.

As for hospitals, I am of the view that hospitals which are predominantly or overwhelmingly funded by the State should be in State ownership. That is my view. The State now essentially supports these hospitals in all manner and means through current and capital funding. In respect of the Sisters of Charity, again that should not be happening. I would have thought that whatever arrangements were being made that elderly blind women would be looked after and protected because that would be the Christian thing to do. I will have to come back to the Deputy on that. With regard to the National Maternity Hospital, my view is the ownership, control and ethos of it has to be informed by State and Government policy.

In respect of Boris Johnson, I did not get advance notice from him in respect of the decision on the extension of the dates pertaining to the protocol, but the following day we got some indication that this was afoot. It is a silly approach to dealing with the issue and it is wrong. Unilateral approaches do not work. We have been making these points repeatedly to the UK side. An approach is being adopted that I do not think is beneficial in the long term with regard to constructive UK-EU relationships.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Cathal Crowe): Perhaps the final few points could be responded to in writing.

Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science: Statements

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): I am delighted to be here today again addressing Dáil Éireann on the work of the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science. We have been working very hard in recent months to establish a new Department. Indeed, the Department was only formally set up in law last August and we have tried to pursue an ambitious agenda of work since then. I believe that if we get this right, this Department will be a powerhouse for good, working to ensure we build a stronger, more inclusive third level education system for this country, one that will serve our society and our economy well into the future. We want to ensure that after this Covid pandemic, instead of emerging with a return to the *status quo*, we are instead in a position to build back better, to emerge stronger in the aftermath and to ensure that our education system can provide equal opportunities for all, whether that is having the right skills to enter employment or to access education.

On Monday of this week, my Department launched its first statement of strategy. A statement of strategy is something every Department is legally required to publish, the significance

of this one being that it is the first for the new Department. This statement of strategy is a three-year plan developed with our stakeholders after public consultation. It outlines some of our priorities, including improving the transition to further and higher education for school leavers. I believe passionately in this. We do not have an integrated tertiary education system in Ireland. We have a higher education system and a further education system and while they talk to each other and help each other out, it is not integrated and we need to fix that. We are going to publish in April a new ten-year strategy to improve adult literacy, numeracy and digital skills. People are getting locked out of participation in society and the economy due to an inability to read, to write, to understand their ESB bill and to look after their own health needs in terms of health literacy and digital skills. We live in a country where one in eight adults lacks basic reading skills and one in five of us struggles with numbers. These are not the fault of individuals. It is a failure of ours, as a State and as public services, to address this issue and we need to do that.

We are going to overhaul the apprenticeship system. There is huge potential to make progress when it comes to apprenticeships, a model of earning and learning that works for many, but we are not where we need to be in that space yet. We have a plan to increase the number of registered apprentices in our country to 10,000 each year from 2025. We need to look at things like gender equality in apprenticeships. I got a briefing note recently that stated we had 26 female apprentices in Ireland in 2015. I genuinely thought it was a typo and I thought we were missing at least one or two zeros, but it was not a typo. We had 26 registered female apprentices in our country in 2015. We are now up to 1,000 but that is 1,000 out of 6,000 or 7,000, so we have a long way to go in that regard. There is a real chance to build a robust apprenticeship system that will work for businesses, big and small, and, crucially, work for citizens in getting where they want to be.

We are going to introduce new legislation to reform higher education governance and to have a sustainable approach to funding. The governance laws in higher education date to the 1970s, and 1971 was the last time the Oireachtas really looked at this area in detail. It is not fit for purpose and it needs to be modernised. I look forward to working with Members across the divide in this House and the other House to try to pass overarching governance legislation for the higher education sector by the end of this year.

We are going to undertake a national engagement on research and science, and develop a renewed national strategy to succeed Innovation 2020. The phrase “A once-in-a-generation opportunity” is a bit clichéd but it is true. The whole country is talking about research, science and innovation. Things that used to be done behind the scenes are now done very publicly, with people like Luke O’Neill and Kingston Mills just two who have become household names. We have a chance to excite a whole generation about science and research but we need a new national strategy in this regard. We do not need silos and fiefdoms and we need to all pull together. We are going to have a national engagement this year on what that strategy should look like. Again, I look forward to the input of Members. We have a chance to grow our international reach and position Ireland as a leader in higher education research.

We intend to establish technological universities right across the country and to advance North-South co-operation in higher education and research. There are things that it simply makes sense to do on an all-island basis and we need to do much more of that.

To focus on some of the particulars, I want to first talk about the Central Applications Office, CAO. I want to talk to leaving certificate students this year who are thinking about their transition to third level next year. As of 1 February, more than 79,000 applicants had applied

to the CAO, which is an increase of around 6,000 since this time last year. There are some interesting elements to that and I want to share them with the House. There has been a doubling of applicants from other EU countries in comparison to this time last year - I call it the Brexit effect and it probably is attributable to Brexit. It is encouraging to see more people choosing Ireland as a place to study but it is also important to acknowledge that an awful lot of people who apply from abroad do not actually end up taking up places, so that is a factor. We have also seen what I am calling a Covid effect. We have seen the number of mature applicants, that is, people who want to return to education and access higher education, significantly increase as well. First preference data show that some subject areas have increased in popularity. There have been increases of more than 20% in first preference choices for medicine, nursing and pharmacy courses, and a 70% increase in first preferences for environment-related courses. Of course, my Department has been aware of the fact that demand on the higher education system is increasing and we have been preparing for that. Some €18 million of additional funding was allocated in the last budget and that is going to deliver 4,100 additional college places this year, made up of 2,700 additional undergraduate places related to demographics and 1,400 additional places through what we call the human capital initiative.

We want to do more. Once there was clarity on the leaving certificate, we established a working group within my Department, engaging with all the stakeholders, to see what more can be done. I really think we can do something good here if we work right across the Government and not just in a departmental mode. Some of these extra places will also require placements so, for instance, if one wants to create an extra place in nursing, it requires a clinical placing. It is the same in medicine, in that if one wants to create an extra teaching post, it requires a teaching placement. We are working across Departments in this regard and I intend to update the Government in April on what more we can do for this year's leaving certificate students in terms of expanding the size of our further and higher education system.

I also want to go into a little detail on my plan to reform the pathways between further and higher education. I do not understand why we live in a country where we narrow the conversation when someone is 17 and tell that person to fill out a form and let us know what he or she wants to do with the rest of his or her life. That sort of mindset needs to go out with the dinosaurs. Why are we putting this pressure on young people to decide everything, or at least to feel they need to decide everything, at that younger age? We need to show them all their options. We need to show them further education, apprenticeship and higher education options. I want to expand the CAO form. I want to create one single portal through which students can apply to further or higher education but I also want to have joint programmes between further and higher education. I want people to have a single credit system whereby they can move much more easily from further education to higher education and, indeed, dip in and out of education as they require it. Not everybody has the luxury of packing their bags and heading off for four years to college. Some people have a whole variety of commitments and they need to do education on a part-time basis, remotely or in a flexible way, over a longer time.

I see Deputy Cairns is present. She arranged for me to meet a group from Skibbereen who made the point that no matter how many technological universities we open in the country, Skibbereen is always going to be far away from them geographically. The question is how we bring education into the community. The Deputy had some ideas with the Ludgate Hub in that regard. These are the sort of things we need to do if we are serious about creating an integrated tertiary system and I want to work with the Deputy on that. This is an area of reform that is long overdue. I am not sure how we have allowed ourselves, as a country, to get to this point where

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the points race seems to be the be-all and end-all every year and people only look to their other options if they do not get the points they require. We need to show everybody all of their options. We need to start the conversation by asking people what they would like to do and then show them four or five different ways of getting there. With the exception of a few professions, there are always four or five different ways of getting to where someone wants to get to in life. It is one of our big flagship projects in the new Department and I look forward to working with the Deputy on that.

I will be meeting the CAO today, after this discussion, and I look forward to keeping the House updated on that. We want to move forward collaboratively. We want to work with everybody on this, including with guidance counsellors, SOLAS, the CAO and university leaders. However, I am clear that now is the time to make these reforms.

Under current Covid restrictions, higher and further education has remained primarily online. I want to talk a little about higher education in the context of Covid, which has posed significant challenges for students across the country. The majority of students are now accessing education at the kitchen table or in the box room, not on the college campus. It is not the college experience they would be expecting and people are finding it very difficult. Contrary to a narrative that sometimes takes hold, students are not all out having house parties and street parties. That is a very small minority. Most students are really suffering and struggling this year. We have seen, from time to time, a small minority of students who let the side down but we have seen that in lots of different age groups and different demographics. The scenes in Limerick were disappointing and were a slap in the face but they are not reflective of the wider student population.

I was very disappointed to see some Members of this House engage in some sort of bizarre populism over the weekend by saying, “Shut down the universities. Close the doors”. It really shows a great ignorance as to what is actually going on in our universities, where very little is happening on campus. What is happening on campus is required to ensure people can graduate including access to labs, access for vulnerable learners, access for practicals and access for apprentices. Closing our colleges would mean students could not graduate and apprentices could not complete their courses. Some of the people calling for this would be the first to wonder, three or four years hence, why we have a shortage in nursing graduates or of certain other people coming from the universities. We cannot do that, and we cannot punish the many for the actions of the few. We are working on a plan for a significant increase in on-site activity for the next academic year. We have meetings every Friday morning with students’ unions, university leaders, ETBs and others on how we can do that in a safe manner and linking with public health.

I will briefly return to one of the other key priorities of the Department, the progression of a number of technological universities. Technological universities, TUs, are not just for education. They are also for regional development. They are an opportunity to end the mindset that all roads must lead to a large city. I have spoken about this to the Acting Chairman, Deputy Cathal Crowe, in his constituency. There is an opportunity here to bring higher education into rural Ireland and to make it available in counties, without everybody having to pack their bags, leave their counties and head to the perceived big smoke. The next step in the evolution of Irish higher education is to bring together the institutes of technology, take the best of that ethos and work together to form new technological universities and ally them with the strengths of universities in terms of access to research, state-of-the-art facilities and international reach.

I have received an application for TU designation for Athlone and Limerick institutes of

technology. If ultimately successful, this would see university education provision introduced and expanded in the midlands and the mid-west, opening opportunities along the Shannon. Later this month, I expect to receive an application from the Connacht Ulster Alliance and next month, all going well, an application for a technological university in the south east. We do not have a university in the south east of the country. It is the only region in which there is none. We must fix that. Deputy Cullinane is present, and I had a good meeting with Members of the Oireachtas from the south east on that topic this morning. It is an opportunity to transform the region, to drive investment into it and for all the counties of the south east to benefit. I am very much looking forward to that and to the Government supporting those initiatives through increased capital funding.

I must return to the issue of a sustainable funding model for higher education. This has been kicked around for far too long. We must start making decisions on this and to fund higher education properly and sustainably. A comprehensive economic evaluation of the funding options presented in the Cassells report, the report of the expert group on future funding for higher education, is under way and almost concluded by the European Commission DG reform programme. This review commenced early last year and I am expecting the work to be completed in the latter half of the second quarter of this year. My Department will continue to work with stakeholders on this comprehensive analysis, but the time for shirking is over. We must confront these challenges. I look forward to publishing all the information, having debates in the House and making a decision.

I look forward to answering the Deputies' questions and to going into detail on any and all aspects of the work of my Department. I will hand over to my colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy Niall Collins.

Minister of State at the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Niall Collins): I thank the Minister for outlining the important work being undertaken by the Department. I will speak briefly on the topics of literacy, numeracy and digital literacy, for which a strategy is currently being developed, apprenticeships, skills and eCollege.

Work is well under way by SOLAS on the development of a ten-year adult literacy, numeracy and digital literacy strategy. This new strategy will provide a framework to build on and streamline the substantial work that is already being done across a range of Departments and agencies to increase awareness of services for the public and to capture the contribution that can be made across government to deliver better literacy, numeracy and digital skills in the adult population. The extensive research and consultation phases of the strategy's development are almost complete. It is intended to send the completed strategy to the Government in the coming months.

With regard to apprenticeships, the Government has set a target of 10,000 new apprentice registrations annually by 2025. A new apprenticeship action plan will set out a clear and ambitious roadmap for the next five years which will more fully integrate apprenticeship into the further and higher education and training landscape. It will be finalised in the coming weeks. The apprenticeship incentivisation scheme, which provides an employer grant of €3,000 payable over two years, has supported employers to take on apprentices and retain them during this difficult time. Almost €4 million has now been paid out under the scheme, supporting over 1,100 employers employing 2,000 apprentices. Apprenticeship will have a very important role to play in our post-Covid recovery and that is why we will continue to invest in and expand the

apprenticeship system over the coming years.

As regards apprenticeship backlogs and the Covid-19 return to on-the-job training, a small number of critical and time-sensitive phase 2 apprenticeship classes returned to training on 1 March with strict Covid-19 measures agreed via the further education and training, FET, stakeholders forum. If all goes well with that cohort, another group will return on 15 March next. The Minister and I announced capital funding of €10 million for both SOLAS and the HEA to alleviate the backlog in off-the-job training for apprentices. This investment will provide almost 4,000 additional training places, which will both ease the short-term backlog and add capacity to the pipeline over the longer term. It will also support the Government's commitment to expand apprenticeship registrations to 10,000 annually by 2025. The funding will also provide additional Covid-related capacity in electrical and plumbing, as well as addressing equipment requirements for other apprenticeships such as hairdressing and pipe fitting.

I will also comment on the opening of retrofitting centres. The greening of the economy and upgrading our housing stock in terms of energy efficiency will be vital to our future. Developing green skills and addressing the climate challenge are key priorities in the new FET strategy. The further education and training system will be central to delivering the relevant skills through expansion of its network of centres of excellence. To date, two centres of excellence are up and running in Waterford and Wexford ETB and Laois and Offaly ETB. A further three centres are under development and are expected to be operational in the coming months.

In the context of skills to advance in the hospitality sector, two new industry-recognised programmes have been created for the hospitality sector, which were announced by me and the Minister on 12 February last. To support recruitment for these programmes, the Irish Hotels Federation is leading a series of roadshow events to highlight the hospitality and tourism initiative developed with strategic partners. Limerick and Clare ETB has also commenced the roll-out of programmes to support the sector. Six other ETBs plan to commence delivery of programmes in March with a further seven ETBs commencing in April.

Finally, I will comment on eCollege. The eCollege courses are temporarily being made available free of charge to all as an additional support to those impacted by Covid-19 containment measures. There were 33,281 eCollege enrolments in 2020. Up to 4 March 2021, there have been 13,395 enrolments on eCollege courses.

I will be happy to take questions from the Deputies.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: I am sharing time with Deputy Cullinane.

The Minister will be aware that, until now, people with disabilities have been forced to choose between academic scholarships and disability payments, including two very impressive women from my county, Mayo. Catherine Gallagher is planning to do a PhD in political communications at Dublin City University, DCU, and Muireann Cosgrave is in the process of completing her undergraduate course in analytical science in DCU and has been offered a PhD position in the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland. Most PhD students work part-time to get by, as the stipend given as part of the scholarship is often far below the minimum wage. This is simply not an option for many people with disabilities. In addition, people with disabilities often have extra expenses and costs for a variety of reasons. I sincerely hope there is cross-party agreement that these barriers in higher education should be removed.

Can the Minister assure Muireann, Catherine and other students with disabilities that this

barrier has been permanently removed? What is the exact methodology for removing the barrier? The Minister for Social Protection, Deputy Humphreys, said she would remove it in recent days. What guidance can the Minister give to current PhD students who have had their disability payments removed? Will there be a retrospective aspect to the change being made now, which I welcome? What other financial barriers, either in terms of grant funding or removal of social protection payments or other income, has the Minister identified that deter people with disabilities from pursuing their educational goals and fulfilling their potential? How quickly can the Minister, Deputy Harris, enforce the change, legislatively or otherwise, to remove those barriers?

With regard to medicine, exactly how many extra places did we create for medical students last year and how much funding did we allocate to medical places? I am really concerned. One of my constituents, who is a postgraduate who wants to go back to do medicine, contacted me recently. He has calculated that it will cost him €100,000 to do the four years in medicine. At a time when there is such a demand for doctors and clinicians we really need to look at that. The banks who give out loans for this purpose seem to be the ones who benefit rather than anybody else. Perhaps the Minister will answer specifically on the number of places and the places this year that will be funded.

On mental health and well-being, I conducted a survey on third level students' health and well-being. I sent the results with policy recommendations to the Minister's office. Four out of five college students have said that their college experience has been negatively impacting their mental health. More than 90% can report struggling with loneliness, with stress and with feeling disconnected. One in every four first year students are not aware of the mental health supports and counselling services available in their college. This is very worrying. Students shared stories of struggling to get an education while living and studying in completely inappropriate environments. Many are in cramped flat-shares with large numbers of other students or are living at home with families that are also juggling working from home and home schooling siblings. Many students are without proper Internet connections, laptops and desks that they need. I have instances in my constituency where the broadband has been down for three weeks flat. All of those students, right throughout national school, to secondary school to third level, cannot access their online studies. One student explained having to study while sitting on the bed as parents and siblings use the other desk spaces for home schooling and for working from home. This means that between studying and sleeping, students are in the same spot sometimes for 20 hours per day. This has obvious implications for the students' mental and physical health. Another student explained that due to sharing a cramped flat with other students he was relegated to sitting on the floor in the corner of a room as he did not have space for a desk. He spoke of struggling mentally and physically after enduring three-hour lectures in one position. Other students spoke of the particular challenges of being parents and trying to juggling care, home schooling and looking after their own education in cramped houses. The results of this survey are alarming and should be a wake-up call about the level of stress and hardship faced by students. The situations that students shared with us are heartbreaking and very concerning. The mental health implications are alarming. Sadly, more than one quarter indicated that they have no one with whom to share their thoughts and feelings. Yet so few, only 12%, have accessed the mental health support and counselling services offered in their colleges. Waiting months for counselling appointments due to limited staffing and resources is a major barrier. We cannot allow this pandemic to inflict long-term damage on the students. Mental health services need to be quick and easy to access. In the Minister's strategy document, however, which focuses on how human capital powers Ireland's knowledge economy, the subject is barely ad-

dressed. According to the *Cambridge Dictionary*, the exact definition of “human capital” refers to “employees, and all of the knowledge, skills, experience, etc. that they have, which makes them valuable to a company or economy”. I ask the Minister, what about the intrinsic value of students and young people as human beings? Students are not commodities and they should not be treated like hamsters on a wheel but I am afraid that they are being treated so. There is a looming mental health crisis among students and I urge the Minister to act urgently. I hope the Minister will review the information that I have sent and the policy recommendations that we have made.

Will the Minister support the Residential Tenancies (Student Rents and Other Protections) (Covid-19) Bill 2021 that is being put forward by the Union of Students in Ireland, USI? I acknowledge all of the work that has been done on that, and especially by my colleague Deputy Ó Broin. Perhaps the Minister could answer those questions. If he has not time to answer all of them maybe he will give the answers in writing.

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank Deputy Conway-Walsh for the constructive questions and points. Let me be clear at the outset: nobody believes students are commodities and nobody has a monopoly of concern for them. In the past two weeks, I have been meeting virtually with students in Cavan, Longford and in Donegal, with six student unions and in the Deputy’s constituency in Ballinrobe. The Deputy is right that it is an extremely tough and difficult time for students and for everybody in the State. I genuinely welcome the work the Deputy has done on the mental health and well-being study and I thank her for sending it to me. The Deputy will be aware that I have established a group, chaired by the USI, namely, the well-being and student engagement group. We are currently seeking submissions to see what more can be done to support students now. We will feed the Deputy’s findings and submission into that process. It is trying to do two things, one of which is to map out the services that are already there. I share the Deputy’s view that not every student can easily find or access some of the existing services that are there. Second, we will identify what more needs to be done. We have provided €5 million of funding for student mental health services. I am hearing from some students the significant benefit of that but I accept there is more we need to do.

I take the point about broadband and some of those broader challenges around remote working and remote studying. I am concerned that there would be any student in higher education without access to a laptop. We have purchased 17,000 laptops. If the Deputy will give me some examples of that issue privately I would be very happy to follow up directly on that.

The Deputy had two specific questions also. On the disability piece I acknowledge the advocacy the Deputy carried out on behalf of Catherine Gallagher and Muireann Cosgrave. This falls within the remit of my colleague, the Minister for Rural and Community Development, Deputy Humphreys, and I am pleased that she has moved swiftly in planning to amend the regulations. The idea that a student who does well will have supports taken away, thereby leaving him or her between a rock and a hard place is, I believe, a clear poverty trap. I thank the Minister, Deputy Humphreys, for the actions she has taken on this. There are a couple more things that I can do within my Department. There is a review of Student Universal Support Ireland, SUSI, under way, with public consultation opening on Friday. This is a chance to look at any of the anomalies there. A new national access plan is being prepared this year and we are very eager to engage with the Deputy on that. I have also asked my Department specifically to draw up proposals to ensure we can get more people with disabilities into higher education.

I will gather the data on the medical students figures from each of the medical colleges and

I will write to the Deputy with the numbers of places created last year and the cost.

The student accommodation Bill is a matter for the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage. This is not to pass the buck, it is just a statement of fact that it is housing legislation. I believe the issue should be looked at very seriously. There is a lot of sense in what students are trying to achieve in this regard. I have spoken to my colleague, the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, and he is actively considering it.

Deputy David Cullinane: We are on the cusp of something really big and exciting for the south east. I have been involved in politics for 20 years. For all those years and more, there have been campaigns for a university for Waterford and the south-east region. In less than a year this can be a reality and can happen. On 1 January next year, we could have a technological university for the south east, operating in the interests of every county and every person living in the south east. If this university is put in place, it will benefit young people and future generations who will not have to leave the region to get a university qualification. They can get it in the region where they live. It will benefit all the people who live in the south east and it will benefit businesses because of the research and development potential that will flow from the university. It is time for the people of the south east to unite behind this project. It is not a time to drop the ball. It is not a time for negativity. It is a time to see what is in front of us, to get this over the line and to push in the same direction to make it a reality for the people who will benefit from it. This is bigger than any party, any politician or anyone playing political games. This is about the future of the south east. It has to happen. We have to get it over the line.

I have some questions for the Minister on issues of concern that have arisen as part of the process. The first question is on capital funding. Will he confirm there is existing capital funding in the region of €150 million currently approved for all the institutes in the region and for a new campus in Wexford? Up to €50 million of that is money earmarked for Waterford. Can the Minister also confirm, if he is in a position to do so, that he can give a commitment that future additional capital funding for Waterford specifically will be sizeable and significant? Can he also confirm that, in appointing a new chair, that appointment process will be transparent and publicly advertised and that he will engage and consult with Oireachtas Members in advance of that? Can he also confirm there will be no change in the terms and conditions of employment for any and all new staff members in respect of the transition to a technological university? Can he also confirm whether decisions will be made on the structure of the new university in line with national policy and the national planning framework to ensure that the cohesion of the south east is built on solid foundations, with Waterford city acting as a university city, which it needs to do? Can he also confirm whether course provision in the future university will be a matter for the academics and the governing body, not a matter for politicians? If possible, I ask the Minister to give clarity on those issues.

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank Deputy Cullinane. I thank him for coming to the meeting earlier and I genuinely thank him for not playing politics with this issue and for being constructive on it. I hope it sends a message to the people of the south east, when he and I are agreeing with such enthusiasm on an issue, that we see the real significance of this to the south east. This is a game changer for the south east, not just educationally but from the perspectives of foreign direct investment, skills, research and jobs. The only region in the country not to have a higher education institution is the south east and we can change that now. On 1 January 2022, we can open the doors of a university for the south east. That is the prize. That is what we are all working for on a cross-party basis and I thank the Deputy for that. We are, in his own words, on the cusp of something good.

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To turn to the Deputy's specific questions, first, with regard to capital funding, approximately €150 million already has been allocated to a variety of projects in the south east as part of the technological university. Second, I am 100% committed, as is the Taoiseach, the Tánaiste, everybody in government and I believe everybody in the Oireachtas, to expanding the size of the footprint in Waterford in the new technological university. Specific sites are being looked at and specific proposals are being worked up by the governing authority. Third, I will publicly advertise for the chair and membership of the governing authority. I will engage with Oireachtas Members and it will be done in a transparent way. Fourth, there will be no change whatsoever to the terms and conditions for any existing staff member and anything to the contrary is misinformation, disinformation and untrue. Fifth, decisions will be made, as they should be for all public services, in line with the national planning framework and, sixth, politicians - me or anybody else - will not be deciding what course goes where. It will be done in consultation and leadership with the academics and decided by the governing authority.

Let us not allow anybody to play politics with this. All of us have a chance here to leave a lasting legacy for the people of the south east, and for the children who are in school today, to be able to go to university in their own region and not have to travel outside it. We know the benefits of that and I look forward to working with the Deputy on it.

Deputy Duncan Smith: I thank the Minister for his opening statement. The focus on higher and further education is welcome in terms of the three-year strategy but I want to focus on the apprenticeship element of it. For too long, apprenticeships have been at the back of the class when it comes to further education and skills. We in the Labour Party welcome the light the Minister is shining on it and the position in which he is putting apprenticeships in the firmament of further education and skills. That is vital because this country has a proud tradition of strong apprenticeships. Our craft apprenticeship system, for example, is the envy of many countries around the world not only in terms of its traditions but also the way in which those apprenticeships and the modules have evolved over years and how our workers who emerge from those are among the highest skilled, if not the highest skilled, throughout the world in terms of crafts.

In looking at the language of the Minister's three-year strategy in terms of a complete overhaul of apprenticeships, I would like a commitment from him that while we need to examine, improve and broaden apprenticeships, the ones that are working well and are the envy of the world will be protected and honoured in the new system and that we will not be undoing the great work that has evolved over decades in terms of those apprenticeships.

We need to look at employers that traditionally have been very strong in providing apprenticeships. I think of our airports and skilled apprenticeships in terms of aircraft maintenance and so on. We need to look at our local authorities, which have been hollowed out in terms of providing apprenticeships across a whole range of crafts and skills. That has to be reversed because if we are to meet our climate targets, one of the low-hanging fruits being the retrofitting of our homes, our local authorities and skilled workers within them will have to play their part. We need to be focusing our apprenticeships on that area.

We need to look also at what the trade union movement has done in this area over the years. In terms of the Minister's action plan for apprenticeships, what role are the trade unions playing as a stakeholder in this regard? I hope it is a strong one and that they are recognised specifically in that document as trade unions and that they will be a real part of that because they have done a great deal of the heavy lifting over the years in this country to keep apprenticeships strong. I

would like to hear the Minister's thoughts on that.

I want to speak to a specific area that is looking for some recognition and I would like the Minister's advice on it. It concerns workers who operate in the water and drainage systems. These are workers who currently have no recognition from the State in terms of any level of qualification, be it FETAC levels 5 or 6, Look Beyond or anything else. That is important work. It is skilled work. It requires knowledge of pumping, sewerage and pipe systems. It requires plumbing and electrical knowledge. It requires critical thinking and, ultimately, it requires problem solving skills. However, although domestic properties, people in business or hospitals would not be able to operate without having those skilled water and drainage companies and workers, at present they are not recognised. I have written to SOLAS on this in the past week hoping that we could develop some form or model of apprenticeship that would befit these workers. They work in every county in the State. They need and deserve recognition. As citizens, we need them as much as we need any other workers in this country, and we do not need to go into detail as to why that is the case, but it certainly is the case. I look forward to the Minister's response on those two issues.

Deputy Simon Harris: I will ask the Minister of State, Deputy Collins, to expand on the apprenticeships but on the water and drainage systems, the Deputy has highlighted a very important issue. I would be very happy to meet some people from that sector with the Deputy and SOLAS over the next couple of weeks to see if we can make progress.

Deputy Niall Collins: I thank Deputy Duncan Smith. With regard to apprenticeships, there are no boundaries or limits to what we can look into in terms of the feasibility of running and developing an apprenticeship programme. That is to follow on from what the Minister, Deputy Harris, said about that. What the Deputy outlined is absolutely the case. These are critical skills that are required in a modern environment.

The whole area of apprenticeships is a key commitment in the programme for Government. The Minister, Deputy Harris, and I, as well as our Department, are keen to destigmatise the area of apprenticeships, mainstream it and put it centre stage in terms of being a viable and rewarding qualification and career path for people to earn a livelihood and to live their lives in a fruitful and rewarding fashion.

We are developing the apprenticeship action plan, as the Deputy is aware, and we will be seeking to have up to 10,000 annual apprenticeship registrations by 2025. We consulted widely on the development of this plan. There were more than 60 written submissions.
3 o'clock There was a survey of 3,750 registered apprentices and more than 340 employers. They were obtained through our regional skills fora managers so it was an all-encompassing process. Everybody was consulted, including the trade union movement to which the Deputy alluded. We will shortly be launching the apprenticeship action plan, which will include the notion of an apprenticeship consortium.

This will consist of employers, sectoral employee representatives and education and training providers developing and updating the skills required for each of the apprenticeships. We will also place centrally in the whole concept a national apprenticeship office to help co-ordinate and review on an ongoing basis the whole area of apprenticeships. I hope that suffices.

Deputy Alan Farrell: I thank the Minister and the Minister of State for coming before the House. As a regular visitor to the committee on higher education, I find it is always great to

engage with them, as we have done on numerous occasions in the past few weeks.

The Minister touched on an area in which I have a particular interest. I was really pleased with his recent announcement on pathways to higher and further education. It is a particularly exciting opportunity within his Department and the Department of Education because it has been so long required for students. As the Minister quite rightly pointed out, for 17-year-olds to make choices at that young age in what could potentially affect the rest of their lives, there really needs to be a somewhat broader focus than the narrow focus of the CAO system. In tandem with the review of the leaving certificate, which my committee has agreed to undertake, it is a particularly exciting time for what is potentially an enormous beneficial change to the education sector in Ireland. I was also particularly pleased to hear the Minister talk of apprenticeships, further training courses and such, which form part of the State's offering. I have referred the Minister before to my proposals in my constituency, particularly in Swords, which is ready-made for such a training facility to be provided given the population and the proposed population growth in the near future. The training and apprenticeship opportunities the Minister of State has just outlined, specifically the national apprenticeship office and the plan being brought forward, are a really welcome development. I think the Minister will accept that education is the great leveller. It really does not matter what socioeconomic, cultural or ethnic background one comes from; education is an opportunity to realise the best that one can be. Therefore, the provision of the options the Minister has outlined is extremely useful.

I also wish to comment on the SUSI review. As the Minister will be aware, I have engaged on this matter in my constituency and there has been some really great feedback from that. There is great potential for beneficial change to be made there. When we look at expanding approved institutions, the barriers to graduate medical students, for instance, have been raised with me. They are important issues we can flesh out, most likely in committee at a later stage.

The Minister referred to foreign students, who are an integral part of our third level offering. It is heartening to hear there have been some improvements, though of course there is still the issue of fees, specifically when it comes to those students who come in from abroad but have not been able to attend in the same way, especially with those courses that require in-person learning.

My time is up but I will just say that for the first time in my ten years in this House, there are aspects to the education programme, apart from the schools building programme, that I am excited about. Those are some of the aspects I find particularly engaging at this time in the development of the new Department.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: I welcome both Ministers. Following on from Deputy Farrell's contribution, it is an exciting time to be part of a new Department. As a former teacher and educator, it is the apprenticeship side of things which really excites me. I think apprenticeships will finally get their long-overdue respect. They need to be a focus of the Government in rolling this out. I note the good work done by both the Minister and the Minister of State in speaking positively about the need to improve our apprenticeship programme and to deviate from the norm when it comes to third level provision. I know the benefit of an effective apprenticeship programme. Many of my friends and family have benefited from undertaking trades in the past. I note that both the Minister and the Minister of State have spoken about this topic in the past. This is about more than just conventional trades, and I welcome the expansion that is envisaged. That said, we need to do more to advertise the attractiveness of apprenticeships, particularly among younger people. Once health regulations can be adhered to and a normal

school environment resumes, I encourage the Department, the various ETBs and SOLAS to engage directly with schools in an almost roadshow-style campaign to inform students of the options and the benefits of pursuing apprenticeships. Too often apprenticeships are dismissed and students favour the traditional educational route. Above all else we need to inform people of choice. If we are serious about encouraging apprenticeships, we need to take action and be proactive in this regard.

Following on from that, I wish to ask the Minister about the development of a comprehensive green further education and skills development plan and where that process is at. We all acknowledge the massive retrofitting programme that is to be rolled out across the country in the next few years and the thousands of jobs that are likely to be created in plumbing, electrics, insulation, etc. I welcome the commitment to increase the total number of new registrations to 10,000 per annum in that regard. I ask the Minister to comment on the green further education and skills development plan and where it is at.

Finally, I will also mention SUSI. I know a review is under way and is due sometime in the summer but I wish to highlight again, as I have done via parliamentary question in the past, the plight of graduate entry medical students. I know the Minister will not be able to give a commitment here or predict what the outcome of that review will be but I ask that that be given its due consideration as part of that review process. Graduate entry medical students need to be considered for grant funding in the future.

Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh: I welcome the ambitious reform agenda and vision the Minister is setting out for his Department. I welcome in particular that commitment to further education, literacy and apprenticeships, which is really important, but the Minister will not be surprised if I return to the issue of the technological university for the south east, TUSE. My constituency colleague, Deputy Cullinane, has already covered quite a bit of ground on this. This was discussed extensively at the Oireachtas committee recently and the Minister described some of the commentary on the location of the headquarters of the new university as “misinformation, disinformation and downright nonsense”. I largely agree with the Minister’s view on this. There are certainly individuals seeking to make hay on this politically, but we can expect rumour to fill a void if there is an information gap, and the Minister can understand if the people of Waterford and the south east are twice shy because we have been bitten more than once by successive Governments. I really welcome the clarity of the answers the Minister has given on the floor of the Dáil today. That has been the clearest indication we have had to date. I have been speaking to TUI members in WIT and they have flagged some of their concerns with me. The academic staff, as the Minister will be aware, backed the memorandum of understanding put to them in 2019 by a huge margin, 93%. That is the level of goodwill that exists in respect of this project, but they have felt sidelined since and they are deeply worried about the public commentary as well. These are people who are hugely invested in the WIT project and the TUSE project. It is their hard work. These are the people who made WIT the leading institute of technology in the country, despite all the obstacles that were put in front of them. I have been clear and unequivocal in my support for the TUSE project from the beginning. In the Minister’s words, it is a game changer. I ascribe to that view and I welcome Deputy Cullinane’s views on the matter as well, but we need to see the definite shape of the project coming in at sharper focus as we close in on the deadline.

I thank the Minister and the Minister of State for engaging with Oireachtas Members this morning. My direct question is this: what plans does the Minister have to engage with these union groups and listen to their very valid and genuine concerns about things such as capital

funding, the composition of the new board and the future configuration of the new university and to give them reassurance, as the Minister has done on the floor of the Dáil today?

Deputy Simon Harris: I will start with Deputy Ó Cathasaigh's question because it is time-sensitive. I want to acknowledge what the Deputy has acknowledged, but the last time TUI members were balloted on this matter, they voted overwhelmingly in favour of this project. That shows their commitment and the scale of their ambition. I would add that the only thing that has happened between 2019 and now is that things have gotten better in respect of our level of commitment to the Technological University for the South-East of Ireland, TUSE, and to Waterford. There is now a firm commitment in relation capital funding and the expansion of the Waterford site. There is very firm commitment from the Taoiseach, the Tánaiste, me and everybody in Government. I know I am working closely with the Deputy on this issue. I have tried to give assurances in the floor of the House today and at my meeting with south-east Oireachtas Members earlier in terms of configuration around courses being decided by a governing authority on the basis of academic input and not politicians. I have also tried to give very clear assurances in relation to terms and conditions. There is no plan B - this is the chance. If we can get this through, and I receive the application by 28 April, we will make it happen. We will have honest, thorough and open engagement through every phase of this. I am happy to engage with the Deputy further. Do I have one minute and 17 seconds?

Acting Chairman (Deputy John Lahart): I wish the Deputy had, but there is another speaker.

Deputy Joe Flaherty: There was great excitement in Longford this week with the confirmation of the allocation of €10 million plus in URDF funding. It has come a number of months after €1 million was allocated to the Longford-Westmeath Education and Training Board, ETB, to develop a digital learning hub in Longford. The ETB is located on the Battery Road in Longford. It is at the very heart of the Camlin Quarter regeneration plans and it currently services 150 post leaving certificate, PLC, students there. There is a fantastic opportunity now for the ETB to develop a state-of-the-art third level campus in Longford town. There is a great tradition of construction in Longford, and the hope and expectation is that we can develop a purpose-built college for apprentices in the construction trade in Longford. For far too long, Longford has been in the shadows and this week we have finally started to emerge from those shadows. I certainly believe that such a campus would represent a new start and a new direction for Longford. I appeal to the Minister and the Minister of State to engage their the Department and Longford-Westmeath ETB to push ahead with what is doubtless an ambitious project, which at the same time could represent a landmark change in the delivery of education in County Longford.

Deputy Claire Kerrane: I thank the Minister for his statement. First, I wish to raise a few issues that I have been dealing with locally in respect of social care students. I welcome the Minister's earlier response to me in relation to this issue. As the Minister knows, the social care students have 800 hours of placement to be completed within their course time. Obviously, at this time, because of Covid, and indeed for the last year, there have been huge difficulties in completing those 800 hours. I was quite concerned to learn that clearly talks and engagement have been underway since March 2020, according to correspondence I received from the Minister, and clearly the alternative arrangements that are needed have not come to pass just yet. I appreciate and welcome the fact that the Minister has sought to intensify those engagements, because obviously students need certainty in relation to this issue and they are under pressure in respect of these placements. Therefore I would appreciate if the Minister could provide an

update on that. If he does not have an update, and I appreciate that this may be the case, perhaps he might come back to me in writing. There are a number of students who are trying to get through the course and they are under pressure in relation to these hours, so I would appreciate certainty for them on that issue.

I welcome what the Minister has said on the Residential Tenancies (Student Rents and Other Protections) (Covid-19) Bill 2021, that it will be looked at, and I hope it will be considered. That is welcome because we know that many students and families were really caught out, particularly by privately-owned student accommodation providers. I dealt with a number of them myself and some would not even respond or engage. It was really difficult and it left families caught out. I hope that as an Oireachtas we will take steps to ensure that student renters are protected and that they have far greater protections than they have had up to now.

On the review of Student Universal Support Ireland, SUSI, grants, I know that the Minister has said that the consultation will begin on Friday. I have seen reference made to the adjacent and non-adjacent rates which will be, and must be, looked at. I have previously raised with the Minister the issue of adjacent rates for students who live under 45 km from their college in rural areas where there is not that public transport link. In many cases, it is not available at all. Whatever comes out of this review, there must be consideration of the rural issue and how the grants are working for students who live in rural areas.

On the back to education allowance scheme, I appreciate that is a matter for the Minister for Social Protection, but of course the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science has a role to play in helping people and supporting them in accessing education. Cost should never be a barrier, but of course we know that it is. It is the case here and in many other places as well.

The qualifying period for those currently in receipt of the pandemic unemployment payment, PUP, has been waived so that they can access the back to education allowance. It has not been waived for those in receipt of jobseeker's allowance and benefit etc. For a whole range of benefits, including the one-parent family payment, claimants must be in receipt of payments for nine months before they can qualify for the back to education allowance. I ask the Minister to engage with the Minister for Social Protection, Deputy Humphreys, on this issue. We should be making access to education as easy as possible. If someone loses a job, I do not see why the person needs to be on jobseeker's allowance for nine months before he or she can access education. If the person wants to go back to education, that is brilliant and should be supported and encouraged.

Finally, another matter that has been raised with me by a number of constituents and students in particular is the Gaeltacht fees for students in Hibernia College. They cannot have the usual Gaeltacht experience because of Covid, which is understandable, but they are still being charged €650 per fortnight. They must have the Gaeltacht experience at home this year because of Covid. It will take place at their kitchen table or in their bedroom at a cost of €650. I ask the Minister to engage with the Minister for Education on this issue.

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank the Deputy for her points on the issue of social care workers and for her correspondence with me on this matter. I checked it out today because I thought she might raise it with me. Obviously, it is a matter for the professional regulator, CORU, but I appeal to all those working through Quality and Qualifications Ireland, QQI, to show flexibility. As we all know, there is a global pandemic ongoing. We need graduates coming through and

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this needs to be achieved in a way that protects professional standards but which shows a flexibility that recognises the reality of the pandemic. I am hopeful that can happen. We have seen progress with a lot of professions. The work for social care workers is truthfully going on, but I accept the urgency if it.

On SUSI grants, the adjacency rates will very much be looked at as part of the review.

On the social protection issue, we have actually ensured that the Department of Social Protection is represented on the steering group for that review to address some of the issues raised by the Deputy.

In respect of the Gaeltacht issue, as the Deputy has rightly alluded to, it is a matter for the Department of Education, but I will certainly engage with the Department on the matter.

Deputy Holly Cairns: First, in response to one of my September parliamentary questions, the Minister stated that all higher education institutions, HEIs, were to publish action plans on tackling sexual violence and harassment by February. I am wondering if all HEIs have complied and if not what steps the Minister is taking to ensure compliance. I would also like to note the Minister's work in this area and the progress being made on the framework for consent in HEIs.

Second, I wish to state that the review of SUSI is most welcome. However, in the meantime, there are a number of issues that need to be addressed. Students of private teacher training colleges are mostly not eligible for SUSI. The State is applying a double standard, as we are happy for them to be trained as teachers through these colleges but are unwilling to support them in their studies. Also, graduate-entry medicine students cannot access this support. These courses are only for graduates, but they are not classified as postgraduate courses meaning that these students cannot avail of either undergraduate or postgraduate supports. This situation needs to be rectified before the new academic year.

Third, and perhaps this is an issue for the Minister of State, the ability of students to progress in their apprenticeships is being affected by the pandemic. Not only are there expected delays in on-the-job elements, but some students are waiting for results of off-the-job phases, meaning that they cannot progress. It is confusing that this is the result of the pandemic, because it does not make sense. I ask the Minister responsible to look into these delays immediately and assure students that they will be supported through their apprenticeships if they take longer than expected.

I know the Minister is aware that for any number of reasons, including poor broadband in rural areas, some students do not have suitable study environments at home. I ask that he works with colleges and universities to facilitate these students being given priority in accessing campus facilities. I look forward to continuing my work with the Minister on remote learning in places such as the Ludgate Hub.

Before Christmas at the Oireachtas Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, the Irish Universities Association, IUA, highlighted that the employment control framework, which has capped the number of permanent staff in the sector, is unsustainable. At a time when student numbers are growing, we need more teaching staff. For years now, staff have been overstretched and more work is poured on early-career lecturers in precarious employment. The IUA is seeking a development structure whereby universities can manage their own workforce within a defined budget. What is the Minister's

response to this?

Finally, I would like to bring to the Minister's attention that I and most Opposition Deputies have co-signed Deputy Conway-Walsh's Residential Tenancies (Student Rents and Other Protections) (Covid-19) Bill 2021, which will provide greater protections for student renters and their families. The pandemic has highlighted many of the issues with this form of renting. I hope the Minister, in conjunction with his colleague, the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, will actively support the progression of that Bill.

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank the Deputy for her questions. In regard to the action plans for dealing with sexual harassment and violence, she is right that they were due at the end of February. I am awaiting a submission from my officials in this regard. My understanding is that the plans are all, or almost all, in, and I expect to be in a position to give a public update in that regard this month. There has been a lot of good work done in this area, from what I am hearing, across the sector, but there is a great need for that work. I will come back to the Deputy directly on this issue but, as I said, I expect to be in a position to give a public update this month.

In regard to SUSI, the Deputy has highlighted two legitimate issues. One relates to teacher training and the other concerns graduate-entry medicine. The Irish Medical Organisation, IMO, is looking to meet with me on the second issue. I know that organisation well from my engagements in my previous Department. I will take that meeting with the IMO on the issue of graduate-entry medicine and the anomaly, which it is fair to call it, that the Deputy highlighted in this regard.

The Minister of State, Deputy Niall Collins, will comment on the apprenticeships issue.

On access to campuses, we have a category called "vulnerable learners" and we do not define what "vulnerable" is. There can be a whole variety of reasons that students cannot learn well at home. As the public health situation improves, God willing, we will look to expand the interpretation of that category. I take the Deputy's point in this regard and I genuinely look forward to visiting the Ludgate Hub with her. It could be an example of a model that we need to roll out. I recently visited an initiative virtually, the Longford Women's Link, which enables women to access Carlow Institute of Technology services from Longford. For many of the women to whom I spoke, it would not have been possible to access higher education if they needed to travel. We are on to a winner in terms of the policy objective the Deputy is pursuing in this regard.

Regarding the employment control framework, the issue raised is a legitimate one. My Department is finalising an engagement with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform on this matter. I recently met with the Irish Universities Association to update its members in that regard.

I will engage with the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, on the student accommodation Bill to which the Deputy referred.

Deputy Niall Collins: In regard to the apprenticeship backlog and the return to on-the-job training, a small number of critical and time-sensitive phase 2 apprenticeship classes returned to training on 1 March, with strict Covid-19 measures in place that were agreed through the stakeholders forum. If all goes well with that cohort, another group will return on 15 March. As I said in my opening statement, we recently announced capital funding of €10 million for SOLAS and the HEA to alleviate the backlog in off-the-job training for apprentices. I will ask

SOLAS to give more up-to-date feedback directly to the Deputy on this matter.

Deputy Holly Cairns: For some people who are doing the apprenticeship programmes, the problem is that they have not yet got their results for the off-the-job training they did. This means that when they are on the job, that time is not being counted towards their apprenticeship. Will the Minister of State look into what the hold-up might be in this regard? It involves the desk work and other activity that could be going on during the pandemic. For a person doing an apprenticeship in mechanics, for example, who has completed the off-the-job activity and started the on-the-job training, the latter will not be counted because the results of the off-the-job training are not yet received. I ask the Minister of State to look into this issue as quickly as possible.

Deputy Niall Collins: I will revert to the Deputy on the matter.

Deputy Richard Bruton: The Minister, Deputy Harris, and the Minister of State, Deputy Niall Collins, are the right people to undertake the radical reform that is badly needed in this sector. The Covid crisis has underpinned some of the notable failings that exist and the need for accelerated reform in the area. I want to focus on four issues that strike me in this regard.

First, five years on from the start of the review of the leaving certificate, little has changed. We know that the examination is not fit for the nation's ambition, is creating stress for students, and is trapping teaching and learning in a straitjacket that is constraining its relevance to the modern world. Second, the junior cycle system and the predictive grades process have shown that it is possible to change the system radically without the roof falling in. We need to be ambitious in dealing with these issues.

A second point on which we need to focus is that there are many really important services on the front line in our economy for which there are inadequate career paths in place. I note, in particular, childcare, other caring areas and several more. That needs to be rectified.

Third, the Covid crisis has revealed that we have not been as effective as we should be in harnessing digital technology to transform teaching and learning. Many schools were caught flat-footed in this regard and that needs to change.

Finally, the voice of the student, which has been heard during the Covid period, must remain a strong one in advocating and pressing for reform. The Minister and Minister of State have significant leverage in making changes happen in the four areas I have outlined, even if they are not directly responsible for them.

I take the opportunity to raise three further issues, all of which are the responsibility of the Minister and Minister of State. First, I ask that they make creating a world-class apprenticeship platform a central plank of the recovery plan. I am talking about something on a far more ambitious scale than we have seen to date. Where is the public service in its commitment to develop and create new apprenticeships or even to take up those that are already in place? Where are the sectors that are clamouring for work permits in their development and implementation of apprenticeship programmes? Where are the large corporations in this regard, many of which are in sectors that, traditionally, have never had an apprenticeship scheme within their operations? We need to put pressure on those sectors to respond.

We also need to make it easier to get an apprenticeship. Sectors with low margins and high labour content need the €3,000 grant and perhaps even more. Support must be targeted at those

particular sectors. There are opportunities in this area but they will not evolve automatically as employer contracts if those companies are under pressure for their margins. We need to have a CAO-type application system for apprenticeships, with perhaps a long period at the start of apprentices' period of study off the job while a sponsor is found.

Finally, I ask that the Minister and Minister of State insist on common-entry grades for third level colleges in order to prevent the type of crazy points race we have seen.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: I have a question on a particular issue, to which I hope the Minister can respond. In the 17 years since I graduated from the University of Limerick, UL, the campus has grown exponentially but it no longer has the space to develop further. There is not adequate land to do so, nor is there sufficient road access from both sides. The campus straddles two counties, encompassing a part in Limerick city and a large portion that is now in County Clare. In fact, the majority of the campus has been developed on the Clare side of the river. This has been great, with huge co-operation between the two local authorities.

Last month, the Government approved phase 1 of the Limerick northern distributor road from Coonagh to Knockalisheen. This has been dubbed an information highway that will ultimately allow road connectivity between the Limerick Institute of Technology and UL campuses. UL management will tell anyone who will listen that it is totally inhibited from growing, expanding and developing at this time because of a lack of land to develop and a lack of road infrastructure on the Clare side of the campus. There are two actions required to address this, namely, the development of a road axis and the establishment of a strategic development zone on the Clare side. Has the Minister been made aware of these demands and, if so, how is his Department engaging with the Minister for Transport, Deputy Eamon Ryan, and the local authorities in advancing them?

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank Deputy Crowe for making me aware of these issues. I am very happy to engage with him, the local authority in Clare and other appropriate stakeholders in this regard. Expanding higher education is going to be a core requirement in terms of meeting demand and preparing for economic recovery. If there is no room for UL to expand in Limerick and it wants to look elsewhere, I would be very willing to engage with the Deputy and other parties to see whether we can assist in that regard. Perhaps we could meet to discuss the matter further.

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: I wish to raise two issues, namely, SUSI grants and students' well-being and mental health. The student grant limits need to be reviewed. Families are quickly finding themselves over the limit and students, therefore, ineligible for grants. While the pandemic is putting a downward pressure on incomes and there probably will be more people qualifying this year than in other years, it really should not take a pandemic for people to qualify for a SUSI grant. The income limits must be reviewed. I understand that the Minister recognises this and is taking steps to address it. Can that review be pushed on quickly in order that its findings are in place for people taking up college places next September? The review also needs to recognise that living 30 km to 40 km from a college is not living adjacent to it. The non-adjacent distance provision needs to be reviewed. Students' well-being and mental health have to be a priority. No matter what college year they are in, they have been feeling increasingly disconnected from campus and their colleagues. They feel isolated at home. Internships may be cancelled or diluted but still contribute to the grade, thus putting additional pressure on students.

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The Minister has recognised the issue of mental health among students and additional funding has been made available. Is the Minister measuring the success of this, however? How is it delivering for students? Students will quickly outline that they feel abandoned by the college and isolated at home, studying in their bedroom or the kitchen. Parents see their children becoming increasingly isolated, disconnected, stressed and worried. How is the Minister measuring the success of what he is doing? Is it being measured? It really needs to deliver for students. They are under such pressure, which is growing further.

Deputy Cormac Devlin: I welcome the Minister to the House to discuss the plans to improve and reform further and higher education and the research and innovation sector. As we have seen during the Covid-19 pandemic, the ability to innovate and adapt to the challenges posed has been critical. These skills should be at the heart of the culture we foster in higher education. After Covid, the relevant sectors and institutions must be supported. Alongside our elderly, young people have suffered particularly badly during the pandemic. They have missed months of school and college. Apprenticeships and placements have been put on hold and those affected have lost critical time in their lives in which to build relationships and friendships.

There are almost 415,000 people in the education and training sector, 27,000 of whom have a disability. They must all be supported as their courses and programmes resume. Where possible, clarity needs to be provided on arrangements, further focused financial supports need to be introduced, and mental health and well-being programmes need to be enhanced. This year's and next year's first-year students have been particularly impacted.

Student unions, sports campuses and college authorities should be provided with additional funding to provide refresher weeks to help develop and strengthen networks on campus when students return. What are the Minister's long-term plans for a capital programme? When does he expect we will see the access plan for higher education and the review of the student grant scheme?

Will the Minister confirm what arrangements are being put in place for further education colleges? They are due to have practical Quality and Qualifications Ireland coursework completed by May. Will this deadline be pushed back? Will the Minister engage with further education and training boards and principals to offer them clarity on that?

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: I thank the Minister for the announcement he made this week on further education and apprenticeships and on how they will be managed. Perhaps the term "further education" itself adds to the perception that there is a difference between higher education provided in universities and that provided through the education and training boards, ETBs, or apprenticeships. We have some concerns in this regard. There is a lot of autonomy in respect of both admissions and the tailoring of courses at ETB level. In many cases, there is a very close relationship with second level schools, where open days are facilitated and where there are interviews. There are tailored admissions policies. I would like to make sure these arrangements are maintained in any reform that takes place.

There have been great strides forward in modern apprenticeships but we want to make sure employers are key and that the application process recognises the reality that apprenticeships are employees as well as students. In 2018, with Dublin facing a skills shortage, as will probably still be the case after Covid, we organised the Dublin City Apprenticeship Summit. At the summit, it was identified that there is a stigma, often evident among parents, including mothers, regarding what apprenticeships and ETB courses can bring. This was part of the Department's

independent review of career guidance services. I invite the Minister to come to Coláiste Íde, Finglas, one of the best ETB centres, so both of us might persuade students and parents, including mothers, that the courses in question are sometimes a better way forward and can provide a better fit and, often, a more lucrative career.

Deputy Simon Harris: I would be delighted to visit with Deputy McAuliffe. He has made some really valid points, including on the use of the word “further”, which I am going to reflect on. I would be very happy to take him up on his offer.

Deputy Louise O’Reilly: I am sharing time with Deputy Paul Donnelly.

I have two questions. The first relates to the critical skills list that is linked to work permits. It has not been updated in ten years. It strikes me as a little odd that there are no skills coming off the list. This is a deficit that needs to be addressed. Clearly, the training is not happening. If the Minister examines the area, as I am sure he has, he will see there are many subgroups, working groups and groups doing this and that but none sitting down to consider how we can deliver training to those who currently need it here and how we can start to reduce the length of the skills list as a consequence. I ask the Minister to consider reducing the length of the list proactively.

My second question relates to apprenticeships. I have to hand a letter from Connect to the Department. It asks whether it is possible that the role of the education and training provider, as the Minister refers to it, could go to a private company? I suspect it could. More than that, I suspect it may form part of the plans but, as ever and as the Minister will know, I am not a pessimist. Rather, I am an optimist with experience so I am willing to be convinced that the Minister is not going to privatise the role although I fear it is his intention.

Deputy Simon Harris: I have missed our question time so much. It is good to be back. The Minister of State, Deputy Niall Collins, can answer on apprenticeships.

On the critical skills list, the Deputy made a really serious point. We now have a Department — mine — dedicated to the skills agenda. We are reviewing the skills infrastructure. We have a national skills council and regional skills fora but the system needs to be more cohesive. To answer the Deputy’s question, the agency charged with responsibility is SOLAS, but I will revert to her specifically on it. I accept the challenge, however. It is a fair one.

Deputy Niall Collins: I have not seen the correspondence to which the Deputy referred. I will review it. I assure the Deputy that there is no agenda on my part or that of the Minister to privatise anything.

Deputy Louise O’Reilly: Is it being ruled out?

Deputy Simon Harris: We have no intention of privatising the role.

Deputy Paul Donnelly: I welcome the plans to ensure apprenticeships are respected. As someone who comes from a working-class background, I know many who work in the trades. There has been a rush away from trades and apprenticeships, and this was really exacerbated by the recession. When the economy collapsed, half a million people left the country. Many of them were tradespeople who never come back. The system was badly damaged then. We currently have 6,928 apprentices waiting to complete their off-the-job training. This is one-third of all apprentices. Unlike other students who have seen their studies disrupted, apprentices cannot

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advance and complete their training without the off-the-job training process. Many apprenticeships have been working through the lockdown and have not been told anything about when their off-site education will resume. They hope they will make up for lost time to qualify for their trades. They face a serious issue. It needs to be addressed.

The second issue I would like to raise with the Minister concerns funding for the student union in TU Dublin following the amalgamation. The union's funding has been severely cut. The tag lines of its emails are interesting and quite shocking. It states its student adviser staff has unfortunately been reduced to four due to funding cuts by TU Dublin. It states it will get back to me about my query as soon as it can but that, due to the funding cuts, it may take longer to do so. Surely it should not be the case in the middle of a pandemic that a union doing its absolute best to deal with the myriad problems students are facing is having such cuts imposed on it, resulting in the loss of a critical number of staff.

Deputy Simon Harris: As someone who also comes from a working-class background, I agree with a lot of what the Deputy says about the importance of apprenticeships and trades and of helping people to have a livelihood in our country.

On the TU Dublin issue, I would be very happy to take it up for the Deputy. I share his concern. If he forwards the correspondence to me, I will revert to him directly.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I am sharing time with Deputy Barry. The Minister may not know it but he has People Before Profit to thank for the opportunity to debate this issue. We specifically requested it at the Business Committee. Such is our commitment to this matter, we have also tabled a motion that will give the Minister another opportunity to discuss it tomorrow. I will have more time to set out our stall in that debate.

Covid has brought us to a moment when long-overdue, radical reform and overhaul of the further, higher and third level education sector and access to it is due. There are many different aspects to this. I agree with the point about the words "further" and "higher". There is an implicit class distinction there that we need to eliminate. That is part of the problem which starts with the leaving certificate. The latter creates stress, mental health pressures and a hurdle over which one has to jump at a young age in order to get to higher education. It is fundamentally perpetuating an inequality and a hierarchy and is limiting access to education in a way it should not. If we are serious about an overhaul, we have to get rid of all barriers. We would consider it unthinkable to ration access to primary and secondary education. Why on earth would we ration, through leaving cert exams, fees and other barriers, access to further and higher education, apprenticeships or whatever? It makes no sense. It creates competition, pressure and a hierarchy. It leads to people dropping out and it is bad for our society at every level. Those barriers should be removed and that starts with the leaving cert. It has no place anymore, as it is blocking entrance for some to further and higher education.

Fees in this country are now the highest anywhere in the European Union. There is no justification for that or for anything that puts pressure on people to drop out of education. Nor is there justification for the thousands of people working in higher education in temporary, insecure positions who would love to be working full-time in a better, radically reformed higher and further education system. Should we not, as an objective, say that all the barriers must go? Education to the highest level is a right for everybody and barriers, whether exams, financial barriers or others, must be removed.

Deputy Simon Harris: I agree on the removal of barriers. I welcome the detailed debate we will start tomorrow on how to go about doing that. The first thing to do is to radically overhaul the CAO system. It is narrowing the conversation far too early. It is making FET and apprenticeships seem like the poor relation and something one only comes to if one does not get the necessary points. It is creating a points race. I do not think the leaving cert, as currently construed, is fit for purpose. I agree with the OECD findings in respect of it. Work has been going on to review it for about five years and that needs to conclude quickly. I look forward to the chance to tease through a number of these issues tomorrow. I thank the Deputy for giving me opportunities to do it twice this week.

Deputy Mick Barry: I will speak about the State's 400 student radiographers. Our student radiographers spend four years in college. Over the course of those four years, they spend approximately 200 days working in our hospitals for free. They have been doing difficult and dangerous work in the pandemic. They do direct Covid-related work, for example, the taking of X-rays. Not only are they not paid, they do not receive sick pay if, for example, they are infected. They do not receive paid leave. They have in many cases had to give up part-time jobs in order to reduce the risk of cross-contamination. They can be asked to work in any hospital anywhere in the State. Sometimes there is a small travel and accommodation allowance but in all cases it is significantly less than the costs that accrue. Does the Minister agree that our student radiographers do valuable work? Does he agree there has been an injustice done to them? Through their union, SIPTU, they have asked for direct talks with the Minister for Health, Deputy Donnelly. Is that something the Minister present would support? Would he be prepared to attend such a meeting were it to be set up?

Deputy Simon Harris: I had the pleasure of being Minister for Health for four and a half years. I will leave that meeting to the current Minister for Health but I would be happy to hear about its outcome. These matters fall to the different parts of the public service and different employers. Anybody doing work as distinct from being in a clinical placement should be paid. When I was Minister for Health, student nurses were hired as healthcare assistants and were paid. Whether one is a teacher, dentist, nurse, midwife, radiographer - I could go on - placements in the public or private sector are part of the education system. I would differentiate between the placement as part of the necessary experience one needs to qualify and graduate versus the doing of work.

The Deputy referred to students having to give up part-time jobs. The Government has made a conscious decision that any student who has had to give up or has lost a part-time job should remain on the pandemic unemployment payment. There were calls from some quarters - certainly not the Deputy - for that to end. Those were calls that we did not heed. I am always happy to engage with students across a range of issues, including student radiographers.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I am glad to have an opportunity to speak in this important debate. We must recognise that we have to change from the way we were to the way we will be in terms of standards and levels. We have to raise our game in order to compete with the best, not just nationally but internationally. On the international market, those people coming from a different place with a different background are competing already and up and running in that business. In a previous incarnation, I had the opportunity of interacting with graduates of polytechnics in eastern Europe and I was amazed at the level to which they had perfected their experience, knowledge and qualifications. That must continue. We must do it to a greater extent in this country.

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I compliment the Ministers on the work they are doing. Are they satisfied that we have in place sufficient structures to incorporate the best that we require in the areas of apprenticeships, academic qualifications, research, science or whatever it is? We must perfect everything. We must extend our knowledge and our competence beyond anything we had before if we are to compete successfully and effectively in the international market.

Deputy Simon Harris: As to whether we have everything we need in terms of structures, the establishment of this new Department and the decision of the Taoiseach to facilitate that has been a good step. No longer are higher and further education a little bit of that Department and research, science and innovation located in another. Having a Minister, a Minister of State, a Secretary General and civil servants working on these issues full-time has been important.

We have brilliant agencies, such as Science Foundation Ireland, the Irish Research Council, the Higher Education Authority and SOLAS. We need to make sure none of us work in silos. One job for me and the Minister of State is to put the policies in place and make it clear as to who must do what. It is not this plan, that plan and the other plan but one plan for Ireland that is needed in these areas and a clear understanding of who is responsible for the delivery of each element of it. Less than a year in, we are making good progress. This is an important year in terms of putting those building blocks in place in policy and reform and we are up for it.

Deputy Jackie Cahill: The past year has been difficult for our third level students. They have sacrificed so much during a very important time in their lives, mostly to protect the health and safety of others. This age group has missed out on key milestones in their early 20s as a result of a year of distance learning.

I will raise with the Minister two higher education issues affecting my constituency of Tipperary, particularly my home town of Thurles. Thurles is well-known for its highly regarded educational institutions both at second and third level. We also have the national apprenticeship centre in the town. In addition, Thurles is well connected to Cork and Dublin via rail and road with very good public transport infrastructure, which is ideal for students. The town is centrally located, strongly connected and a highly respected hub for education in the midlands.

I thank the Minister for agreeing to meet Dr. Finn Ó Murchú of Mary Immaculate College, St. Patrick's campus, in Thurles, regarding the development of university level courses. There is major potential for the establishment of a home economics course on the St. Patrick's campus. At the moment, the only place people can avail of this course is Sligo. Numerous people have contacted me to say they would like to see a greater range of teacher training courses locally. St. Patrick's in Thurles is in an ideal location for this. There is clear potential to expand the choice and location of such a course and it is clear that Thurles would be the prime site for this due to its central location, transport links and reputation for third level educational standards. I look forward to continuing to work with the Minister and other key stakeholders with a view to developing the range of teacher training options available for third level students in Thurles. I again thank the Minister for agreeing to meet with Dr. Ó Murchú.

I welcome the news that the Government is working to deliver university status for Thurles. This is yet another area where we have clear scope to invest in third level education in the county. The amalgamation of Limerick and Athlone institutes of technology into a technological university, TU, for the midlands and mid-west comes as very welcome news for the town of Thurles. This will allow for enhanced educational programme offerings to be made to third level students, not just in Tipperary but in the entire region.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: I welcome the three-year strategy launched by the Department in recent days with the objective of ensuring that everyone, regardless of background, age, gender or address, achieves their best potential, whether that is through education or the workforce. This is welcome.

I will raise with the Minister the technological university for the south east. As we move into the final stage in this crucial week, I want to say “well done” to everyone for their hard work. I know how hard everyone is working on this.

As the Minister knows, the south east is the only region without a university. We must all work together to achieve this. We cannot make it a political football. The Minister’s commitment on funding is important, as is the fact that jobs will be safe, which I also welcome. The application for the TU has to be submitted by 28 April. There will then be a review by a panel of international experts. That is an important part of the process and it is crucial that we are on track to complete it by 1 January 2022. This is a good news story, which will be game-changing for the south east. We had a virtual meeting of all Deputies from the south east this morning. I welcome that.

Another priority for me is Carlow. The Minister will be aware of our fabulous third level institutions. Key to achieving the Minister’s objective is the full integration of Carlow College, St. Patrick’s, into the higher education system in the south-east region. I have had considerable engagement on this with the college and stakeholders, the Minister’s office and the Department of the Taoiseach. Carlow College, St. Patrick’s, plays a significant role in the higher education landscape in the south-east region, with a concentrated expertise in the delivery of programmes in the arts, humanities and social science. I am working to ensure no stone is left unturned in progressing this into full integration. Can the Minister update me on this process today? This is a really good news story.

Deputy Fergus O'Dowd: I welcome the Minister. I acknowledge his competence, interest and dynamic approach to third level education and also his new initiatives. I endorse his policy in supporting Dundalk Institute of Technology, DkIT, in becoming a technological university. It is a critical demand for our area. As we know, Dundalk and Drogheda are two large urban conurbations on the Belfast-Dublin corridor, which will be the base for new industry coming here. The technological university proposal makes a lot of sense to us.

Drogheda is a budding city at this stage. How can we ensure there is investment in third level courses in Drogheda, the biggest town in the country? I appreciate the Minister may not be able to respond on my second point as he only has one minute left. I ask him about his concept of integrating the education systems in the North and South by offering opportunities to students from the South to go to the North, even if only for some of their semesters, and, obviously, the converse as well.

Acting Chairman (Deputy John Lahart): The Minister has two minutes to respond because I cut him off earlier.

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank Deputy O'Dowd for his constant work with me, particularly on North-South issues on which there is potential to do an awful lot more. The Deputy is correct on the exchange of students between North and South as well. There is no reason people from Queen’s University Belfast could not come to DkIT and *vice versa*. That is good on many levels, educational and otherwise.

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I am very much interested in meeting the Drogheda and District Chamber, further education providers and the Deputy to discuss how we can make sure, as we roll out more in the further education and training space, such a large conurbation as Drogheda gets its fair share and is ready for the recovery, and also work out how DkIT will fit into the landscape of higher education. I very much welcome the chance to take the Deputy up on that invitation and have those meetings.

I thank Deputy Murnane O'Connor for her leadership on the south-east university project and for attending the meeting this morning. I am not playing politics and I want to work with everyone to get this project over the line. Carlow College, St. Patrick's, plays a major role in third level education and I look forward to seeing its future protected. The Deputy knows what I mean by that. I know work is going on with Institute of Technology Carlow. I will keep working with the Deputy on that.

I look forward to meeting Deputy Cahill regarding the home economics course and the opportunity to do more for Thurles. I thank him for his support on the roll-out of Athlone and Limerick institutes of technology and the benefits that will bring to Tipperary.

Deputy Pauline Tully: I will put a number of questions to the Minister. If time does not allow for a response now, perhaps he will get back to me in writing.

I have been approached by a number of people who are currently undertaking apprenticeships and are concerned about the college aspect of their courses. One young man in particular told me he was due to start the college part in September 2020 but has been told he will not be able to enrol until 2022. That is two years later than planned. Obviously, the course was closed for a time, numbers were reduced and there was a backlog as a result. This is concerning, however, because many young people are asking if they will have to work longer on very low wages until they get their qualification. Can something be done to clear up this mess? Perhaps more resources could be provided to allow more students to undertake the college aspects of their apprenticeship and qualify at their normal time.

The second issue I raise is the recognition of Irish Sign Language as a subject. The Minister is probably aware that there is a course in deaf studies in Trinity College Dublin. Many of those who graduate from the course choose to go on and teach it. It is a four-year honours level degree course. It is not recognised as a teaching subject by the Teaching Council, however. Can this issue be addressed? Perhaps it does not fall under the Minister's remit. If not, he might direct me to the Minister with responsibility for this issue. Irish Sign Language is recognised as an official language of this State and should, therefore, be treated on a par with all other languages.

A number of students who are undertaking social care subjects - this may also apply to a number of other courses - must go out on placement work. I have written to the Minister on this issue and he indicated that he is seeking a solution. Has any resolution been found? Has any progress been made on that score?

I was concerned to hear this week that the number of students applying through the CAO process to pursue courses in teaching has declined. I am aware that schools have been finding it difficult for a number of years to get teachers on any sort of level, be it full-time, part-time or as substitutes. This is a serious issue. If educational standards in our school system fall, it will have a knock-on effect on the prospects of every student. This issue needs to be addressed urgently. What can be done by the Department to encourage more young people to go into the

teaching profession?

Deputy Simon Harris: I will ask the Minister of State to respond on the apprenticeship matter. I will take up the issue the Deputy raised regarding Irish Sign Language. As she suggested, the Teaching Council is obviously independent of me and Government. I will, however, get a view from my officials regarding the course in Trinity College Dublin and revert to the Deputy with some suggestions as to how we might be able to raise that. She makes a very fair point.

On the social care work issue, as I believe I outlined in my letter to the Deputy, I have asked Quality and Qualifications Ireland, QQI, to engage with all regulators. CORU is the regulator in this area and it is not for me to direct it. We are asking all our regulators to show flexibility considering we are in a global pandemic. We are not asking them to lower professional standards but to try to come up with other ways.

We have had good progress with some professions and regulators, as well as some ongoing work with others. The Deputy's point about the CAO and teaching is interesting, a point which struck me as well. To reassure the Deputy, there will still be many more people applying for teaching than there are places. I do not think it will result in or contribute to a shortage of teachers. My Department is undertaking work with all the institutions and across the Government to see what more we can do to provide additional places and placements for this year's leaving certificate cohort. I am due to update the Government on that next month. I will keep the Deputy informed on that.

Deputy Michael Lowry: I compliment the Minister and the Minister of State, Deputy Niall Collins, on their innovative and creative approach to their new Department.

The Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science has the capacity and ability to play a central role in our national recovery plan. These are exciting and refreshing times for institutes of technology. I am delighted with the progress made in establishing a technological university between Limerick Institute of Technology and Athlone Institute of Technology. This venture includes Thurles and Clonmel campuses.

The umbrella group representing all stakeholders did a wonderful job of work. Discussions and negotiations went smoothly. They were united in purpose and the merger is on track. This is a massive opportunity and ground-breaking initiative for Limerick Institute of Technology and its Thurles and Clonmel campuses. Thurles and Clonmel will become university towns and it will have a hugely positive impact on the educational and enterprise landscape of Tipperary.

Has the external independent evaluation of the application been completed? What is the timescale for the Government's sanction? Will the Minister outline his thoughts and vision for this new entity and the impact it will have on Tipperary and the regions?

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank Deputy Lowry for his questions. I also thank him for keeping in touch with me, the Government, Limerick Institute of Technology and Athlone Institute of Technology on this project.

This is transformational. When we talk about Limerick Institute of Technology and Athlone Institute of Technology, people automatically think about Limerick and Athlone when the former obviously has a clear and firm footprint in Tipperary in both Thurles and Clonmel. This is going to be transformational for County Tipperary. As Deputy Lowry said, Thurles and

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Clonmel will become university towns. Young and not-so-young people in Tipperary will be able to access university education in their county. They will no longer have to pack their bags to head to some other county or city. It is transformational not just for education but in many other ways. We know that the longer somebody stays in their county, the more likely they are to put down roots there, to raise their own family there and to get a job there. Hopefully, this will rejuvenate, regenerate and revitalise rural and provincial areas. Tipperary will be very well-placed in that regard.

The Government's commitment to this comes with an assurance of wanting to do more on the capital side, as well as looking for opportunities to expand and grow the university presence as we form technological universities.

The international panel concluded its work around the end of February. It is now in the process of finalising its report which it will submit to the Higher Education Authority. It will then get input from Quality and Qualifications Ireland. Then the report is submitted to me with the recommendation to grant or not. I would be very hopeful of a positive recommendation. A significant amount of work has been done. I thank all the staff in Limerick Institute of Technology and Athlone Institute of Technology, particularly the two presidents for their leadership. The Minister of State, Deputy Niall Collins, and I will be keeping in close contact with them. Obviously, the Minister of State has a keen interest in this. I know that the hopefully soon-to-be new technological university is eager to be designated as quickly as possible. That is certainly my aim as well. We will be in a position to put a specific date on that once I receive the report.

It is all systems go. It is a really exciting time, not just for the midlands and mid-west but also for County Tipperary. Thurles and Clonmel could, this calendar year, potentially be university towns.

Deputy Verona Murphy: I thank both the Minister and Minister of State for attending this afternoon. I thank the Minister, Deputy Harris, for his time earlier this morning for a meeting on the technological university for the south east. It is an exciting project which I am passionate about. It will be exciting to see that develop over the next 12 months. Hopefully, we will have announcement on it in January.

I concur with Deputy Lowry on the innovative response and how both the Minister and Minister of State are driving the Department. Their decision to streamline the CAO system is welcome. Students will now be able to apply through the CAO for an apprenticeship and level four and five courses. Hopefully this will increase the take-up and awareness of apprenticeships. For some reason, we have developed a recent obsession to push everyone into college courses. Apprenticeships have often been overlooked by those who would be better suited to them, not to mention the severe lack of apprentices in many years. Will the Minister investigate further why the obsession with college courses has developed to the detriment of apprenticeships and other employment focused training? That has been my experience as a former president of the Irish Road Haulage Association. I am sure we can all point to examples but it would be good if the Minister could just look into that to ensure one does not circumvent the other.

A recent *Irish Independent* article quoted the Higher Education Authority's figures on third level dropout rates. These figures show dropout rates of 25% across the third level sector. Dropout rates rise to 45% among those studying computing courses. That is a concerning and alarmingly high figure. The overall figure for college dropouts being one in every four students must also be ringing alarm bells in the Department. It is a major issue which we need to ex-

amine. Hopefully the new CAO reforms might help address that to some extent. However, we could and should be doing more.

One reform I believe is worth investigating is an optional transition year between second and third level. We already have a transition year between junior and senior cycle in secondary schools. A strong case can be made that the transition between second level and third level is a far more significant and difficult one for students to make. They are moving away from home for the first time, possibly, meeting new people, living with other students, being expected to cook and run a household. It is learning to live in a totally different way than what is expected at second level. There are significant challenges for third level students. It would be worth investigating a similar type of optional transition year system between second and third level. Under such a system, students could sample different course options, getting used to the challenges of living away from home and generally familiarising themselves with the college way of life before making a final course decision.

The hope would be that such a scheme would help reduce the number of college dropouts and the number of people who end up enrolling in courses that they regret. The leaving certificate classes of 2021 have missed a significant chunk of their face-to-face school time over the past two academic years. This will no doubt have a knock-on effect for those students heading off to third level in September in which case it may result in higher dropout rates and more difficulties for students settling into third level life.

On grade inflation under predicted grading systems, it is well documented that students who sat the leaving certificate in 2019 or prior to that who are looking for a CAO place in 2021 will not have the benefit of such inflation. Are any steps being taken by the Department to address the imbalance and to ensure that deferred CAO applicants will not be negatively impacted by this? A written response to this would be perfect.

Deputy Patrick Costello: In his opening statement, the Minister commented on not wanting people locked out and ensuring access to education for all. I want to raise a particularly vulnerable group, namely, children who are leaving the experience of State care. This vulnerable group has complicated and broad-ranging needs. No two individuals really are the same in this case. If we look across at our nearest neighbour, many universities like Portsmouth, Greenwich, Keele and Birmingham have introduced a specialist designated staff member to deal with this group of students. I have written to the Minister already on this. I would appreciate if the Minister could give us an insight into whether we could provide funding to set up a designated staff member to reach out to young people in care to ensure they reach their educational potential and if he would possibly be able to even meet Empowering People In Care, EPIC, the independent advocacy group which is pushing the needs of young people in care.

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank Deputy Costello for his paper and the proposal that he sent me and the amount of work that has gone into this. I will take up his offer to meet EPIC with him. I would welcome that opportunity. We want to break down barriers. We want education to be for all. I accept we have much work to do on that. Let us do that. The Deputy's proposal merits serious consideration.

I wish to share with the Deputy some of the initial thoughts from my Department on this. Each higher education institution already has what we call an access infrastructure in place and this provides for both pre-entry and post-entry work required to support students from target groups or vulnerable groups to access higher education. This year we will be developing a new

national access plan. It will be an opportunity to examine all of these issues as well.

It is important to say, although this line often bugs me, that all higher education institutions are autonomous. It bugs me because it sounds like we are passing the buck but that is not the intention of the comment. It is more that we will need to bring them into the conversation in terms of how they apply their access policy. There are a number of supports already in place through access offices and their teams support students who are care leavers. However, I take the point that there is not a specific workforce for this.

Having read Deputy Costello's paper quite thoroughly, I see real benefit in sitting down with him, with EPIC and with others who have an interest in this and seeing if we can make progress in the context of the national access plan. I thank Deputy Costello for his work and considerable thought on this. I look forward to engaging with him.

Deputy James O'Connor: I am happy to be here today to discuss some of the issues facing students right around the country. I do so as the youngest Member of the Dáil. Of course, the Minister and I had something in common when we were first elected - recently I was admiring that photograph on the Minister's Twitter account of his election ten years ago this week - in that we were both elected to Dáil Éireann at an extremely young age. That brings with it not only the responsibility to our constituents but also for our age bracket and group in society. As the youngest Member of this House, and indeed one of the youngest parliamentarians in the world, I am quite conscious of that.

This pandemic has brought enormous challenges to Deputy Harris, as the Minister at Cabinet representing this Department, and I acknowledge that. However, one area I would like to see a greater focus placed on, and I hope the Minister would agree, is the issues faced by students who are renting in terms of their leases and their rights, which are incredibly precarious in many circumstances. The Union of Students in Ireland has been doing exceptional work in this regard. Obviously, I am quite limited, as I am supporting the Government, in how I can support votes that may be before the Dáil but one issue I would like to see the Government support is the effort by the Union of Students in Ireland to address some of the issues faced by students in terms of their tenancies. Unfortunately, many people were left out of pocket because they were dealt cruel hands in terms of how their landlords were treating them. The way in which many students were treated across the country was unacceptable. I would ask the Minister to focus on that area.

In the limited time I have left, I would also ask the Minister to give further consideration to some of the aspects of the Cassells report, which identified many of the funding shortfalls that fall within the Department's remit. Obviously, the universities are under extraordinary strain to receive funding from the Government. This has been clearly outlined, including in a number of steps within the Cassells report to address that. The Minister, the Department and the Government must give priority to that because Ireland needs to continue its efforts to remain a global leader in the area of education and higher education.

Deputy Alan Dillon: I thank the Minister, Deputy Harris, and the Minister of State, Deputy Niall Collins, for facilitating today's statements and questions and answers.

The only higher education topic of discussion in Mayo, and stretching from Donegal to Galway, is that of the Connacht-Ulster alliance. The new technological university for the west and north-west of Ireland will be one of the largest multi-campus universities on the island. When

approved, it will span a unique geographical region on the periphery of Europe which has a predominantly dispersed rural population. I ask the Minister for information regarding the application for technological university status and the expected timeline of the application by the Connacht-Ulster consortium. In addition, I would like to learn of the benefits that this will have for the Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology, GMIT, Mayo campus in Castlebar.

I was delighted to hear about the Minister's engagement with Ballinrobe Youthreach centre. The feedback was excellent. They really enjoyed their virtual experience. I would also like to learn what more can be done to support organisations such as Ballinrobe Youthreach in their valuable work.

I note the publication this week of the Department's statement on its three-year strategy. One ambition is to implement a new access plan for higher education and a review of the student grants scheme. I would welcome any additional information on this. I will give my remaining time for the Minister to respond.

Acting Chairman (Deputy John Lahart): We are short a speaker in this slot and the Minister has a little extra time.

Deputy Simon Harris: I will respond to Deputy O'Connor as well, if that is okay.

I thank Deputy Dillon for his questions. I am really excited about the development of this new university for the west and the north-west. It will be transformational, not only in terms of access to education but also in creating a real powerhouse for jobs, investment and regional development. When one looks at the map of Ireland, one can see the need for that level of investment. It will change the economic profile of the region. Of course, it will make Castlebar a university town. The Deputy and I had a number of meetings with GMIT. Let me be clear, GMIT and the Castlebar campus will be major players. It will be a major campus as part of this university and I look forward to working with the Deputy to drive investment into that Castlebar facility as well.

I really enjoyed my visit to Ballinrobe Youthreach. It was a chance to meet students, to thank them, to hear from them about their Covid experiences and how challenging the year has been. It was also a chance to meet the staff who are passionate and determined. They have a couple of capital projects they would like to do to improve their facilities there. I am eager to work with the Deputy, and have discussions with the ETB, on that.

On the national access plan, we want to deliver a new one this year. We have made a lot of progress on access to higher education for people with disabilities but not enough and we need to do more.

The SUSI review will open for public consultation on Friday. We want to get an output by the summer in order that we can start planning for the Estimate campaign and, obviously, the budget, which will take place in October.

While Deputy O'Connor and I both shared the title of baby of the House, as former baby of the House, I was of the much older age of 24 when I got elected to this House, unlike the Deputy, at 22. I congratulate the Deputy on his achievement in being elected to the Dáil and advocating for the people in his constituency but also for younger people.

On the USI Bill, I take seriously the issues in it. I am talking to the Minister, Deputy Dar-

ragh O'Brien, about them. While the Bill tries to provide a temporary solution to what I hope is a temporary problem, the bigger body of work for us to do together is build more student accommodation owned by college campuses. We saw the benefit of that this year where we could give refunds much more easily on the accommodation owned by campuses. We have not done enough on that.

On the Cassells report, as the Deputy will be aware from his past life, we have increased investment in higher education by almost half a billion euro since 2015. We are get the European Commission's economic evaluation back in the second quarter of this year and I look forward to trying to settle the question of a sustainable funding model.

Deputy Niamh Smyth: I thank the Minister for taking the time to do a virtual visit of Cavan Institute last week and to meet the distinguished principal, Ms Ann Marie Lacey, the staff, the chief executive of Cavan and Monaghan Education and Training Board, CMETB, Mr. John Kearney, and the students themselves to hear their first-hand inclusive and real-life positive experience for everyone who attends Cavan Institute despite Covid.

Cavan Institute enrolls in excess of 1,000 students year on year and has grown from strength to strength. I previously outlined to the Minister in our meeting that the principal and the deputy principals have been relentless in their efforts to attract students, to provide a broad spectrum of courses and to provide a positive learning experience for everyone who attends. They deliver more than 60 full-time courses each year and have outstanding support services and an excellent track record in transitioning students to employment and higher education.

In the absence of higher education in the Border region, Cavan Institute has responded by collaborating with a range of higher education colleges to deliver some of their courses on an outreach basis in Cavan Institute so as to continue to meet the needs of the students and the local economy. Moreover, it has responded excellently during Covid in supporting students and staff to transition successfully to online learning.

My question to the Minister here today is about the building list. Cavan Institute has been on the building list with the Department of Education for nigh on eight years and has not progressed. As the Minister heard, this is a priority for Cavan Institute and CMETB, as it has outgrown its current facility, which no longer meets the institute's needs with a growing number of students. When can we expect progress on this?

It is my opinion that Cavan Institute is best placed to become the hub for the delivery of integrated FET services in Cavan, particularly in view of its expertise and the level of support services available for learners. Unless we have the physical infrastructure to support that, it will not be possible.

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank Deputy Niamh Smyth for her question and for coming along on my virtual visit to Cavan Institute. I am really looking forward to visiting the facility in person. I fully recognise the need to progress that capital project and I am very eager to work with the Deputy and her Oireachtas colleagues who represent Cavan and Monaghan in order to get that done. Cavan Institute is an example of best practice and I am already telling people about and using examples of what I learned on my visit. I refer to the pre-law course as one example in that regard. Ann Marie, John and the whole team there are doing a great job. I know the Deputy worked for the ETB, so let us meet on the capital project and try to make progress on it in the coming months.

Deputy Carol Nolan: I have two issues I wish to raise with the Minister. The first relates to the reinstatement of the educational disadvantage committee. We know that the recent HEA report shows clearly that students who come from disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to progress to third level or even to apprenticeships. We need to ensure that we have measures in place. One way of doing this and a cost-effective solution would be to reinstate the educational disadvantage committee which did great work when it was in place. This is a matter I have raised on a number of occasions in the Dáil and I introduced a Bill a few years ago in respect of it. I would like that this proposal might be reconsidered.

On my second issue, namely, SUSI grants, I understand that students in part-time work can only earn €4,500, which is a disincentive for them to work. As this is such a low amount we need to do more and to raise that amount. I ask the Minister to look at that when he comes to the review of the SUSI grants.

Deputy Simon Harris: I will certainly give consideration to the issue of re-establishing the educational disadvantage committee. If the Deputy wishes to communicate with me further on that in writing, I will be happy to look at what she has to say. Most importantly, I want to put money into tackling educational disadvantage and I am very pleased that we now have a ring-fenced fund for mitigating such disadvantage. We have never had this before and need to make it a regular part of the landscape.

On SUSI, the Deputy makes a fair point. The review is under way and we have set up the steering group. The consultation will open on Friday and I very much welcome the Deputy's submission on that and will be happy to engage with her further.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: On Monday last, the Government unveiled plans to reform the CAO system of access to third level education. This news is certainly welcome and the three-year plan will lead to an increase in the number of apprenticeships to 10,000 every year by 2025. The programme should be much more ambitious in respect of apprenticeships, however. I propose that the target should be 15,000 apprenticeships by 2022. There is a severe housing shortage and we need apprentices to be fast-tracked in order to help with the demand in this regard.

While it has been great that the students have been able to commence their studies in college, I am of the view that this was just a box-ticking exercise on the part of some universities. Of all the cohorts of students, none has been more affected by Covid-19 than this year's first-year students. First, they had the controversy relating to the leaving certificate to deal with. The results which followed were like no others in the history of the State. I was speaking to a parent who has a child in first year at university who has only been on campus for one hour since September. This young person has not met anyone else in their cohort and does not even have as a text buddy. The IT colleges have put in a much bigger effort for first years and have brought them in as often as possible, circumstances allowing.

We now have a Minister and a junior Minister in charge of this aspect of education. I have not heard them mention broadband as a priority for students. In recent days I had a student from Mary Immaculate College in Limerick contacted me. This person was set to do a live interview with a tutor but the broadband faded and the interview could not be completed. Another student was working towards deadlines and the broadband connection failed. Students are not even sure if their tutors believe them. This a very significant issue.

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The laboratories in the universities are operating online at the moment. Laboratory classes can be small and surely this is a provision that can be made at this time in colleges, particularly with proper social distancing.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I too want to highlight the lack of broadband connectivity in rural areas to help students. I am aware that several students are travelling to hubs or to the homes of neighbours who have broadband or whatever in order to try to access their courses. I ask the Minister to recognise the difficulties that exist in rural areas.

I ask that the Minister be on the ball this year when and if students have to access accommodation. We had the story last year where students sought accommodation, got it and paid for it but when they went to attend classes, the colleges did not open at all. That cannot happen again. I appreciate that the Minister will let students know in a timely fashion what the scenario will be.

We need more places for students, as the Minister is aware. Students completed the leaving certificate late last year. These students will be coming on stream together with those who will be sitting the leaving certificate later this year.

I acknowledge and appreciate the new dimension for apprenticeships. I want the Minister to explore that and to advise students that there is a need for apprenticeships, whether that is for carpentry, plumbing, electrical work or whatever because we need these apprentices for housebuilding. There is a serious shortage in all areas of apprenticeship. We need to encourage students to go that way because we will need them if the economy is to keep going and if we are to continue to build houses and improve infrastructure. I wish to stress to the Minister that we will need apprentices in all areas.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I agree with the Minister's comments to the effect that universities have failed to provide accommodation on campus. This has certainly contributed to the housing crisis. I have first-hand experience of it in Galway where students were left to the market in this regard. I welcome the Minister's comments on that issue. I also welcome his initiative on apprenticeships and the opening up of the CAO.

I had intended raising something with the Minister but it has resolved itself. I have picked two other topics which I will raise with him. One is in respect of Limerick and it involves a series of questions. The Minister has come back to tell me that universities are independent, which I fully appreciate. He has made an effort in his replies regarding a particular report that was commissioned by the university and that was compiled by an external entity. I asked the Minister if he had been made aware of its content and he said he had not as the universities were independent. He then came back in December with an interesting reply to confirm that the report had been shared with the governing authority of UL and it is expected that a copy of the outcomes and recommendations will also be shared with the HEA. As regards the actions resulting from any review, under the Government's framework, which is operated by institutions in conjunction with the HEA, institutions are obliged to notify the HEA of any weaknesses in internal control that has been identified. This was in December and we are now in March. Is the Minister aware if this has happened and has the university identified weaknesses and passed them on to the Minister? I will give the Minister time to reply on this.

We know, and the Minister took a particular interest in her case, that Dr. Aoibhinn Ní Shúilleabháin had to go outside of the structures. In this case in Limerick, I understand - I do not

believe that I am breaching any rule here - that one of the people involved has written to the Committee of Public Accounts. Evidence was given when I was a member of that committee and the person involved has now stated that they were under pressure to say certain things. The individual has set out the position and that is where matters stand. Can the Minister comment on this issue? I recognise that universities are independent. I have spent four years of my life on the Committee of Public Accounts, which was a privilege and which provided me with the equivalent of a university education. What I learned was that anything can be written down but that does not necessarily mean it will be complied with. There is a role for the Department here. I am giving the Minister two minutes to reply and I will have one minute at the end to comment.

My other point relates to precarious employment. We made some progress in Galway on gender equality as a result of the sterling work done by the women there, starting with Micheline Sheehy Skeffington and followed by other courageous women, but that was only on one particular aspect. I am told the vast majority of staff in precarious employment are women. I have tabled parliamentary questions and the Minister has come back to tell me that universities are independent and that he does not know. How can we ever tackle anything while recognising their independence if the Department is unaware or not made aware or if there are no structures? I, for one, am not happy that the vast majority of academic staff in precarious employment are women. I am not happy that some of them are men either but the majority are women. Perhaps the Minister will take a minute or two to reply.

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank Deputy Connolly for her two very specific questions. With regard to the UL issue, I will honestly have to come back to the Deputy to see whether the HEA has now been made aware, and I thank the Deputy for the reminder on it because I want to know. My logic in my letter to the Deputy in December was that once the HEA had become aware, there was then a route from me to become aware because it is an agency of mine. I will seek an update, and I say this on the record of the House, from the authority as to whether it has been made aware of it and I will revert to the Deputy directly on the matter. I will be very eager to know the position.

The broader point, and I do want to say this, is about governance. There is a reason I need to bring forward governance legislation. There is a reason I am bringing it to Cabinet in April. There is a reason I want to pass it through both Houses this year. I am not satisfied that I have to keep giving Deputy Connolly these answers. Universities are autonomous, and I get that, but the governance structures have to be better. The HEA has to have the power to go in and get answers. The HEA has to have statutory powers on governance and performance frameworks. Quite frankly, it does not have some of these powers now. When I bring forward the legislation I really will need the help of Deputies to get the best piece of legislation we can in order to have robust modern fit for purpose governance structures in terms of the composition of governing authorities, their size, the power of the HEA, my role as Minister and the role of the Department. I am working actively on this and it will be our major piece of legislation this year.

On the issue of precarious employment, I am not happy about it either to be honest. I can give the Deputy the whole answer about autonomy, and they are autonomous, but aside from this there is a role for the Department in terms of bringing together all of the funders. They are autonomous but they are funded through the HEA, Science Foundation Ireland and the Irish Research Council. I am setting up an advisory group in the Department to look at a number of these issues around precarious employment, career pathways and supports for researchers. I will be happy to put some of my thoughts in writing to the Deputy on this matter.

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Deputy Catherine Connolly: I thank the Minister for the reply and for promising the update. With regard to precarious employment, we will have another group to look at it. Surely the mechanisms are already there. We are reliant on *thejournal.ie* and whistleblowers coming forward to tell us the position, or I have to go forward as a Deputy under freedom of information. Surely all of this should be at the Minister's fingertips. Surely this is what we should be working towards.

With regard to Limerick and, indeed, Galway and the other universities, I have to say whistleblowers have a particularly difficult time in Ireland. While we may have brought in legislation to facilitate it we have not had a sea change on it. It seems with regard to each institution, and I will not single out any one, if it does not round on the whistleblowers it certainly isolates them, sends them to Coventry and makes their lives difficult. All of the time it seems to be about protecting the institution and not valuing the information coming forward and dealing with it speedily and effectively.

Deputy Simon Harris: In the context of any governance legislation I bring forward to protect whistleblowers, openness and transparency will always be really important to me. I served on the Committee of Public Accounts. I saw the great lengths whistleblowers had to go to in this country and where they were not always protected and I accept more work is to be done. I am delighted people make protected disclosures but, to be very honest, I am not happy with the level of protected disclosures that people feel compelled to make because they cannot get the answers and the openness they would like. I am very eager to work with the Deputy on this through the governance legislation. I have quite a long note on the Cush report on precarious employment and some of the measures we are taking and perhaps I will write to the Deputy on it in the interests of time. I am happy to pick it up again.

Sitting suspended at 4.35 p.m. and resumed at 4.55 p.m.

Land Development Agency Bill 2021: Second Stage (Resumed)

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

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Bernard Durkan was in possession. He has two minutes remaining.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I am glad to avail of the two minutes. The Ceann Comhairle and I know this subject well and it is very close to our hearts in the context of County Kildare. I would hate to lose any minute of support for this issue.

I believe we need about 800 houses as a matter of urgency - direct build, local authority houses. We also need a revamping of what used to be the local authority loans scheme under the Rebuilding Ireland scheme. It has to be simplified and brought into line so people can avail of it quickly. We also need what we used to call private sites, developed sites which can be made available at a lower rate to people building for themselves. If we have all those things in place, we can help the Minister to do a good job in the shortest possible time. In a four-year period in the 1980s, when things were not as sophisticated as they are now, as the Ceann Comhairle and I well know, something like 1,600 local authority housing loans were issued in County Kildare. That was a huge amount and took a huge number of people off the housing waiting list. It also took people who were not on the housing waiting list but whose incomes

were within the scope of the scheme.

My final point concerns eligibility for loans. I ask the Minister to deal personally with the manner in which the qualification guidelines are laid out in regard to the income limits, the eligibility for loans and how long people have to be on the housing list. They should take into account the length of time people are paying rents on rental property as a prelude to introducing them to a loan which is much more effective and better for them. All of these things are required, to my mind, and I am sure, from his own knowledge of the same county, the Ceann Comhairle will heartily agree.

We wish the Minister well. We want him to succeed at this because it is hugely important to us and hugely important to the young people of County Kildare and the entire country, with no exceptions. The sooner, the better and the more, the better.

An Ceann Comhairle: As we do not have a Labour Party contributor at this point, the next slot is for the Government. I call Deputy Barry Cowen.

Deputy Barry Cowen: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the Bill, the purpose of which is to place the Land Development Agency on a statutory footing and to confer on it various powers.

Housing was the dominant issue in the general election, and it was the dominant issue in the lifetime of the previous Government. It remains a dominant issue in society. Of course, it has been challenged by issues resulting from the pandemic and the impact that has had on different sectors, but there is a great onus of responsibility on this Government to address the housing crisis. This issue was to the fore in the discussions among the parties on preparing and agreeing a programme for Government. The competency and potential of the Land Development Agency were discussed at length and there was a commitment on the part of all parties to the agreement to prepare and bring forward legislation to give effect, impact and potential, by virtue of increased powers, to the Land Development Agency, in order that it could play its part in resolving this issue.

There are various tools, opportunities and avenues by which the housing situation can and should be addressed. They include the local authorities. Despite record amounts of funding being available to many local authorities, not enough houses are being delivered by them. Social housing associations have an increased role in the provision of housing solutions, but they are solutions that do not afford to those who acquire or avail of those units the opportunity to buy them, an opportunity that I believe must be available. We have seen the potential that the Part V provision relating to private house building can yield to the State. In recent times, thankfully, we have seen the restoration of the 10% affordable element of that provision. Unfortunately, however, the issue of supply means that this tool or avenue is not delivering as it could and should. Then we see local authorities being forced, due to the nature of the crisis and the need to provide instant solutions, into a position where they are competing with young affordable purchasers in buying stock. While that was a solution for some councils, and a welcome one, it was not a solution for many people who were seeking to buy such houses and get on the housing ladder to have that competition against them.

The provision of an affordable scheme, rental units and cost rental units and the provision of the Land Development Agency as an added tool to address this issue must be welcomed. I am thinking of the potential. People predominantly see many lands in State ownership that are

not in use. They are not necessarily lands in the ownership of local authorities, but owned by the State. At the time those lands became available to the State through whatever means, at its foundation or thereafter, it was the contention of the State that such lands had specific uses, for example, for an Army barracks. Now when one sees an Army barracks not in use, with no benefit accruing to the community in which it is located, one would expect there to be ample opportunity for the State to make a new decision about such lands. In this instance, it has the potential to make such lands available for public housing, affordable housing and housing for the general public. These are all the supply chains that must be replenished.

The ability of local authorities is not necessarily challenged by the Land Development Agency. I discussed this with councillors in my constituency in recent weeks. There is a fear, of course. The fear or belief that is expressed is that somehow their role and potential to contribute to this crisis are threatened. In the first instance, and I welcome the commitment by the Minister and the Government, we are dealing with populations in urban centres of over 10,000. The agency is looking at lands that are not necessarily in local authority ownership but which are owned by the State and need to be used for the benefit of the public to address this crucial issue. I welcome the means by which there is provision for the Land Development Agency to address the fears and concerns that existed when it was first established with regard to the issue of State intervention and State rules and about tailoring the Land Development Agency to be in a position to make a contribution and not to be curtailed by those State rules. The means by which the Minister has done that are welcome. The ability thereafter of the agency to make a telling contribution is at its behest, and it is answerable to the Minister and the Government. The agency can work in conjunction with all others who have a contribution to make, be it the local authority, the private sector or the State. We all want to contribute and to provide opportunities for everybody on every step of the ladder. We all want to make a meaningful contribution to resolving this issue.

The contention is expressed by some that this is merely to appease builders and developers in their aspirations to make as much as humanly possible at the expense of others. That might be suitable for those who oppose this and who wish to oppose every proposal that is put before us without coming forward with credible alternatives. As already stated, however, the Government is hell-bent on addressing the housing crisis and assisting the different tools and means by which it can be addressed. I have mentioned the local authorities. Unfortunately, many local authorities have lost - I will not say the will - the wherewithal, expertise and, it appears, the ability to deliver the amount of houses they delivered in the past. That must be acknowledged. We have to press upon the members and executives of local authorities the need to improve their performance and ability to provide those units.

One tool that was provided by this Government is the increase in the local authorisation available to them without going through the four-stage approval process. The increase is from €2 million to €6 million. That gives the ability to local authority members to identify land in the ownership of the local authority and to put it to use. It is imperative and important that we and others hold them and their executives to account and allow the members to participate in finding solutions locally to which they can contribute. They should not be frightened by this agency, which they say is a train coming toward them. That is not the case. Ample time and space should be given to the Government to allow this agency, and all that is contained within it, the opportunity and time to ensure that it does its job effectively and makes the contribution we believe it can make.

Another issue I wish to mention in this context is something I spoke to the Minister about

recently. I have his full support and, indeed, the input of his officials and the Department in bringing forward legislation to give effect to putting on a statutory basis the length of time An Bord Pleanála is afforded to make decisions on appeals or on applications made to it directly based on the current legislation. The current situation whereby An Bord Pleanála can take as long as it believes is necessary to make a decision cannot be allowed to continue. There is too much invested in this, in the form of people's expertise, money and in votes in the case of those of us who have a responsibility, too, to ensure that the atmosphere is right for applications to be made, without an arm of the State holding up such applications.

Another element that is no help in our efforts to move these developments forward is the avenue of judicial review.

Many strategic development zones that have successfully gained planning permission from An Bord Pleanála are then faced with the prospect of judicial review, with more time wasted. I am aware of many people who have invested heavily and had great difficulty and trouble in accessing finance, and who find themselves being financed by funds from outside the State. There is great surprise among the funders of these schemes when they learn that a scheme has permission but also does not have permission. Once a project has secured permission from the local authority and An Bord Pleanála after a lengthy period of time and procrastination on their part - the legislation needed to restrict them to a statutory time period is not in place - there is the prospect of further delay caused by adjudication in the courts of a judicial review that may be taken on the administrative aspect of the application. Many of those who fund schemes find it wholly inappropriate and amazing that there is a third stage and, in the midst of a crisis, they are being held up by these administrative planning delays that in no way reflect the urgency we want to bring to bear on addressing this issue.

In the context of the House discussing the Land Development Agency, its potential and the provisions of the legislation, I am glad the Minister has said that many suggestions and amendments being put forward by Deputies will be considered as the Bill evolves, especially on Committee Stage when it can be explored even more. I welcome that commitment and I look forward to many Deputies making a contribution to improve elements of the legislation governing the Land Development Agency and ensure the agency does what we want it to do. We want it to be in a position to take over lands in State ownership that are not being used, so they can be put to good use in providing housing and in the development of an affordable housing scheme. Despite the ideology and all the rhetoric from all sides of the House, we do not have such a scheme. This proposal sets about putting one in place and delivering a firm contribution so that people can see its potential impact and finally be in a position to afford a home. For those who do not necessarily want to travel down that route, there is the potential for rental schemes and cost-rental schemes that have a wider appeal to many young people, especially nowadays given the nature of their jobs and the way they want to live their lives, including their desire to move without being held back by the cost of properties and the costs associated with a purchase. They can also take advantage of the advances in infrastructure, especially in our cities, through the provisions of this scheme.

I reiterate my support for the Land Development Agency and the provisions of the legislation. I thank the Minister for making available to Members across the House an opportunity to make amendments and improvements. I also reiterate the point to councillors that the Bill does not offer a stick with which to beat them but an opportunity to take lands that are not necessarily in the ownership of local authorities. The agency will be able to go after lands in the local authorities' ownership if the lands are left stale and not used or put to use. That is many years

down the road because it will have a lot to do in the meantime.

The Bill has the potential, by virtue of the Minister's proposal to place on the lands an affordability lien, as it were, to overcome the state aid problem that has been a concern up to this point. This is a huge and telling contribution. The rate at which the Minister sets this will be appropriate to the land, its location, the lists and expectations. It will be done in conjunction and consultation with the relevant local authority, its planning section and also its members who have expertise and knowledge about what is needed in their constituencies with regard to the sites that come up to be taken in charge by the Land Development Agency.

At one time, I thought the Land Development Agency could have at its disposal a suite of builders who would be available under contract to do work on its behalf, with a view to leasing back social units to local authorities in the long term thereafter. That too would be welcome but our opponents and detractors would accuse us again of helping builders. The bottom line is that one cannot have a house unless one has a builder. We cannot build houses unless we have the relevant tradespeople - blocklayers, engineers, carpenters, plumbers and labourers - who are found in every community and in many of our families. They too have to be assisted and have at their disposal relevant and appropriate schemes and initiatives to help the country and its inhabitants to own their own homes or have available to them the opportunity to rent a home if they wish at cost price rather than market price. The vehicle of the Land Development Agency has within it the potential to realise that ambition. This is the first time we can say this with the degree of definitiveness that is necessary. This legislation is necessary to copper-fasten that.

In two or three years, we can review the effectiveness of the Land Development Agency and its ability to deliver and improve or, if necessary, scrap it. Nobody has a monopoly on solutions here but as a Government party, we had a responsibility to put in place a programme for Government that addressed what was perhaps the greatest issue to arise during the lifetime of the previous Government and, more importantly, during the course of the last election. That responsibility has been taken on board by the parties in government with various proposals, schemes, initiatives and policies that seek to address this housing crisis. This is one of them. I support and welcome the Bill and I will work with those who bring it before the House to ensure it can be strengthened to do what we want it to do, namely, play a major role in addressing a serious crisis that has not gone away and will most definitely not go away in the absence of legislation and the potential of these proposals.

Deputy Mark Ward: The Land Development Agency will create the largest development company in the history of the State. This first raised its head back in 2018 when the then scheme proposed just 10% social housing and 30% affordable housing on public lands. It was the brainchild of the former Fine Gael housing Minister, Deputy Eoghan Murphy. When I was a councillor on South Dublin County Council I saw at first hand the lengths to which Fine Gael would go to scupper social housing and cosy up to developers. Clonburris is a site that runs between Clondalkin and Lucan. It is a strategic development zone initiative under which up to 8,500 homes are to be built in a phased manner alongside community infrastructure such as schools, transport, sports facilities and businesses. The difference between this SDZ and previous SDZs is that South Dublin County Council owned more than 22% of the land. This is public land. At the time, I submitted a motion on behalf of the Sinn Féin group that saw the council maximise its land and develop up to 2,700 much-needed social and affordable public homes. This plan would also see the delivery of public transport such as trains and buses linked to the phased development. If the National Transport Authority, in conjunction with all the relevant stakeholders, delivers this plan, Clonburris will have sustainable, long-term transport

solutions. However, not only did Fine Gael oppose the motion I submitted, along with Fianna Fáil, it wanted to see the number of public homes in the development reduced to just 10%. Fine Gael not only voted against the development but also appealed it to An Bord Pleanála alongside NAMA and private developers. It was like the unholy trinity. The Clonburris strategic development zone, SDZ, is not perfect but if it was not passed it would have given way to developers to build on their own sites and maximise their own profits without the need to develop the schools and the much-needed community infrastructure I mentioned.

I am from north Clondalkin and when I first moved to the area there were no schools, transport or shops. My area was a victim of bad planning in the past and Fine Gael, supported by Fianna Fáil, wanted to inflict that bad planning again on the people of Lucan and Clondalkin. All this appeal achieved was to delay the building of homes in the middle of a housing crisis by a minimum of one year.

This Bill will also see elected councillors stripped of their powers to vote on land transfers from local authorities to the Land Development Agency, LDA. I received an email today - I am not sure if the Minister received it - from the Association of Irish Local Government, AILG, which represents councillors the length and breadth of the State. They were concerned about the potential implications for local authorities in terms of their ability to deliver social and affordable housing given the proposed extensive powers the Land Development Agency will have as envisaged in the Minister's Bill. This move is designed to make it easier for public land to be used for the delivery of unaffordable homes in cases where councillors want to use the land for genuine affordable homes for working people.

The LDA will also be made a development authority giving it strategic development zone master plan powers. Here we go again with the Land Development Agency Bill as proposed by the Minister. It is like the baton being passed from Fine Gael to Fianna Fáil that will see public land used again to make big profits for private developers. This is public land. Public land should be used for public housing, social and affordable purchase and affordable rental.

This Bill will not address the waiting lists in South Dublin County Council. The average wait time for a two- or three-bedroom property in the local authority in Dublin Mid-West, which I represent, is more than 11 years. The average wait time for a four-bedroom property in South Dublin County Council is 14 years. We are talking about a whole generation of families who are living in their parents' back bedrooms or in unsecured private rental through the likes of the housing assistance payment, HAP. There is also a generation of children who have been brought up in hotels and in homeless hubs. This Bill will not address that.

There are countless people in my area who are also over the threshold for social housing but they will never be able to afford to purchase their own home because of inflated rents. I briefly looked at *daft.ie* this morning to see the average rental price of a three-bedroom property in Lucan. The price was €2,200 per month. I have heard the Minister saying that Fianna Fáil built houses but at what price does it build houses?

Under a Sinn Féin Government we will see genuine affordable homes for working people, evenly split between affordable cost rental homes and affordable purchase homes. Affordable homes on public lands are doable for €230,000 or less but not under this Government, which seems to be determined to sell off as much public land as possible to private developers.

Deputy Imelda Munster: This Bill represents failed Fine Gael policy dressed up in Fianna

Fáil clothes. The Minister was against this Bill when it came before the housing committee in the previous Dáil and now he is all for it. He claims that the Bill has been fundamentally changed since then but we all know that is not true. The fundamental flaws remain and they were outlined in great detail by Sinn Féin's housing spokesperson, Deputy Eoin Ó Broin, previously in this debate. Section 56 of this Bill will strip section 183 powers from councillors. It will stop councillors being able to insist that public land is used for 100% public housing and that it must be genuinely affordable. That will have terrible consequences, including in my constituency in County Louth. Coupled with that, the Bill will enshrine the definition of "affordable" in law. Unfortunately, the definition will falsely state that "affordable" means below the prevailing market price to buy or rent. By that logic, anything below €460,000 in the Minister's constituency will be affordable.

The Minister's party's response to the housing crisis is to gaslight the nation. We all know that this is absolute rubbish and outrageous but that is what Fianna Fáil, supported by other Government parties, is doing with this Bill. In the real world outside of this bubble, where real people are suffering because they are stuck paying sky-high rents or living at home or in temporary accommodation because they are victims of the crisis, "affordable" means a price for a house that working people can afford to pay.

There might be a place for the LDA but not when it comes to residential property. Local authorities are best placed to manage that. They can deliver public homes on public lands and, when they are properly funded and resourced, they always do a good job and have proven that through the decades. We need to return to the council model of housing and allow councils to provide public housing.

In Louth, we have more than 33 acres of land banks lying idle. The Government instructed the council to buy them at the height of the boom. We need them developed into public housing but we need the council to do that. However, it cannot do it when the Government keeps stripping it of funding and eroding the democratic mandate of councillors. As a result, those land banks are sitting idle, barren of any development of houses, despite the fact that we have almost 5,000 people on the housing waiting list in County Louth alone.

The Minister is stripping important powers from local authorities and handing them over to quangos, developers and the Land Development Agency when all he needs to do is support local authorities to do the job they should be doing, that is, building social and affordable housing on public land. The council in Louth does not even have an appropriate maintenance budget to manage the existing stock. In Louth, if one's windows are broken or one's boiler gives out in the second half of the year, it will not be fixed by the council. That is how dysfunctional matters have become due to the neglect by the Minister and his Department.

If this Government wants to increase the housing supply it needs to keep away from the LDA and increase capital investment for public housing on public land but I suspect, deep down, that the Minister knows that.

I said at the outset that when this Bill came before the housing committee in the previous term the Minister was opposed to it and that he now seems to be all for it. That seems to be a bit of a habit developing on the part of the Minister. That is not the only issue on which he has flip-flopped. I had hoped the Minister would deliver but I have discovered he is good at making promises during election time and then reneging on them afterwards. I want to take him back to early 2019 when he visited Drogheda, County Louth, as his party's spokesperson on hous-

ing. He met his Fianna Fáil colleagues on the election trail but he went one step further than that. He actually called a public meeting on the port access northern cross route. He stood up at the public meeting, giving it welly, and stated that this road needs to be built and that it was a vital piece of infrastructure that Drogheda needs. He said that if this road gets the funding, which he said it should do, it will open up land for development to deal with our housing crisis, get rid of the traffic gridlock that Drogheda is renowned for, help to open up the town centre, take lorries out of the town centre directly to the port and allow Drogheda, businesses and the town centre to prosper. He swore black was white in that if he was in government that is what would be done. At the start of this week, after three applications by Louth local authorities for funding for the northern cross route, two were refused. We had high hopes. Given what the Minister did - he got his media coverage, his photographs in the paper and the whole lot out of it - I thought he fully understood how crucial and how vital this piece of infrastructure is for Drogheda but, lo and behold, last Monday came the news that he too had refused funding and had reneged on the commitment he gave. He has been only a year in power. He is the Minister in charge. He is the Minister with the purse strings. He has already publicly identified the need for this, but when push came to shove he did what his party is renowned for doing; he reneged on his election promises.

In the Government's Project Ireland 2040 plan Drogheda is designated as a growth centre and there are population targets etc. If one were to take the plan at face value, one would say that if Drogheda is in it and has been identified and designated as a growth centre, surely it must be a priority for this type of funding. No, it was not a priority, which leads me to believe that the Government's Project Ireland 2040 plan is not worth the paper it is written on. I spoke to Louth local authorities yesterday. As of yesterday afternoon, they had no confirmation whatsoever from the Minister's Department as to why the application was refused. Earlier last year the previous housing Minister said Louth County Council had met representatives of his Department after the last refusal and had consulted widely with the Department. He said the Department would engage and assist local authorities in submitting their applications and Louth County Council did consult with the Department. That application has been sitting in the Minister's Department since last May. Despite the number of times I have raised it here and the number of times I corresponded with the Minister, not once did he flag for one moment any weaknesses in the application. Neither he nor his Department ever contacted the local authorities to say there was any weakness in the applications or to say "you may not get this" or "you ought to apply to X, Y and Z". There was nothing, not a word. The Minister kept them dangling there for the guts of ten months after the application was submitted.

Thinking back, I had high hopes, as I said, that the Minister was genuine. Those hopes are gone. I do not know if the Minister has any idea of the anger of the people in Drogheda and south Louth over this. I have not felt such anger for a long time. We have waited for this funding for 15 years. For the first time ever we had a Minister who publicly stated and who benefited from that statement by getting media coverage that this was a vital piece of infrastructure and that if he were in government, the funding would be granted. What did he do then? He turned his back on them. I ask him to overturn this decision, given that we have been 15 years in the waiting. In addition, is there an appeals process whereby the local authorities can appeal this decision? The northern environs plan is for 7,000 houses to be built in an already traffic-congested town. While 2,000 of those houses have been built in recent years; there are a further 5,000 to go. Does the Minister want to destroy Drogheda with poor planning and lack of infrastructure? Is that what he is about? I appeal to the Minister again to overturn this decision because if he thinks for a split second that I or the people in Drogheda will let this go,

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given what he said previously and the way he just turned down that application and refused it point-blank, he has another thing coming. Is there an appeals process and will he overturn this desperate decision?

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Housing is a basic need. Without housing, all aspects of life become radically more difficult. Physical and mental health starts to deteriorate and a family's ability to provide even simple nutrition falls apart. Education and work life are next to impossible without a home, and the human condition disintegrates if a person does not have a house. Ireland is suffering from a prolonged housing emergency and the level of human misery being caused by this prolonged housing emergency is unprecedented. I firmly believe that about 1 million people in Ireland are currently in housing distress in some fashion, whether it be mortgage distress, homelessness, years spent on housing waiting lists or grossly unaffordable rents and mortgages. This crisis has been going on for so long that the media and the political establishment have now become desensitised to it. The whole housing crisis has been completely eclipsed by Covid and this is an absolute disaster for many people around the country. It is the primary responsibility of the Government to make sure that people have access to affordable and reasonably priced homes and that those who cannot afford homes at market prices have an alternative route to a home. In this, in every measure, this Government and the previous Government have failed. In a normal society the cost of a house should equal about two and a half times to four times a person's annual income. In the South of Ireland, the average wage is about €44,000 but the average price of a home is now eight times the average income of an individual. That is double the high end of what the cost of a home should be in relation to a person's income. Even the Minister has to admit it at this stage, to hold up the white flag, to hold up his hand and say that the Government has radically failed the people of Ireland when it comes to homes. In Dublin a family on an average wage pay well over 50% of their after-tax income on average rents. For people on the minimum wage, both buying and renting homes is now absolutely impossible in Dublin. The record of three successive Governments on housing and homelessness has been nothing short of shameful. Last year 79 people died in homelessness on the streets of Dublin. The Minister's response to this shocking humanitarian crisis has been very poor. First, the fact that he has not rushed to make all the other local authorities in the State record the deaths that are happening in homelessness in those other counties annually is amazing. We will go through another year during which only Dublin will have recorded the number of people who died in homelessness. That is a major mistake. Second, the issue I brought to the Minister's attention in the dying months of last year in respect of people who are from outside of Dublin being refused homeless services in Dublin has not been fully resolved. It needs to be fully resolved. In addition, many people with disabilities on local housing waiting lists have been waiting more than a decade. The average rent in Dublin is well in excess of €2,000. Annually, this is a full €3,000 more than the before-tax income of a person working full-time on the minimum wage. In my home county, people who are single must wait well over ten years on the waiting list for a home, another shocking fact.

I note that last week, a Green Party Minister stated in the context of a plan for direct provision that he would guarantee a person coming into Ireland a home after, I think, four months and that he or she would have a guarantee of his or her own front door. I oppose direct provision. It is a shockingly inhumane way to house people who are fleeing war, violence and famine. This country should offer refuge to people from abroad who are fleeing war, violence and famine. However, the idea that this country, which currently cannot home a person who has been a waiting list for ten years, will have the capability to home people with their own front door within four months or arriving in this country is so outlandish that it is amazing that the Government

has even made that ambition known. We believe that people who are going through the direct provision system should have their application for direct provision fully completed after 18 months. Those who are refugees, seeking refuge from violence, war and famine should be offered refuge, and those who do not fulfil the law should have the law imposed on their particular situation.

To afford the cheapest accommodation in Dublin, a couple or individual needs to have an annual income of around €100,000. The cheapest two-bedroom apartment available to buy in Dublin costs €375,000, which would require a deposit of 10%, or €37,000. The list goes on. The fact of the matter that in housing terms, we are in a perfect storm that has been handed down from Minister to Minister like a hot potato, with each of them afraid to deal with it. At the same time, there are tens of thousands of houses around the country which are empty. At the same time, there are thousands of acres of land around the country that have been zoned, are in developers' hands, and are lying idle. There are sites that are not being taxed for site valuation tax. There is a dysfunctional housing market that this Government is refusing to make functional.

One of the difficulties that I have with this Bill that the Minister has brought forward is the fact that the Government is saying that local authorities will be bypassed. Local authorities have been gutted by this Government and previous Governments for a long time. The town councils were derailed and closed and local councillors are basically in hock to the officials in councils with regard to what they can and cannot do. They are extremely powerless already. One power they have is to represent local people when it comes to the building of social and affordable homes. They provide rich and invaluable information and oversight, in respect of how those homes get built in local areas. That is going to be deleted by the Government's plan. Local democracy is going to be totally deleted with this Bill.

I have concerns with regard to the percentage of the lands that will go to social and affordable homes. I know that the Fine Gael Bill, of which this is a close copy, contained a 30% limit in this respect. I am not sure exactly what the Minister is planning but I am significantly worried that much of that property will end up in the hands of private developers and the lands will be used to build homes under a definition of "affordable" that is marginally below the current market price, which to many people is absolutely unaffordable.

Before I finish, I make the point that the Economic and Social Research Institute, ESRI, recently warned the Minister that the Affordable Housing Bill would jack up house prices. It is incredible that the Minister is deaf to many independent economists and organisations that are trying their best to advise the Minister on keeping house prices down, and the Minister is implementing policy that is actually going the other way. I note there was a report in the *Irish Examiner* which stated that when the ESRI was making its presentation to the Oireachtas Committee on Housing, Local Government and Heritage, there was lobbying from Deputies, asking it to tone down or delete its critique of the Minister's work. Perhaps the Minister had nothing to do with that but nonetheless, it was reported. If it is the case that we are going to seek to reduce the ability of third-party organisations and experts in their fields to present us with information that is economically sound for political reasons, that would be a big mistake.

Deputy Joe Flaherty: I welcome the Land Development Agency, LDA. It will be an important mechanism as we look to undertake a strategic review of State lands and fully utilise these lands with the aim of building sustainable communities and affordable homes. I know that the Minister and his Department are passionate about affordable housing and committed

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to delivering it for Dublin and for other major urban centres. However, I have, on a number of occasions, reminded the Minister that there is a need for a not-dissimilar scheme in six to seven counties, namely, a sustainable housebuilding programme. County Longford will be at the front of the queue when this comes.

The current average price for a new standard three-bedroom semi-detached starter home should be around €229,000 in Longford, yet the average house price locally is around €122,000. The reality is that it has not been commercially viable for builders to build houses in County Longford and it is extraordinary to think that it is now 12 years since a three-bedroom semi-detached house was built commercially in the county. Throughout that time, the local authority will have turned down in excess of 500 families for social housing support on the basis that they were over the income threshold for supports. All these people now find themselves in a housing nightmare, unable to access social housing supports because they are earning too much and unable to access expensive private rental because they simply cannot afford it or the housing stock is not there. I am currently working with many young couples who are caught in this very bind. They are working hard and trying to save for a deposit on a house that in all likelihood will never materialise because the supply simply is not there.

Several counties that share a similar socioeconomic profile and housing market to County Longford need a cautious and measured intervention, modelled on the affordable housing scheme, in the hope of kick-starting sustainable housebuilding activity again in these counties. This is the type of measured, assured and cautious intervention that will reinvigorate provincial Ireland, just as the country saw throughout the 1950s and 1960s, when the Governments of those days put the principles of housing for all and affordable housing for all, front and centre.

The existing affordable housing scheme can and should be tweaked to suit counties such as Longford. It is to be hoped that local authorities will be mandated to invite expressions of interest for two to three housing developments in the county, with the guiding principle of sustainability and affordability for would-be homeowners. For many in rural Ireland, the media obsession with delivering affordable housing in the big cities and towns is frustrating, because many of these communities are themselves dealing with a nuanced but challenging housing crisis, and one that still could be easily fixed. I know that I have spoken with the Minister about this issue several times, and that he comprehends the viability challenge that currently exists for builders in the Longford market, and that of other counties. The hope and expectation is that the Minister will be able to tweak the affordability scheme to foster sustainable housebuilding in counties such as Longford and thereafter give local authorities the mandate to invite expressions of interest, with the aim of recommencing the construction of affordable housing in our communities.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: I wish to start by expressing my thanks for being able to make a contribution to this most important debate. At the end of the day, any Government and any Minister for housing will want to be judged positively by the people they represent in providing affordable and local authority accommodation, and having a situation whereby people can afford their own door at a certain stage of their lives, when it is available to them to do so.

Yesterday would have been the late Jackie Healy-Rae's 90th birthday, if we could be fortunate enough to have him still with us. In getting prepared for this debate, I was thinking about the work that he and people like him did on local authorities before ever coming to Dáil Éireann. I thought of the great county councillors and how simplified the housing process was at the time. County councils got money, bought land and built houses. That is exactly how it was.

They used local contractors, not necessarily big contractors but, as a rule, people who came from within the county. This created local employment and kept the hardware shops going. The houses got built and after a period of time of their being lived in by local authority tenants, those tenants could, if they were fortunate enough to get the legs going under them, purchase their house. That was great.

I would say to the Minister not to overcomplicate things and to try to keep to that system. We need to ensure that our local councils can build houses, give them to people on the housing list and let those people have an opportunity, whenever it would be prudent for them financially, to buy the homes at an affordable price. That is what I and every other person elected to Dáil Éireann wants, as do, most importantly, the very hard-working councillors throughout the country. I do not want anything we do here in passing legislation and setting up new agencies ever to interfere with what I could call the autonomy of local councils and country councillors. In Kerry, the council's housing department does excellent work, from the director of housing down to the investigating officers and the staff who process the grant applications and deal with the people who fill out forms to go on the list. They do their work in an excellent fashion. Every elected member of our local authority is, to a man or woman, a driven person who wants to represent every part of the county and do good for the people on the housing list.

There are certain questions I have to pose about what the Government is proposing. The Minister knows that I am not one of those people who stands up in this Chamber and says that all Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael are out for is to promote the big developers. I believe that is nonsense. Perhaps things happened in the past that neither I nor anyone else would be proud of, but I do not believe that anybody will go pointing fingers at a current Minister and say that this person is all for the big developers. That is a populist thing for politicians to be saying about any individual. If I thought it was true, I would not be standing up and defending a Minister. When I think that a Minister is being blackguarded by that sort of talk, I do not like to hear it when I believe it not to be true. I want that to go on the record.

However, as I said, there are certain things I have to question and nobody can blame me for doing so. I have my own very strong, heartfelt views on direct provision because of the simple fact that in the county I represent, I have met and dealt with many people over the years who come from places where they were not safe to seek protection, our hospitality and to be taken care of in this country. It is right and proper that Governments should offer that protection, but the question is how to do it in the best fashion. We all want to get better and do better all the time. I have seen the White Paper that has been produced, which states that a person who comes to this country will, after a certain period, be entitled to own-door accommodation. I ask the Minister to remember that I am on record as saying that the ideal situation is to process the applications quickly of people coming here, in order that they are not left indefinitely in a particular situation. To me, hotels are a place where people go on holidays or for short-term stays. Everybody knows that is what a hotel is and what it should be. It is not a place for a long stay for anybody.

Having said that, when it comes to people seeking asylum having own-door accommodation, it is stated in the White Paper that they would, or could, have it after four months. How does that marry with the people who are on our local authority lists in Tralee, Listowel, Killarney, Killorglin, Sneem, Kenmare, east Kerry, north Kerry, west Kerry and all of south Kerry? How in the name of goodness can we tell people that those who come here from abroad will get a house after four months but the people living here and who are on a housing list will have to wait seven, ten, 11 or 12 years? Where are the houses going to come from so quickly? I would

be delighted if I could be proven wrong in this. I would be delighted if the Minister could say to me that he can do it. However, would he be telling me in the same breath that the young couples and people starting out who are on housing lists and have been waiting for a long time will no longer have to wait? We cannot say one thing to one group of people and something else to another group. If we are able to fast-track the giving of local authority housing to anybody, we should be able to do it for everybody or else we should do it for nobody. I would like the Minister, at some stage, to explain to me and to the House how he can tell people that they will have own-door accommodation, or be entitled to it, after four months. I cannot see where the housing is going to come from in that period of time.

We all have to work very diligently to ensure that young couples who might not be looking for local authority housing at all but might be able to secure loans and mortgages to buy or build their own houses are able to do so at affordable rates. I am sure the Minister is acutely aware of something that has happened in the past number of months, but I want to remind the House of it. I refer to the increase in the cost of materials. The price of timber, steel, concrete and every other material that is used in construction has gone up enormously. I will not bore the House with the statistics but the increase is frightening. If one priced a steel structure, for instance, 12 months ago, compared with what it would cost today, there have been something like five increases in the price of steel and four increases in the price of timber. That is all within a 12-month period and every one of those increases was what I would call substantial.

We have to take that factor into account and it leads us on to other debates such as where we are going with the forestry industry in Ireland that we are importing all the timber because we cannot cut down our own trees and have our own mills milling our timber. That would obviously be at a cheaper cost than importing it from Russia, Scandinavia and other parts of Europe, which does not make sense. There are common sense things like this that we must do to try to keep the cost of the raw materials for construction down.

I referred to things that are said a lot in this House about Ministers and big developers. I do not know what people would define as big developers but we should remember that any person who has a building business, whether a big, small or medium-sized business, must have people working for that business. There is no sin and there is nothing dirty or wrong in being a developer or builder. I want to send that message out from Dáil Éireann to the people who are maligned an awful lot. As I said, things might have happened in the past with big developers, big money and things like that, but it does not pertain to the politicians I know today or the developers who are operating today. One thing I do know is that we need builders. We need people with gumption, who have the ability to take on projects and are smart enough to know how to do the finances, employ the contractors and subcontractors and do the work in local areas. That ability does not fall out of the sky. The politicians who are sometimes jumping up and down and criticising those types of people could not organise a tea party themselves. I certainly would not put them in charge of any building project because not only would it fall down, it would not fall up in the first place to fall down in the second place. We have to remember who we are talking about and what we are saying when we are critical about any section of society. To me, builders might be big, medium or small employers but all they are doing is giving jobs to people in local areas and providing a service.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I am glad to have an opportunity to talk on this very important matter. Housing is the dominant issue that we are asked about every day.

I appreciate that the Minister is trying to do something about it. While I might not agree with

the Land Development Agency aspect, it is not personal. It is my view versus the Minister's.

I, too, compliment the local authority in Kerry on what it has done in very difficult times to provide housing. While it has a fairly hefty housing list all the time, it continues to do its best. It has done so going back as far I can remember, during which time it built rural cottages and brought out demountable homes. In this regard, I can think of a special man who did an awful lot of work and who I am not sorry to mention, namely, Mr. John O'Donoghue from Knockaderry, Farranfore. He was a clerk of works but he carried out some works and organised some houses. He used local builders who employed local tradesmen. They did magnificent work with very little. They did not have teleporters or much of the modern equipment available to builders today but, nevertheless, they had a massive housing programme over the years. The only thing we are short of now is finance.

I am not happy about the Land Development Agency and have significant concerns about it because it is removing accountability from ordinary elected members, ordinary county councillors who have done their best over the years and who are still doing their best in Kerry County Council. I acknowledge there are problems acquiring land and getting houses built here in Dublin, which may have tempted the Government to go the way it is going. Maybe that approach is needed in Dublin but it is not needed in Kerry. I have concerns over public lands being handed over to private developers. Like Deputy Michael Healy-Rae, I have nothing against developers but I believe public lands should remain in public ownership. It would be fine if the developers built the social or affordable housing for the local authority but I am very concerned about the Government's statement that they could acquire public lands, and even private lands, at agricultural prices. It could create a civil war in a town or county if land were purchased compulsorily from private people. I would be very worried about that.

I am also worried about accountability. It is accountability that we need. We have lost accountability in many of the sectors. Where roads are concerned, when a councillor puts down a motion in Kerry County Council, the request is sent on to Transport Infrastructure Ireland. It is a step removed. Refuse collection is working fine in our county but in other places, the local authorities have no role in it. We are lucky in Kerry with the refuse collection. Town councils did great work in their towns but they were abolished. They were very necessary for local representation. I rue the day that they were abolished.

There are various schemes that the Minister could help us with. The tenant purchase scheme is not working. Those who have been paying rent for 30 or 40 years are not allowed to purchase their house if they are not working and have become pensioners. The scheme was abolished for a number of years and the affected individuals exceeded the maximum age before it was reinstated. No one is allowed to purchase any house built since 2015. Normally, they could be purchased after 12 months.

Rural cottages are very hard to get built in our county. We cannot get enough money. The scheme that was in place was great. A young couple could provide a site, more often than not on their family-owned land, and could pay back the council the cost of the house when they got up and running. The council, in turn, was able to build more houses. This helped to pay for the voids. Kerry County Council is doing well enough now but, for a period, it was struggling seriously because it did not have the money to turn the voids around and put people back into the houses.

Many couples would build their own house if they could get planning permission. That is

all they want. The urban-generated pressure clause is depriving many couples of the ability to build their own house.

The Government is saying people should consider building in towns and villages. We do not have the sewerage schemes. I hear the Green Party talking every day about the environment, stating we must protect it. I want to protect it as much as anyone else but these people do not want to talk about the sewerage schemes. Places such as Scartaglin have no sewerage scheme. They have proud communities. Brosna is another example. In Kenmare town, a developer who has got planning permission cannot proceed with a development because the sewerage scheme is not adequate. It is being said that money will be got but that has been said for a long time.

There are other issues, including those affecting young couples. Consider the case of a young couple who obtained planning permission and built a house without any loan. They have the roof on and the windows and doors in, and all they need is money for the wiring and plumbing, but they will not qualify for the grant of €30,000 because they did not get a mortgage. One of the conditions to qualify for the grant is that the applicant has a mortgage. The county council cannot give the couple a loan because they do not have a greenfield site. That is absolutely ridiculous.

Another case involves a grand young fellow who only wanted to borrow €100,000 to build his house. He could do a lot of the work and had enough money to go so far but no bank would give him the €100,000. The banks would not lend without lending the entire cost of the house. Can the Minister understand how ridiculous that is? There are rules and regulations on planning and getting a small bit of help that are driving people down through the ground.

The levies and charges for connecting to the local sewerage and water systems and for connecting the electricity are absolutely ridiculous. If the Government really wants to help people — I know it would like to — it will have to suss out the amount of VAT and other taxes chargeable. As Deputy Michael Healy-Rae stated, the cost of materials has become very high but, on top of that cost is the cost of the VAT and other taxes. It is nailing people to the cross. Many would try to build a house for themselves and would do their very best but they are nailed by rules, regulations, levies and charges. Many who want to build a one-off house in Kerry cannot get planning permission. They would gladly build if they got a small bit of help. I ask the Minister to get someone to reconsider the urban-generated clause that is depriving so many of planning permission in Kerry — people who just want to put a roof over their heads with hardly any help required from anyone else.

An Ceann Comhairle: We do not have another Government contributor at this stage, nor do we have another Sinn Féin contributor. That being the case, I call Deputy Connolly.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I welcome the opportunity to speak. I have waited for quite some time for it. The Minister's comments about ideology on the left are not helpful and his comments about hysterical Deputies on this side of the room are not conducive to a reasonable debate either. I come from a large family and I have had broad experience within that family. We have had many trades and experienced every side in relation to jobs. My father was a small builder. I watched him all my life working extremely hard, putting in hours when he would price jobs and never get a penny and so on. I fully understand the situation from a number of perspectives. The Minister's comments are not helpful.

Deputy Cowen talked about housing coming up at the last election. Since 2011, I have stood in three elections in February. In 2011, 2016 and 2020, the same issues came up consistently, namely, housing, public health, climate change and public childcare. There were other issues but they were the major four issues. It seems to me they are all intermingled if we are to have a sustainable society. Since those three elections, we have had the pandemic and we have had the mantra repeated in here that we cannot go back to the way things were. That is what the Minister is doing with this Bill. Maybe I am wrong and I will be the first to put my hand up if I am. Maybe there will be appropriate changes to the Bill but I have serious concerns about what this Bill is doing. We are not learning from the pandemic that we need a sustainable society. That must be built on principles of equality. The most basic part of that is that people have homes and that, whether one rents or buys, the price is affordable and related to income, not the market.

I live in the Claddagh, which is a beautiful place. I saw a two-bedroom house recently for rent for €2,000 per month. I do not mean to single out a particular house but that is simply unsustainable. I use as an example a two-bedroom house in Galway city at €2,000 per month. How could that be sustainable? My difficulty is with successive governments, starting with the Labour Party and Fine Gael Government when it introduced the housing assistance payment, HAP, in 2014 and enshrined it as the major Government policy. People were taken off a housing waiting list if they received it and it enshrined in policy that tenants, who until then had paid under-the-counter payments, had to pay over-the-counter payments. The Government or local authority would pay so much, nobody could get a house at a rent that was under the limits and tenants had to pay the excess.

The purpose of every scheme that successive governments have brought in has been to bolster the market. That is my difficulty. There is a role for the market. I have heard various Deputies talk about how we need developers. We certainly do and we need builders, including small builders. I am all for that but that is not what this proposal is about. Let me put this in perspective. I have given one example of a rent of €2,000. The Simon Community has produced its 18th snapshot, *Locked Out of the Market: The Gap Between HAP Limits and Market Rents*. In the Galway city summary, it states:

There was an average of 62 properties available to rent in Galway City Centre over the study period.

[...]

For the fifth study period in a row ... there were no properties available within standard of discretionary HAP limits in Galway City[.]

[...]

This is the eleventh time over the 16 *Locked Out* studies that there have been no properties to rent within standard HAP limits in Galway[.]

I could go on but I will not. According to *daft.ie*, rents in Galway have increased by 4.9%. The report goes on to show that the position in the city suburbs are marginally better. Out of 61 properties, there were three available within the discretionary limits. I have read each report that came out and with each report the crisis intensifies.

Over the three elections I mentioned, the message has been consistent. I ask for a message from the Government that the market will not provide sustainable homes for our people. The

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market is for profit, and fair play to anyone who can make a profit. However, that profit must be made within a policy set by a Government that says a house is not a commodity to be traded. It is the most essential building block if we are to have a civilised society. That message is not coming from the Government. There are mixed messages, which is confusing.

We have asked repeatedly on this side of the House for a declaration of a housing emergency. We did that with climate change. That has not happened. We have asked for housing and homes to be enshrined as the most basic right in our Constitution and that has not happened. We have utterly relied on the market and it is getting worse and worse. HAP payments now amount to more than €1 billion a year. Every time I mention that, some Minister shakes their head, but I will keep saying it until a Minister tells me I am wrong.

We still have rent supplement. There is nothing wrong with rent supplement but it was a temporary measure. Instead of building houses and dealing with the problem, we did the opposite and enshrined HAP as a policy document. Unfortunately, it was brought in by the Labour Party and Fine Gael. That sent a strong message to the market that, from now on, we would allow the market to house people with insecure tenure, we would pay the rent and when we do not succeed in paying a sufficient amount to the landlord we will put the onus on the tenant to come up with the cash.

I looked at the Bill, consisting of 78 sections, ten Parts and two Schedules, many times as I waited for my chance to speak. The problem is set out at the beginning of the text. It is an “Act to regulate relevant public land in order to increase the amount of land available”. There would be nothing wrong with that if we did it to increase the amount of land available for public housing on public land. I might come back to the term “public housing”. However, we are doing it “for the provision of housing so as to address deficiencies in the housing market”. We are not recognising there is a crisis or that we need dramatic change, as the Minister knows, if we are to face the next pandemic or climate change. We need to have a sustainable approach to housing. This Bill is twisting language to say we will look at public land but leaving numerous escape routes to allow that public land to be used for private housing that will be sold off or rented with no guarantees about who will own it and so on. There are so many questions. If the Minister comes back to tell me that in Galway - or wherever it is necessary, as I am not parochial - there will be public housing on public land, I would be the first to support him but that is not the message being given here.

Many Deputies have mentioned the undermining of local democracy and the Minister has shaken his head and said it is not happening. That is exactly what is happening with regard to the disposal of public land. It is enshrined in section 56. I will not read out the text but it enshrines that councillors will not have a say in the disposal of public land to the Land Development Agency. I would have thought that before putting the Land Development Agency on a statutory footing, the Minister would at least look at what it has achieved to date and what it has cost. It was to establish a registry. What progress has been made with the registry of public land? What does it cost us in rent to have another quango and a CEO? We run down our local authorities all the time. The Minister is shaking his head. The CEO of the county council has moved on to greater things in Mayo. He was acting CEO for five years or maybe longer. We have left the county council without a manager after having someone as the acting manager for five years. Galway has a city manager who has been in office for more than seven years. The only idea the previous Government came up with was to amalgamate the two local authorities in Galway against the overwhelming decision of councillors, who opposed the proposal and argued that bigger was not better. They said smaller, well-resourced and well-staffed was bet-

ter and they would deliver. Two reports at the time were in favour of the amalgamation but not before under-resourcing and understaffing were dealt with. Those have never been dealt with.

In addition to taking power from councillors, the Minister also set up a quango in the Land Development Agency. I will stick with Galway because, perhaps, it best captures this. I have never tired of highlighting the crisis in Galway. I will take one aspect of that crisis. I mentioned there are not enough properties for rent and certainly not enough properties within the housing assistance payment, HAP, targets or objectives.

On top of that, however, people are waiting for 15, 16 and 17 years on the local authority list. My regular email to the county and city councils asks that they please explain to me how these people were never offered a house in that length of time. That is one aspect. The second aspect, which I observed with my own eyes and heard, is that from 2009, all construction was suspended in Galway and other areas. As a result, we had lovely quarterly reports in which the final category was “housing suspended”. We bought land at a very high price. Programmes for building social housing were all suspended. Not one house was built. On the one hand, the Government stopped all housing construction, while on the other it gave out money under the HAP scheme to bolster the market. Now, we find the market can provide something we knew all the time.

When I read this Bill, I want to thank Dr. Rory Hearne for his many articles on housing. His analysis has been very helpful to me and other Deputies. He talks about looking at housing through the prism of the market and as a commodity to be traded for profit. If the Minister calls me an ideologue because of that, I will take it. I do not believe I am an ideologue. I do not believe I have any ideology in that respect other than that I believe fundamentally in equality. I believe it is right because it makes for a healthy society and a more sustainable economy.

I see no equality here. I see snobbery built into the comments on the Bill and references to undue social segregation, whereby we cannot have too many tenants of the same type in the same area. I have lived long enough to observe Shantalla, the local authority estate from which I come. The houses have not changed. The estate has the same appearance, yet the price of a house has gone up to €500,000. That tells us something about perception and in-built snobbery. What was once a local authority house, and many still are in Shantalla, is now worth €500,000. The railings outside the hospital are exactly the same colour. The estate has exactly the same type of road structure and the same houses, but the price has gone up.

I am really allergic to in-built snobbery I see in the term “undue segregation”. Personally, I would not like to live beside any of the men who have been caught up, to put it mildly, with the Davy stockbrokers scandal. I certainly would not like to live beside one of the few bank managers who have been exposed. Segregation works in many ways. I will go back to basics and stay away from the emotion but it really gets to me when I hear that comment.

I would like to see a massive construction programme of public housing that is available for all of us, if that is what we choose. With that, the Minister would send a message that would bring the prices of houses down. The price of my house must come down whether I like it or not. It is simply not sustainable for house prices to keep going up as if a house is a commodity. If that message were to go out, prices would come down and we could then look at building public housing on public land.

We have no master plan in Galway city. I have tried to explain this. I have extra time today

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so I will dwell on it. We have no master plan to manage our overall land in the city. CIÉ is doing its own thing in Ceannt Station, as are the docks. The Land Development Agency, with Galway City Council, is looking at Dyke Road. We have substantial public lands in all these areas.

The Land Development Agency has been involved in Galway, yet we do not have a report. A task force was set up. The Minister might recall that it took some effort on my part to get correspondence from his Department regarding that. When the Minister shakes his head, I waste my time responding. I ask him, in his own time, to look at how long it took to get these three letters, none of which contains a report showing an analysis of the position in Galway and what is required. They refer to attachments, none of which were provided. The point about setting up a task force is that I foolishly breathed a sigh of relief at the time and thought we were going to look at what was wrong in Galway. I thought we would get a master plan for all the public land but we did not get one.

We have infrastructure deficits in Connemara, in the smaller towns and on the east side of Galway city. This has been mentioned by Deputy Canney and Senator Kyne lately in the Seanad. We cannot have balanced development because there is a lack of infrastructure. For example, there is a shortage of drinking water in Ceantar na nOileán in Conamara because of an absence of progress with Irish Water. We now use Irish Water as the punching bag as opposed to the State setting what is required and insisting that Irish Water do it. We have raw sewage ag dul isteach san fharraige taobh amuigh den Cheathrú Rua agus gan aon chóras athchúrsála i gceist ansin.

We have no infrastructure year after year. I could mention many other things but I will not single out areas. I am singling out the absolute lack of commitment to balanced regional development and an overdevelopment of cities which cannot even cope with what they have. Mutton Island is struggling to cope with the population we have in Galway. We have no sewerage infrastructure on the east side of the city, yet we are now coming in with the Land Development Agency, a CEO, rent and extra staff.

We have systematically undermined our local authorities and denuded them of staff and power. We took away waste management. In 2001, we produced a plan in Galway city in which we stated we did not want an incinerator but put forward an extremely positive proposal. The response of the Government was to take our powers from us. This Government is taking local authority powers in the area of housing without an analysis of what is required. I will give the Minister an example of this with regard to the strategic housing developments. I refer to a very courageous submission on the review of the strategic housing commission by a chief planner in Galway. If the Minister does nothing else, I ask him to read this report from 24 July 2019. The individual in question certainly took their courage in their hands in setting out that the strategic development was not appropriate and used up the resources and time of the staff in the city council and, presumably, all the local authorities, to no avail and without any recognition whatsoever. Let me read one tiny bit of it: "The meetings with the applicant and An Bord Pleanála are more dictate than dialogue or negotiation." Trust was a problem and it included the use of additional staff, time, meetings and resources. It is a long submission and my time is nearly up so I cannot go into it. I invite the Minister to read it. I also ask him to give me whatever analysis was done by the task force in Galway. I have three letters but no attachments or conclusions from a task force that has sat for more than two years in a city which is crying out for a master plan.

Finally, and this worries me, the docks in Galway are under a company and Ceannt Station

is separate. Will those lands be available for the Land Development Agency to consider? Are they outside the agency's remit because the docks have a commercial remit? I thank the Ceann Comhairle. I will not go over my time.

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Joan Collins, who is sharing time with Deputy McNamara.

Deputy Joan Collins: As Deputy Connolly stated, this Bill does not recognise, in any shape or form, that there is a housing crisis or emergency. Although the previous Minister said that there was a crisis, we never actually took it on as a task with which to deal. This crisis and emergency did not come about by accident. It is a consequence of policy decisions and an ideological stance going back decades through successive Governments involving Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael, Labour and the Greens. All of these parties should be honest and accept their responsibility for the current situation.

One of the most basic and fundamental human rights is the right to shelter. In this case, it is the right to affordable and good-quality housing with security of tenure. The failure to provide such a basic need is a signifier of a failed state. This situation will not be solved by tinkering with the present system of reliance on the private sector or the managing of the figures on social housing. It needs an immediate and fundamental change in policy. It needs a declaration of a housing emergency and a commitment to a mass programme to build public housing.

The Minister knows Mel Reynolds, an architect who has compiled many reports over the years. In March 2019, Mr. Reynolds made the point that there is enough zoned public and State-controlled land to build 140,000 housing units. He claimed that there was enough zoned lands owned by local authorities in Dublin to effectively clear the 40,000 waiting lists across the four Dublin local authority areas. Instead of action to build public housing on State-owned land, however, we got the land initiative, a scheme to give State land to private developers for a return of a paltry supply of social housing. This went nowhere mainly because of lack of interest on the part of the developers and, rightly, opposition by councillors.

I welcome the idea of having the Land Development Agency to manage and develop publicly owned land in conjunction with local authorities, semi-State and other public bodies. However, serious questions need to be addressed in this Bill. Dublin City councillors are concerned that the Bill contains clauses which might remove their right to vote on the disposal of local authority lands. They have asked the council to take legal advice in this regard and are expecting a report on the issue next week. This may not be the Bill's intention but it is an issue that needs clarification and a possible amendment.

What does the commitment to a certain amount of affordable housing mean? Will public land be given to private developers? How much land will be set aside in this regard? What does the Minister consider to be affordable? We are looking at up to €400,000 for a private apartment or house. This is not affordable for a couple on an average income.

We need a change of mindset if the Government is serious about solving this crisis. We need a commitment to public housing and only public housing on State-owned land. By public housing, I mean a mix of traditional council houses and cost-rental units. This will accommodate those who are not eligible for social housing because their incomes are higher than the limits allow. The thresholds are too low anyway and should be raised. It would also ensure mixed-income communities alongside public spaces, parks, community crèche facilities and

good public transport links. From this point of view, local authorities should have the key role of developing their zoned lands. Local authorities would build better quality housing with more focus on public space. This would avoid the problems with fire safety regulations and construction problems which occurred with privately built housing during the boom. In theory, local authorities should be able to build cheaper because they already own the land, which is the main cost factor for private developers. Local authorities would also forgo the average 15% profit margin raised in the private sector.

The other aspect of this issue relates to land held by semi-State and public bodies such as the Department of Defence. The development of the former Clancy Barracks at Islandbridge is 100% private. We also have Iarnród Éireann, probably the largest holder of public land, seeking a developer to build on land around Heuston Station. In this deal, the developer will rent out the units for 25 years and then the properties will be owned by Iarnród Éireann. Again, this will be a 100% private development on State-owned land.

There is a meeting tonight about the development of cost-rental accommodation at St. Michael's Estate in Inchicore. Dublin City Council has the option of 20-year or 40-year loans from EU Structural Funds. If it is a 20-year loan, the cost recovery through rent charges will not be significantly lower than market rents. This will defeat the whole concept of the cost-recovery model. Instead, there should be affordable rents for good quality housing with long-term security of tenure. A 40-year loan would mean much lower rents and affordability for people in the communities in question.

I am on the board of the Dolphin House regeneration project. We went through phase 1, which was successful. When we moved to the next phase, however, problems arose. They arose because the local authority said it could not cover the cost of providing community facilities and green spaces in the regeneration development. Seemingly, this issue has arisen in Limerick and other places as well because, under the planning regulations for regeneration projects, community facilities and properly controlled community land must be provided. The Dolphin House community was forced to hand over a piece of land to a private developer who would pay for these facilities. This is outrageous. We either have regeneration or we do not. All monies must be given to the local authorities to create and develop community spaces and facilities.

As already stated, a State development agency to manage public land in conjunction with local authorities and other public bodies is a step forward. It must have a clear mandate, however, to build public housing of mixed tenure on publicly owned land.

Deputy Michael McNamara: I will start by going back in time a little and examining how we came to this point. I will go back ten years to be precise to a Government that had taken power in a slightly different economic situation but one that I fear is about to be revisited. I supported not all but many of the difficult decisions taken by that Government. The Minister was critical of the 2011-2016 Government, perhaps rightly in some instances. However, one achievement of that Government, and one of the reasons I supported it, was that there was no sell-off of State lands. There was a huge amount of pressure to sell off State lands at the time regardless of what entities owned them. They were preserved in public ownership, however, which is a testament to that Government. It was important that those State lands were maintained because they are now what the Government is proposing to develop for public housing. I have no problem whatsoever with that.

The 2011-2016 Government's record in house building was not great. The Government

before it, which the Minister supported, was no better. Both of them were in difficult economic times. The economy determines what services we provide, be it health, education or public housing. It also determines how efficient and how successful society is in vindicating social and economic rights. It is very difficult to build houses if there is no money. The Soviet Union built millions of houses from Biaystok right across to Vladivostok. They were not building many of them by the 1990s because their economy was on the rocks. The previous Government has a particular failing to answer for in that the country was doing well economically but houses were not being built.

To go back to my point about the importance of land banks for building houses, even if one gets a Government that does not have the wherewithal to build houses because of what it or a previous Government has done to the economy, the moneys at least are there. The land bank remains. That is why I would join with some previous speakers in expressing concern, in particular, at sections 49 and 56 of the Bill. The Local Government Association, which is a non-party political organisation and on which there are representatives from all organisations, has expressed concern.

I want to be clear that I do not have a problem with the Department or even a local government management agency taking property in instances where a local authority has manifestly failed to develop lands but the powers that are currently contained in this Bill are far wider than that, and that is my concern. As I say, I have no problem with what I think is the Minister's intention. I acknowledge and applaud that but I suppose we must legislate not only for the Minister's intentions but for the intentions of future Ministers of the Department, whatever it may be called in the future.

The powers to acquire land from local government must be tightened somewhat. There has to be a demonstrated failing by the local authority in question before the land can be taken off it and if there is such a failing and the land is taken by a development agency to develop public housing, who could possibly complain about that?

My other concern is that there is the power to take lands in public ownership and develop private housing on it. The Minister has made it clear in the case of Dublin - in fairness, it is his intention right across the country - that is not what he intends to do with this Bill. I repeat that we are not legislating for the Minister's intentions; we are legislating for future Ministers.

I want to be absolutely clear that I am not in any way talking about the Minister but predecessors in his office have been found to have been corrupt. I would worry in the event that there was a corrupt Minister in the future. Obviously, it is the Land Development Agency that would seize the land but, of course, all of the members are appointed by the Minister. The Minister, as Ministers do in the vast majority of agencies, will set the tone of the agency, be it a move towards the development of private housing on public lands or a commitment to developing exclusively publicly housing on public lands, or indeed something much more untoward. It is not impossible. If it has happened previously, it can happen again. The whole issue around development of lands, particularly in west Dublin, but in many other parts of the country, was fraught with corruption for years. Thankfully, I am not aware of any such corruption at present. I am certainly not aware of any such forces in Irish politics that were there previously but I am making the point that we are not legislating for now; we are legislating for the future. We should be cognisant of that.

The other issue I wish to raise as we are talking about housing is a failure by local authori-

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ties, including the local authority in Clare, which I represent, to adequately use the Derelict Sites Act 1990. There are many derelict buildings in towns across Clare, as there are right across Ireland. They are damaging to the morale of a town and I suppose they are particularly offensive in circumstances where there are long housing lists.

If the Derelict Sites Act needs to be amended, that is fine. Clare County Council has made the point that it feels the Act is inadequate. On the other hand, I believe Louth County Council has used it quite effectively to acquire. As for who is right and who is wrong, I do not know. I know about towns such as my own home town of Scariff and, in particular, Tullow, which is very near to me. The Minister has been criticised quite a bit for his plans to visit various areas of the country. I applaud the Minister for visiting areas of the country. A Minister should know what is going on across the country at all times. However, I would ask the Minister, when he is visiting an area, to look out for derelict buildings. I would ask the Minister to visit Clare and look at the amount of derelict buildings, in particular, in Tullow. It is a problem in Kilrush, Kildysart and Scariff. It is a problem on the street of Killaloe. In every town, there are these buildings which are not being utilised and must be brought back into use. If the owners have immediate plans to bring them back into use, that is the purpose of the Derelict Sites Act where a person is notified that it is intended to put his or her site on a register and the person can say that although it is a bit messy, he or she plans to carry out the following works in the following timeframe and the site is not put on the register. Alternatively, the site can be put on the register and if the site remains on the register for a period, the local authority can compulsorily acquire it and bring it back into use, either residential or retail, or a mixture of the two. It is something that we badly need to see utilised. Just as we badly need to see public lands being developed for housing, we need to see people back living on the main streets of our towns instead of those buildings falling in as they are at present.

I do not have a problem with the Minister's stated intentions and if local authorities are not developing the lands at their disposal, they should be taken off them and given to an agency which will develop them for public use. My concern is that the powers provided in this Bill are greater than that and could be abused in the future, either to bring about the development of private housing on public lands or for more nefarious purposes.

I have no problem with the Bill. I will be voting for it on this Stage but I strongly advocate that the Minister bring in amendments to tighten up the powers to take the lands, on Committee Stage or further down the line.

Finally, I also urge the Minister to look at the Derelict Sites Act and its operation to ascertain whether it is adequate. Various local authorities will have different views on the matter but it must be adequate. Just as there are a lot of public lands that are not been adequately used in the Minister's view and need to be adequately used, there are a lot of derelict sites right across the country. If particular local authorities are not stepping up to the plate and are not doing enough to bring them back into ownership, some strategy needs to be developed by the Minister and his Department to ensure that the blight of dereliction in our towns is combated.

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):
Ar dtús, gabhaim míle buíochas le gach Teachta a ghlac páirt sa díospóireacht seo. Bhí sí an-úsáideach agus bhí na Teachtaí, den chuid is mó, an-dearfach freisin. D'éist mé leis na pointí a bhí á phlé ag mo chomhghleacaithe agus oibreoimid le chéile chun dul chun cinn a dhéanamh leis an mBille. Táim ag súil go mór le Céim an Choiste den Bhille go luath. Táim oscailte freisin chun féachaint ar fíorleasuithe agus leasuithe úsáideacha. I thank the Members who

contributed to the debate. We have had a good debate with different views on it but I welcome that most of the contributions have been constructive. The Land Development Agency Bill is important legislation which will endure for years. We are all in agreement that we need to manage State land in a better way. Tá brón orm.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I must adjourn the debate at 7 p.m. but the Minister will continue to be in possession.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: Táim beagnach críochnaithe anois.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Tá tú ceart go leor.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: This agency and the legislation that underpins it will endure for some time. We need to get it right. As I said, I have listened to Members and I look forward to working with them on Committee Stage. There are reasonable and useful amendments that I will be open to considering. Let us remember why we are introducing this legislation. We need to ensure that State-owned land is used productively to house our people. It is not an attack on local government. The local government sector and councillors are of great importance and they will be the main driver and provider of public homes, both social and affordable. I want that to continue but I also want to ensure that land that is not being used, which some speakers correctly noted could house 114,000 families, is used. We have to get on with this. There is too much State-owned and agency land not being put to productive use and there are many reasons given as to why this should not happen. I will certainly not stand over that as the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage.

I am looking forward to working with Members on Committee Stage to craft and improve the Bill, while doing so expeditiously. We need to ensure the agency is up and running, is capitalised and can fund itself to deliver cost-rental and affordable housing and assist in delivering more social housing. I thank Members for their contributions which have been noted. I look forward to working with Deputies from all parties and none on Committee Stage.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I apologise to the Minister for interrupting. I was simply pointing out that I would have to interrupt him at 7 p.m.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: Tá sé sin maith go leor. Fadhb ar bith.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Táimid críochnaithe beagáinín níos luaithe ná mar a cheapamar. We have finished a little earlier than expected. Táimid críochnaithe ar an Dara Céim den Bhille anois.

Question put.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: A division has been called and, in accordance with Standing Order 80(2), the division is postponed until the scheduled weekly division time, which I understand will be tomorrow.

Public Service Pay Bill 2020: Order for Second Stage

Bill entitled an Act to provide for the adjustment of the restrictions, contained in the Financial Emergency Measures in the Public Interest (No. 2) Act 2009, on increasing the remuneration of public servants.

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neration payable to public servants and for that purpose to amend that Act, the Ministers and Secretaries (Amendment) Act 2011 and the Public Service Pay and Pensions Act 2017; and to provide for related matters.

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): I move: “That Second Stage be taken now.”

Question put and agreed to.

Public Service Pay Bill 2020: Second Stage

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): I move: “That the Bill be now read a Second Time.”

I thank the Leas-Cheann Comhairle and Deputies for facilitating the commencement of Second Stage of this Bill this evening. This Bill is a key enabler for the new public service pay agreement, Building Momentum, and allows for a range of reforming pay matters, including implementation of aspects of Sláintecare. It continues the process of unwinding and repeal of the financial emergency measures in the public interest, FEMPI, legislation. As such, it builds on changes that began with the Lansdowne Road agreement in 2015 and the Financial Emergency Measures in the Public Interest Act of 2015 and continued with the Public Service Pay and Pensions Act 2017 and Public Service Stability Agreement 2018-2020.

The Bill will allow implementation of the pay increases provided for by Building Momentum. Before dealing with the specific provisions of the Bill, I note that in December 2020, negotiations concluded on a new public service pay agreement entitled Building Momentum, which will apply for the next two years. The agreement was accepted by my colleagues in Cabinet and ratified by the public services committee of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions on 23 February. That decision by ICTU is welcome as it will deliver stability for the Government, public service users and public servants over the lifetime of the agreement.

We will all agree that the public service has stepped up to the challenge of the Covid-19 crisis and has delivered a world-class response. Public servants have been quick to adapt and readjust the way in which services are delivered so as to minimise the negative impact of the pandemic on the public. It is important that this agreement recognises the value of the work of our public servants during this pandemic and provides for affordable increases with pay adjustments weighted toward those on lower incomes. This is balanced by ensuring that the Government continues to exercise a prudent approach to the overall management of our public finances. The economic sustainability of this agreement is based on a pay pause for the majority of 2021 and modest but reasonable pay increases in 2022 when we expect a strengthening economy and labour market recovery as the vaccine roll-out takes effect.

The agreement provides for general pay increases of 1% in October 2021 and in October 2022, or €500, whichever is greater. I am also allocating a sectoral fund amounting to 1% of basic pay to resolve any outstanding issues such as those that resulted in industrial action in the period of previous agreements. There is also an independent process on the issue of Haddington Road agreement hours and an envelope of €150 million is being allocated to make a start in 2022 on implementing recommendations from that agreement in respect of the issue of hours.

This is an agreement that is weighted towards those at lower incomes, with an increase of approximately 5% for the lowest paid public servants. These groups will also benefit more from other measures in the agreement, including changes to overtime rates and premium payment adjustments. The pay adjustments provided for by the agreement are phased with implementation commencing later in 2021. In that regard, the agreement is fair, affordable and sustainable, and recognises the economic challenges facing the country. Most importantly, the agreement provides certainty on pay and industrial peace over the next two challenging years. A key element of the deal, one which taxpayers expect and the unions have now agreed, is that industrial peace will be maintained and there will be no additional cost increasing claims.

The agreement also sets out a reform agenda that seeks to embed the agility demonstrated during the Covid-19 period into enhanced public service delivery in the future. These include harnessing the capacity of technology and remote working across public services. It takes a new sectoral approach which recognises that different areas may have unique and innovative approaches to providing service delivery. A key element of this is that each sector will produce and publish reform plans that will demonstrate delivery each year.

Crucially, payment of the 1% sectoral fund will be conditional on the delivery of actual reforms. There will be scope to extend opening hours of public-facing services, so when people need to see someone to access a public service, it will be at a time which is convenient for them. Learning from experience in the Covid-19 pandemic, mechanisms will be agreed where staff will move quickly to different parts of the public service to deliver a response to critical and urgent demands.

As noted, the Bill will also enable progress on a range of pay reform matters. I will touch briefly on two of these, namely, Sláintecare and the seagoing commitment scheme in the Naval Service. A key objective of the Sláintecare implementation process is to remove consultant private practice from public hospitals. Central to implementation of this reform is a move to public-only consultant contracts and to tailor that contract to align with wider Sláintecare reforms. Taking that into account, all future consultant appointments will be to a new Sláintecare public-only consultant contract from a date to be decided shortly. The Sláintecare contract will have no provision for private practice and will be available to all existing consultants. The offer will be informed by a process of consultation with key stakeholders.

7 o'clock

The new contract, noting the significant reforms involved, is to offer an increased pay level.

Debate adjourned.

Ceisteanna (Atógáil) - Questions (Resumed)

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Legislative Process

37. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications when the climate action and low carbon development (amendment) Bill will be brought before Dáil Éireann; if he has amended the Bill to include recommendations from the pre-legislative scrutiny report of the Joint Committee on Climate Action; if so, the recommendations adopted; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13516/21]

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: As the Minister knows, before Christmas, the Joint Committee on Climate Action did a huge amount of work on the draft climate Bill at pre-legislative scrutiny stage and submitted 78 recommendations to him. Where does the Bill stand? When will the Dáil or Seanad see it? Has the Minister taken on board any or all of the recommendations?

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The climate action and low carbon development (amendment) Bill will provide for a whole-of-government approach to address climate change, with the purpose of achieving the transition to a climate resilient, biodiversity rich and climate neutral economy by the end of the year 2050. The Bill will significantly strengthen the statutory framework for climate governance, with appropriate oversight by the Government, the Oireachtas and an enhanced Climate Change Advisory Council. The Bill will introduce new legal obligations, including enacting an objective to achieve a climate neutral economy by 2050 at the latest, embedding a process of carbon budgeting, including sectoral emission ceilings, and providing for the preparation of an annual update to the climate action plan and a national long-term climate strategy every five years.

To this end, the Bill will provide for a significantly strengthened climate governance structure, which includes annual revisions to the climate action plan to address the need for intensive and regular monitoring and updating of policy actions to ensure we remain on track and within our emissions limits. In addition, Ministers will have to account annually to an Oireachtas committee for their performance in reducing emissions. The annual revision to the climate action plan and enhanced ministerial accountability will combine to act as a further review mechanism and opportunity to readjust or refocus actions, if required.

I welcome the extensive pre-legislative scrutiny report on the Bill published by the Joint Committee on Climate Action on 18 December. I have considered the 78 recommendations contained in the report and I am finalising proposed amendments, which are being carefully reviewed in the context of the overall framework and objectives of the legislation.

I intend to bring the Bill to Government at the earliest possible opportunity for approval to publish and initiate the legislative process in the Oireachtas as soon as possible thereafter. I also intend to formally respond to the Joint Committee on Climate Action, following publication of the Bill, to set out how the extensive work and detailed report has informed any revision to the Bill.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I thank the Minister for his response. He will appreciate that it does not provide the type of clarity I was hoping for. Will he give some indication of the date on which we might see this? Will it be in a week, a month or a year? I am conscious that there was great energy to try to get the Bill before the Dáil prior to Christmas. In fairness, a massive amount of work was done by the members of the committee across the political spectrum. It has been with the Department since before Christmas. What is the timeframe? The Minister mentioned targets. Will there be 2030 targets? Will there be interim targets before 2050? Will

there be mechanisms to correct as we go along rather than rolling on a yearly or five-yearly basis? What is the date? What is the hold-up? What are the problems?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: There is time sensitivity because we want 2021 to be the first year in the initial five-year budget. By summertime, we want to have our new updated climate action plan. We want the Climate Change Advisory Council to be able to inform it. Yes, there is an urgency. We have an interim advisory council chaired by Marie Donnelly, who has already started the preparatory work, but we do need the full legislation in place. I expect it very shortly, not within days but within the month for sure. We will bring it to the Dáil and the Chief Whip and the Business Committee will facilitate it.

To answer the Deputy's question on the committee's recommendations, I hope we can reflect many, if not most, of the recommendations in the final Bill. This process, while it has somewhat delayed developments, has been very positive. The work of the joint committee was really progressive and useful. We will reflect a lot of that in the final Bill.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I reiterate the point on the level of examination at pre-legislative scrutiny stage from across the political spectrum. There is a willingness and eagerness to get this work done. On this point, will there be 2030 targets? A significant point made by the committee was that it would not just be a matter of 2050 targets. Were the proposals on the Climate Change Advisory Council taken on board? Do the recommendations in respect of which the Minister is agreeable include that the Climate Change Advisory Council would be independent and adequately resourced? Will specific reference be made to just transition in the Bill as it is brought through the Dáil and Seanad? Is it the Minister's intention to bring the Bill before the Seanad or Dáil first?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: My expectation is that it will come to the Dáil first. I cannot answer specifics regarding the final wording on amendments or particular aspects. I hope we will have this discussion in the Dáil very soon. This has been a very unusual process in that it was an actual draft Bill that went to pre-legislative scrutiny. Usually it is the heads of a Bill. The extent of analysis and discussion in the pre-legislative scrutiny was unprecedented. A lot of good work has been done, which will inform the Dáil debate. It means it is a much more advanced Bill. It has almost already gone through Committee and Report Stages and not just pre-legislative scrutiny. It has been through what would ordinarily happen in a very extensive Committee Stage or Report Stage process. We have done this before we have even introduced the Bill to the Dáil. I look forward to further debates in the Dáil and then the Seanad.

Legislative Process

38. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the status of the new climate action and low carbon development (amendment) Bill 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13252/21]

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: It reflects the importance of the Bill in question that it is also the subject of my priority question. I would also like to ask the Minister for an update on the Bill. To take it a bit further, what are the actual delays with it? The Minister has said that considerable work has gone into it. When the committee first received the document, the Minister hoped for a two week pre-legislative scrutiny period which, to be honest, would have amounted to very little. Instead, we brought in a series of experts who all said the same thing on the weak-

nesses of the Bill. We put a lot of work into it. Will the Minister provide an update?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I have a written response but because it is very similar to that given to Deputy O'Rourke, I might skip it and Deputy Whitmore can read it because it does answer her question directly. To come back to the process, because there was a certain time urgency I thought the pre-legislative scrutiny process would be short and then we would probably spend longer on Committee and Report Stages. However, when the Oireachtas committee came back with its suggested approach, I was happy to agree to that much more extensive consultation. In my experience of the last three to four years, what has worked in climate politics in this country, if I could put it that way, has been the good co-operation between Government Departments and the joint Oireachtas committee. In particular, the Joint Committee on Climate Action in the last Dáil, and again in this one, has shown a cross-party approach that really benefits us. It is in a similar respect that we have taken time to review and consider the amendments. While I cannot remember the exact number of amendments, perhaps 90 or so, that was not a short process in terms of considering not just the amendments but the evidence we heard at the joint Oireachtas committee, including valid criticism, which we accept, that we need to listen and try to improve things. We will end up with a vastly improved draft Bill. While the time it has taken has been somewhat frustrating, I think it has been time well spent and we will see that in the Bill as it emerges.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: It has been 83 days since the committee handed back the recommendations so I hope the time the Minister has taken has been to incorporate those recommendations, not to get rid of them. The frustrating thing for me is the sense of urgency with this. There was a huge sense of urgency in getting this Bill up and running. I do not know if the Minister can picture that image by the Spanish sculptor of a group of politicians sitting around discussing climate change and how we deal with it, as the water rises above their heads. To me, that is what it feels like. Our biggest risk, and the most problematic issue here, is our ability and the ability of a bureaucratic system to deal with things quickly.

One of the previous questions I had hoped to ask the Minister this evening, although I did not get an opportunity to do so, was in regard to CETA and its implications for any legislation. Does the Minister foresee any issues in regard to CETA once this Bill is passed into law in terms of being able to bring in the policies we need to see brought in to address climate change?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: On the last question, I do not. There is a whole range of other international treaties that will affect climate change. The energy charter treaty is a very specific energy treaty that has all sorts of mixed implications on climate, some pro and some of which would give rise to concerns, so it is very complicated. The recent Brexit agreement is going to affect how we approach climate and there is a whole range of new treaties coming. The issue of trade and climate is critical and a variety of different trade agreements and other structures will affect that. I have not had any sense that CETA will have a direct impact but we will continue to review that. I know various Oireachtas committees are looking at it.

I want to make one point in regard to the Deputy's comment on speed of delivery and political action. With regard to the collaborative approach I mentioned, in this country in the last three years, Deputy Pringle's Bill delivered an end to investing in fossil fuels, a similar Bill from Fine Gael in the last Dáil delivered an end to fracking on our part of the island and Deputy Bríd Smith's Bill on ending oil and gas exploration - we had a similar one - is about to bear fruit when, on Committee Stage of the climate Bill, we will introduce the provisions to stop oil and gas exploration. We are effectively stopping the use of coal and we have stopped the use

of industrial peat extraction. If anyone had said to me four years ago that we would stop State investment in fossil fuels, stop fracking, stop the use of coal and stop peat extraction, I would have said that to do that in such a time period was a remarkable achievement. We should collectively recognise that politics sometimes does deliver and that in the sort of actions that have been made in the last three to four years, we have achieved significant change.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: For a lot of what we are trying to get into place, infrastructural changes will be required and there are lead-in times for that. The Government has a target of 2030 as the next major step. We had the transport discussions yesterday with the climate committee. It came as a surprise to me that when the National Transport Authority is putting in applications for Government funding or putting forward its proposals for different programmes, they are not assessed as to what the emissions results will be or what reductions will come out of those projects. The climate Bill will be very welcome once we have it in legislation, so long as the recommendations are incorporated, but there is a whole jigsaw that we need to get done. I know many wind farm operators want to know when the renewable electricity support scheme, RESS, option will happen and what the terms and conditions of that are. There are timelines and milestones that we need to speed up, if possible, to ensure we get this done.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I agree. While the Deputy was in the Joint Committee on Climate Action yesterday, I was answering questions at the Joint Committee on Transport and Communications, where I made the case that we will need to have a radical system change in transport. What we have done with switching to electric vehicles or switching to biofuels will deliver certain elements, but it will not deliver the enhanced ambition we are now setting ourselves. That will only come with really significant reductions in the demand for travel and the volume of travel, and also with radical changes in modal share shift. That is why I keep coming back to the benefits of a collaborative political approach around climate. As the Deputy and I know, that then comes around to difficult decisions about allocation of road space and allocations of resources at a local authority as well as a central government level in terms of how we make it safer for active travel, and how we really promote public transport by allocating road space and investment priorities. The critical need for time urgency is that the national development plan review will be done at the same time as the new climate action plan is developed, which is absolutely right because it has to be climate-proofed. That is what we will do.

Electricity Grid

39. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if EirGrid has recently sought between €700 million and €3 billion for grid investment; if so, the new and existing projects this will fund; the way in which he plans to deliver this crucial grid investment while also working with local communities; his views on delays to key grid improvements and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13517/21]

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I ask the Minister if EirGrid has recently sought additional funding for grid investment; if so, the new and existing projects this will fund; the way in which he plans to deliver this crucial grid investment while also working with local communities; his views on delays to key grid improvements; and if he will make a statement on the matter.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: Matters relating to the cost of grid investment and projects funded are operational matters for EirGrid and the Commission for Regulation of Utilities, CRU. EirGrid is the transmission system operator and its responsibilities include the appropriate devel-

opment of the grid and power system to achieve our energy policy objectives and underpin economic development. The CRU is the independent energy regulator and, through a formal price review process, it decides on appropriate spend by EirGrid on a five-year basis.

The recent price review decision by the CRU on the allowable spend on our electricity grid over the next five years signalled a significant and necessary increase in funds for grid enhancement. EirGrid already seeks to optimise the existing electricity grid to minimise the need for new infrastructure through upgrades, refurbishment or up-volting of existing infrastructure, where possible. However, in light of the Government's ambition to have 70% renewable electricity on the power system by 2030, and with demand profiles increasing as we continue to electrify more sectors of our economy, further investment in the power grid is required over the coming decade.

I recognise the vital role that communities across Ireland are going to play in delivering on this target. Working in collaboration with local communities to ensure that grid development is appropriately delivered will be crucial as we continue to decarbonise our energy system and wider economy. The Government takes the commitment to community engagement and acceptance seriously, as does EirGrid. In this respect, EirGrid has this week launched a detailed consultation document, entitled *Shaping Ireland's Electricity Future*, which outlines innovative approaches to developing the grid to meet our ambitious 2030 renewable electricity target and reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: It is acknowledged there needs to be significant investment in electricity and energy infrastructure. I want to raise the issue of data centres and the impact they will have on the grid. In addition, I want to raise the issue of our continued dependence on fossil fuels and the expectation that has been reported in the media by a number of commentators that we will be dependent on fossil fuels for far longer than the Minister intends or is providing for, and that we are facing a cliff edge in about 2026 and are not prepared for it.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: The new consultation from EirGrid takes a very good approach because it looks at the wider picture of how we develop our society. It is not just about emissions reductions or bringing forward renewables, but the long-term big picture thinking about what type of energy system we have to serve our society. That poses various questions to the public. Should we perhaps continue what has been done in the last ten or 20 years, which was more developer-led whereby the developers of renewable power said where they wanted to go, or should we go for demand-led? Should we move and adjust some of the demand to match the power system we need? We will probably take a combination of various approaches, but one of the things we will ensure is that demand, be it from data centres or other large energy users, is planned in a way that lowers the cost, minimises emissions and ensures we have a fully sustainable system. That may involve locating data centres close to where the power is, or restricting in certain areas where the grid cannot cope with the addition. However, it will not say "No" to data centres because we need them as part of the wider economy.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: The question then arises of the Minister's and the Government's confidence that we are not walking ourselves onto a cliff edge in 2026 in terms of the increasing demands on the network, the shift away from fossil fuels and how to square the two. What is the Minister's expectation of demand into the future for fossil fuel for energy and electricity production in the State? Does he believe it will extend far beyond 2026 and to what extent will that be? What percentage of our energy might we still be expecting to deliver through fossil fuels at that stage?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: We will be doing what many other countries are now committed to, such as net zero by 2050 in the UK and what California is doing, which is net zero in the same timeframe. Other countries in Europe are aiming for more ambitious times sooner than that. China and Germany are doing this. The world economy is switching towards this new energy system because it is better. By 2050, and it hard to have a crystal ball, it is likely there will be a variety of different technologies that provide back-up and support to what will largely be a renewable electricity power system, with electricity having an increasing role in transport, heating and a range of different sectors. That may involve carbon capture and storage, CCS, where one takes the carbon out in the generation process and stores it geologically. It may involve a switch to new green hydrogen fuels, whereby through electrolysis we can convert our superabundance of renewable power into fuels like that, which can provide back-up, and other storage systems. There will probably be a variety of demand management, with sophisticated switching on and off of energy uses to store and balance electricity. It is going to come because it is a better system. It is more competitive, cleaner, indigenous and we are good at it. That is why I am very confident in EirGrid's ability to help make this happen.

Data Centres

40. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if he will review State policy relating to the building of data centres in Ireland and specifically the impact on energy consumption; if this policy is compatible with national climate-related targets; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13279/21]

Deputy Bríd Smith: There is growing alarm at the spread of data centres, what they are doing to our hopes of reaching the Paris Agreement targets, as well as our climate goals, and whether an economic policy based on the unlimited growth of data centres is compatible with any chance of tackling a climate catastrophe. I am not assured by what is being said about them using sustainable energy. Based on what we see, they will swallow increased amounts of renewable energy. Will the Minister comment on this?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: Government policy relating to data centres is primarily a matter for the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment and any review would be a matter for him. The Government statement on the role of data centres in Ireland's enterprise strategy of 2018 recognises that a plan-led approach is needed to develop a range of measures to promote regional options for data centre investment, minimising the need for additional electricity grid infrastructure.

Data centre-related electricity demand in Ireland continues to grow. EirGrid, in its Generation Capacity Statement 2020-2029, projects that demand from data centres could account for 27% of all demand by 2029, up from 11% in 2020. Significant increases in volumes of generation capacity, including from renewable energy sources, will be required to meet data centre demand and deliver on Ireland's climate objectives. Under the Climate Action Plan 2019, Ireland has adopted a target of at least 70% renewable electricity production by 2030. This will contribute to meeting the Government target of reducing Ireland's greenhouse gas emissions by 51% by 2030 and meeting the long-term target of climate neutrality by 2050. The plan sets out a number of actions to ensure that data centres are accommodated in a sustainable manner, including implementing flexible demand and other innovative solutions for data centres. This has been implemented by EirGrid for new data centres seeking to connect in Dublin.

10 March 2021

EirGrid has this week launched a public consultation on “Shaping our Electricity Future”. The aim is to make the electricity grid stronger and more flexible so it can carry significantly more renewable generation as well as meet increasing demand from high-volume energy users such as data centres.

Deputy Bríd Smith: First, people should be aware that there is an astonishing growth in the number of data centres in the State. There are currently approximately 54, mainly based around Dublin. Another ten are under construction and planning permission has been granted for another 31. Although the argument the Government makes is that they will have their own renewable energy, that means that by 2030 half of the total renewable energy produced in this country will be gobbled up by data centres. In anybody’s book, that does not make ecological or environmental sense and is not sustainable.

There is also the issue of water. We cannot regenerate water, but these data centres use a vast quantity of it. The question of water as a public resource has been at the heart of politics in this country. The Minister should, in the first instance, begin to examine the planning legislation, which allows data centres a special place as part of strategic infrastructure and fast-tracks planning permission for them. This is getting out of control.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: The Deputy is correct that we must ensure our planning matches other objectives, including our decarbonisation objectives. Included in that is the planning of the grid system because that is probably the biggest constraint. It is one thing if something has planning permission, but whether it can get a grid connection and has good access to the grid is probably the main constraint. That is why EirGrid’s consultation is key. Every sector of the economy, such as the transport, agriculture and industrial sectors, including data centres, must fit in with our new climate action plan. To my mind, they can.

We always have to think about where we are going next if it is 70% by 2030. We have agreed this. We all have collectively said that we think offshore wind has the potential for us to go even further, such as an additional 30 GW. That is the scale. It is almost nine times what we are using at present in terms of scale. There will be opportunities in this country whereby, if we locate them correctly and have the grid correctly connected to them, we will be able to run data centres efficiently with low carbon, and possibly look at other matters. We are starting to look at Tallaght, for example, and how we use that data centre. The Deputy is correct that we must consider the water use as well. We must also look at the heat and, perhaps, the potential use of heat from data centres for local district heating and other purposes. That overall planning is critical. The Deputy is correct that it must be centre stage.

Deputy Bríd Smith: I do not believe it is sustainable, or that it is possible to make it sustainable. If we take the climate crisis seriously, we will not go down this road. It is not in our interest to gobble up renewable energy and water on this scale. Ireland bends over backwards to facilitate foreign direct investment. That is fine; that is a different argument for a different day. This is also a facilitation. No other country in the world will have this level of data centres and facilitation of them, including fast-track planning, strategic development and so forth. Ireland will stand alone in that regard because it is facilitating Amazon, Facebook and all the famous, big, high-tech companies. They are based here already and there is a proliferation of data centres to facilitate them. It is an unsustainable and dangerous road for us to take. I ask again if the Minister, the Government and the Cabinet will consider removing data centres from strategic development infrastructure so that at least they cannot be fast tracked thorough planning.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: The strategic planning process will have to take into account Eir-Grid's analysis to show where is the best place, what is the number and what is the limit. The Deputy is right that we also must look at water use. This has to come from the land use plan the Government is initiating, which is also key to meeting our climate and biodiversity targets. Yes, the planning process has to take into account the low-carbon efficiency of the energy system and the ability to deliver water and other resources before any commitments are made. We cannot allow industrial policy go ahead of sustainability policy. It has to fit within it, like every other sector. I absolutely commit to putting that approach in the right order.

National Broadband Plan

41. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the number of homes that will have high-speed broadband in County Donegal by the end of 2021 and the end of 2022; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12764/21]

Deputy Thomas Pringle: Will the Minister confirm how many homes in Donegal will have high-speed broadband by the end of this year and the end of next year? Donegal is one of four counties where the roll-out of the national broadband network of fibre broadband is not yet in progress. Working from home and home schooling have highlighted the importance of Internet connection for rural communities. People are very frustrated by the slow roll-out. If people are expected to work from home and to home school then they should be provided with the tools necessary to do so. Every other county will see the start of the national broadband plan roll-out by the beginning of next year. Donegal is not expected to see any roll-out until the second half of 2022. Will the Minister comment on this?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: There are 32,373 premises within the national broadband plan intervention area for County Donegal within the national broadband plan. As of early March 6,389, or 20%, of the premises in the county have been surveyed. Of these premises that have been surveyed to date, National Broadband Ireland, NBI, indicates that approximately half will be passed and ready for connection next year with the other half passed and ready for connection in 2023.

Further details are available on specific areas within Donegal through the NBI website, which provides a facility for any premises within the intervention area to register their interest in being provided with deployment updates through its website www.nbi.ie. Individuals who register with this facility will receive regular updates on progress by NBI on delivering the network and specific updates related to their own premises when works are due to commence. I am advised that NBI is working to provide more detail on its website, with a rolling update on network build plans.

Broadband connection points, BCPs, are a key element of the national broadband plan providing high-speed broadband in every county in advance of the rolling out of the fibre to the home network. As of 3 March, 287 BCP sites have been installed by NBI and the high-speed broadband service will be switched on through service provider contracts managed by the Department of Rural and Community Development for publicly accessible locations and by the Department of Education for schools. Ray Community Centre, Leghowney Community Centre, Fort Dunree Military Museum, Coole Cranford Community Centre, the Gweedore Theatre and the Meenreagh Hostel have now been connected with high-speed publicly accessible broadband.

My Department continues to work with the Department of Education to prioritise schools with no high-speed broadband and this aspect of the national broadband plan is to be accelerated to ensure 679 primary schools nationally are connected to the high-speed broadband network by the end of next year. This will include 42 schools in County Donegal.

Deputy Thomas Pringle: Those figures are shocking. The Minister said some 3,500 premises have been surveyed in County Donegal and with a bit of luck they will all be connected. This is out of 32,300 premises. That is shocking. This means there is very little happening in Donegal with the national broadband plan, the county that is probably in most need of development and most need of work on that cannot do anything. Some 2% of the premises nationally are in Donegal and this is not good enough. It is not good enough that the national broadband plan is not delivering. Since there is not reliable broadband for Internet connections it means that employers in Donegal, such as those based in Letterkenny, cannot have their workers working from home. I urge the Minister, if he is interested, to speed up the roll-out in the county because it is vitally important.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: It is true that the national broadband plan has been somewhat delayed by Covid. As with so many other areas, workers are not available and contractors are not able to come into the country, but we are progressing at full speed and are working with the company and with other companies to see if we can accelerate the programme further. In truth, this was originally a seven-year plan and I would like to see if we can bring that back to a shorter number of years. Our commitment to Donegal is very real. There is a €128 million investment. It is part of a wider strategy. The national broadband plan is closing and filling the gaps at the same time that other companies are delivering really high-speed broadband. In Donegal Eir has rolled out to some 28,000 premises with the really high-speed fibre broadband. SIRO has passed 18,000 premises. It is not just the national broadband plan, there are also those additional 40,000 and 50,000 houses that have, in the last two and three years, got significant upgrades. Yes, we need to go further and go faster. We will do everything we can to make that happen.

Deputy Thomas Pringle: I am sorry to say that this is not the case. This question does not even cover Eir and how people do not get broadband even in the areas that are supposed to be covered by Eir. They do not get a response from Eir when dealing with it. I could spend the next hour on questions about Eir and its lack of response to people. The reality is that once again Donegal has been put on the hind tit with regard to the national broadband plan and will have to make do with whatever the Minister decides. The Minister might be shortening the period of the plan but the fact is that Donegal will be at the end of the shortened period regardless. This is not acceptable. This problem was about long before Covid. It is a bit rich to blame Covid for this. The Department has not done its job and it is leaving Donegal behind again.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: There is no intention, far from it, to leave Donegal behind. It is a county that has suffered from a lack of infrastructure and a lack of connection to the rest of the State in transport and a whole range of areas. I absolutely accept that Donegal should get priority. The roll-out of this NBI plan, with regard to where the surveys are done or how the network is developed, is a technical one. It is not that we, as politicians, are telling to NBI to do Cavan first and go back to Donegal later. It is far from that. It is purely a technical exercise in where the network points are to start and how it is rolled out. My direction to the NBI would be to please do Donegal as fast as possible and to make it a top priority. Donegal needs improved connectivity in a whole range of ways. If there is any way this can be accelerated in Donegal I would happily support it. It is, however, an engineering task first and foremost and we must at

some point cede to the engineers as to how they roll out that technical network.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

Climate Action Plan

42. **Deputy Gino Kenny** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications his views on the use of negative emissions technology in reaching Ireland's climate targets; if concerns regarding the climate action and low-carbon development (amendment) Bill 2020 that, as first drafted, may rely too much on unproven technology to achieve reduction needed in greenhouse gas emissions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13287/21]

Deputy Bríd Smith: By prior arrangement I will take Deputy Kenny's question for him.

Like many others we are alarmed at the use of and over-reliance on negative emissions technology, NETs, in the climate action Bill. We have been warned repeatedly by the science and by the scientists that over-reliance on technology that does not actually exist and that gives us hope for the future without dealing with the here and now is the wrong way to go. I would like the Minister to make a statement on that. If we are over-reliant on NETs we may never see an avoidance of a 2°C rise in temperature.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: The Government is committed to an average 7% per annum reduction in overall greenhouse gas emissions from 2021 to 2030, equivalent to a 51% reduction over the decade, and to achieving net zero emissions by 2050 at the latest. A key aspect of delivering on this ambition will be enacting the climate action and low carbon development (amendment) Bill, which will underpin our policies.

The Bill will significantly strengthen the statutory framework for climate governance, with appropriate oversight by the Government, the Oireachtas and the Climate Change Advisory Council. It would introduce new obligations including enacting an objective to achieve a carbon neutral economy by 2050 at the latest and providing for an annual update to the climate action plan and a national long-term climate strategy every five years.

The increased scale and depth of our climate ambition is consistent with the approach being taken at EU level. Both domestically and at the EU, it is recognised that we are not yet in a position to identify all the emerging technologies or policies to meet our full ambition. However, committed research in the area and the continued intensive updating of mitigation measures over the decade, and beyond, will ensure that we remain on course to achieve our climate goals. Investment in research to support Ireland's efforts to decarbonise and achieve our climate ambition will also be an important element of the national economic plan and is an important commitment in the programme for Government.

While negative emissions technologies will likely be needed to deliver Ireland's net-zero ambition, the carbon budget structure will serve to determine the scale of negative emissions that may be required to achieve the national climate objective. This will inform investments in such solutions and thereby inform policy responses. In this regard, it will be necessary for Ireland to develop pathways for removals of carbon dioxide related to land use and to protect carbon sinks and stocks.

New strategies will be needed, with additional policy attention across multiple sectors, to sustain an emissions reduction trajectory that will increase over the next decade and beyond. However, the potential for negative emissions technology should not be seen as a means to avoid making the necessary reductions in emissions across the different sectors of the economy.

Deputy Bríd Smith: That is fair enough as an answer but it does not get to the point I am making, which is that the Bill the Minister published had an over-reliance on negative emissions technology. That is a sort of dream into the future because when one unpicks the models of negative emissions technologies, NETs, and a large-scale deployment of them, if it was possible, in the words of the scientist, Kevin Anderson, it is taking a high-stakes gamble in the hope that such technology can be invented in time and on scale but the problem is that we do not have that technology. Moreover, the touting of negative emissions technology often comes from the same sources of existing fossil fuel interests and much of what we hope and are promised seems to be a version of medieval indulgences - sin today with the promise of atonement tomorrow or the next few decades. In this case, NETs allow the continued sinning and profiteering of the fossil fuel industry and big agri-industry and allows us to continue with the fiction that it is okay to issue or renew licences like Barryroe or to build liquefied natural gas plants because somewhere down the line we will have new technology that can carbon capture and store that. It is not there.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: It is starting to develop carbon. The Deputy spoke lastly about carbon capture and storage. It is very expensive. We do not have many examples of large industrial applications but I believe it is likely that by the end of this decade we will start to see deployment at scale for both industrial production purposes, power generation and potentially in other areas. We have to be very careful about that. It should not in any way be a continuation of a fossil fuels pass. We know that in the likes of our industrial emissions, which is some 8 million tonnes at the moment, we will need a 50% reduction in emissions. Could the use of carbon capture technologies in some of the large industrial processes help us? It probably could, and that is something I would not rule out. Similarly, in power generation, we will have some backup, whether it is hydrogen powered or gas and so on. If there are mechanisms where we could safely, in terms of geological storage, put that carbon I do not believe we should rule that out. It is one of the elements but it is not any sort of flag for the secure future of the fossil fuel industry because it will be more expensive, primarily backup and is only one small element in the overall mix.

Deputy Bríd Smith: I admire the Minister's optimism but as we know the reality is that for decades carbon capture and storage has been proposed as the silver bullet solution for cutting carbon emissions. Despite billions of dollars in funding and years of research there are no carbon capture storage, CSS, plants anywhere in the world that effectively capture and store carbon. Relying on a hope that it will do so in the future is a fundamental mistake. My question to the Minister is whether his refined and changed Bill that he is about to publish will take that into account and cut out the over-reliance on these negative emissions technologies as a way forward because they are not in existence to a scale where they will work. They have been touted by the fossil fuel industry and there is no evidence anywhere in the world that they will help us reduce our carbon emissions. Obviously, some things do help us do that, such as plants and trees and re-wetting bogs but the false reliance on this technology that does not exist has to be removed from the new Bill. Otherwise, it is not a functioning Bill to deal with the climate catastrophe.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I look forward to the Dáil debate on that aspect of the Bill and

whether there is such an over-reliance. In any climate action plan we are developing now I do not believe there will be an over-reliance on that because what the Deputy said is true. The real cost, scale and widespread deployment of carbon capture and storage is still evolving in the same way that, for example, there is huge investment, which is going on in both areas now, in the use of hydrogen fuels. I refer to green hydrogen as a potential replacement for existing fossil assets. It has to be green and not blue to ensure that it is not just another pass for the fossil fuel industry. Again, in that sector it is not exactly clear what the cost and an optimal deployment will be but almost every country I look at is investing massively on the expectation that that will evolve and be part of it. We will need a suite of measures. We will need every tool in the tool box to solve the scale of this challenge. If one does not work, which may be the case in terms of finding that CCS proves not technically as easy to develop, then we will have to switch to alternatives. That flexibility and being open to a variety of options is the right strategic approach.

Renewable Energy Generation

43. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the way in which the existing Climate Action Plan 2019 can be enhanced in order to increase the speed at which renewable energy generation projects are brought online particularly in the context of the expedited downsizing of the Moneypoint power station. [13290/21]

Deputy Cathal Crowe: I thank the Minister, Deputy Ryan, for being in the Chamber. I wish to ask him, in his brief as Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications, how the existing climate action plan can be enhanced to increase the speed at which renewable energy projects are brought online, particularly in the context of the expedited downsizing of the Moneypoint power station in west Clare.

(Deputy Eamon Ryan): Under the programme for Government and the Climate Action Plan 2019, Ireland had adopted a target of a 70% renewable share in electricity production by 2030. This will contribute to meeting the Government target of reducing Ireland's greenhouse gas emissions by 51% by 2030 and meeting the long-term target of climate neutrality by 2050.

Electrifying large parts of our economy, including our heating and transport systems, means building a grid that can handle a high level of renewables which will be critical to our success. The efficient connection of onshore wind, solar and offshore projects will be driven by regular competitive auctions under the renewable electricity support scheme, RESS, as well as enhanced regulatory rules for connecting projects to the grid.

Revised planning guidelines for onshore wind and a new consenting architecture for offshore renewable projects will facilitate a more rapid roll-out of renewables to replace retiring fossil fuel generation. Furthermore, enhanced flexibility and system integration tools as well as new technologies and use of storage technologies and hybrid assets will enable a speedier roll-out of renewables to take the place of fossil plant. EirGrid has this week launched a public consultation on shaping our electricity future. The aim is to make the electricity grid stronger and more flexible so that it can carry much more renewable electricity. EirGrid's consultation will align with Ireland's strategy to further reduce electricity emissions which will be set out in this year's revision to the climate action plan.

The climate action plan sets out that the burning of coal at Moneypoint will cease by 2025.

That was the existing plan.

The major ramp up in the levels of renewables on our power grid and the move to a highly electrified economy means we also need to ensure security of supply. My Department is carrying out a review of the security of energy supply of Ireland's electricity and natural gas systems. The review will include a detailed technical analysis and a public consultation. It is planned that the review will be completed by the end of 2021.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: I thank the Minister. He said that Moneypoint will cease burning fossil fuels in 2025. There is a belief, and a worry, in Clare that that will happen much quicker because it is losing out in key energy options. It has colossal 400 kV power lines running from the coast of west Clare right across to Leinster. It is the best specification of power line in Ireland and that is where the future lies.

Ireland's maritime area is approximately seven times that of its land and the scope and potential for offshore wind energy is colossal. The cost of generating electricity offshore is rapidly becoming more competitive than fossil fuel generation. Time and again the Shannon Estuary has been identified as a key location for generating high-speed wind energy three times more efficient than onshore wind energy. It is where the future lies and, as the Government has committed to in the midlands where there is a just transition plan, we need a Government plan for Moneypoint that puts it at the centre of this nation's strive to move to greener, more renewable energy. It has to be developed offshore, and Moneypoint is the perfect processing point to bring it onshore and across the whole island.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I absolutely agree with the Deputy on the development of renewables, offshore wind in particular, and particularly in the west, where our sea area is ten times our land area. The highest wind speeds are in the west, north west and south west, so that is where we have huge potential for economic development. I absolutely agree with the Deputy on the Shannon Estuary. It is not just Moneypoint; there is also potential in Foynes and even areas around Ballylongford and other areas. We expect and will plan for such areas becoming the centres of these new industries, not just in electricity generation. Going back to what I said earlier, the location of industries close to the power is what we need. That offers potential for huge long-term investment in the whole Shannon Estuary. It has incredible deep water and is safe and connected close to the power supply system out in the Atlantic.

As for the specific use of Moneypoint, I am conscious of the time. Perhaps I will come back in my final contribution with final points on Moneypoint.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: A very delicate balance has to be struck. We want to see a shift and transition away from old fossil fuels and towards more renewable energy. The Government needs to speed up the issuing of new wind energy guidelines to all local authorities. We have had some absurd wind applications granted and other ones turned down. For example, in my county of Clare today we had the council determining - rightly so - that a 100 m high wind turbine in the middle of the village of Parteen was wrong and improper planning. It is to be taken down by 8 April. That is right. It is in a residential area. Wind turbines need to be taken away from communities and put in more obscure areas, where the wind is stronger, and offshore is the way to go. The guidelines need to be updated quickly. We do not want to see Carrownagowan, Meelick, Cahermurphy and Parteen repeated time and time again. We need updated guidelines and an embracing of our best asset of all: those high-speed wild Atlantic winds off the coast of Clare. That is the type of wind energy we need. It is three times more efficient, with all the

infrastructure there to take it already. I implore the Minister to drive this on in his Department and to make it part of the realisation of our movement away from fossil fuels.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: To go back to Moneypoint and to give an example of how things are changing, five years ago Moneypoint accounted for about 16% of our electricity generation; it is probably down to 2% or so in the past year or two. It will continue to decrease because if one considers the price of carbon on the emissions trading system markets, which is about €40 per tonne at the moment, at that price it is very hard for coal to come into the merit order among Irish power plants. However, what Moneypoint has is incredible sea jetty access and a very large platform where one could assemble, store or manage the deployment of offshore wind. Moneypoint also has that incredible grid connection. The ESB may look at it as a potential plant that would be used only as backup in an emergency. There is a whole variety of options. I very much trust the ESB and its expertise in this area as to what the best outcome will be not just for the workers and the future of Moneypoint but for this whole new energy system. It is absolutely committed to this new decarbonising system because it recognises that it is the way the world is going and that it is a better system. We will make sure in this transition that there is a just transition for the people of Clare, Kerry and Limerick who border the Shannon Estuary.

North-South Interconnector

44. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if he will reconsider commissioning an independent report incorporating international industry expertise to examine the technical feasibility and cost of undergrounding the North-South interconnector in line with the resolution of Dáil Éireann on 16 February 2017. [13090/21]

Deputy Matt Carthy: I firmly believe that the proposed North-South interconnector can be undergrounded and that the technology is available internationally in order for that to happen. I would go so far as to say I believe it will happen only if the Government changes tack and instructs EirGrid and SONI to pursue that route. In 2017 a motion was passed in this House calling on the Government to commission an independent report to examine the technical feasibility and the cost of undergrounding the North-South interconnector. Will the Minister now commission that report?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: The North-South interconnector is critical to improving the efficient operation of the all-island single electricity market and increasing security of electricity supply in Ireland and Northern Ireland. It will also help Ireland to move towards our 70% renewable electricity target by 2030. A resilient and well-connected energy infrastructure is vital for Ireland's economic well-being and the ability to respond to the future needs of energy consumers.

The Government does not have any role in the delivery of electricity infrastructure on the ground. This is consistent with the 2012 Government Policy Statement on the Strategic Importance of Transmission and Other Energy Infrastructure, which states: "The Government does not seek to direct EirGrid and ESB Networks or other energy infrastructure developers to particular sites or routes or technologies."

The option of undergrounding the North-South interconnector has been comprehensively assessed on several occasions. Most recently, and fully in line with the resolution of Dáil Éireann of 16 February 2017, my Department commissioned an independent report incorporating international industry expertise to examine the technical feasibility and cost of undergrounding

the North-South interconnector. The report from the international expert commission was published in October 2018 and it found that an overhead line remains the most appropriate option for this piece of critical electricity infrastructure. I do not intend ordering a repeat of such a review.

EirGrid and ESB Networks, as our electricity system operators, always seek to work in close collaboration with landowners and stakeholders in the delivery of electricity infrastructure. Both companies are engaging with those living closest to the route of the interconnector. In that regard I note that EirGrid has already set in place a variety of engagements locally, including the appointment of community liaison officers and a mobile information unit active in the area. I expect such engagements to intensify in the coming weeks and months, subject to national Covid-19 public health guidelines.

Deputy Matt Carthy: I hope the Minister does not believe what he is saying because if he does, it means he is completely out of sync with his role and his responsibilities. The Government does have a role. EirGrid itself has been on the record on a number of occasions telling the Government that if Government policy directs it to underground the interconnector, it will be forced to oblige. The Government has never implemented the resolution of this House. Yes, a report was commissioned and carried out in 2017 and published in 2018, but it did not do what this Dáil asked it to do. It did not examine the prospect of a full underground route in terms of feasibility and cost. Even if we are to take that report, however, does the Minister know that the report states in its findings that undergrounding the interconnector is “a credible option”? Those words are taken directly from the report. The question that needs to be asked is this: will the Minister continue to allow EirGrid to proceed along a route that will lead to further delays and increased costs or will he engage with the communities concerned and come up with a viable option that will allow us to deliver this interconnector?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I was on the Oireachtas joint committee back in the early 2000s when this issue first arose, and the need to strengthen our grid infrastructure and interconnection with the North of Ireland was set out with real urgency. In the meantime, there have been a lot of positive developments: the creation of a single North-South electricity market, the meeting of 2040 renewables targets and an all-Ireland approach to energy. Everything I have seen over the past 18 years looking at this tells me that this is a critical piece of infrastructure and that not having it would threaten the economic strength of the areas through which it passes because having an AC grid infrastructure strengthens economic prospects. It is different from a DC underground connection in what it can do. Its absence would risk all the progress that has been made on an all-island policy on energy, and that would be a huge cost to the people north and south. It would make it almost impossible, I think, to meet a lot of our climate objectives. We would be forced to look at new investments in the North and an effective separation again of the two systems, which would be hugely damaging in a variety of ways. Therefore, having looked at this for 18 or 19 years now, I believe that the approach and the objective that EirGrid is setting is the correct one.

Deputy Matt Carthy: Does the Minister wonder why it is 18 years later and there has not been a single move to erect a single pylon in the intervening period? It is because, crucially, in all the objectives and all the parameters EirGrid set itself, it is missing a crucial component that is at the heart of projects such as the ALEGrO interconnector, a very similar project happening between Belgium and Germany, which has one fundamental difference: it is being undergrounded. The reason it is being undergrounded is that the objective I talk about is the objective of public acceptance. That is a criterion that EirGrid has never taken into consider-

ation. If the Minister wants, as I do, to see this interconnector developed, he will need to talk to the campaigning communities. I ask him again today: will he engage with those communities? Will he speak to them to hear their concerns? Will he actually engage with EirGrid, not to take its word verbatim as gospel, as he and successive Ministers in his position have been doing, but to engage critically with it to ensure we can deliver this infrastructure through underground technology? It is the only way that the project will be delivered.

Deputy Johnny Mythen: The Minister knows that the communities completely united against the North-South interconnector. We could be talking about it in another 18 years if we do not look at the option of undergrounding. The communities are furious with EirGrid, which led fancy public relations and marketing campaigns while ignoring the concerns of the communities and the people involved. There must be a new review of this project involving the North East Pylon Pressure group, and all the relevant stakeholders, or we could be looking at in ten to 15 years' time again. As the Minister will be aware, the communities are united and the only way to get this project on track and moving is for the Government to bring the people with it.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: While it is true that we need to have the people with us, they will expect and want an energy system that will work and will deliver all the goods that power supply does deliver for us, namely, heating and lighting our homes, and helping to provide jobs. EirGrid is a public service company with no interest in this project other than serving the public. That is its entire objective. I believe that it is correct in its engineering assessment that it will not be possible to meet those two objectives by putting power lines underground. It would not be able to meet its obligation to the public to provide a secure electricity system this way. If, in the past 18 years, in the series of international reports that we have looked at, an alternative way of doing it emerged, then we would have all jumped at it. However, I do not believe that it exists.

That brings us to what we do have to do. EirGrid has to engage with the local community to make sure that we maximise the level of public acceptance and address concerns on the ground. The company is best placed to do that. That is the critical next step that we must take as we start to construct the project.

Question No. 45 replied to with Written Answers.

Climate Action Plan

46. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if he will seek to future proof the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Bill 2020 against potential misuse of negative emissions technology to delay reducing overall greenhouse gas, GHG, emissions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [1498/21]

Deputy Paul Murphy: The so-called Climate Action and Low-Carbon Development (Amendment) Bill 2020, or at least the first version of it, amounted to vague promises but no plan for real action. One important area that raises concern is the statement that “the means of achieving a climate neutral economy ... may evolve over time through innovation, evolving scientific consensus and emerging technologies”. This amounts to kicking the can down the road and hoping for some technological fix to solve our problems. Will that be removed from the Bill?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I will not read out the prepared response, as it is very similar to that which I read out in response to Deputy Smith's question earlier. I will come to key point at issue if I understand the Deputy's question correctly, that is, whether we know exactly what the technologies are that are going to deliver the scale of the decarbonisation we want. We do not know this yet. This may even form part of a response to the previous question. The management of the electricity grid will continue to evolve in a way that is not yet clear. We will develop new interconnection and grid technology. The super grid concept that has been discussed will allow us to shift power in different directions. It is new and innovative technology that will enable is to balance a grid. It is just one example of an area that I am confident will be central to meeting our objectives. While the technology is not yet here, I believe it will be developed. Over the past 20 to 30 years, solar and wind technology have evolved in a way that nobody could have predicted. We have seen the development of electric vehicle, EV, technology in a way that nobody would have expected ten years ago.

The broad parameters of where we are going will involve the electrification of everything. The balancing of the management of variable power and demand will be at the centre of a new industrial revolution. There will be some other technologies, as I mentioned earlier, such as green hydrogen, and it is not yet clear how they will be used, but I have a very strong expectation that they will be central. Across a variety of different areas, I can indicate where I believe that there will be significant technological innovation. We should lead it, because by learning by doing, we will develop an economic advantage that we can share with other countries throughout the world. It is right to be honest and upfront and to invest in that innovation with confidence, because what we have seen over the past ten to 20 years is that this delivers a better system. Low carbon will be better and will win.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I have no problem with, or objection to, using technology in respect of electrification, better battery storage and better and more efficient renewable energy. The question relates to what is being spoken about here and whether this can be used for relying on technological sequestration solutions - the idea of carbon capture. It is the idea that in the future, a person will invent something we can use to suck all of the carbon out of the air, and basically we do not have to worry about it. The Minister knows that that is a ploy used by fossil fuel companies, much like that used by cigarette companies historically. They did not stop selling cigarettes when all the public health evidence emerged. They came up with new marketing spin and added filters. They tried to make it seem like their cigarettes were safe. The talk of carbon capture and technological solutions for the future is about avoiding taking the action that is necessary to take now, and putting it on the long finger. Does the Minister agree that we cannot rely on technological sequestration solutions arising in the future?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I agree with the Deputy that we should not be blinded by techno optimism. A variety of the technological solutions that we have heard mentioned are highly problematic, and we should not go next or near them. For example, people talk about putting particulates in the upper atmosphere. That would have major knock-on consequences for other aspects of our complex life systems and we should not go next or near it. There is false optimism that we will be able to suck carbon out of the air. We should be very wary about false promises. However, that does not mean that we should not avail of certain technologies when they are proven and as they develop. Carbon capture and storage is one of those that is in existence. There are environmental issues around it and one must be very careful with it. Primarily, storage within existing geological structures and the use of gas fields, and so on, is more likely. We do not have many such storage locations in our country. It may involve us shipping carbon

to other jurisdictions because they may have better locations for it. However, it is not a magic bullet. It is only one of the elements on which we should rely. I keep going back to that figure. For example, if it is possible, using carbon capture and storage along with other technologies for us to decarbonise heavy industries such as cement production, we should not rule it out.

Deputy Paul Murphy: If this is the Bill that is going to be published, and I would like to know when we are going to see the next version of it, then the Minister is going to provide a big escape clause for those who have to take action now, by implying that there will be big technological solutions in respect of carbon capture in the future. It is most problematic. The main carbon capture that we know of relates to forests and grass. They are things that we know and understand today. We cannot rely on these kind of miracle fixes for climate change as a way of avoiding what is necessary, which is a radical, eco-socialist green new deal that improves people's lives at the same time as completely transforming the nature of our economy and taking on fossil fuel capitalism. It involves taking the big oil companies and business polluters into public ownership so that we can plan to cut emissions as part of a rapid, just transition to a zero-carbon economy by 2030. Anything else is just kicking the can down the road and not following the signs, which are absolutely clear, in respect of what needs to be done.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: The Deputy is absolutely right. The first real technology we turn to is rewetting our bogs and managing that. Nature-based solutions are going to be at the centre of our response to climate change, for example, in how we manage our bogs, what type of farming we do and storing carbon in our pasture land and forestry. In the process, we will improve water quality and reduce ammonia, nitrogen and other pollutants. That is the first priority. The second priority is in changing our everyday transport system and our homes. It is not about one big technological solution. We need to look at everything. We must not put all the focus on the farmers and make them the major problem, which they are not. In fact, they are part of the solution. Another thing we should not do is just go down the market solutions route where it is all about what one buys or what one does with one's car or home. It should be about a system change for the better. Included in that is industrial system change and how industrial emissions are managed.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: As the Deputies who tabled Questions Nos. 47 to 49, inclusive, are not in the Chamber, we will move on to Question No. 50 in the name of Deputy O'Rourke.

Questions Nos. 47 to 49, inclusive, replied to with Written Answers.

North-South Interconnector

50. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if he has spoken to an Taoiseach regarding the concerns in regard to the proposed North-South interconnector; his plans to address the significant concerns of local representatives and communities across counties Meath, Cavan and Monaghan; if funding will be provided to underground this important project for the grid; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13261/21]

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I again raise the issue of the North-South interconnector. I want to know whether the Minister has spoken to An Taoiseach about the significant concerns of local representatives in regard to the project and what his plans are to address those concerns.

Fianna Fáil was the party that tabled a motion on this issue to the Dáil. Its representatives at local and national level say they want a review. Have they made that request to the Minister and will he support them in it?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I speak to the Taoiseach on a weekly basis, including on issues such as the one the Deputy has raised. Last Monday week, we had a special Cabinet sub-committee meeting on climate change, which included a presentation from EirGrid and, as part of that, a discussion around the North-South interconnector. I have discussed the matter with the Deputy's party leader. I have also discussed it with Ms Nichola Mallon, the Minister responsible for infrastructure in the North, and Ms Diane Dodds, who is the Northern Ireland Minister with responsibility for industrial energy policy. In our discussions, we spoke about the critical all-island dimension of this project. We had a very interesting event in Government Buildings two weeks ago where we talked about how we can co-operate on environmental protection on a shared-island basis. That was mainly about nature-based solutions and climate adaptation.

I keep coming back to the point that the development of the North-South interconnector is crucial to all-island co-operation. When I mention it to the Taoiseach, I often put it to him from that shared island perspective. I fear, with absolute certainty, that if we do not proceed with the interconnector, we will lose what has been gained, as I said earlier. That tends to be one of the aspects that I refer to in my discussions of the project with the Taoiseach, the Deputy's party leader and anyone else who cares to listen.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: A judicial review is to take place in the North in the time ahead regarding the decision taken by the Minister, Ms Mallon, on her own, as is the nature of the executive in the North. Will the Minister insist that no works will progress on the interconnector project in the South until such time as the judicial review has taken place in the North? To prevent throwing good money after bad on this project in terms of design and the procurement of pylons and infrastructure, will the Minister insist that this does not happen until the outcome of the judicial review is known, at the very earliest? I sincerely believe that it is a case of throwing good money after bad. In my very clear opinion, until such time as the project is undergrounded, it will not proceed.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We will not have any comment on the judicial review, as such, which involves proceedings before a court.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I thank the Leas-Cheann Comhairle for her direction because it is similar to the approach I would take in discussing this matter with the Minister, Ms Mallon, or anyone else. It is not appropriate for us to comment on the legal proceedings taking place in the North, which will have to be worked through in their own time.

As I said in response to an earlier question, EirGrid's management of any project is a matter for the company and we do not get down to specific project management details like that. EirGrid will make the call in this matter. It is a single project and it must connect North to South because that is the very definition of it. There would be no point in running it to the Border and stopping there. There must be a cross-Border perspective on it. The details are a matter for the company. My discussions with the Minister in the North were not around the legal aspect relating to the project. They were around the strategic benefits of co-operation, in which I firmly believe.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: In my priority question earlier, I raised the issue of EirGrid's

ambition. In his response, the Minister referenced the public consultation. The truth is that what is happening in this area is a perfect example of how not to do planning. At a meeting of the climate committee yesterday, where we discussed ambition in terms of transport, one of the contributors raised a point around the planning process and the concept of procedural justice. The communities in counties Meath, Cavan, Monaghan, Tyrone and Armagh feel that their voices have not been heard in this process. Time and again, their opinion has not been noted. The Minister needs to recognise that.

There is a solution to the problem, namely, a co-design process involving all the stakeholders and an independent review. Everybody should have their say in terms of how that review is designed and then the review can be conducted. I am confident that this proposal will get cross-party support. If the Minister does that, he will find a solution to what currently seems to be an intractable problem.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: Again, I am reluctant to refer to court proceedings but my understanding is that the decision of An Bord Pleanála in December 2016 to grant planning consent for the interconnector was the subject of two High Court judicial reviews. On 22 August 2017, the High Court upheld the development consent granted by An Bord Pleanála for the interconnector. That decision was appealed in the courts over two days in December 2017 and, on 11 January 2018, the High Court refused leave to appeal the initial judgment. The High Court decision of 11 January was subsequently appealed to the Supreme Court, with a two-day hearing taking place on 15 and 16 October 2018. The Supreme Court dismissed that appeal on 19 February 2019. The right to legal questioning of process in this matter has been very much exercised, as I understand it, and the Supreme Court has made the decision in that regard.

Energy Infrastructure

51. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the discussions he has had with stakeholders regarding the future use of Lough Ree power station; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [44952/20]

Deputy Denis Naughten: As the Minister will be aware, Mr. Kieran Mulvey, the just transition commissioner, outlined in one of his reports the pristine condition of the two power stations in Lanesborough and Shannonbridge. Both of those power stations have a remaining lifespan of ten years. The Minister has asked the ESB to carry out a review of the feasibility of retaining the plants for some other energy operation. I am asking for a commitment from him that there will be an independent review of all available options.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I thank the Deputy for his question. The first progress report of the just transition commissioner, Mr. Kieran Mulvey, published on 22 May 2020, included a recommendation that a study be undertaken of the future potential of the ESB power stations at Lanesborough, Lough Ree power station, and Shannonbridge, West Offaly power station, for the establishment of a dedicated energy hub in the midlands. This was subsequently included as a commitment in the programme for Government. A feasibility study into the establishment of a green energy hub using the existing infrastructure of the West Offaly and Lough Ree sites has been under way over the past number of months. This has been overseen by a steering group chaired by the ESB and includes representatives of my Department, relevant local authorities, the just transition commissioner and other stakeholders.

To inform the group's work, the ESB commissioned an internal engineering report to examine how the power plants might be reused in the future. This report was subsequently reviewed on behalf of the ESB by Fichtner, an international consultancy firm with acknowledged expertise in these areas. I expect the group to finish its work shortly and that it will reach conclusions on the viable uses of the existing infrastructure. I have separately been informed by the ESB that it intends to lodge planning applications shortly to develop additional energy services at the sites. This will include synchronous condensers and energy storage capabilities at both locations. These applications are in anticipation of future competitions to be run by the energy regulator and EirGrid for the provision of those services. The future use and management of ESB-owned facilities remains the responsibility of the board and management of the ESB.

Deputy Denis Naughten: Therein lies the problem. The board and management of the ESB are responsible for the future use of these two power plants. As the Minister knows, the report will recommend their demolition, which is wasting €176 million that Irish electricity customers right across the country have already paid towards their cost. There are alternative options. I said here last December that three separate proposals have been put forward, independent of the ESB. As the Minister knows, the Just Transition Fund approved by his Department has funded a study in Lanesborough to consider alternative uses of the site. There are also options for Shannonbridge. Surely we should have a completely independent review, independent of the ESB, to examine all available opportunities for both plants.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I do not believe we should pre-empt the review and whatever options are presented. In my mind, nothing has been excluded. I have said throughout the process that if Deputies have proposals or plans they want to submit or share, they should by all means put them into the mix. There are no exemptions regarding potential uses. The ESB does have an interest. It has a long-standing involvement with the plant and local community, with genuine benefits and commitment. People from the local community are involved. The interest of those involved is the same as the wider State interest.

It may be difficult. If there is not an obvious and immediate solution, we may have to consider a variety of options. The various just transition projects the Deputy referred to are progressing. I understand from talking to officials today that the concerns that arose some months ago on state aid clearance may be possible to address. The Deputy is correct about Lanesborough. The option mentioned is one of many. Out of the options, we may see new economic shoots, green shoots, in the midlands, including from the ESB, Bord na Móna and other interested parties.

Deputy Denis Naughten: If the ESB is so committed to the midlands, why would it go to the regulator to seek to recoup the €5 million it paid over to the just transition fund expecting electricity customers across the country to pay for it? That is the commitment of the ESB to the midlands. All the local public representatives were told last month that the report will recommend that the two plants be demolished. The fact is that the ESB is compromised because it has a vested interest in both of the sites which is not necessarily in the interest of the taxpayer or electricity customers across the country. It is definitely not in the interest of the local communities. I asked the Minister to have a completely independent review of all potential options for the two plants rather than having them demolished. He should not repeat the mistakes made with the sugar industry in Mallow and Carlow.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: As I said in my earlier response, an international consultancy firm with absolute expertise in the area has reviewed the proposals coming forward. I accept that

while one listens to what international experts have to say, one should listen to views that contradict them. If the Deputy believes there is an economic solution that has not been considered, he should submit it. I will ask my officials or others to examine why it was not considered. This was an open process. It is not as if people are trying to protect a vested interest that has a genuine, obvious future. The ESB is considering some of the measures I mentioned, such as synchronous condensers and other storage facilities. There are many such developments in the midlands that comprise new economic opportunities.

Deputy Denis Naughten: There are no jobs in battery storage

Deputy Eamon Ryan: No, but as discussed previously, there will be jobs in the development of this balancing system, this energy system, and there will be jobs as the ESB works with Bord na Móna, Coillte and other developers in developing new renewable power supplies. On the back of those jobs, other jobs will come because we will locate the industry close to the power. That is where the ESB has a vital role in the midlands and elsewhere.

Deputy Denis Naughten: Yet the data centres are still being built in Dublin.

Questions Nos. 52 to 58, inclusive, replied to with Written Answers.

Broadband Infrastructure

59. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the way in which he plans for all persons in Ireland to have access to high-speed broadband when commercial operators are reluctant or refuse outright to extend existing lines, even by a few metres, to other homes and businesses in need of high-speed broadband; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13263/21]

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: What are the Minister's plans for all persons in Ireland to have access to high-speed broadband when commercial operators are reluctant or refuse outright to extend existing lines, even by a few metres, to other homes and businesses in need of it? Will he make a statement on the matter? I am referring to the gap areas.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I said earlier, in response to Deputy Pringle I believe, that the key is to have a variety of developers. The national broadband plan is key, particularly for those areas that the market cannot serve, but investment of the kind that Eir has made in the 300,000 additional houses in rural areas is critical. It probably now needs to start focusing on some urban areas also because some of these areas may not be accommodated by the cable network operator or other high-speed Internet providers. We need to move towards a system whereby every house in the country has access to really high-speed broadband so we can also develop social services on the back of that. I cite the co-operative arrangement between Vodafone and the ESB in the roll-out of SIRO, which has been an exceedingly successful innovation in using electricity wires as a conduit to get broadband into people's homes. The ongoing delivery is critical. Where a service can be delivered effectively in a small number of specific locations where some houses have a service while their deeply frustrated neighbours do not because they are not covered in the plan - for example, where Eir provides a new extension in a rural area - we would encourage it and seek for the regulatory authority to facilitate this in whatever way it can. Through a series of interventions by a variety of companies, including cable, mobile broadband and fixed-line companies such as Eir and SIRO, and through the national broadband

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plan, we are on a path to having universal coverage, ahead of most of our comparator countries. That will be of great benefit to the country.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: The Minister touched on the issue. Any public representative can give an example. Stamullen, a growing urban centre, became very built up over the Celtic tiger period. When we made requests repeatedly, be it to Eir or National Broadband Ireland, we encountered the scenario in which areas were incorrectly categorised, thus requiring recategorisation. Regarding other areas within the group, we were told it would take a number of years before Eir, for example, would be back with the network bringing fibre to the home. The Minister touched on the fact that a large number of people are caught in the gap in that they are not covered by the national broadband plan and not in the intervention area. It does not make financial sense for Eir to go the extra 100 yd up a road because there are thousands of such cases. When one adds them up, one realises it does not make financial sense. Eir has no interest in addressing this and it has been very clear about it. Rather than hoping for a solution, I am asking the Minister to state there is a clear plan to provide a solution for all those affected. I am not blaming him for the problem but just saying we need a solution. It is a problem.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: On the broad strategic approach, I make reference to the network operators. The infrastructure is strange because one wants the process to be both collaborative and competitive. One wants that competitive tension so companies are forced to make investments for fear that their competitors will take the market from them. At the same time, one wants it to be collaborative with a shared infrastructure. The national broadband plan was designed with such an approach. It uses National Broadband Ireland. It is open access and all other retailers will use it. It works in collaboration with Eir in making ready and using its poles. It will also be collaborating with the ESB and will use some of its network. The solution to the problems the Deputy rightly identifies in Stamullen and elsewhere will be further collaboration and co-operation to make sure that it is universal and that we go the extra hundred yards so we do not leave houses behind. It will take some time. The national broadband plan will, as everyone knows, take a number of years but that collaborative approach will get us that 100% coverage.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I thank the Minister and Deputies for their co-operation. That concludes questions to the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications.

Written Answers are published on the Oireachtas website.

The Dáil adjourned at 8.31 p.m. until 10 a.m. on Thursday, 11 March 2021.