



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

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

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Déardaoin, 22 Aibreán 2021

Thursday, 22 April 2021

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

Paidir.

Prayer.

Direct Provision: Statements

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman): I will share time with my colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy Joe O’Brien. We will have seven and a half minutes each.

As a country, we pride ourselves on being welcoming, kind and empathetic. Our own history of emigration gives us an understanding of the pain of leaving one’s own country and the difficulties and challenges of settling elsewhere. As a people, we want to extend a welcome and a shelter to those coming here fleeing violence and war.

Over the past two decades there has been an outpouring of empathy and solidarity for people who are in the direct provision system. The public wants to see the best of our values, as a country, demonstrated in the supports we provide to people fleeing violence. Alongside the campaign to end direct provision, we have seen local support groups grow to assist people in the international protection process in practical and thoughtful ways, welcoming these new arrivals into their communities. At a time when politics in many parts of Europe and around the world are mired in anti-migrant and xenophobic dogma, in our own country the push to end direct provision has actually become louder and greater, and the belief that we can do better as a country has become widely accepted. There is not a Deputy in this House who has not received emails, phone calls or engaged with their constituents on this issue. I am really heartened by the engagement I have had with Deputies and Senators who are so aware of and engaged in this matter.

We can be under no illusion that there are groups and individuals who seek to sow hatred and division in our society. These groups use disinformation and play on people’s well-meaning concerns to pedal racism and discrimination. They seek to play marginalised groups off against each other. There is a mean-minded Ireland, one that is closed, unfriendly and filled with suspicion. It is up to every Deputy in this House to reject this policy and politics of division. We have enough compassion, humanity and political will to support those in need, those who are vulnerable and those who come here seeking our protection. Ministers, Deputies, Senators and

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councillors, all of us, have an absolute responsibility when a person comes to us and says, “I don’t want these people here”, to challenge and reject that view. We address concerns that come but in a responsible manner. We do not make politics out of hostility. We appeal to the better nature of Irish people who, we all know, are charitable, compassionate and kind.

Earlier this year, we as a Government took the first steps towards meeting the aim, set out in the programme for Government, of ending direct provision, with the launch of our White Paper which sets out the Government’s new international protection support service. This new service will take a much wider, more holistic view of the needs of international protection applicants, rooted in the idea of integration from day one. The new system will be divided into two phases. Phase 1 will identify the needs of individual applicants. Applicants will be accommodated in reception and integration centres for no more than four months, where they will have access to wraparound supports, including healthcare, education and language support, and employment supports to enable them to live independently and integrate into their communities, should they receive a positive decision on their application for international protection.

Phase 2 offers community-based accommodation across Ireland for those who are still awaiting a decision on their application. In both phases, applicants will continue to have access to wide-ranging supports, should they need them, recognising that applicants have diverse needs, depending on their situation, and require further support to successfully integrate into communities.

My Department is working closely with the Housing Agency, which will support us to purchase and build houses and apartment complexes in various locations across the country. I met the Housing Agency last week, and a memorandum of understanding has been drafted with it and is being finalised at the moment. The accommodation that we obtain will be managed for us by approved housing bodies which will also manage the building of new housing. We will work to complete the transition to the new model by December 2024. A detailed implementation plan is now being developed which will drive forward significant changes for each year between now and 2024.

While the White Paper sets out an ambitious proposal for ending direct provision, there are almost 7,000 people living in the current system. We are committed to improving the system for them as soon as possible. Earlier this year, we introduced pilot vulnerability assessments and, since February, this has applied to all new applicants. To date, 268 applicants have entered the vulnerability assessment process with 161 assessments complete and 107 ongoing.

The Government has also committed to introducing independent inspections of all direct provision accommodation, and my officials are progressing this with the Health Information and Quality Authority, HIQA, at the moment. As we all know, HIQA is the gold standard for independent inspection and rigour of inspection.

In the programme for Government, we committed to ensuring that international protection applicants can access driver licences and bank accounts. My colleague, the Minister for Transport, Deputy Eamon Ryan, is progressing the road traffic (miscellaneous provisions) Bill, which will allow us to provide driver licences to international protection applicants.

Bank of Ireland recently announced that it would allow international protection applicants to open bank accounts. I very much welcome this announcement and would like to commend the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission, IHREC, on its ongoing work on this and

its ongoing engagement with various banks. The Department of Justice has also introduced changes to the right of applicants to access the labour market meaning applicants are now able to apply for access six months after they have registered their application, if they have not received a first instance decision in this time.

In February, I wrote to all direct provision providers instructing them to ensure period products are provided free of charge within their accommodation. In March, the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, Deputy Simon Harris, and I announced that from the start of the 2021-2022 academic year, international protection applicants who have permission to work and are seeking to access post-leaving certificate, PLC, courses will no longer have to pay international fees. These changes will improve the lives of people as they progress through the international protection system and I am committed to making further improvements in the months and years ahead.

In making a home here, people seeking protection strengthen and enrich our communities and, as a State, we have an obligation to support their integration. Throughout the process of implementing the White Paper, I am committed to engaging with Deputies and working constructively with local communities across the country in order to welcome new residents. We know the Irish public wants to see an end to direct provision and see those who are coming here seeking protection receive better supports. The White Paper commits us to doing this and will allow us to deliver on these key goals.

Minister of State at the Department of Rural and Community Development (Deputy Joe O'Brien): I thank the Minister, Deputy O’Gorman. As is evident from the White Paper we published at the end of February, our intention is to create a new system of support for international protection applicants that is fundamentally different from the current model. We need a system that meets the needs of applicants and enables them to contribute positively to Irish life.

I have visited many direct provision centres in my day. They vary quite a lot. Many have a hollow, disconnected and disjointed feel to them, a feeling of limbo. We have all heard and know of many individual cases over the years where people in vulnerable situations simply did not get the help they needed. The new system will be different as the profit motive will be replaced with an approach that will be centred on the primacy of nurturing the humanity and rights of people.

As Minister of State with responsibility for community development and charities, I am delighted there is a key role envisaged for the community and voluntary sector in how we as a State and a society will treat international protection applicants. Putting the humanity and rights of people at the core of our approach is best done by having the community and voluntary sector centrally involved, simply because it does this best.

Community integration is at the heart of the new model. Instead of living separately from communities, in large congregated settings, often in isolated locations, applicants will live in houses and apartments in towns and cities throughout the country. They will be encouraged to seek employment once they are eligible to do so and will be supported to become active members of their local communities. Integration from day one is a key principle of the new policy. The approach used by the Irish refugee protection programme to co-ordinate refugee integration under the leadership of local authorities will be our guide. Such an approach ensures service providers can plan for the arrival and needs of applicants and their families and can mobilise community and volunteer integration supports in meeting them. NGOs will be

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contracted to provide integration workers to support applicants.

The new policy emphasises the importance of community engagement and includes a commitment to provide funding to support specific community integration initiatives. The Department of Rural and Community Development and the Minister, Deputy O’Gorman’s Department will collaborate to ensure local programmes are aligned with broader community policy goals and delivered to a consistent standard of quality.

Children and young people’s services committees also have a key part to play in the delivery of the new policy. They will work to ensure there is a specific focus on the needs of children, young people and their families in international protection accommodation. This will also proactively support wider community engagement and child and youth participation. I have spent much of my life sitting down with people new to the country and explaining to them their rights and entitlements and helping them to navigate systems they have got lost in and been struggling with for months or often years. I am glad to say that at every stage of the international protection process, applicants will have a right to information describing the services and supports they can receive. Under the new model, comprehensive information will be proactively supplied to applicants at key stages and will be available at request at any stage via case workers, phone, email and online. All staff and officials working with international protection applicants will be required to foster a culture of openness, approachability and trust.

As many applicants for international protection require interpretation services to enable them to avail of services and supports and take their first steps in integrating into Irish society, the international protection support service will ensure all service users have access to high-quality interpretation services when they need them at each stage of the process.

The new model anticipates that NGOs will be centrally involved in the delivery of services to applicants and in promoting their integration into local communities. A new specific integration fund will be established to enable NGOs to develop integration projects and programmes on behalf of applicants. As mentioned by the Minister, Deputy O’Gorman, the Department of Justice introduced changes to the right of applicants to access the labour market. Now applicants are able to apply for access six months after they have registered their application, if they have not received a first instance decision in this time. Furthermore, applicants are now granted labour market access for a 12-month period, which can be renewed. This is double the length of previous permission grants.

Once labour market access has been granted, it is already the case that applicants can attend further education and training courses to help in upskilling. Since post-leaving certificate, PLC, courses are also often focused on directly developing skills for employment, it is now proposed the international student charge for PLC courses, currently €3,600, be waived for protection applicants who have established labour market access, a change that will facilitate wider access to these courses. The narrowness, the monotony, the feelings of wasted time and wasted life expressed by too many asylum seekers will be positively impacted by these measures.

Applicants for international protection whose applications are successful and who are eligible for social housing support will be assisted by local authorities with their move out of international protection accommodation and into mainstream accommodation within the community. This is an important feature of the existing process and will continue to be so in the new model.

Due to increased budget allocations I secured in budget 2021, by the end of this year, every county in Ireland will have its own fully fledged volunteer centre. With this national network, the new national volunteering policy and the ongoing growth and development of volunteer policy and support structures, volunteerism will play an increasing role in the integration of new communities in Ireland. This will happen because volunteerism offers positive environments for migrants to mix with Irish people and broaden their understanding of their lives, but it also offers new communities accessible, easy and supported introductory pathways into Irish society.

I oversee the social inclusion and community activation programme, SICAP. Pobal recently published a report on the impact of SICAP on migrant integration. Asylum seekers are a key target group under SICAP, so knowing the value of the tailored one-to-one approach of local development companies nationally, it was no surprise to me that local development companies implementing SICAP are doing valuable work with asylum seekers and so will also play a key role going forward with this new approach.

Integration and inclusion are the cornerstones of Ireland's new international protection support service, which will create better outcomes not only for international protection applicants, who come here seeking our assistance and compassion, but also for local communities, who will host them and welcome them into Irish society.

Deputy Pa Daly: Is cuimhin liom, tuairim is deich mbliana ó shin, go raibh beirt fhear agus bhí cónaí orthu in ionad soláthair dhíreach i dTrá Lí. In my club, the Tralee Dynamos, we had two players who were living in direct provision. One was Samir, from Algeria. I remember talking to him. He was receiving €19 per week. He told us he had obtained work for a weekend. He worked for 19 hours over the course of the weekend and he got less than €100 for his work that weekend, which was around half the minimum wage. Samir was probably one of the most skilful players ever to play in Kerry and that is how he was welcomed. Another player was called Mohamed. One Sunday evening, we had to play a match in Castlemaine. He was late coming back and he was refused his dinner. He complained and we never saw him again because he was transferred to another place.

I am hopeful some of the proposals in this White Paper will end some of the problems Samir and Mohamed faced, that there will be own-door accommodation, a right to work and accommodation close to services, since both of their lawyers were in Cork. I hope there will be speedy processing, proper integration and an end to the waste of public money by enriching speculators.

This White Paper builds on work done previously, and the issues with international protection and direct provision are clear. We need to face the realities that war, discrimination and climate change will continue to force people to seek international protection in Ireland. Attempting to make it more difficult for them, as the system has done historically, will not change this. We should not continue to exploit and impose further injustice on people who are vulnerable.

Regarding accommodation proposals, Sinn Féin feels it is important the State would own and operate the phase 1 reception centre facilities and that there would be a clear and independent system of inspection. We have seen private companies become involved in this type of facility in other jurisdictions, leading to problems. Cutting corners or locating these centres in isolated areas creates the potential for poor conditions and conflict with local communities.

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Beyond the reception centre phase, there is a move towards own-door accommodation. Forcing residents to share cramped accommodation created a serious public health hazard and an unconscionable situation in Cahersiveen last year. Sinn Féin has long called for a system where approved housing bodies build and maintain accommodation. Sinn Féin supports dignity for all in our housing policy, including those accessing homeless services, those on the social housing list and those in need of affordable housing. The Government must get serious about addressing housing shortages for all, as this will be the best means of providing integration and community cohesion.

Beyond that strand, things are a little more uncertain. Strand 2, which offers incentives to convert commercial properties within areas earmarked for urban renewal needs more detail. The for-profit nature of the system has been its biggest Achilles' heel and has led to private operators cutting corners in inappropriate accommodation around the country. Moving away from poor provision in peripheral areas not serviced will be key and the White Paper does not have as strong an emphasis on this as the Day report.

How we get from there seems a little uncertain, and I note that the Irish Refugee Council, IRC, recently emphasised the need to use the legally-binding standards within existing centres to improve things in the interim. We must avoid any limbo that could result from a lack of capital investment, as well as the potential for old providers to get into the new system through the back door. There are concerns in Kerry that properties were being purchased with a view towards doing this and I am seeking and hoping that the Minister will see that new fit-for-purpose accommodation will not be in inappropriate locations.

Regarding welfare, education and employment, I commend the White Paper and it makes some good suggestions. The right to work and welfare proposals are also positive, and aligning payments to supplementary welfare allowance and child benefit payments makes sense. However, access to driver licences and proper work permits can, and should be, arranged as soon as possible.

Deportation notices being received by those working in the health service was an unedifying part of the pandemic, as I am sure the Minister will agree. However, the Day report's recommendation to grant five years leave to remain for people within the system more than two years is only under consideration. This might mean that many asylum seekers working in healthcare and food supply will have to worry about deportation, and I would like to hear from him regarding ensuring that he will clear the current backlog. Turning to the speed of any new system, avenues of appeal must be respected and we must adhere to Ireland's international obligations, while respecting due process.

Deputy Kathleen Funchion: I thank the Minister and the Minister of State. Like my colleagues, I welcome the White Paper on ending direct provision and the steps that must be taken in that regard, especially the recommendations on taking a human rights-based approach. I will focus my comments on the perspective of children and young people in the direct provision system. It has been particularly difficult for them. They have been pretty much isolated from their communities and many have been left in limbo, in some cases for their entire childhoods. I always think that some of the most difficult representations we receive is when there is a possibility of someone moving on to third level education. That person may have spent a large proportion of his or her young life in direct provision and might then be cut out of accessing third-level education due to the financial situation existing in that regard.

Many young people living in direct provision have used their voices to raise the serious faults with the system. They are engaged and want to be involved in the conversation. It is important that the Government works with young people to build a system that works for them. We must build a system that makes a real effort to reduce waiting times, because allowing people to languish in cramped and inappropriate accommodation is unacceptable. The delays in processing families has an enormous impact on children and young people's mental health. Any new reception centres must lessen the anxiety and instability that many children face on their journey to Ireland, particularly when they first arrive.

Sinn Féin is supportive of the proposal to provide the vast majority of asylum seekers with own-door accommodation. This welcome move will have a very positive impact on children's mental, physical and social needs. I am very happy to see that the impact of direct provision on children and young people has been highlighted in the report by Catherine Day. I broadly welcome the additional funding that will be provided to Tusla for parenting supports and child development services.

While I recognise the inclusion of Tusla in providing supports for children who have experienced trauma and conflict is a positive step and one to be welcomed, I would not like to see Tusla, which has an enormous remit and a significant workload, being asked to undertake this vital and important intervention work without adequate funding. It is important on this point to state as well that people dealing with children and young people coming from a traumatic situation must have the correct qualifications and experience for dealing with people who have experienced trauma. It is very different to other situations and we must always bear that point in mind. As much as possible in future, we really need to try to have an approach focused on intervention, and early intervention, and dealing with any anxieties concerning children and their mental health. The research shows that the best outcomes result from the earliest intervention. I would like the Minister and the Minister of State to be mindful of that fact.

Obviously, no one could stand over the current direct provision system. It is completely unacceptable, particularly for an unaccompanied child. This White Paper sets out that a decision on protection applications must be made before a child turns 18, and this is to be welcomed. Hopefully, that will also help to prevent such situations as I referred to earlier concerning children and young people trying to get into third-level education. I am also happy to see that children and young people in direct provision will be treated the same as Irish children, and the inclusion of a payment similar to the child benefit payment will have a positive impact on child poverty in the system.

Concerning the oversight group, who will comprise its membership and what role will it play? Turning to the timeframes, 2025 is when this is expected to take place. No one believes that anything can happen overnight, but we all know how long the current system has been in place, how inadequate it is and how it is failing people and especially children and young people. We cannot continue to have that happen and any moves that can be made to address this situation properly before 2025 would definitely be welcome and would show there is a serious commitment here and that this is not some sort of great plan on paper, which we often see in here, and a case of saying, "we will deal with this in a few years". I, therefore, urge that any immediate action that can be taken should be taken, especially concerning children and young people.

Deputy Sean Sherlock: I welcome the Minister's speech. By any objective analysis, the White Paper has resulted in clear action on the part of the Government. He has come before

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us today to articulate those areas where progress is being made, especially concerning access to education. That aspect is a key element for every young person in the direct provision process. Education is the key to building for a future where we integrate people and give them the rights to which they are entitled by dint of any international standard. I, therefore, welcome the progress on that aspect.

I do not propose to detain the House for too long, but I would like to ask the Minister about the Irish Nationality and Citizenship (Naturalisation of Minors Born in Ireland) Bill 2018. Regarding the recent success in getting agreement on this Bill, which, if fully implemented, would give a pathway to citizenship to children born in direct provision, if we could see that bearing fruit, it would be a massive leap forward for society. I acknowledge that the Government is committed to that. The campaign to count time as an asylum seeker as reckonable residence is ongoing. The Labour Party is in contact with the Movement of Asylum Seekers Ireland, MASI, on that issue. I am pretty sure the representatives of the Minister and the Government are also in contact in that regard. That would be a big leap forward.

We accepted the recommendations of the report by Catherine Day as our own de facto policy in September. We acknowledge that perhaps the Government's White Paper is marginally less ambitious than the Day report, but it is still very ambitious. That must be acknowledged. I welcome the progress regarding the issuance of driver licences as well. These are what I would call simple, low-hanging fruit issues, but they are significant to so many people in regard to giving them the freedoms to move, notwithstanding the current situation in which we find ourselves. It allows people to move. It allows people freedom and independence. Therefore, we welcome progress in all of those respects.

We very much support the Government's position in respect of the White Paper and will work with it in pushing on the issues. We are hopeful that the commitment made in respect of the length of stay in reception or integration centres being no more than four months will prevail and succeed.

There is one issue that was brought to our attention yesterday. RTÉ reported, through its reporter, Laura Fletcher, that two healthcare workers had to leave their jobs in nursing homes due to issues over temporary accommodation. The story was widely reported yesterday on RTÉ. The report stated that these workers could no longer avail of a HSE temporary accommodation scheme and were subsequently returned to direct provision. In one case, a worker was placed 200 km from where she lived and worked. My understanding is that nowhere does it say in documentation, and the report highlights this, that eligibility criteria are dependent on whether or not there are Covid-19 cases in the workplace. The context of the HSE kicking these two workers out of temporary accommodation remains to be examined further. I will now quote from the report and one of the women involved: "My employer told me that you can't stay in the HSE accommodation anymore because they said that we don't have any case [of Covid-19] in our nursing home."

Am I out of time?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Deputy is out of time.

Deputy Sean Sherlock: I did not realise that I had so little time. Gabh mo leithscéal.

I ask the Minister to address that point, because these are issues that are stumbling blocks to the progress that we are trying to make.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: I also welcome the White Paper, which is most important. When a person turns 21, there are balloons and celebrations. However, it is pretty shameful to say that 10 April 2021 marked 21 years of the brutal system of direct provision. To me, that is horrendous and unacceptable. I welcome the Government's move to ensure that we do not continue with this system. That is why the White Paper is so welcome.

I have been concerned to learn of Covid-19 outbreaks in the confined settings of direct provision. I was concerned when comparisons were made recently between the cramped conditions in mandatory hotel quarantine and those of the direct provision centres. However, we know that hotel quarantine will come to an end. While direct provision is being removed, no independent inspections of direct provision centres are being carried out. Are independent inspections of direct provision centres going to be carried out? I ask the Minister to respond to me on that issue, which is most important.

The National Women's Council of Ireland, NWC, reported that women in marginalised groups have been among those most affected by Covid-19. It has highlighted that women in direct provision have had difficulties accessing appropriate hygiene facilities and space to self-isolate and socially distance. That must be looked at.

I welcome the announcement that Lidl is the first major retailer in the world to offer free period products to combat period poverty, in partnership with Homeless Period Ireland. The Simon Communities of Ireland and the Ladies Gaelic Football Association clubs around the country will also distribute free products, which is most important. I am aware the Government is also committed to this, which I welcome. It is important.

My second question for the Minister is as follows. What supports are currently available to women, children and men in direct provision? What wraparound services are available? We have spoken about education, physical health, mental health, language barriers, employment and housing, in particular. Everybody needs a house. It is most important that we get it right. I know that the Minister really wants to do this and that he has the full support of all Members in doing so. However, as he said in his speech earlier, we have a responsibility. That responsibility means that we must ensure that we get it right.

In respect of funding, what sort of funding is currently being provided for wraparound services? Is there enough funding? As the Minister knows, and as all of us have seen, in the past year the Covid pandemic has been difficult for everybody, but it has been much harder for those living in direct provision. We must ensure that we get this right.

My questions for the Minister are as follows. Are independent inspections of direct provision centres being carried out? What funding is available? Is enough funding being put into the wraparound services to ensure proper services are provided and that those in direct provision centres can access such services?

Deputy Cathal Crowe: I am delighted to be able to speak today on what looks like an end to direct provision. I am from Meelick in County Clare, where we have received refugees since 1957. First, we had refugees coming in from the Hungarian Revolution in 1956. On a sporadic basis, over the decades, we had various cohorts coming to Ireland and to our village for safe refuge. Despite what we saw at various community halls around the country two years ago, with outrageous protests and slogans daubed across the walls of these halls, it has been an enriching experience to have refugees stay in the community for many years.

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The model of direct provision does not work, but having refugees come to our community has been a very enriching experience. I want to put on the Dáil record the name of one of them. When I was a teacher in the local school, Ms Anna Mundu joined my class at the age of eight from the Democratic Republic of Congo. She did not have a word of English. She has thrived in the Irish system, going right through primary and secondary schools. Today, she is a front-line health professional and holds an Irish passport. She is a person I really admire and look up to. To this day, we still have a friendship. Indeed, I will speak to her this week.

In my experience, Anna is an example of someone who has gone through the direct provision system and has come out as a fully-fledged, wonderful Irish citizen. While not perfect, the system has enabled her to come from a war-torn country to safe refuge in Ireland and come out the other end. The system has not worked perfectly to date and has many shortcomings. I am glad there is a White Paper in place to end all of this by 2024.

On 1 June 2020 in my home village of Meelick, a sign went up at the crossroads, which stated: "Black Lives Matter". It was put up in solidarity with George Floyd and the larger Black Lives Matter movement in the US. The sign also had a tagline, which read: "End Direct Provision". For the people who have come to Meelick and the Knockalisheen centre, it has been a long-running campaign to end direct provision and to live a more normal life like the rest of us.

I wish to make a few points, specifically on how the system will work between now and its conclusion in 2024. First, there is no footpath around the Knockalisheen centre, so the people who leave the centre have to walk on one of the busiest roads in the area. It is a road that the Government is going to spend millions of euro on in order to make it a northern distributor road, but there will be no pedestrian connectivity. Therefore, the residents are physically cut off from the community, the school, the local GAA pitch and all of the amenities that some of the kids use. I have approached the council and the Minister for Justice and I have gone from Department to Department raising this issue. I hope the Minister's officials make a note of it. There does not seem to be a funding stream for it. It makes no sense for the residents to be physically cut off from the community. For the next three years, until the facility is wound down, they will continue to walk and traipse the roads, putting themselves at risk. I ask that an official from the Minister's Department communicates with me on the issue. I would be happy to give them more information.

The centre is run by a catering company. A catering company is perfectly equipped to run a cafeteria in a college, at a train station or in an airport. However, in my view, such a company is not equipped to run a direct provision centre and deal with all the sensitivities, complexities and the many social issues people bring with them from their home countries, where they have left war and famine and have witnessed horrendous events.

I would also like to highlight the fact that people in direct provision centres are totally disenfranchised. This has not often been spoken about over the last year or two, as this debate has gained more and more volume. When I was a councillor, up to 14 months ago, I was often asked to go to the direct provision centre and meet with people who I was helping through the legal process to remain in Ireland. On each occasion, I was denied entry. The people living there are totally and utterly disenfranchised. I was once smuggled into the building by some residents and got to see the small cubicle curtains separating parents from children. It was like a hospital environment, where you pull around the little curtain at night-time. I was their representative and they were entitled, under the Irish voting system, to vote for me in local elections. Some of them did vote for me. I, in turn, had every constitutional right to represent them, but

I was not allowed beyond the security barrier. That is fundamentally wrong and it should be changed between now and the wind-down of direct provision in three years' time.

Two or three years ago, I went on Niall Boylan's radio show to talk about direct provision. One of the points I made was totally and very deliberately misconstrued by the presenter. I want to repeat that point today, because it will crop up again. When an awful humanitarian situation arises in Syria or elsewhere in the Middle East, for example, the Government, under pressure from European counterparts, agrees swiftly, and rightly so, to take in a cohort of refugees from that country. It is wrong, however, that those refugees should leapfrog the people who are already in direct provision centres in this country. In County Clare, for instance, we have had families in direct provision from Congo, Ghana and many other war-torn countries that have faced horrors over the years. They have seen people coming in and leapfrogging them in the system - going into local authority housing, for example - when they have been in the system far longer. That is something the Department must weed out and stop happening. Direct provision is not an ideal system and somebody who has had to endure it for eight or ten years certainly should be housed and assimilated into all the supports that are available more quickly than someone who has just arrived from a situation of humanitarian crisis.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I welcome the opportunity to speak in this debate. I begin by acknowledging the work done by people like Dr. Lucy Michael and by the regional anti-racism groups. I refer specifically to the group in my constituency, which is also the constituency of the Minister of State, Deputy Joe O'Brien. Fingal Communities Against Racism, FCAR, is a small group made up of very dedicated individuals. I am very proud to be a member, although I wish I had more time to be involved. I encourage the Minister, Deputy O'Gorman, if he has the time, to engage with that group and the wonderful work it does in my area.

When Fianna Fáil introduced direct provision in 2000, it made very sure it was a business-type model. It has since grown into a big business for catering contractors, as has been mentioned, and other companies that seek to tender for the business involved. There are people making an awful lot of money out of the abject misery of the conditions in which people are forced to live. We need to recognise that direct provision is a business model, in place for 21 years, and there are people profiting off the backs of the misery of the people consigned and confined to it. If the issue were not so serious, it would be funny to listen to Government party Deputies talking about mandatory hotel quarantine as a deprivation of liberty or some kind of horrific imposition. I would love for them to see exactly what direct provision is like, because they would genuinely be absolutely horrified.

I want to raise a particular issue that I hope the Minister will add to his agenda. The reception centre in Baleskin in my constituency is accessible, which means persons with disabilities can be facilitated there. However, no account is taken of a person's disability when he or she is transferred from Baleskin. There have been reports directly to FCAR of wheelchair users having to be lifted up the stairs by other residents. There is no dignity in that and it is just awful. All that is needed to prevent it is to match the person with the accommodation. However awful, atrocious and dehumanising the accommodation the Government is providing, and it is, it should at least be made accessible for people with disabilities. We have had cases of residents having to lift their spouse into a bath. That is back-breaking work and it should not be happening. We know the facilities are there. It is simply a question of matching people up with the right facilities. This is something that can be done in the short to medium term. It does not require a White Paper, lengthy debate or any other delay. The international protection accommodation service, IPAS, is aware of this issue and knows what is going on. I ask that the

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Minister at least add it to his agenda and take account of it. Some of the changes needed in the direct provision system are major and will take time to achieve. This is something that could be done in the short to medium term.

Deputy Holly Cairns: The past year has been incredibly hard for everyone. We are in limbo, unsure of when the pandemic will end and we can see loved ones again, and unsure of work. This has been an abnormal year for most of us, but it is normality for the thousands of people we keep in direct provision, where families are forced into limbo for years. Life events pass by, funerals are missed, children and grandchildren grow up and professionals deskill. A State that is unwilling to learn from its past continues to institutionalise vulnerable people and somehow devise new ways to erode their dignity. They are given meagre allowances, limited access to work, regimented diets and few cooking facilities, and cramped accommodation in isolated centres.

We all welcome and support the Minister's plans to end the system. The reality, however, is that we are still looking at years of families being trapped in direct provision. While they remain in this limbo, I have three points to bring to the Minister's attention. First, the difficulties of the Covid pandemic are exacerbated by a person's place in society. It is harder for disabled people, the elderly and asylum seekers. For instance, I have repeatedly brought up the impact of the ongoing restrictions in maternity hospitals. Those restrictions, and similar limitations on other medical appointments, are felt acutely by people in direct provision, many of whom do not have English as a first language and are unfamiliar with the Irish medical system. They often require translators and advocates but are denied them under the current measures. Residents of congregated settings are at greater risk, as we saw from the clusters of infections in nursing homes and direct provision centres. This is not surprising when it is considered that operators of centres are contracted per person, not by physical space, which incentivises cramped conditions. The Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth and the Department of Justice need to appreciate these realities and respond accordingly.

Second, there is a right to education in Ireland. Nominally, we have free education in this country, but we all know that is not the case. In fact, education is expensive, many families cannot afford it and many people cannot progress due to financial barriers. This reality is felt severely by asylum seekers. Every year, calls go out for school uniforms for children in direct provision, including coats, shoes and other basics that make an education possible. Textbooks are another large expenditure but it seems to be up to individual schools to waive the rental fee. We have a whole cohort of children who are only able to exercise their right to education because of the kindness of communities and school staff. The inequalities of access to further and higher education are even more pervasive. That ingrained inequality extends to people in direct provision who cannot afford to go to college. Very high fees and living costs, combined with few or no supports, exclude asylum seekers from the benefits of education. Again, some minor recent changes and a small number of grants from individual institutions are the only counterbalance to a system designed to keep them out.

Finally, there are numerous needless barriers that keep asylum seekers in limbo and prevent them from living dignified lives. The ban on obtaining a driver's licence is a clear example and is complete nonsense. It prevents asylum seekers from taking up employment opportunities. In rural areas, where many direct provision centres are located, a car is essential for work. In addition, because they are required to surrender their passport and cannot access driver's licences, asylum seekers have difficulties opening bank accounts. This financial exclusion forces them into the unregulated economy and low-paid, cash-in-hand jobs. These are the impacts of a dra-

conian, callous system. We know the default status for the State is to provide the bare minimum but, in this case, it is intentionally discriminating against non-EU persons. It is part of a mindset that creates barriers and hurdles to deter people. It is evidence of an antiquated and worrying understanding of the realities of migration and asylum.

These are just three issues from a long list of issues affecting people in direct provision. Others include the difficulties of women experiencing period poverty and issues with the quality of food in centres that have their own shops. Over the past 20 years, 60,000 people have spent years in direct provision and more than €1 billion has been given to private companies to run the system. The Minister is working to end direct provision. As the thousands of asylum seekers wait in limbo for that to happen, will he act now to address the issues I have raised, of which I am sure he is aware and which he can resolve?

Deputy Richard Bruton: Managing migration from failed states and climate disruption and displacement will be an enduring challenge and it is likely to get considerably worse before it begins to get better. We in politics who aspire to the values of humane systems must steer a very difficult course between the harrowing stories and how we accommodate them. There has been a rise in parties that use migration to seek to undermine those very values we espouse. Systems have become overwhelmed, as we have seen in other countries, and we must find a way of co-operating across member states and supporting institutional improvement in many of the states to support the sort of response to the climate challenge that is necessary to bring long-term balance to this.

I commend Dr. Catherine Day on her work. One element that stuck out was the need to end silo thinking if we are to address this matter. Reading the White Paper, I wonder if the Minister has that level of commitment across government. I fear that what is put in place for implementation will fall short in this respect and this needs very high-level commitment from the centre of the Government and from the Cabinet down. Will the Minister be able to stand over that?

I really welcome phases 1 and 2 and the move to income support in phase 2, the opportunity to work and access to the sort of services that the previous Deputy referred to. Phase 1 is built on the expectation that we can turn around 3,500 places in 12 months and there would be four months in phase 1. That would be roughly 1,200 places. The reality is we now have six times that figure and at our peak we had ten times that figure. Of people in direct provision, 50% have been in the system for more than one year. We need to have assurance the speed of decision-making will change dramatically. Dr. Day's report indicates that in non-urgent cases, it takes 40 months to even get to the end of an appeal process. That is more than three years, after which there is review and judicial review. Could we have an assurance that we will get down to the 12-month target that has been set?

We have less than half the rate of refugee applications of the EU and we must consider our capacity to deal with surges that may arise. That has happened and overwhelmed systems, resulting in the sort of political backlash that could be so damaging to the process. I commend the Minister on his work but I hope he can end silo thinking and, most crucially, get a quick decision-making process in place.

Deputy John Lahart: I welcome the statements and I know the Minister will sum up at the end. I reiterate some of the points made and the first is that we as an Oireachtas should acknowledge that movement has finally been made. Some of the movement may be seen by some as being in the realm of the ideal, but the fact is that commitments were placed in the

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programme for Government on a matter that has been hanging around for well over a decade and a half. We all know the issues and the inhumane aspects of the process. Some of us have got a tiny glimpse of what it has been like, as one of the previous speakers mentioned, in being locked down and having freedoms corralled to some degree. It might give us some inkling into what life would be like in direct provision with a restriction on our freedom; it in no way gives a window into the daily reality of lives for people.

I agree with Deputy Bruton, who raised the question of capacity across government and particularly as it relates to housing. I particularly welcome the movement expressed in the programme for Government and the White Paper to try to accommodate people as quickly as possible. I have a simple question: is that accommodation commitment to be incorporated to the budget of the Minister's Department or will it be taken from the Department dealing with housing? Capacity is connected to the question of exposure to right wing views that can exploit the sensitivities of people. The Minister knows it. There are some people on housing lists in my constituency for more than a decade and we have started to make some small inroads on that. We should be conscious of how Covid-19 has affected the construction industry and we should avoid Irish people making a claim that they are being excluded from housing as a result of the accommodation of people going through the direct provision system. The two systems must be seen to be separate but complementary. One budget should not have an impact on the other. This is really where the rubber hits the road. People should be drawn from completely different lists so as not to affect other lists in any shape or form.

One of the problems with Covid-19 is the bandwidth of the public's imagination and ability to take in stuff is so clouded by virus and vaccine matters that much of the really positive action by the Government over a short period may be lost sight of. There will be a need to revisit this again to reinforce the fact that there is a commitment now, for the first time in a decade and a half, by a new Government. The make-up of that new Government is clearly intrinsic to the change, as it did not happen in the previous decade. That should not be lost on the public or the messaging around this.

Deputy Matt Carthy: The direct provision systems should be a source of shame to us all, particularly considering the history of people from our country seeking sanctuary from hunger and oppression in other places across the world. The direct provision system has failed utterly those who have sought asylum and also local host communities.

I was struck recently in listening to recollections of those who were in mother and baby homes and Magdalen laundries by how similar some of these were to the reports we have received up to today from residents in direct provisions. There are stories of an uncaring system where human beings are treated essentially as less by officialdom and administrators and there is fear underlying every consideration as to whether a complaint should be made about mistreatment. In short, direct provision has been a scandal and every Fine Gael, Fianna Fáil, Green Party, Progressive Democrat or other Minister in a Government that has overseen it should be ashamed of it.

Host communities have also been failed. Instead of the policy being underpinned by integration, the approach by Government agencies, including very senior officials, has been marked by secrecy and hostility. Communities with virtually no investment and which have seen services such as schools, Garda stations and GPs being removed find one day, without any consultation, that their local hotel is being turned into a direct provision centre. It is little wonder that racist and far-right groups see opportunity in this. At the same time this utterly failed system has cost

€1.6 billion over 20 years and therein lies one of the challenges faced by the Minister. There are vested interests who have made millions of euro from this inhumane regime. Only in this country could Fianna Fáil formulate a system designed to support some of the most vulnerable people in our society and turn it into a funnel to direct profits to the usual cronies.

This White Paper is welcome but the Minister and his Government will be judged on actions and results rather than rhetoric. I sincerely hope that within this term, we will be able to say collectively the shame of direct provision can be put behind us and we can create a humane system that supports people seeking international protection in our country along with the communities in which we hope they can integrate.

11 o'clock

Deputy Bríd Smith: I support what the previous speaker said about the direct provision system. However, in the limited time I have I wish to go a little off message. It is absolutely true that racism and far-right politics can gain from playing on the scarcity of housing in this country. In my area, leaflets are already being distributed, which state that we must look after and house our own first. It immediately begs the question: who are our own? Are they Denis O'Brien, Larry Goodman and the very wealthy in this country such as Keelings? Keelings are at the receiving end of a great deal of criticism in Ballymun today because an entire hotel, Travelodge, is being emptied of homeless people who were being accommodated there to provide for workers who are coming in to work in Keelings. One must ask why the rich Irish always get preferential treatment over the most marginalised in this country, including people in receipt of direct provision and in homeless accommodation.

The question the Minister must answer in the here and now is: what are we doing now to help those who are in direct provision? Do we have to wait until 2024 to see the cruelty of the system ended? In the meantime, do we have to do something to address issues such as, for example, the workers I spoke about on television yesterday who are being pushed out of special accommodation back into direct provision because there is no Covid-19 in the care homes in which they work? The Minister must talk to the Minister for Health and ensure that contradiction is ended. He must also talk to the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage and ensure a hotel in Ballymun is not emptied of homeless people to facilitate a very wealthy Irish entrepreneur. Those are the challenges we face daily. If the Ministers do not talk to each other and deal with these problems, of course, racists, extremists and far-right activists will milk them for what they are worth. We should look after everybody. They are all human beings. We cannot be forced to have one race or group of desperate people competing against the other.

Deputy Mick Barry: The transition year students of Cork Educate Together Secondary School went to the Lower Glanmire Road recently to erect a billboard. One of their spokespersons, Rachel Young, said:

We know that government can act quickly when it needs to. Four more years is not ambitious, and we don't accept this.

The billboard refers to the Government's four-year lead-in to what it describes as the abolition of direct provision. Those young people are absolutely right in what they say, and I echo it.

The Government says that direct provision will be dismantled by December 2024. However, what will happen in 2025? Asylum seekers who come to this country will have to go to what

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is described as “a reception and integration centre” and stay there for a period of four months. What is that, and how do we know it will only be for four months? When the direct provision system was introduced we were told it would be in place for six months. Are people going to be kept in the reception and integration centres for four months or will it run to six months, a year or more than a year? Will they have a legal right to leave those centres after four months? They will not, according to what the Minister and the Government are proposing. What is being proposed is that the four-month promise will not be underpinned by law. MASI, which has many asylum seekers in its ranks, has described this as appalling and I agree.

Why are these proposals not being underpinned by legislation? Let us consider the question of welfare, for example. The White Paper states that after a period asylum seekers will be able to access welfare. However, this is not underpinned by law. Other people who are able to access welfare have legal rights that are underpinned by law. That is not the case here. Are the Minister and the Government saying that asylum seekers have fewer legal rights than other people living in this country? This issue must be addressed.

Deputy John McGuinness: I welcome the White Paper, which is timely. I intend to reflect on the system that has been in place since approximately 2000. It is inhumane and a system of which one could not be proud. I welcome the actions being taken now to deal with the issue, and that there will be a new system in place after 2024. However, there are things we can do now. We cannot wait until 2024 to take the actions that are necessary in this area.

There are people in this country who have not been able to work and lead a proper life. They have not been given a break, despite the fact that they came here seeking protection. Some form of amnesty should be put in place to allow people who have been here for a number of years to participate fully in society and the economy. I refer to a case I have been dealing with since 2000. When the family arrived in this country they were seeking assistance and protection. They received that, but they only got their passports in recent years. However, the husband has not been naturalised for some reason. It is said that he did not secure naturalisation because of a comment on his file. If there is a comment on the file, the individual wants to attend an interview with any law enforcement or other agency to clear his name. Does he not have a right to clear his name? Should the Minister not allow him to clear his name? Why is there such secrecy in the process of naturalisation? We can take action on that now. We can, at least, let that family make a difference in their lives. We can allow the process to judge him rather than some anonymous comment on his file. I wish to see that dealt with.

There are other issues with direct provision we can deal with now. We can fast-track the systems we have in place after we provide an amnesty. It could be explained to the House why it takes so long to deal with the applications. Surely to God with our current technology there is room for fast-tracking applications and dealing with them in a humane way. It is unfortunate to see individuals such as the one I described. Another individual has been here for 20 years on a stamp 4 permit. He had to remain here following an accident and missed 20 years of his life. The State must reflect on that. We must reflect on the fact that sometimes it is the action or inaction of the State that leads to the racism we experience. We cannot ignore that, and we cannot wait until 2024. There are things we can do now to make a difference in people’s lives. I ask the Minister to examine those, take the actions that are necessary and give people a meaningful existence in this country.

Deputy Pádraig O’Sullivan: My sentiments centre on, as previous speakers have discussed, what we can do here and now. I welcome the publication of the White Paper on end-

ing direct provision and establishing a new international protection support service. It is a big step. It will be a complex process and, undoubtedly, will require time to deliver. We all are aware of the shortcomings of the current system. The new system will aspire to be based on a human rights approach. In time, it will allow access to the labour market for applicants and make it easier to access other services such as opening bank accounts, driver licences and so forth. The new process will reduce processing times for international protection applications and ultimately lead to a phasing out of direct provision by 2024. That is some time away yet, unfortunately, but welcome nonetheless.

In the meantime, could steps be taken to improve conditions for people living in direct provision? I know the Minister will be aware of issues surrounding accommodation, cooking and laundry facilities and other issues that arise in these settings. My office has been in contact in recent months surrounding difficulties and conditions in Ashbourne House in Glounthane. Thankfully, a resolution was found in this instance but I am under no illusion that these difficulties are faced in other settings.

It is worth stressing the people in these communities are taking part in our local schools, they are out litter-picking at weekends and are engaged with sports clubs. For all intents and purposes, they are integrated into our local communities. I understand we have regular inspections of these facilities. In the interim, however, and ahead of the full phasing out of direct provision, does the Minister have any plans to introduce improvements in the short term? I would appreciate it if he could touch on this in his closing statement. Like other speakers have said, I believe there are probably some short-term measures the Minister could take ahead of the full phasing out by 2024.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this issue. As someone who, like Deputy McGuinness, has spent the past 20-odd years dealing with immigration issues, I believe and hope we have learned a lot but we still have much to learn. We should avoid trying to create a divisive debate that tries to throw the blame onto one sector or other in our society. That does not solve the problem. We need to try to be careful, supportive and constructive.

In the course of the past 20 years, I and everybody else in this House who has dealt with these cases would have had direct interaction with people who were physically and mentally tortured, and women and children who were traded and sexually, physically and mentally abused over long periods and who were in a pitiful situation. We have all had situations where women who were coming from that kind of situation were looking for somewhere else - a refuge - and we gave them refuge. Perhaps it was long, drawn-out and cumbersome or could have been faster and more efficient. Perhaps it could have been more in line with what was required by the people who were looking for help at the time. It was an attempt address the issue, however.

I compliment the numbers of people throughout the country, both individuals and groups, who came forward and offered help and assistance of a constructive nature and were able to take on local arguments where people had indicated reticence in terms of accommodating and dealing with refugees or immigrants. Not everybody in the country was as welcoming. The rule still applies. As a nation that has wandered across the face of the earth for the past couple of hundred years, we more than anybody else should be in a position to understand the situation the refugees have and will still come from.

We have heard criticism of people who are so-called economic immigrants. I do not see

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anything wrong with and cannot see why there would be any reticence or objection to people who are economic immigrants. We were economic immigrants. Both my parents were economic immigrants in years gone by. We, therefore, more than anybody else, should be in a better position to offer constructive assistance in this kind of situation. I hope this debate leads to more of that.

Deputy Réada Cronin: I welcome the White Paper on direct provision. Our State has a nasty history of institutionalisation of vulnerable people and successive governments have turned a blind eye to the suffering and trauma that direct provision has caused countless people.

Sinn Féin is committed to an end to this for-profit system and this White Paper will bring some light at the end of a very dark and long tunnel which has brought distress to many and disgrace on us as a society. Children have spent years in these, for want of a better word, detention centres. I know all parents, and mothers feel this deeply, have been deprived of the basic right to provide a home-made meal for their children. To be deprived of something as basic as that for sometimes years really brings shame on us.

As a nation who for centuries went anywhere we could speak the language and anywhere that would have us, we have a particular responsibility to welcome and give home to strangers forced from their own countries, like we were, by oppression, occupation, starvation and now, increasingly, climate change. If we could see in the desperate faces of those who come to us the faces of our own people, our diaspora, who still have links to our country but were forced to leave, some people would have a kinder and better view of the people who come to our shores. I am talking about people being led astray by far-right groups. If they could look into the eyes of the people who come to us seeking refuge and see in them our own diaspora, they would treat those people differently.

I welcome the White Paper. I commend the Minister on taking this on when it has been put on the long finger by successive governments. The devil is in the detail, however, or, unfortunately, the lack of it. We need legislation and clarity around the setting up of an agency to deal with many of the provisions and, of course, the lack of any kind of housing response proportionate to the crisis we are in as a society. I hope this will be addressed.

Sinn Féin also believes people should have the right to work earlier than the six months proposed. We should remember our older generation were fed and reared on money sent home from England, Scotland and America by their fathers, and often by older brothers and sisters. The people who are coming to us should also have that right. I was looking at my father's old pictures and perhaps three or four of the children had shoes. Many of those families were kept alive and nourished by money that came home. People have a right to work.

Culturally, earlier generations knew what it was like to wait for the parcel and the letter with the dollars or pounds in it. Now it is our turn. The right of people to work in a timely manner and perhaps send money home to their extended families is not a radical proposal.

Many asylum seekers work in our health centres and in our healthcare system. If this wretched coronavirus has shown us anything, it is that, in this world, we are just one people and it is our responsibility to take care of everybody. Certainly, this is a good pathway out of our current damaging and shameful direct provision system. A pathway is not enough, however, if it can be blown away and destroyed by the whims of selfish future governments. It is a good start, however. I say, "Well done" to the Minister. Let us make sure, however, the detail and

legislation and housing vehicles are put in place and we will do our very best for the people depending on us for their future and, indeed, for their very lives.

Deputy Denis Naughten: At the outset, I want to pick up on something I believe was discussed at Cabinet earlier this week, that is, the measures that will be introduced this year to bring about a regularisation scheme for undocumented families in this country. I welcome the significant progress that has been made in the past 12 months, particularly since the Green Party went into government. This is something on which I have long campaigned and on which we made some progress during the previous Government, although not nearly enough.

I welcome the significant progress that has been made on it and look forward to seeing that enacted into law. It is wrong and immoral that people in this country pay tax and PRSI and contribute to our society and economy, but if they get sick or lose their jobs, there is no safety net available for them. It also causes significant hardship for their children. We have all come across situations where the children of people who have fallen under those particular conditions come up against significant barriers when they try to go on to further education. That is a very welcome development.

I will turn to the issue before us, that is, the direct provision system and the commitment that has now been given to phase this out in an expeditious manner. I warmly welcome that. I know that the then Minister of State, Deputy Stanton, and prior to that, the former Minister, Alan Shatter, in particular did much work in making progress in this area. I hope we can bring this to fruition now over the term of this Government. We have some 7,500 people within our asylum system at the moment. Up to 7,000 of those are within direct provision system, including approximately 2,000 children. Anyone who has had the opportunity to visit some of these facilities when that was possible, or to engage with people who are stuck in that system, cannot be but impacted by the mental health, psychological and emotional issues faced by those stuck in it. As I have said in the House on numerous occasions, having nothing to do and all day to do it is not good for any individual or their mental health. Many of us have seen that at first hand over the past 12 months as a result of the Covid-19 lockdowns. Some of these people have been in direct provision facilities for up to a decade. Children have been born and, in some instances, have gone through their primary education living in these facilities. It is not good, right or acceptable that we are still looking at nearly a two-year processing period for asylum applications. It is not right for those individuals that it is taking so long to process those applications. They deserve a decision. Whatever that decision is, they deserve a timely decision based on all the evidence.

Neither is it good for the taxpayer. It is imperative that an expeditious and properly resourced system is put in place. Some 11 years ago, the late Brian Lenihan brought forward the Immigration, Residence and Protection Bill to reform the processing of asylum applications in this country. Many elements of that legislation remain outstanding to this day. We need to have a streamlined process for everyone involved. There must be clear and definitive timelines in order that those in the system can get a timely decision.

We should not forget about some of the disgraceful practices seen in the past in the direct provision and hostel systems. Within the past 12 months, I have spoken in the House about the scandal of unaccompanied minors in the hostel system. During the height of the economic boom in the 2000s, 443 children went missing from hostel facilities run by the HSE and were never seen again. Some children missing from the hostel system were found in brothels, in restaurants or had been subsequently trafficked out of this jurisdiction. However, 443 of those

children were never found. These were children who were put into the custody of the State and just disappeared.

That practice had been brushed under the carpet until eventually it was exposed and addressed. Thankfully, that hostel system has been outlawed once and for all. We need to see a similar approach being taken with the direct provision system.

Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh: I add my voice to those who welcomed the recent publication of the White Paper to end direct provision and to establish a new international protection support service, a move long overdue and widely anticipated by people who have lived, and still live, in the direct provision system. Ending direct provision was one of the major priorities for the Green Party when we negotiated the programme for Government last year. I am proud to see significant and meaningful progress on it less than one year on.

I am not just talking about those big-ticket items such as those included in the White Paper but also those small nuts and bolts, everyday issues like movement on driver licences and bank accounts, which are important. While I do not want to conflate migration and the international protection process, I want to mark the launch recently of the Waterford migrant integration strategy. I acknowledge the work of the Waterford migrant integration forum and the work of the Minister of State, Deputy Joe O'Brien, who helped kick that process off in a previous life. I want to mention the Lismore Welcome project which is a great example. It is a model of those community-based solutions to which the Minister referred. I also want to mark the designation recently of Mount Sion in Waterford as the first school of sanctuary and the first school to achieve that status.

I do not want to focus on the countless reasons and arguments for ending direct provision. I would like to believe that in this House and country, with a long legacy of emigration, we fully appreciate the hardship of leaving home but also the hope of pursuing a new life and new opportunities. Our system of international protection should focus on opportunity and fulfilment, finding one's place in the world and contributing to the country that not only acts as a host but, in time, a permanent home. My real interface with the direct provision system was in my teaching life where I had the privilege of teaching children in the centres in Tramore. While I would not gloss over for a minute the impact this inhumane system has had on these children's attainment and development, in my mind's eye I see Kofi, our star centre forward, Enid and Hillary who would draw you anything, and Zinedine, whose mum makes the most amazing biscuits as gifts for the teachers. I see Mohammed who was my best Gaeilge speaker in that class, even though Irish was his seventh language. Their stories are now part of our story. The threads and strands of their lives are now woven into our communities. The fabric of our society is all the stronger and all the richer for their inclusion.

Deputy Joe Flaherty: I welcome the publication of the White Paper to end direct provision and the establishment of a new international protection support service. We have heard many harrowing back stories leading to direct provision. We are all too aware of the shortcomings of the process and the urgent need for reform. Behind the campaign for change and the necessity for reform are real people. These are real people, often lost in a seemingly endless cycle of uncertainty and fear.

One of these people is a man well-known to me, Malik Amir Iqbal. For Malik, the White Paper offers no answers. Malik has spent six years living in direct provision while awaiting a decision on his application. He has never been given a permit to work. Throughout that time,

he has endeared himself to the community in County Longford and has also excelled in the arts through the medium of dance.

A massive appeal in support of this affable man's application for a right to remain with us on humanitarian grounds has included letters of support from many within the arts community, including high-profile names such as the actor, Stephen Rea. A talented dancer, Malik featured on the Abbey Theatre stage no less in 2019 and has had numerous offers of employment from a range of Irish employers. Since last October, Malik's many friends in Longford and the arts community have pleaded for his right to remain. We cannot realistically action the White Paper without granting Malik and the others who are contributing to our communities, the length and breadth of the country, the right to remain and participate in a truly modern and inclusive society.

Malik has shown himself to be a creative, conscientious and valuable member of our community, as well as a vibrant contributor to the national arts scene. I want to give Malik a voice here today. I appeal directly to the Minister to give due consideration and, hopefully, a favourable response to his campaign for the right to remain here on humanitarian grounds.

Deputy Michael Collins: Direct provision in Ireland represents a human rights failure and a gravy train for accommodation providers. Costs associated with the direct provision system rose significantly in the past two years with the Covid-19 pandemic leading to extra accommodation needs, according to figures from data compiled and published by the *Irish Examiner* several weeks ago. It shows, for example, that accommodation providers have earned over €1.6 billion in direct provision accommodation contracts since 1999. To put that enormous figure in context, at an average building cost of, say, €150,000 for a social house, the €1.6 billion would have built 10,666 houses in the same time. How many families would that have housed, instead of the Government giving the money away to the direct provision system? It shows a deep lack of understanding or strategy. That figure comes from figures furnished by the Department on the overall cost of direct provision accommodation for asylum seekers between 1999 and 2020. There are children in the shocking conditions of direct provision and in some cases we have seen large numbers of people in one room. It is wrong for the State to bring people to this country on the false pretence of normal accommodation and then subject them to up to ten years in some shocking conditions.

During the term of the previous Government I put forward some solutions for how rural Ireland could perhaps have created a solution for asylum seekers whereby families - not in large numbers but maybe in smaller numbers - are integrated into local towns and villages. These towns and villages have lovely shops, schools, churches and community centres and would have been ideal homes for any families. It would be a more human and respectful way to treat people than the situation we left them to. Unfortunately, nobody seemed to listen. It seems there are massive amounts of money going into the direct provision system. We have so much to offer. West County Cork got no rural regeneration funds this year but that does not matter; the community will come up with the goods and people can come to live in our towns and rural communities. We have a lot to offer there. That is one fairly good solution that should be put forward here yet it has not been worked on.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I too feel compelled to be very critical of the system of direct provision. It has been an abject failure.

I have visited the centre in Carrick-on-Suir a number of times over the years and have seen

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the way families are incarcerated there. These are, in the main, traumatised people who have come from very harrowing and desperate situations. I visited refugee camps outside Lebanon some years ago and saw the children and the old women. There was nobody else there. They are traumatised and are waiting there. Then they come here to Ireland of the thousand welcomes and my God, what a welcome. We heard the shocking figure of over 400 children going missing from these incarceration centres - that is what they are. We are here every day debating the Mother and Baby Homes and the horrific situations that went on here. This will be as bad when history looks back on what we are doing to our guests. We offer, and agree at European level and United Nations level, to take so many people. Direct provision is a gravy train for the people who have the buildings. They do not care, they just provide the house, get the money and run. The services are not there. I salute the community in Carrick-on-Suir for the way it has integrated them into the schools, GAA clubs and everything else. It is wonderful to see some of them who are athletes and everything. However, it just takes too long, is too cumbersome and too slow.

What is wrong with our Department of Justice and now the Department of Children, Disability, Equality and Integration that they cannot operate this? How can we have 440-odd children go missing and no talk about them? They just vanished into the sex trade, into child prostitution and slave labour. This is when all our eyes are open to what went on in the past, when we were supposedly backward and we did all kinds of things. We have learned so much now and we are so open, so pluralist, so engaging, yet this is going on under our noses.

It is the same with the housing assistance payment, HAP, system. We throw billions of euro into HAP payments to keep people in long-term rented accommodation instead of building, and Deputy Michael Collins has given us the figure of how many homes could have been built. We have an awful lot of dirty linen to wash and the linen is being dirtied all the time. Our Departments have failed miserably. Their ineptitude and that of Tusla is appalling. Above all, there is no accountability, none whatsoever. We throw money at it and have tribunals and inquiries. Common decency is what we should be about. It sickens me to my craw to see people talk about how we are this and we are that, while this is going on at the very same time. We exposed what went on 40 years ago when our people were meant to be backward, when they did their best with what they could. Now, however, when we know everything - knowledge is a wonderful thing - and we have all kinds of rights we let this go on endlessly, year in and year out for decades.

Deputy Thomas Pringle: I have been asking the Business Committee for this debate and thank it for accommodating the debate today because it is important we discuss this issue. The White Paper publication happened to coincide with the opening of a new direct provision facility in County Donegal. I would like to say a céad míle fáilte to our new Letterkenny neighbours. Last month, the first of 60 families started moving into the new own-door accommodation in Port Road, Letterkenny. This self-catering, own-door accommodation is being hailed as the new style of direct provision, which is expected to be run by not-for-profits in the future. Unfortunately, this centre is still being run by a private company with limited choices as to where residents can shop and no real independent complaints mechanism. I have serious concerns around the need for an independent complaints mechanism for all accommodation centres because it is not satisfactory that residents should first complain to a centre manager and then to IPAS.

As always, the key to the success of the White Paper to end direct provision will lie in the implementation. Unfortunately, the White Paper is not being backed by a legal route and so it

will only be implemented at the will of the Minister, which means the next Minister can change it again. Unless the huge backlog of people waiting for decisions on their applications is addressed, there is absolutely no way that the 2024 deadline to end direct provision will be met. Would the Minister agree that the Department of Justice is a large cog in the wheel of progress here? There needs to be a significant increase in staffing and resources at the Department of Justice, the International Protection Office, the International Protection Appeals Tribunal and the Legal Aid Board. The plans in the White Paper just do not have any teeth without buy-in from the Department of Justice. Reports in January 2021 showed that “Of the 7,494 people... seeking asylum, 5,259 are awaiting a first-instance decision...” That is shocking. People are reportedly left in limbo waiting for a decision for 18 months, then they are further trapped in direct provision because of the unavailability of housing options.

I echo calls from the Irish Council for Civil Liberties on the need for independent, human rights-focused inspections of direct provision accommodation centres to be implemented. As the Minister knows, the inspections are currently carried out by a private contractor, QTS Ltd, and officials from IPAS. The Minister has said that HIQA should hopefully be taking over the role of inspections shortly. However, while discussions have taken place, the required legislative changes and allocation of resources are the responsibility of the Department. When will these legislative changes take place?

Finally, if Members have not already read *This Hostel Life*, written by Ms Melatu Uche Okorie and published by Skein Press, then I highly recommend they do so. The beautifully written short essays tell the stories of migrant women in a hidden Ireland. Unfortunately, that hidden Ireland may continue under this system.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I welcome the Minister’s speech and his leadership. Hopefully this will be a transformative day where this matter is concerned.

Direct provision coincides with my involvement in politics; I went for election in 1999 and direct provision was introduced in 2000. After 21 years we are finally grown up, in theory in any event. I hope the Minister actually makes this happen, with our support. We will be pushing him every step of the way. Looking at the Minister’s leadership, I must say I welcome it, though I must put it in perspective due to the 21 years. During that time we had the Mahon report, finally, in 2015. We had the spending review in 2019, the interdepartmental group on direct provision in 2019, the justice committee report, the Dr. Catherine Day report and the Minister’s own White Paper. This is in addition to the NGOs on the ground who worked solidly, the residents seeking asylum themselves who at every opportunity told us what was going on and the Ombudsman’s reports which have added to the debate. The Minister’s leadership comes on top of that and a system none of us could stand over. It was a system designed to commodify, dehumanise, isolate, to make a division between them and us, but most of all to ensure profits for the big boys. I am sure some women were in there too. Indeed, I remember saying in 2000, as an innocent councillor, that we should welcome asylum seekers to our city. An experienced councillor, who happened to be in Fianna Fáil - though it could have been any politician - told me “some things are best left alone”. That typifies the attitude we have endured for 21 years and, worse than that, we have deliberately allowed violation of human rights legislation. If this is a change, and it certainly is a change in theory, I welcome it and I will be working with the Minister on it. However, there are many things that could be done in the meantime. An amnesty has been mentioned by Deputy McGuinness, and we should look at that as well as other practical matters such as the right to work. There is an inconsistency between the Day report and the White Paper and there are many other inconsistencies but I would like to focus on the

positive.

It is time to engage with the communities. As the Minister knows, I come from a county where we had the meeting in Oughterard. Notwithstanding how bad and difficult that was, the message I got from the people was that they would welcome asylum seekers to their town if it were done properly. I remember Deputy Stanton, the former Minister of State at the Department of Justice and Equality with responsibility for equality, immigration and integration, talked about a pilot project for communities and facilitating communities to help them. I wonder if the Minister could come back to that in his closing speech.

I mention vulnerability assessments. They are not part of a pilot project and they should not be. There is an obligation on us to carry out vulnerability assessments. The Minister might clarify that.

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman): I thank all the Deputies for their detailed contributions to this important debate. Deputy Connolly listed out the range of individuals and groups that have contributed to the knowledge we have as an Oireachtas and a Government about the failures of direct provision. She is correct to acknowledge the work of the likes of Mr. Justice McMahon and his group, the previous Committee on Justice and Equality that launched its report, and all of those who worked on Catherine Day’s group. I hope what will be different this time is that the determination to act on this is contained in a programme for Government and in a White Paper that was issued early in the context of a Government. It is contained in the moving of the accommodation element to a new Department that is focused on the human rights of individuals, be they of children, those in direct provision or those with a disability. I have no doubt the Deputy and other Deputies will continue to put the pressure on over the coming three and half years, and that is appropriate.

I want to talk to the broader issue of housing first because the likes of Deputies Daly and Loherty raised the issue. The work of implementing the significant policy change contained in the White Paper will take place in conjunction with the wider actions we are taking to address the housing crisis in this country, and they are laid out in the programme for Government. These include an additional 50,000 social houses, an affordable housing scheme, the introduction of a cost rental Vienna model to address issues of affordability in rental accommodation, and the continued roll-out of the housing first approach in the context of those who are homeless and living rough. That focus on the housing crisis in the country was backed up in the 2021 budget by the significant capital allocation and the current allocation the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Deputy Darragh O’Brien, received and is spending. My Department will have a budget to provide for the accommodation that is set out in the White Paper separate to that budget for the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage. Whereas the actions have to take place in all-of-government approach, they are separate in that my Department will look after the housing for those in international protection, whereas the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage will look after housing for those on the social housing lists and other elements of housing.

Deputy Pringle spoke of his experience and I recognise the extensive work he has done in welcoming the new centre in Letterkenny. That new centre is an improvement on those that exist but that is not the model we are setting in the White Paper. The White Paper is clear that phase 1 involves reception and integration centres for a short time period of four months with significant wrap-around services provided within them and then a move to accommodation in

the community. That accommodation will consist of independent living that will be supported, it is hoped by those living there taking up work if they can. They will be supported in taking up work, but if they are unable to find work, they will be supported with a social welfare payment and a payment modelled on child benefit which will support that independent living.

A number of Deputies, including Deputies Bríd Smith and Sherlock, raised the issue of people living in direct provision who are working on the front line in our health services. I recognise that there are hundreds of people living in direct provision who are acting in our health or social care services. The HSE set up a system to accommodate them so they would not be in the congregated setting of direct provision. About 1,500 places have been provided throughout the country. In a number of situations that have recently come to note, those placements have ended. I am engaging with the HSE on what exactly happened there. There were a small number of situations where people's HSE housing placement ended and their original direct provision centre had closed in the interim. I know in one of those situations it was a centre we all welcomed the closure of, but in that situation the residents were reaccommodated somewhere far from their work. We will continue to work to engage better with the HSE where HSE-provided accommodation is ending so that we can ensure the disjointed actions that happened in the situations that have been brought to the attention of the media recently do not happen again.

A large number of issues have been raised and I will not be able to respond to them all. I note that Deputies Funchion and Ó Cathasaigh focused on the importance of children within the White Paper. That is essential in terms of the supports we will provide in the reception and integration centres, involving Tusla providing childcare and involving the child protection and safeguarding inspections, CPSIs, in each area supporting the immediate integration of children and young people and making sure they have schools in the area. The availability of schooling for both primary and secondary level will be taken into account in determining the location of the reception and integration centres.

Deputy Sherlock spoke about his party's citizenship Bill. I know the Minister for Justice, Deputy McEntee, engaged extensively with Senator Bacik on that. Deputy Sherlock also spoke about the regularisation process for undocumented workers. This week, the Minister, Deputy McEntee, provided Cabinet with an update on those approximately 17,000 people who are undocumented in the country, including 3,000 children. That was a commitment in the programme for Government and the Minister, Deputy McEntee, is working on that. In September the full scheme will be provided for and that will be within the 18-month timeframe we set out in the programme for Government. I know Deputy Naughten spoke about that as well.

Deputy Pringle talked about the issue of independent inspections and I know Deputy Murnane O'Connor spoke about that as well. We will be getting HIQA to undertake independent inspections. The inspections are currently undertaken by a private company and by IPAS. That does not give the level of independence we need. We are in detailed negotiations with HIQA on a memorandum of understanding. I hope in the coming months we will see HIQA take up that important role, but I will continue to update the Dáil because I know it is an issue of major concern.

I know Deputy Murnane O'Connor wanted to talk about the level of funding available. Some €225 million was provided for the existing IPAS services and that was an increase of €45 million over the previous year, so it is a significant investment. We all know the system we seek to create through the White Paper will be one where the investment gives us a long-term

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return in having actual accommodation rather than the over-reliance on the private sector we currently have.

Deputies Connolly and O'Reilly spoke about the vulnerability assessment. We have had an obligation, which as a country we have not met for many years, to implement vulnerability assessments. We are now implementing a vulnerability assessment on all applicants who arrive in this country. It was a pilot because it was the first time we were doing it and we needed to learn because it is a new process. Let us be clear that everybody is getting a vulnerability assessment as they arrive. There have been more than 268 done already and we will learn from the pilot and implement those lessons when it is fully applied. That is an important element and it is hoped it will help to avoid the situations Deputy O'Reilly outlined of people being allocated entirely inappropriate accommodation.

A number of Deputies spoke about what we can do now, including Deputies Cairns, Bríd Smith, McGuinness and Pádraig O'Sullivan. I will reiterate some of the points I made earlier. We are dealing with the issue of period poverty. I have made a direction to all direct provision centres to ensure period products are provided free of charge to all residents. We are dealing with the issue of bank accounts with the Department of Justice, and the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission has engaged significantly with the major banks. Last year, there was a big announcement from Bank of Ireland and I understand continuous engagement is taking place with other banks.

We are dealing with the issue of the driver licence. There is provision in the traffic (miscellaneous provisions) Bill that will come before the Oireachtas soon, which will deal with the issue that prevents people in the direct provision process being able to apply for a driver licence. Of course, there are also the significant announcements I made with the Minister, Deputy Harris, on access to higher and further education.

Looking forward, we are aware we need to move people out of emergency accommodation because at present there is a significant number of emergency accommodation centres. Many have been provided to try to get us through Covid and provide for the decongregation of existing direct provision centres. The focus in the next year will be to provide accommodation so we can move people out of existing emergency accommodation centres. There will be a particular focus on single men who far too often are accommodated in crowded situations, which are entirely inappropriate.

I am very conscious of the speed of the decision making. It is an issue on which I am working very closely with the Minister for Justice, Deputy McEntee. The decision-making process remains a matter for the Department of Justice. Significant investment in finance, a new IT system and personnel have been put in place. We will continue to work to shorten the period within which someone's application is adjudicated.

I would have loved an opportunity to address more questions but I have no doubt we will continue to debate this matter in the months ahead.

Sitting suspended at 11.52 a.m. and resumed at 12 noon.

Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I want to raise the issue of Dolphin Trust with the Tánaiste this morning. It is a Ponzi scheme, a scam that has 1,800 Irish victims who are to lose up to €108 million in pension savings. These are not well-heeled or seasoned investors, but ordinary people, some of whom have lost all of their life savings and pensions.

This centres around a German company called Dolphin Trust, renamed the German Property Group, and its director, Mr. Charles Smethurst. Dolphin told investors it would use their money to buy derelict buildings across Germany, turn them into luxury flats and apartments and sell them to German buyers. They promised high-interest returns and their original capital back. Dolphin Trust has now collapsed and owes investors around the world in the region of €3 billion. In Germany, it was reported that the properties held by Dolphin Trust would only be able to recover €100 million. British and German media have reported that investors' money, the money that they invested in their pensions and savings, was used by the director and his family to pay for parties, fashion shows, luxury items and rent.

The nerve centre of this operation was in Ireland, through Dolphin International Group, based in Cork. It marketed and processed the loan notes from 2012 and distributed commissions throughout the world. In the bonanza years, brokers were earning commissions of 20% and more. For a decade the loan notes were administered by a company called Wealth Options Trustees Limited, with all marketing and distribution of the loan notes handed over by Dolphin to the associated Wealth Options company in 2018. These companies, under the Wealth Options umbrella, are based in Naas, County Kildare, co-owned and co-directed by two Irish individuals, with Charles Smethurst himself also a director of the two Irish special purpose vehicles, SPVs, which channelled these investments. During this time the directors of Wealth Options received more than €9 million, and paid themselves more than €4 million from 2018 when the Ponzi scheme was clearly unravelling.

German authorities are now investigating this scheme as investment fraud. It involves the misuse of the pensions and savings of in excess of 1,800 Irish people and it was clearly a scam. As I said, these are ordinary people, not with hundreds of thousands of euro but €20,000, €30,000 or €40,000 to invest in pensions. It is unlikely that these people will ever see the full value of their money - for some their entire life savings - and that is heartbreaking for them.

With Ireland in many ways the nerve centre of this scheme, which has ripped off more than 20,000 people and their savings worldwide, there are questions that need to be answered. In 2016, Wealth Options was contacted by the Central Bank and asked to provide details of the products, in particular, these loan notes, it was selling. In other words, the Central Bank was aware of the risks as far back as 2016 - indeed, it was reported at that time - of these high-risk, unregulated products that were compromising people's pensions and savings. Why was no action taken? Why did the Central Bank not alert people in terms of a notice on its website that there was an issue here? It was even after this time that the sales of these loan notes went through the roof, with the directors of Wealth Options paying themselves more than €4 million in 2018 and 2019 when the Ponzi scheme was clearly unravelling.

At its heart this scandal is regulatory failure of a dramatic nature. Wealth Options were regulated by the Central Bank and the brokers who sold the products were regulated by the Central Bank, but the products they marketed, distributed and sold are not. This is the Wild West of the financial market with no sheriff in sight and now 1,800 Irish people may not recover

their pensions or life savings.

When the Government of which the Tánaiste was a member become aware of this in 2016, what actions, if any, did it take? What actions does the Government plan to take in response to this scandal today? Finally, there are hundreds of millions of euro of pensions invested in unregulated, high-risk loan note products. What action will the Government take to bring this market into the light and these products under robust regulation?

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for raising the issue of Dolphin Trust. I am afraid I am not aware of all, or even many, of the facts in relation to this issue and I am reluctant to give an answer that may be incorrect. However, I want to express my sympathy to those affected, both here in Ireland and across Europe. These were small investors who have lost money, as the Deputy said.

On the questions relating to the Central Bank, the Central Bank, as the Deputy will be aware, is a regulator independent of Government. It is not possible for me to answer questions on behalf of the Central Bank but I am sure the Central Bank will answer questions in due course.

The Deputy asked what actions the Government took when it became aware of this in 2016. I am not aware that the Government became aware of this in 2016, certainly not the Government in the sense of the Cabinet in that if there was a Cabinet memorandum on it, I would or I ought to remember it. Perhaps the Department of Finance, the Minister for Finance or somebody in the system of government became aware of it. Without knowing who, when or what that was, again, it is difficult for me to answer the question properly but I will certainly inform the Minister for Finance that this was raised here in the Dáil today and ask him to give the Deputy any answers to any questions that he can.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I am sure those who have lost their life savings will be relieved that the Tánaiste sympathises with them but what they would rather have seen is action. In 2016, it was not a secret that the Central Bank was raising concerns regarding the high-risk loan notes and, indeed, Wealth Options. This was reported in the *Irish Independent* in 2016 by Mr. Charlie Weston and I am sure officials in the Department of Finance read the *Irish Independent*. If Mr. Weston was able to report it, I am sure the Department of Finance would be aware of it.

The problem is these are ordinary individuals. The brokers went to these individuals and told them to take their money out of pension investments that were regulated and put it into these type of products because the brokers were getting commission of more than 20%. These are unregulated products and they have lost their life savings. In some cases, they have been told that the investments are secured against properties that do not exist in Germany. In one case, a foreign individual was told that the folio number he has is in a location in Germany and when this was followed up, it is a German Army base.

Is it the Tánaiste's view that the Government will regulate these products and bring this area into light? The Tánaiste cannot say that it is nothing to do with the Government. It is Government that allows for regulation of this type of activity. Are we going to bring an end to this unregulated activity, which has sacrificed so many people's pensions up until now?

The Tánaiste: Obviously, this is a very serious matter, not only for the people who are directly affected. People will have questions and they will want answers. They should get those answers but, unfortunately, I am not the person who can offer those answers because this is not something that I have any detailed knowledge of but I will inform the Minister for Finance that

it was raised here and ask him to answer any questions that he can.

I think the Deputy mentioned that these were unregulated products. If they were unregulated, that, in itself, creates a difficulty because the regulator is responsible for regulated products and services, not those that are unregulated. Perhaps the people who made these investments were not aware of that at the time or were misled in some way. Knowing so little about this, I am loath to give any answers.

I will inform the Minister for Finance that the Deputy has raised this. The Deputy would not raise it today in this forum if he did not think it was a serious matter. We will try and get him a more detailed response as soon as we can.

Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin: I want to raise with the Tánaiste the issue of youth unemployment. The youth unemployment rate in Ireland now stands at 59%, which means that for every five young people in Ireland, three of them have no job. The EU average is 17%. It is considered to be extremely high in Spain at 40%, while in the UK, the rate is 14%.

I am sure the Tánaiste will agree that young people have been unfairly targeted over the course of this pandemic. They have been working incredibly hard within their own families and communities over the past year and over the past number of years they have changed Ireland for the better with their activism, engagement and campaigning. The Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, Deputy O’Gorman said yesterday that it was the energy and activism of young people that brought the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Bill to the Houses of the Oireachtas this week and he is right. We saw what happened earlier this year with their activism around the leaving certificate.

Our fear in the Labour Party is that we are losing a generation again, as we did ten years ago. What we and the National Youth Council of Ireland, NYCI, are asking for is a task force on youth unemployment. The Government needs to take this issue seriously because in the economy and in the country presented to these young people before the pandemic, 40% of young people under 30 were in insecure employment and far too many were in insecure accommodation. They are looking at a return to “normal” which means insecure jobs and high rents and many of them are wondering why they should hang around. We lost a generation ten years ago; we cannot afford to lose another one. We have a youth unemployment or joblessness rate of 59%. This falls within the ministerial responsibilities of the Tánaiste. What priority is he giving to this issue? Will he listen to the NYCI and establish a task force? What is he, as Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment, and his Government doing to tackle the issue of youth unemployment in Ireland?

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Ó Ríordáin for raising this issue, which is really important to him and really important to me too. It is true young people have suffered a lot in this pandemic. Different people and different sectors in our society have suffered in different ways. Women have suffered differently from men and older people have suffered differently from young people. Certainly, when it comes to the health impact, older people have borne the brunt of this pandemic in terms of lives lost and people hospitalised or made very sick as a result of the virus but the economic impact has fallen disproportionately on younger people in terms of jobs lost. Their lives have been interrupted, including their college experiences and their education, not to mention their inability to make friends, build relationships and do all the things younger people do. I very much agree with the Deputy’s analysis and assessment in that regard and I certainly do not want us to lose another generation.

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Too many times in the past we lost a generation of people to emigration due to economic mismanagement. Many people under 35 are now experiencing their second recession in their adult life, which is extraordinary. We need to make sure we do not have a repeat of the last recession, where younger people had to leave and go to other countries to seek opportunities.

We are going to respond to this in a cross-Government way. The Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, Deputy Harris, is meeting NYCI this week. I intend to bring together the Ministers for Social Protection, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science and Education and others to see what we can do to respond to this problem. Part of that response may involve a catch-up programme for people in education, which Deputy Ó Ríordáin has called for. That will be for people who have missed out on schooling. There will also be a response in terms of educational opportunities. It is already the case that there are more people participating in third level education than ever before in Ireland and we want to continue to expand that further. The Deputy will be aware of what the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science is doing in relation to apprenticeships and increasing opportunities in that area. We also want to make sure that once the economy reopens, younger people get their jobs back and have better terms and conditions. The Deputy will know of the work that is under way on sick pay, a living wage and auto enrolment.

Deputy Ó Ríordáin said in his opening remarks that we have 59% youth unemployment, meaning that three out of five younger people are out of work but that is not correct. We calculate youth unemployment in a particular way in Ireland and do not include people who are in education or training. When we say that 59% of young people are unemployed, that does not mean that 59% of all young people are unemployed. It means that 59% of young people who are in the workforce are unemployed, or 59% of young people who are not in education or training. Of course, a very large number of them are out of work because they would have tended to work in areas like retail, construction and hospitality, most of which will reopen, we hope, over the next couple of months. Typically, youth unemployment is double the older people rate but that is actually not what it seems because of the way it is calculated.

Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin: I know this is not a priority for the Tánaiste because I took the time last night to go through every single one of his tweets this year. Since January 2021, the number of times he mentioned youth unemployment came to the grand total of zero while the number of times he referenced Sinn Féin came to a grand total of 12. If I was a young person in Ireland, I would come to the conclusion that the Tánaiste's obsession is not with young people, youth unemployment, getting people jobs and saving this generation but with a political game with Sinn Féin. I counted zero tweets about youth unemployment but 12 tweets about Sinn Féin since the beginning of this year.

The Tánaiste: I just think that is a very cheap shot. The Deputy once again is engaging in virtue signalling, trying to make out that not only do we disagree with each other, he is also a better person than me and he cares more. That is just cheap politics, I believe. The number of times one tweets about something is not necessarily a reflection of how important one regards it-----

Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin: Not once; zero-----

The Tánaiste: If the Deputy wants, he can go back and read a speech I gave to the Young Fine Gael conference only last Saturday. A large section of that speech specifically dealt with

this issue, namely, how young people have been impacted by the pandemic and what we intend to do. It was covered in the media and the fact that it was not tweeted is irrelevant. That was just a cheap shot, unfortunately.

An Ceann Comhairle: We move now to the Regional Group and Deputy Matt Shanahan.

Deputy Matt Shanahan: Unlike the Tánaiste, I am not medically qualified although I spent a number of years in the healthcare area working around medical devices and medicines. I am not an expert so I talk to experts to try to inform myself of what is happening on the ground. When I say experts, I mean those who are at the front line of medicine, working with cutting edge medicines and dealing with Covid patients.

On 4 April 2020 I issued a national statement calling for the use of face masks but this was not supported by NPHET until August 2020, when it mandated the use of masks in shops and indoor settings. On 23 April I asked NPHET to consider allowing senior nursing staff in residential care settings to take nasal swabs rather than sending in National Ambulance Service personnel in full PPE, which was terrorising dementia patients. I asked for that in April but it did not become policy until the end of May, again waiting for NPHET approval. In May 2020 I raised the issue of antigen testing by a world-leading pharmaceutical company with NPHET but this was dismissed out of hand, within two days. I pushed the issue with the Tánaiste's office, the Taoiseach's office and the Department of Health and asked that pilot studies be done with the Construction Industry Federation, CIF. I engaged with Professor Paddy Mallon on this and to be fair to the Tánaiste, he looked to get Professor Mark Ferguson on board because he saw the resistance to antigen testing. Now we are talking about the roll-out of some pilot studies in August or September of this year but this is not acceptable. Antigen testing is being used in the US and we are using it as a Brexit mediator in the context of haulage. We are still trying to roll it out and this is retarding our Covid-19 response.

In recent weeks the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Health produced a very fine report on the use and possible benefits of vitamin D supplements. There is overwhelming evidence supporting this but it has not been adopted by NPHET or even properly looked at. Vitamin D is a very benign prophylaxis that could be used and I cannot understand why we are not doing it. NPHET still refuses to take seriously the views of underlings in the healthcare service. Who is making the decisions? It is people who are earning many times the average industrial wage in this country and who are not furloughed from their jobs or businesses. I also ask the Tánaiste to look at the issue of e-health. We do not have a patient identifier number. There is the farcical situation with healthcare where there are two systems, one in the acute hospitals and one in community health, that do not talk to each other, which leads to double booking of people coming in for vaccinations. This is not Ireland in 2021, nor should it be. We must consider what Slovakia, Denmark and Hungary are doing and send people there to find out what e-health systems they use and bring this into our Covid-19 response.

The Tánaiste: The Deputy made some very good points. However, while Denmark has had a very good response to the pandemic and is one of the few countries in Europe, or the world, with a lower mortality rate than us, we would not follow Slovakia's or Hungary's response to the pandemic because their mortality rates, sadly, are among the highest in the European Union.

Deputy Shanahan is spot on in relation to e-health. A lack of an individual health identifier is a real deficiency in our health service. We have a really good PPS system and public service card which, for many reasons, have not been extended or replicated for health. One of the

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outcomes or dividends from this pandemic must be universal patient registration with a health ID for everyone so that we can do vaccination programmes and screening programmes much better and identify people through disease registers and so on. What the Deputy said in relation to that was spot on and will have to be part of the legacy of and dividend from this pandemic.

Deputy Matt Shanahan: I referred to Denmark's and Hungary's e-health systems rather than their mortality rates.

The Tánaiste referenced PPS numbers. We have up to 20% more PPS numbers than population, which behoves us to come up with a new identifier number to manage our systems.

As the Tánaiste is well aware, there have been issues for years in terms of hospital inpatient data, the hospital inpatient enquiry, HIPE, system. For years, University Hospital Waterford suffered from the under-reporting of cardiac activity in terms of the national HIPE system. I ask that as part of this exercise we seriously consider integrating technologies and communications systems to provide a better response in our hospitals and primary care settings and for our patients. As the Tánaiste said, we will have spent a considerable amount of money and we must have something at the end of this. I hope the Government will deliver initiatives on new health ICT systems shortly.

The Tánaiste: The Taoiseach and I feel strongly about this, not least, because we are former health Ministers and understand the problems facing health administration. We are both keen to use a decent chunk of the European recovery fund - we have approximately €800 million to €900 million coming to us - on e-health, to do some of what Deputy Shanahan suggested.

However, much has happened in our health service in terms of e-health that has worked well. Our patient record in maternity care is good. Something is starting in pediatrics. The medical laboratory information system, MedLIS, means people do not have to take the same blood test twice. Our radiology system is good, having moved from a picture archiving and communication system, PACS, to a national integrated medical imaging system, NIMIS. I would not like the impression being created that nothing has happened in this space, but it is true not enough has happened. I concur with the Deputy's view we must up our game and invest in e-health.

While people may have been scared by the experience of personnel, payroll and related systems, PPARS, the very expensive health service system which went horribly wrong ten to 15 years ago, we should not make the mistake of not investing in e-health when we need to.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: Baineann mo cheist le Gaillimh agus an fáinne fí atá ar siúl, faraor géar, le fada an lá maidir leis an roinn timpistí agus éigeandála nua agus an t-ospidéal nua atá beartaithe. Tá neart eolais ag an Tánaiste faoi nGaillimh. Is iar-Aire Sláinte é agus bhí sé i nGaillimh cúpla uair agus labhair sé faoin ábhar.

My question relates to the hospitals in Galway. The Tánaiste is familiar with this subject. He is a former Minister for Health and has been to Galway. I used the term "fáinne fí" to describe the unreal magic going on in relation to the accident and emergency department and the lack of progress in Galway. The former Taoiseach, Enda Kenny, said it was not fit for purpose. The current Taoiseach echoed that and the former Minister, Deputy Simon Harris, said the same thing.

I looked at the questions. One would need an advanced post-doctoral degree in some type of English to understand the responses. We talk about business cases and feasibility studies be-

ing updated. The estates part of the Health Service Executive is considering it. I do not know what it is considering. However, I know an accident and emergency department is urgently needed in Galway. The Tánaiste has agreed with it but it is nowhere to be seen. There is no planning application. There is no nothing.

An options appraisal came down on the side of a new hospital in Galway as the long-term plan, in addition to short-term and medium-term solutions. A capacity review of beds has been conducted. As the Tánaiste is aware, University Hospital Galway caters for approximately 1 million people from County Donegal to County Galway. It is one of the busiest hospitals in the country.

I will read from the additional report to the options appraisal, the regional elective hospital scoping study. A study carried out on the existing infrastructure stated that “64% and 95% of the infrastructure in UHG and MPUH (respectively) is ‘not satisfactory/unacceptable’ for its current function”. The study later refers to operating at capacity and lengthy waiting lists and so on.

I will try to be focused. I have a sense of utter frustration. I cannot imagine what it is like for the staff, and more importantly, the patients. I have responses going back to 2015 telling me the emergency department is going on the capital list. An options appraisal and a scoping study tells me the long-term solution - long term being in the next ten years - is for a hospital in Merlin Park. In between, the programme for Government promises an elective hospital which I have no difficulty with. I have difficulty with the confusion and two of the Tánaiste’s colleagues having a public spat in County Galway in relation to who is holding back what. It is not the type of leadership we want and it is why the Health Service Executive got an options appraisal to guide the way forward. I ask the Tánaiste for a focused reply on what he knows about Galway.

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for raising a question I have been asking in recent weeks because Government made the commitment many years ago to build a new emergency department in University Hospital Galway, on the existing site. It is in the Project Ireland 2040 plan and has been in all our capital plans for quite some time. My understanding - I may not be fully up to date on this - is the plan is to build a new emergency department and a new maternity and pediatric department in the same building, on the University Hospital Galway site. It has been the plan for quite some time.

I made inquiries a few weeks ago to try to understand why it was taking so long. Similar to the Deputy, I received a lengthy response which I could not fully interpret or understand. I am not happy with it either and will follow up on it with the HSE because, as the Deputy said, University Hospital Galway is not just the hospital for Galway city, it is a specialist centre for the entire west and part of the north west. Therefore, it should have as good an emergency department as exists anywhere else, such as the new department in Limerick and in Dublin hospitals. I will look into that further.

No decision has been made by Government in relation to Merlin Park and the elective hospital. A debate is under way as to how the elective hospitals in Dublin, Galway and Cork should look. Should they be day hospitals only, or, have overnight facilities as well? While options appraisals have been done on that, no decision has been put to the Government as of yet.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: If the Tánaiste has difficulties understanding the replies, as I do, then that tells us something. It is time for leadership. An elective hospital came from

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an options appraisal. It was never exclusive to the plan for a new hospital on the Merlin Park site. It was to be step 1 in the phase. If the accident and emergency department is better suited to the new hospital in Merlin Park, so be it, but let us stop the fáinne fí ag dul ar aghaidh agus ar aghaidh gan aon chiall. Tá daoine ag cailleadh muiníne as an gcóras. We are losing all confidence in the system. The accident and emergency department went up four or five floors in the planner's imagination and it came back down to two floors to incorporate the maternity unit overhead, which is a good idea, but it seems that the timespan for that is almost the same as the timespan for a new hospital at Merlin Park University Hospital, if we go by the options appraisal presented to us in the audiovisual room. There has been a spat between two of the Tánaiste's colleagues, with one accusing the other of delaying it. It is unacceptable. We want a new hospital for Galway. We want a timeline. We want clarification about the emergency department. We want no more obfuscation.

The Tánaiste: I think we agree on one point, that we need a clear plan for hospital services in Galway and that we need to get on with it. I am frustrated and embarrassed too that this has taken so long. This is a project that was live when I was Minister for Health, which was five or six years ago. I will take this up with the CEO of the HSE. I appreciate that the HSE has much on its plate, especially with the pandemic, but that should not be a reason for this project not to progress to design and planning permission. I thank the Deputy for raising it. Notwithstanding their differences on some points, I assure the Deputy that both Deputy Naughton and Senator Kyne are equally keen to see the new emergency department built and health services approved in the region. I will take this up with the CEO of the HSE in the next couple of days and try to get things moving again.

Ceisteanna ar Reachtaíocht a Gealladh - Questions on Promised Legislation

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Last month, the Dáil unanimously supported an Teachta Aengus Ó Snodaigh's legislation to preserve and revitalise Moore Street in Dublin as a cultural quarter. At its meeting earlier this month, Dublin City Council voted unanimously to make Moore Street an architectural conservation area, a decision which imposes strict planning controls on the demolition of buildings in the area. As a result of both of these votes, no planning application by the developer should be allowed to proceed that undermines the clear wishes of elected representatives in this House or indeed in the council. This area has been described by the National Museum as the most important historic site in modern Irish history.

Does the Tánaiste agree that the processing of any application by the developer at this time would represent direct interference with the legislative process and render the votes of this Dáil and the city council meaningless? Will he ensure the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage makes it clear to any State agencies that may be required to provide letters of consent that it is the Government's view that issuing such letters in respect of such a planning application would be contrary to proper planning and a betrayal of the public interest in this matter?

The Tánaiste: I am afraid I may have to come back to the Deputy with a further reply on this but my understanding is that if a planning application is lodged, it is lodged under the existing law, not under a proposed law or a future law. I do not know much about proposals to revise this development. I received a presentation some years ago about what was planned for the area. I know we purchased four buildings on Moore Street which constitute a national monument. They are in Government ownership, so it is for the Government to decide how that

is developed. It is a different matter for the wider area.

Deputy Duncan Smith: It is clear that one of the impacts of Covid will be changes in work practices that will last long after the pandemic has ended. This is something I have campaigned on in recent years, representing a commuter area and county in Fingal. The Government has launched a remote working strategy and it is clear working from home and working from local community hubs will be the norm. However, we will need policies that support workers in that. One relates to the tax saver annual ticket. The cost of an annual tax saver ticket could be €1,450 deducted directly from wages, but if people are only working two or three days a week, either by choice or by design with their employers, will the Government consider the provision of a part-time tax saver season ticket for commuters? This would be a significant help to their overall income and I ask the Government to consider it strongly.

The Tánaiste: That is a good idea so I will certainly speak to the Minister, Deputy Ryan, about it to see if we can do something or examine that. I would point out that part-time working is not new. We have had people who work for two or three days a week in the city centre for as long as I can remember and probably since the beginning of time. Part-time working is not something new so perhaps there is a good reason this was not done before, but I agree that in the post-pandemic world of work, it will be much more common for people to work from home for a day or two and maybe only go into headquarters for a day or two a month. We need to find a way to assist them with the cost of public transport. We will have to look at it in the round but, to cut a long story short, it is a good idea we should explore.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: There are reports this week of 435 apartments in Ashtown in Dublin 15 being sold off to a foreign investment company based in Germany several years before these apartments will be completed. According to the Construction Industry Federation, in 2019, 95% of apartments were sold to institutional investors, leaving only 5% for everyone else. Individuals and couples simply cannot compete with these multimillion euro investment funds. An entire generation is being locked out of home ownership. Rents for apartments in Dublin are higher than in any other city in the European Union. In Germany, residential investment funds were banned from buying up apartments and homes. Will the Government bring forward legislation to ban the buying up of homes by real estate investment trusts, REITs, and investment funds?

The Tánaiste: I do not believe there are any plans for legislation in that regard but I will check with the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage. We need to take a more rounded approach to housing in general. Rather than banning different types of housing or housing investment, we need all sorts of housing and lots more of it, whether it is social housing for people on the housing list, cost rental or private homes for people to buy. We need more housing of all types in Ireland. The solution is not to try to ban types of housing or housing investment. While it might be the case there are too many of these investment funds and they are too active in the market in Dublin, it does not mean there is no place for them at all. It is not that these apartments are empty. I know people who live in apartments managed by companies such as Kennedy Wilson in places like Islandbridge. They do a good job, people rent there, and they have a home as a result of that. I do not think we should be so ideological and absolute about this. This should never be about banning types of housing or housing investment. We need lots more housing of all types and we need both public and private investment.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: On the same issue, will this rounded approach to housing extend to trying to do something to stop people from being unjustly evicted? Our treatment of

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the homeless reached a new low this week where the homeless, in homeless accommodation, are now being evicted. At the Travelodge in Ballymun, families, including a woman with a tumour, and people with kids in school in Ballymun, were told on Tuesday they had to be out on Thursday from homeless accommodation. We now evict the homeless. They have been told they have to go off to Coolock or Clontarf, and if they do not accept that, they will end up in a dive, to quote one official. Will the Tánaiste look into doing something about that? I have asked repeatedly if the Tánaiste will do something about the tenants of St. Helen's Court in Dún Laoghaire, eight of whom stand to be evicted tomorrow by a vulture fund because the Government has failed to close the loopholes that allow vulture funds, purely for money, to evict good tenants who pay their rent and put them onto the street and who will now be knocking on the homeless service's door in Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown.

The Tánaiste: I appreciate these are important issues and the Deputy is entitled to raise them, but where they refer to specific developments and specific individuals, it is difficult for me to reply without knowing any or much of the information. If the Deputy wants to correspond with the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, that would be the best way to bring the matter forward.

Deputy Verona Murphy: In 2016, the Friends of Wexford General Hospital group was told that it would be given funding for an essential MRI scanner for the hospital if the group was able to raise €250,000. The group appealed to the people of Wexford and within 18 months that €250,000 was raised by the people of Wexford. It was by 2018, some 18 months later. Some weeks ago, South East Radio interviewed Paul Reid, chief executive officer of the HSE and he was asked when Wexford General Hospital would see the promised MRI scanner in place. He replied that there was no mention nor provision made for an MRI scanner in the HSE's capital fund. Can the Tánaiste confirm to the people of Wexford that the previous Government, in which he was the Taoiseach at the time, and this Government have not hoodwinked the people of Wexford and that they do not think they can just fob them off? Can the Tánaiste confirm when the MRI scanner will be in place and a timeline for that?

The Tánaiste: I am a friend of Wexford General Hospital. My first job as a surgical intern was in the hospital back in 2003. I have fond memories of working there. I got a great education there but I also met some really great people. Increasingly, MR is becoming a standard investigation method and it would make sense to have that facility available in every acute general hospital. I do not know what specific commitments were made by this Government and the previous one regarding Wexford General Hospital, so I will have to check. I appreciate, however, that the Deputy is raising a very important issue and I will follow up with the HSE and get her a more detailed response.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I return to the issue of a bypass for Tipperary town. Two sets of consultants are looking at the road from Limerick to Waterford. Tipperary town must be bypassed and we had plans before to do that. Why has a 6 km wide passage of land now been sterilised from Limerick to Tipperary town, and including towns such as Bansha, Cahir, Clonmel, Carrick-on-Suir, Piltown and on to Waterford? People want to build houses in those areas and they cannot apply for planning because of that 6 km area. These studies were done before and major plans were drawn up for the M24. Those plans are there, so why do we have to sterilise a wider area this time?

I think this is only giving money to consultants. Surely, we can look at locations case-by-case within that corridor. That would allow those people who are lucky to have a site and a

mortgage and who are able to build a home to apply for planning permission. It would help to solve or at least lessen the housing crisis. It is bizarre that a 6 km wide tract of land would be sterilised, because the dogs in the street know this is not going to be used. It is going to be a corridor similar to the one before. It is a time consuming and delaying process.

The Tánaiste: I will inform the Minister for Transport, Deputy Ryan, that the Deputy has raised this matter again and I will ask him to furnish the Deputy with a detailed reply.

Deputy Thomas Pringle: On Monday of this week, Inner City Helping Homeless, ICHH, published its Empowerment to Rights report. Some 98% of homeless people have never engaged in an official exit plan for homelessness; 87% said that the situation often leads to feelings of anxiety and depression; 40% of respondents experienced sexual assault while homeless; 84% of respondents said they were not comfortable making a complaint within the homeless services; and 65% said that they have been finding it difficult to manage their hygiene during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The press release from ICHH stated that the most frequent words used in the survey to describe the homeless experience included “shame”, “dirty”, “alone”, “unseen”, “inhuman”, “lost”, “depressed”, “unwanted” and “scared”. Does the Tánaiste think that is acceptable that that would be the outcome of the survey? What is the Government going to do about it?

The Tánaiste: I am afraid I am not familiar with the survey, so I probably should not comment on it. I will, however, take a look at it. The Government is investing more in homeless services than has ever been the case previously. While there are still far too many people homeless in our country, it is down considerably on where we were a year or two ago. We must ensure we keep that trajectory going in the right direction. That involves, in particular, investment in the Housing First programme, of which I am a big fan and which I think has been very successful. We need more tenancies under that programme.

As the Deputy knows, however, homelessness is a complex problem. It is not just about housing, although it is very much about housing; it also involves mental health, addiction services and many different things that we have to get right. The level of investment now going into all those areas is unprecedented, however, and we are seeing a result in the form of lower levels of homelessness than we experienced a few years ago. It is absolutely the case though that it is not enough and more needs to be done.

Deputy Emer Higgins: Construction is starting on 1,000 new homes in Clondalkin in my constituency, of which 30% will be social homes. Yesterday, the leader of Sinn Féin came into this House and demanded more social homes. Yet, Sinn Féin voted against these 300 social homes in Clondalkin. Why was that? It was because of the funding model. I do not think the funding model matters a great deal to people on the council housing list or to young couples looking to get a foot on the property ladder. Can the Tánaiste confirm that this Government is committed to delivering homes for people, rather than and despite the Sinn Féin model of delay, delay and delay?

The Tánaiste: I concur with the Deputy’s remarks. It is very much my view that if we are going to solve the housing crisis, make homes more available to more people and reduce the cost of housing, well then a big part of doing that, which is probably the main part, has to be more supply. We need to be building about 35,000 homes a year in Ireland. We are not doing that and the pandemic has not helped. However, we need to do that and we are only going to

do it if we build housing of all sorts, including social, cost rental, public and private and one-off housing.

Any policy which states we should ban one type of housing or restrict investment in a different type of housing will result in less housing and that will make the situation worse. When I hear the Opposition speaking about housing, it seems to be a case of not here, not there, not anywhere, not that type, not this funding model, indeed, almost any excuse that can be come up with to oppose housing. It does make me wonder whether the Opposition, or elements of the Opposition, actually want the housing crisis to end.

Deputy Michael Moynihan: The outdoor dining enhancement scheme provides funding for improvements to outdoor dining facilities for gastro pubs or pubs providing food. Will the Tánaiste consider extending this scheme to wet pubs as well? I refer to pubs exclusively selling just drink to ensure they can open and have outside facilities. Many owners of such facilities have been in contact with me seeking to have this grant available to them so they could provide facilities outdoors during the summer months. Hopefully, if things open up and if the vaccination programme continues to roll out at pace, they can open as well. I would like to ensure the outdoor dining enhancement scheme open to bars and pubs that serve food is also available to bars and pubs that only sell drink.

The Tánaiste: As the Deputy knows, all the evidence suggests that outdoor dining is much safer than indoor. The same applies to drinking outdoors being safer than drinking indoors. That is why the Government established a scheme to help restaurants and gastro pubs make better use of their outdoor areas. I understand that so-called “wet pubs”, and I hope we abolish that term soon, cannot avail of this scheme. Deputy Michael Moynihan has raised this today and Deputy Phelan also raised it earlier this week.

I will endeavour to see if it can be changed. I will have to talk to the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media, Deputy Catherine Martin, to see if that can be changed. There may be good reasons for excluding those pubs that I am not aware of. On the face of it, however, it certainly seems like common sense that this scheme should also be open to pubs that do not serve food. I reiterate that I will take this up with the Minister and I will respond to the Deputy as soon as I can.

Deputy Mark Ward: I have changed my question on the basis of what Deputy Higgins has just said regarding public land sold to a private developer. The Sinn Féin model is to ensure we get the best bang for our buck on public land for public homes, social and affordable. Therefore, I ask the Tánaiste to comment on Clonburris strategic development zone, SDZ, which has 8,500 homes planned for it. Deputy Higgins, along with the National Asset Management Agency, NAMA and other developers, appealed this decision to An Bord Pleanála, which delayed the process of the building approximately 8,500 homes in the middle of a housing crisis by more than a year. NAMA, the developers and Fine Gael are like an unholy Trinity. Does the Tánaiste think that a delay concerning 8,500 public homes in the middle of a public housing emergency is Fine Gael policy?

Deputy Seán Crowe: Good on the Deputy.

The Tánaiste: There is no official Fine Gael policy regarding the Clonburris SDZ. I am sure, however, that Deputies and councillors act in the best interests of their constituents in any observations they may make to An Bord Pleanála.

Deputy Sorca Clarke: As the Tánaiste will be aware, cabin crew and many other workers have been on short-time work support in addition to reduced wages, which have been cut by as much as 40%. Some of these workers have now had that payment stopped. Others have been told by social welfare that they need to take a further substantial loss in earnings before they will be eligible for any other support. One lady was told that she had not taken a big enough pay cut by her employer.

These workers are not off work by choice. They are off work because of a global pandemic. If they could, they would happily go back to work in the morning, but they cannot. They cannot because of circumstances entirely outside of their control. However, now they also cannot keep up with food bills, rent and mortgage payments, light and heat bills. Will the Government urgently review this scheme with a view to suspending the rules around qualification to allow workers to retain that supplementary income?

The Tánaiste: I appreciate how difficult the past year has been for people working in the aviation sector. I represent Dublin West, a constituency where many people work in Dublin Airport and for airlines. While they were able to get by for a few weeks or months, it has become much more difficult because their income has been hit so hard for more than a year. A lot of financial support is being given to the airlines. They are major beneficiaries of the wage subsidy scheme. Grants are also being awarded to the airports.

Deputy Sorca Clarke: Will the Government review this scheme?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Let the Tánaiste respond.

The Tánaiste: To which scheme is the Deputy referring?

Deputy Sorca Clarke: The short-time work support scheme for those on “Xs and Os”.

The Tánaiste: We can. It does not fall under my remit. I am not sure under which Department’s remit it falls. I will certainly find out and ask the line Minister to reply to the Deputy.

Deputy Thomas Gould: For 13 months, SouthDoc in Blackpool has been closed. The people of Cork North-Central need this vital out-of-hours GP service. I ask the Tánaiste to commit to investigating why SouthDoc is receiving €7.29 million from the State to provide a service that it is not providing to the people of Cork North-Central. It would not happen in the constituencies of the Tánaiste or the Taoiseach, so why it is happening in my constituency and to the constituents that I represent? We do not want a part-time service or half a service. We want SouthDoc in Blackpool to be reopened with a full service, because that is what the people deserve. That is what this Government is paying for. Will the Tánaiste and the Government to reopening SouthDoc in Blackpool immediately with a full service?

The Tánaiste: I will have to check with the HSE about the situation in respect of SouthDoc in Blackpool. I do not want to give the Deputy an answer now, off the cuff, without knowing the facts. I will check with the HSE and revert to the Deputy.

Deputy Brendan Griffin: The National Treatment Purchase Fund, NTPF, plays a very important role in addressing public waiting lists. That is more important now than ever. It is also crucial that acute hospitals in the public system co-operate with the NTPF as they go about their business, in the interest of patient safety. My information suggests that University Hospital Kerry has not been co-operating with the NTPF recently, resulting in significant delays for

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patients who are on waiting lists for scope procedures. How is this happening? Can he assure me that those patients will get the scope procedures that they need done? They are important diagnostic procedures. How can we ensure that this does not happen again? I ask for an explanation as to why this happened in the first place.

The Tánaiste: The NTPF has had a considerable increase in its budget. I believe its budget is now well over €100 million a year. It is tasked with buying healthcare and health services for patients, from both private and public hospitals, using additional capacity where it is available. I strongly encourage any public hospital and also consultants to make use of this budget and service. If a person is waiting for a scan, scope or investigation, the NTPF should be used because it means that he or she will get the test, appointment, investigation or operation her or she needs much sooner.

I do not know the details in respect of University Hospital Kerry. However, it would be a shame if that resource was not being used for the benefit of the people of Kerry, because that is what the money is for.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: In April 2016, in a parliamentary question to the Tánaiste, who was then Minister for Health, a proposed primary care centre for Tullow in County Carlow was queried. In the reply and on record, he stated: “The HSE proposes to deliver the primary care centre for the Tullow, Rathvilly and Hacketstown area using the direct/own-build mechanism.” Therefore, in 2016, it was stated that the centre would be delivered. In a HSE reply on the matter at the time, it stated that its capital plan would fund the centre.

Five years have passed since then. I have been in contact with the Tánaiste, his office, the Minister for Health and the HSE. The executive told me that it has identified a site in Tullow that will serve as a primary care centre and will serve the local communities in Hacketstown and Rathvilly. This issue has been ongoing for five years. My understanding is that delivery of the centre is to commence this year. I ask the Tánaiste to deliver on the commitment that was given in 2016 by him as Minister for Health for the people of Carlow, Rathvilly and Hacketstown.

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy and appreciate that she has raised this issue previously. I know that it is a priority for her. I am glad to hear that a site has now been identified in Tullow for the new primary care centre. When such centres are built around the country, and there are two or three in my constituency, they really do enhance primary care services, so the more we have, the better. As the Deputy will be aware, many construction projects are delayed as a consequence of the pandemic and, therefore, I cannot say that it will start this year, but it should be this Government, comprising our parties, that makes it happen. I will take a personal interest in the issue and try to get a timeline that we can both stand over.

Deputy Denis Naughten: Some 66 days ago, the National Ambulance Service, NAS, started to vaccinate an estimated 2,700 housebound people over the age of 70. The plan was to have all of the first doses administered by last Sunday week, namely, 11 April 2021. I am being contacted by people in their 80s and 90s who are still waiting to receive their first appointment from the NAS.

To be quite honest, when trying to find information, the HSE locally and regionally does not know what is going on. It would be easier to find out the Third Secret of Fatima. I raised the issue a month ago with the Taoiseach in the House. He committed to getting the relevant

information and furnishing me with it. He does not seem to have received information from the HSE either. When will those who are to be vaccinated at home receive their appointments?

The Tánaiste: This issue has come up a lot in the past week. Indeed, it was discussed at my party's parliamentary party meeting last night. The latest update I received is that approximately 1,000 housebound people are still waiting to receive their vaccine. Generally, older people will receive the AstraZeneca vaccine in most cases because it is the easiest one to transport. That work is being done by the NAS. It is taking a bit of time. I understand how frustrated people must be, not even knowing the date of their vaccination. They are worried that they will be forgotten entirely. However, they will not be forgotten and they will be vaccinated.

I have asked for this issue to be put on the agenda for the meeting of the Cabinet sub-committee on Covid-19 next week. If it is the case that the NAS is being asked to do too much, and it is being asked to do a lot, whether it is running pop-up testing centres or administering vaccines in addition to its normal work as an ambulance service, perhaps we need to find an alternative. Could we, for example, ask local GPs to do it in the form of a house call, and remunerate them for doing so? Could we ask pharmacists to do it? Perhaps if the process is taking too long, we need to look at an alternative model to assist the NAS so that it is not asked to do it all on its own.

Deputy Michael Collins: In the past week, €70 million in rural regeneration funding has been announced. Rural regeneration funds are a lifeline for rural communities throughout our country. I fully congratulate any town or village that has been successful in getting funds.

The Tánaiste launched this scheme in 2018. Can he explain why, in 2019, 2020 and 2021, when both Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil have headed the Government, Cork South-West got zero funds, even though it had shovel-ready projects?

One is the Schull Harbour development project, which would have created up to 50 jobs in the Beara Peninsula. Another is the Dursey cable car project in Castletownbere, which would bring massive tourism to the peninsula and to west Cork. The third project in west
1 o'clock Cork for which funding was refused involved doing up the surrounds of Bandon town, which has been decimated by flooding and sewerage works.

The rural regeneration and development fund is, in my view, a slush fund for towns and villages in constituencies that have Ministers in government. Can the Tánaiste answer why Cork South-West, where there are shovel-ready projects, continues to be overlooked for rural regeneration while other towns and villages, which do not have projects that are shovel-ready, get funding?

The Tánaiste: As I understand it, the applications are received by the Department of Rural and Community Development, which has a scoring system. It is against this scoring system that projects are assessed and a decision is made on which ones to fund. I cannot answer as to why no projects in the Deputy's constituency have been funded. There must be a reason and those who have put forward those projects and are promoting them are entitled to know why they did not receive funding. I certainly will speak to the Minister, Deputy Humphreys, about this and ask that she create a system whereby, at least, people who do not get funding understand why and can perhaps apply again and get funding the next time. That is what we do with sports capital funding. Sometime people do not get funding one year but they might get it the next year or the year after. That is probably the best approach in this case too.

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Deputy Pádraig O’Sullivan: Last week, we had great news in Cork about the opening of a special education school in Carrigaline. I spoke to other local political representatives about it this morning. They like to play the north side versus south side dichotomy on many different issues. That needs to be called out for the political gimmickry that it is. I welcome the provision of the new school in Carrigaline to cater for 23 families who faced having no school place for their children this coming September.

The programme for Government states that we need to “ensure that each child with a special educational need has an appropriate school place, in line with their constitutional right”. Unfortunately, we know that is not happening. Since the announcement last week regarding the school in Cork, I have been contacted by a number of people in different counties who are facing the prospect of having no special education place for their child in next year’s enrolment. Can the Tánaiste give some reassurance to parents in that situation in terms of what they can expect for next September?

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for raising this important issue. I am afraid I do not have an update to give him, but I know he would not raise it on the floor of the Chamber unless it was something of real importance to him and his constituents. I will ask the line Minister to prepare a reply for him and I hope it will be satisfactory. I know how much parents worry when they cannot get a place in a school for their child, but the situation is almost always resolved by September. There is a long way to go until then but we will try to get it fixed as soon as we can.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: The Tánaiste, as a former Minister for Health, will be aware that, in County Donegal, we have iCARE on the Inishowen Peninsula and Bluestack Special Needs Foundation in south Donegal. For the past 20 years, both organisations have provided a vital service to children with disabilities and their families in north and south Donegal. They did so without State funding for a long time but, in recent years, €36,000 has gone to each organisation. However, it is only a fraction of what they need. The Minister of State with responsibility for disability provision, Deputy Rabbitte, has given a commitment that they will receive the funding they require, but that was months ago. I ask the Tánaiste to comment on this matter and raise it with his colleague, the Minister of State.

The Tánaiste: I am not familiar with the particular services the Deputy mentioned but I appreciate the importance of the issue. The fact he is raising it today is evidence of that. He mentioned that the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, has made a commitment in regard to funding. I am sure any such commitment will be honoured. I will be seeing her in the next couple of days and will mention that this issue was raised in the House and ask her to get back to the Deputy directly about it.

Planning and Development (Strategic Housing Developments) (Amendment) Bill 2021: First Stage

Deputy Róisín Shortall: I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to amend the Planning and Development Acts 2000 to 2019 and for that purpose to amend section 28 of the Planning and Development Act 2000 in relation to ministerial guidelines, to restrict section 4 of the Planning and Development (Housing) and Residential Tenancies Act 2016 to applications received on or before the coming into operation of this Act in respect of strategic housing

developments and to provide for related matters.

Members from all parties are well aware of the serious problems caused by the weakening of planning laws over recent years. The decline in standards began in 2015, when the then Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government, Deputy Kelly, greatly reduced the minimum size of apartments. It continued under the succeeding Minister, Deputy Coveney, who oversaw a fast-track strategic housing development, SHD, process for large projects, which was essentially drafted by construction lobbyists. That was followed by the decision of the next Minister, Deputy Eoghan Murphy, to remove height limits and, with them, the discretion of planners regarding building size. Taken together, these changes have amounted to what can only be described as a developer's charter.

There were two purported reasons for the changes, namely, to boost supply and reduce prices. That has not happened. Instead, all that has been achieved is lower-quality housing at greatly increased prices. Of the 110 SHD projects in the Dublin region that have been granted planning permission since 2017, construction has started on fewer than 30% of the sites. Developers' reticence to proceed from planning permission to construction was evident even before the pandemic. In fact, a use-it-or-lose-it provision to stop developers hoarding planning permission was supposed to be introduced by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage last year. It has not materialised. It should be noted that where local residents have been in a position to take judicial reviews of SHD projects, a majority of those reviews have been upheld.

The weakening of planning laws has had a hugely negative impact on local communities, including in my own constituency, particularly in Santry and Finglas. The SHD process has squeezed local people out of the planning process, leaving them with no choice but to take on a judicial review and all the cost, hassle and time-consuming work that is involved in doing so. The changes represent a sustained attack on the planning process. They make a mockery of development plans and local area plans, the purpose of which is to respond to local circumstances and need. They undermine the efficiency and transparency of the planning process. The centralisation of the planning process and planning decisions is a worrying trend. These changes have very much impacted on local decision-making, with local councillors and planners being sidelined. The reduced apartment standards and unrestricted heights are clearly designed to facilitate build-to-rent apartments to be bought up by real estate investment trusts, REITs, and investment funds, as well as expensive long-term leasing deals with local authorities, which are now becoming all too common. There are huge prices to be paid for that in the future.

We have seen a move towards a situation where the sky is the limit when it comes to the height of apartment blocks. Smaller apartments equate to more profit for developers and we are seeing one-bedroom units and studios accounting for up to 50% of developments. People will never see apartment living as a long-term option without proper standards for space and storage and better outdoor facilities. As it stands, the SHD process has been a success at only one thing, namely, boosting the value of developers' sites. It has not been a success when it comes to the provision of housing stock. At what point will the Government admit these interventions in the market have failed utterly? The Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, has signalled the strategic housing development process will come to an end in February next year but he seems to have no idea what will replace it. Today I am offering him a helping hand.

This Private Members' Bill seeks to undo the damage caused by those interventions over recent years. The Social Democrats want to address the housing crisis not with shoebox apart-

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ments priced out of the reach of ordinary workers but with high-quality, affordable housing that promotes sustainable communities.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Is the Bill opposed?

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment(Deputy Leo Varadkar): It is not opposed.

Question put and agreed to.

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

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

Question put and agreed to.

Covid-19 Vaccination Programme: Statements

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We can start with the Minister of State, Deputy Mary Butler.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): Throughout the course of Ireland's vaccination programme, we have sought to ensure the administration of vaccines is conducted in a manner that is fair and has due regard to the protection of the most vulnerable in our society. I am pleased to note, in that regard, the significant positive impact the programme has had in long term care facilities, including nursing homes. The positivity rate for the current cycle of serial testing in nursing homes is down to 0.11%.

The vaccination programme has now been extended to people aged 65 to 69 and the vaccine portal opens for everyone aged 60 to 64 tomorrow morning. The HSE is asking people aged 64 to register first on Friday and the process will then work down through those aged 63 to 60. More information can be found at vaccine.hse.ie. As of 17 April, more than 95,000 individuals who are at very high risk of being negatively affected by the symptoms of Covid-19 have received their first vaccination dose. There are 25 mass vaccination centres fully operational as of today, vaccinating people between 60 and 69, including the Waterford Institute of Technology arena, Carlow Institute of Technology and Cillín Hill conference centre at Kilkenny. Vaccination of those over 70 has already been administered in many of these centres.

These are positive steps. Over time, we will see further positive measures being put in place and further resources being assigned to ensure the vaccination of every individual who wishes to receive the vaccine. I acknowledge, with huge thanks, the hard work of the HSE, its vaccinator teams, general practitioners and others that have contributed their time and effort to achieving this level of progress.

I will now refer to housebound vaccinations as there have been many questions asked about this in recent weeks. To date, in excess of 3,500 referrals have been received as part of the housebound vaccine programme. Due to the complexity of the triage process, which involves follow-up with both referring GP, individuals to be vaccinated and their family, a number of additional referrals are awaiting triage, and as such this figure is likely to increase further. So far, as part of this programme the HSE has offered more than 1,800 appointments to people referred

by their GP. Appointments may not be completed for a range of reasons, including refusal or a person entering long-term care or being unwell. The National Ambulance Service continues to follow up on these appointments.

The ambulance service is currently operating a seven-day service which deploys more than ten vehicles each day to undertake between 50 and 60 appointments, with around 400 appointments each week. The length of time it is taking to complete the project is driven by the complexities involved in triaging referrals, logistics of vaccine delivery and the requirement for more than 30 to 40 minutes at each residence. In around 10% of cases, visits can take up to 50 minutes due to medical histories, which require a 30-minute observation period. As individuals to be vaccinated are dispersed throughout the country, it can also take ambulance staff a considerable amount of time per visit to reach their destinations. The completion of first doses as part of this programme is expected in May 2021 while the second dose is expected to conclude in June 2021. To provide assurance to the individuals and their families who still await vaccination under the programme, the HSE will make direct contact with them over the coming days, starting today.

The initial number in this cohort was 3,200 but much work has been done and more people have come into the scheme. An ambulance may travel around County Waterford with 30 minutes or 40 minutes between each call. There may also be 30 minutes or 40 minutes spent with the person receiving the vaccination. It is taking quite a lot of time. We must remember these people are very vulnerable and older. I thank the ambulance for the work it is doing. It is very important for the HSE to make direct contact with everybody who has not been vaccinated to date as people are worried.

As of 20 April, in excess of 645,000 vaccines have been administered by GPs to those over 70 and we are on target to deliver approximately 692,000 vaccines by this weekend. The Helix was in operation last weekend with approximately 2,700 second doses administered to people aged between 75 and 79. The focus this week has largely been on completing the first dose vaccination of those in the 70 to 74 age cohort, on continuing the second dose of the 75 to 79 age cohort, and largely completing the second dose vaccination of the 80 to 84 age cohort. The vaccination hubs in Cork and Galway will be in operation on 24 April, with more than 1,500 patients expected to receive the second dose. It is expected that more than 757,000 vaccinations for people over 70 will be completed by the end of next week's cycle.

The focus next week will be on completing first dose vaccination of the 70 to 74 age cohort and on largely finishing second dose vaccination of the 75 to 79 age cohort. A dedicated GP team is fully operational, supporting distribution and allocation, linking with GPs and their practice staff to resolve quickly snags and issues that arise.

The vaccination programme's primary aim has always been to protect the most vulnerable among us. Tremendous progress has been made in this regard and this is clearly reflected in the levels of Covid-19 present in vaccinated groups. Levels of disease in long-term care facilities, including nursing homes, mental health settings and among older citizens, continue to substantially decline. This has been an incredibly traumatic year for so many, but we are now starting to see the benefits of the vaccination programme. As supply increases over the coming months, more individuals will be offered vaccination as we place those most vulnerable to Covid-19 at the forefront. Ultimately, everyone who wants to receive a vaccine and for whom it is deemed clinically safe will be offered the protection it affords. This pandemic will not end until everyone is protected, but as we progress from spring to summer, there are much brighter days ahead.

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Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I welcome the opportunity to update the House on Ireland's Covid-19 vaccination programme. There has been much progress since we last discussed it. We hit the milestone of 1 million vaccines administered, and now more than 1.2 million vaccines have been administered. The vast majority of those living and working in long-term residential care have been fully vaccinated. First vaccine doses for healthcare workers have been substantially completed. Ireland is one of only a handful of EU countries that have achieved this. Ireland is leading the EU in prioritising and vaccinating people over 80 years of age. The majority of people aged 70 years and over have had at least their first vaccine dose. Approximately 95% of this group will be covered by the end of this week.

More vaccination centres are opening, and next week 28 of the 38 centres in total will be open. Recruitment continues for the vaccination centres. For April and May, we have many more vaccinators ready to go than are needed, with recruitment continuing for June onwards. The online registration system is going strongly. It opened last week for those aged from 65 to 69 years. By last night a very encouraging 83% of people in this age group had registered and vaccinations for this group started earlier this week. Tomorrow the online registration system opens for those aged 60 to 64 years, which is another important step. Vaccinations are moving at pace for those with underlying conditions that put them at very high risk from Covid-19. More than 100,000 people in this group have now had their first vaccination dose.

It is fair to say that we have had a busy few weeks. What is very encouraging is the impact of the vaccination programme, which is nothing short of astonishing. We have the lowest level of Covid-19 hospitalisations in a long time. From January to last week, there has been a 98% reduction in Covid-19 cases among healthcare workers, a 99% reduction of incidence in those aged over 85 years and a 100% reduction in the incidence in nursing homes. Given all this, it is not surprising that public confidence in the vaccination programme is strong. Nine in every ten people are saying they will take a vaccine when offered one. I thank the thousands of women and men throughout Ireland who are making this programme work. It is not easy. Last week, we had to adjust to major changes for the AstraZeneca, Johnson & Johnson and Pfizer-BioNTech vaccines, while keeping the programme running. Currently, we are awaiting further advice from the national immunisation advisory committee, NIAC, on the Johnson & Johnson vaccine. In the past week alone we have had changes to the delivery schedules for every vaccine for nearly every week.

In spite of this, vaccination centres are opening, general practice is running the vaccination programme at full speed, and online registration opened and is expanding. Critically, people are getting vaccinated at the pace at which we are getting vaccines into the country. I thank everyone working in general practice and in the vaccination centres. I thank the Defence Forces, the vaccination teams in hospitals and communities and everyone working in long-term residential care and disability services, in the National Ambulance Service and in the voluntary sector who are involved in this programme. I also thank everyone else working so hard to make Ireland's vaccination programme a success, to ensure we protect the most vulnerable and that we have a path out of this pandemic.

The benefits of vaccination have put the Government in the position where it can continue to reopen carefully. Thanks to an all-Ireland effort, we are ahead of the best-case scenario presented just a few weeks ago. The R-nought number remains below one, and the number of close contacts has remained steady at 2.6. This is a major achievement for Ireland, particularly given the prevalence of the B117 variant. It has only been possible because of the continued solidarity across Ireland and the daily efforts of every person, family and community. The

recent decline in incidence of the disease across all age groups has happened through our joint efforts, contributing to the protection of our loved ones and communities. As a result of these efforts to suppress the virus at home, Ireland has one of the lowest rates of Covid-19 in Europe. We also have the strongest measures in place against variants coming into the country. We have a vaccination programme which is consistently performing among the best in Europe.

The plan is working and great progress is being made. To protect it, we still must proceed carefully. Social interactions are increasing. We all can see that. GP referrals for Covid-19 tests have increased this week. The number of daily cases is still higher than any of us want. If we reopen carefully, adhere to the public health measures and ensure enough people are vaccinated, we can look forward to what we all want, which is a good summer with our friends and families.

I will briefly address specific issues relating to specific vaccines. Safety is a cornerstone of the vaccination programme, and Members will be familiar with the recent advice from the European Medicines Agency, EMA, and NIAC regarding AstraZeneca. The EMA has added unusual clotting events with low platelet counts as very rare side effects to the vaccine product information for AstraZeneca and recommended the same for the Janssen vaccine. The EMA has been in regular contact with its American counterpart. The European Commission's vaccines steering board, which oversees the procurement of vaccines on behalf of member states, has been kept apprised of developments during the course of all these deliberations. The EMA completed its review on 20 April, recommending the product information for the vaccine be updated to refer to the possible, but very rare, side effect of these blood clots. The EMA also said the overall benefits outweigh the risks.

NIAC carefully weighed the advice provided by the EMA on AstraZeneca. It has recommended that AstraZeneca can be used for all those aged 60 years and more. NIAC has also recommended that all those who have had a first dose of AstraZeneca should have their second dose. This applies to all age groups. The interval for those under 60 years is 16 weeks, except for those who have an underlying condition that puts them at high or very high risk from Covid-19, for whom the interval recommended is 12 weeks. NIAC is currently considering the EMA's recent position on the Johnson & Johnson vaccine and I expect a recommendation on that early next week. The European Commission has also successfully concluded an agreement with Pfizer-BioNTech to accelerate deliveries into April, May and June. This means more than 500,000 additional Pfizer-BioNTech vaccines will be in Ireland in the coming months, which is very welcome.

Notwithstanding the range of vaccines currently authorised or in various levels of production and testing, there is a need to consider the future trajectory of Covid-19 and the measures required to address it. The degree of protection provided by the various vaccines is being monitored closely. However, it is likely that further rounds of vaccinations will be needed next year. In conjunction with this, it is evident the disease is evolving such that a range of variants of differing severity and infectiousness have already been detected. Plans are being advanced by the European Commission for future procurement of vaccines. The Commission recently commenced negotiations with Pfizer-BioNTech with a view to securing a new agreement on behalf of member states. This agreement is for the delivery of 900 million doses of a reconfigured version of the vaccine across member states over a two-year period, which is very welcome.

If our collective experience of Covid-19 has taught us anything, it is that we must be flexible and adaptable. The disease continues to evolve and our response to it must also continue

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to evolve. This applies to testing, tracing, genome sequencing, rapid testing, home and hotel quarantining and public health measures. Of course, as the past few weeks in particular have demonstrated, the need for adaptability applies all the time to our vaccination programme.

The past few weeks have been particularly busy as we incorporated several very big changes from NIAC advice on AstraZeneca to actions taken by Johnson & Johnson on the delivery of its vaccine into the EU to the very welcome news of more than 500,000 additional Pfizer doses for April, May and June. I have no doubt that changes like this will continue to happen every month, possibly every week, and will keep coming at us. We must continue to adapt to make sure that safety, as always, is a cornerstone of our vaccination programme and that we meet our core target, which is that people are vaccinated at the pace that vaccines are coming into the country.

An Ceann Comhairle: We move on to Deputy Cullinane, who will share time with Deputy Tully.

Deputy David Cullinane: First, I join the Minister in commending all those in the HSE and NIAC on the work they are doing on the vaccine roll-out. I also commend those in our wider health services, both in public health departments and in our hospitals, on all the work that has been done over the past year in difficult and trying circumstances.

As we come out of Covid-19, there are an awful lot of lessons to be learned on how we approach our public services, and most especially, putting a more positive emphasis on public health. That lesson is being learned.

Life is starting to open up and we can see the finishing line on the horizon. That is all for the good. The quicker we see the easing of restrictions, the better. It cannot come quick enough or soon enough for all of us. I fully appreciate it must be based on the public health advice. I appeal to people to stick with the advice over the next number of weeks. If we do that and get it right, there will be opportunities for people who want to get back to work and do more outdoor activities in areas such as sport. People obviously want to open up their businesses again and get more normality back into their lives. We all want to see that happen. I appeal, therefore, for people to stay the course over the next number of weeks.

However, we also need strong leadership and competent management in whole range of areas, however. The Minister referenced all-island co-operation. He will notice that this week, people in their 30s are being offered the vaccine in the North. We are starting to see substantial reopenings in the North and that is all for the good as well. That was because we had a very strong and steady roll-out of vaccines. That competent management is, therefore, really important. It has to be seen in contact tracing, travel checks and quarantine and the vaccine roll-out.

I will start my questions with the vaccine roll-out. At the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Health, the HSE said the projection for delivery of vaccines for the month of April is 800,000. We since learned that there were more changes to the AstraZeneca supply with the delivery of 40,000 doses on Saturday reduced to 9,000. Then, the delivery on 30 April of 160,000 doses was pushed out a couple of days. Is 800,000 still the figure for the month of April?

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: I thank the Deputy for the solidarity and support in people sticking with the measures. We are in a slightly cautious space right now where more and more people believe that we are through it, whereas we are not. We are getting much closer so I thank the Deputy for his words on that.

My latest figures are from the task force on Monday. I believe they were with him the following day. The figure I have for April is a total of just under 940,000 doses to be supplied. To address exactly what the Deputy was saying, however, that includes almost 41,000 Janssen vaccines coming into the country as well as an accelerated number of Pfizer vaccines. As the HSE will have covered with the committee on Tuesday, there was a large delay of one week to AstraZeneca, which moved its delivery from the last week in April to the first week in May. The numbers, therefore, have been moving around, as the Deputy will be familiar with.

Deputy David Cullinane: We have been calling for this now for some time. In my view, we need weekly reporting on the estimated delivery of vaccines. We accept all the caveats that can be put on it. The Minister is correct that the HSE confirmed to us that there were a number of interruptions on the supply side. We accept that those interruptions are not the responsibility of the HSE or, indeed, the Government. It is important we get weekly figures for the actual deliveries that came in but also weekly supply projection targets. My understanding is that the weekly reporting of what has arrived will now be fortnightly reporting. That is wrong. Can the Minister, therefore, confirm that it will not be fortnightly and that he will retain the weekly reporting of the vaccines that have arrived in any given week?

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: My understanding is exactly that. There will be a detailed report, per vaccine, for everything that has arrived week by week.

Deputy David Cullinane: Some journalists have been getting emails from the Department of Health stating that it is going to move to fortnightly or biweekly reporting. I ask that the Minister takes that up with the HSE and makes sure reporting is on a weekly basis. The projection of all those targets for each week also needs to be set out.

The issue of pregnant women was raised with Professor Karina Butler and with the HSE at the meeting of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Health. While the HSE said the vaccine is being rolled out according to age, which we all accept, Professor Butler stated: “If it is recommended in pregnancy it is not so much that pregnant women require a specific prioritisation as such but as pregnancy is time-limited it may be that giving it to them might need to be facilitated in some way.” That it “might need to be facilitated in some way” is not really what we want to hear; we need a firm recommendation. Will the Minister follow that up with NIAC? We have all received representations from women, gynaecologists and staff in maternity services in hospitals who say this should be looked at. Rather than saying it might be necessary, and I am sure that NIAC is looking at it, it would be better if we had a consistent message and a firm approach. I ask the Minister to take that up with NIAC.

Regarding new variants, what is his opinion on the Indian variant and on what we are seeing in India at the moment? Some 295,000 cases per day and 2,000 deaths per day is really worrying and yet, as I stand here and he sits here, India is still not on the red list. It has been added to the list in the North and that was the right thing to do. The Minister spoke earlier about flexibility and adaptability. Speed is important but staying ahead of the virus and new variants is also important. Why has India not been added to the list given what is happening in that country on a daily basis?

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: It is an excellent question. In fact, yesterday India had in excess of 300,000 cases. I believe it is the highest number of daily cases for any country since Covid-19 arrived. It is absolutely heartbreaking. The team that advises the CMO met yesterday for this week’s review. The deputy CMO and I have spoken directly about India and I expect a

recommendation on it this week. To answer the Deputy's point, I am concerned about it. When the deputy CMO and I spoke on this yesterday, the Indian variant had not yet been classified by the multilaterals as a variant of concern. We know the UK has added India to its list, however. We are looking very closely at India for the reason outlined by the Deputy.

Deputy David Cullinane: I thank the Minister for that response. I believe it is an urgent issue. One of the lessons we have surely all learned over the past year is that we must, at all times, stay ahead of the virus and new variants. Pushback from some within government, mainly within the Fine Gael Party regarding mandatory quarantine, is not helpful. When NPHEC talks about that horizon, the finishing line and the ability to substantially reopen society, which all of us want, it is contingent on strong leadership and getting all the measures right, including quarantine. We must make sure we prevent any new variants coming in. Given what is happening in India, I believe that would be prudent.

Today, the health minister in the North, Robin Swann, told its health committee that he was concerned about the level of co-operation between North and South. He said this was shared at the highest level, including with the First Minister and the deputy First Minister. He specifically said there are difficulties with data sharing, sharing information about the passenger locator form and new variants. He said that the first he learned of the three cases of the Indian variant in this State was through the media. What level of co-operation exists? The Minister of Health in the North said at official level it is working but he specifically said that at ministerial and decision-making level it is not. That is of concern to me. Will the Minister address what engagement there is between the two?

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: I thank the Deputy. For reasons we all understand, we take North-South co-operation seriously, no more so than on this issue. The closer we can have to an all-island approach to this, the better. I will have to see Mr. Swann's comments for myself. However, there is a good and constructive ongoing relationship.

Mr. Swann and I recently held a health sectorial meeting for the North-South Ministerial Council, something that had not been in place for many years. We are co-operating on data sharing and Covid. It would not be normal for me to directly contact the Minister, Mr. Swann, about the identification of variants, any more than he would contact me about specific variants being identified in Northern Ireland. There is close ongoing co-operation between the chief medical officers. The more co-operation we can have on an ongoing basis North and South, the better.

Deputy Pauline Tully: On those who are housebound and still have not received the vaccine, there are many in my constituency affected by this. I have a case of one woman who is 99 years of age, turning 100 in August, who had difficulty receiving her vaccine. She was notified there was a vaccine for her at beginning of March. However, she was not able to go to her GP and nothing happened. In the end, her family, with great difficulty, managed to get her to the GP to give her the vaccine but it caused a lot of distress. Will the Minister clarify the processes around the National Ambulance Service in this regard? What are the conditions attached to it? Does the service need a certain number of people within a locality before it can allocate the vaccine? There are different stories floating around about that.

On those identified as very high risk, as opposed to those categorised as high risk, have GPs been given clear instructions on how to categorise people? I have had several people with MS ask me what category they are in and how they will be notified, for example, as to when their

vaccine will be ready.

I apologise if I missed an announcement on the two jabs as I was delayed at another meeting. However, there is much anxiety among those who have received the first jab, especially among the over-70s and the very high risk groups, if the time between the two jabs is extended. Could that be left as it is for those who already received their first jab? If it is going to be extended, can it be done for those who are receiving the jab at a later stage after the announcement?

I am concerned family carers have still not been offered the vaccine or have not been prioritised as front-line healthcare workers, which they are. A testing centre was moved to Castle Saunderson in County Cavan. It is a remote and beautiful forested area which people use for exercise. Many are annoyed the testing centre has been moved there, bringing much traffic to the area. It is not serviced by public transport and is difficult to locate. Why was this done with no consultation with locals?

Deputy Mary Butler: To date, there have been 3,500 referrals of housebound persons. Of that, between 300 and 400 came in the last week alone. The GP refers the person who is housebound and it is then triaged. The complexity of the triage process involves following up with the GP, the individual to be vaccinated or their family. Several additional referrals that came in this week are awaiting triage.

There are ten ambulance vehicles on the road, operating seven days a week. One must understand the complexity of the number of people we have to get to. Each call would involve maybe 30 minutes to 40 minutes with a particular person. Up to 1,800 people so far have received dose 1 of the vaccine through the ambulance service.

The HSE is making contact, starting today and into next week, with everyone who has not yet received a call-back to reassure them that nobody will be left behind. However, it is quite complex. When the National Ambulance Service has turned up at houses, it has been met with different issues. In some instances, the person has been vaccinated already by his or her GP. In other instances, the person has gone to hospital or to a nursing home and was not aware of the call. There also have been refusals and, in several cases, the person had passed away.

It is seven days a week covering the whole country. Nobody will be left behind.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: I thank the Minister and Minister of State for their statements. It is helpful to have specific detail. I also acknowledge how difficult the vaccine roll-out is, coupled with uncertainty and changing delivery schedules. I understand how logistically that is an extraordinary strain. I commend all involved in grappling with an ever-changing situation.

I want to focus on one vaccine and one cohort to seek clarity. The only eligible group of citizens to receive AstraZeneca now are those in the 60 to 69 age cohort. I am one of those myself and I know other colleagues here fall into the same category. Most of us, certainly including myself, have no problem at all in receiving AstraZeneca. Indeed, I would be delighted to receive it. However, there are issues which we need to address and be clear about. AstraZeneca has proven to be the most unreliable in terms of delivery. Up to 45,000 doses were expected this week. We know only 9,000 were actually received, a fact we only found out at the last minute. Some 165,000 doses were expected on 30 April. Now that has been put back to at least 3 May. Few would bet their house that we will get 165,000 doses on 3 May.

There is only one cohort, namely, those aged between 60 years and 69 years, who are totally

dependent on this single vaccine, AstraZeneca. To add to the issues for that cohort, this is the only vaccine currently where there is a 12-week gap between doses. All the others are much shorter. As the vaccine programme continues, younger and, according to the clear medical advice, less vulnerable groups could be fully vaccinated before the 60s age cohort group is. I believe that would be unacceptable.

Since the 60s age group is dependent on AstraZeneca, how can the Minister be certain that the 840,000 doses to fully vaccinate the 420,000 people involved in that group will arrive in a timely fashion? How sure is he that this group will not be pushed behind the lower age groups and, by definition, less vulnerable people before it is fully vaccinated? Does he believe this group uniquely should have to wait 12 weeks between doses and be, potentially, overtaken by less vulnerable people? Will he review that situation?

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: I thank the Deputy for his kind words on the programme and his questions. There are several cohorts which are either fully or partly using AstraZeneca, including cohort 2 which is healthcare workers of all ages. They will be getting their second dose. NIAC has put a 16-week interval in place for people under 60 with no underlying conditions. Quite a number of people in cohort 4 have had AstraZeneca as well and NIAC has said that regardless of their age, their second dose should be administered after 12 weeks. The same applies to any in cohort 7 which is high-risk, although it is a much smaller number. To answer Deputy Howlin's question, AstraZeneca will also be given to cohorts 5 and 6, which is essentially persons aged between 60 and 69 years. There are a few things to say here. First, I will take his question directly back to NIAC and to NPHET as well. It is a very fair question because I think, based on the intervals, younger people could be fully vaccinated beforehand and there could be significant bonuses to being fully vaccinated, including, for example, exemption from hotel quarantine, potentially the EU green certificate and so on. I will therefore take those questions back today and ask NIAC to add them to its deliberations. It is considering a variety of issues right now.

There are a few points it is important to stress. One is that the protection from the first dose is very significant for all the vaccines and is quite a bit ahead of what the clinical trials suggested. That is why we are looking at extending the intervals for the mRNA vaccines. Another point is that we may well have a recommendation from NIAC around Johnson & Johnson. My hope is that Johnson & Johnson will be for all cohorts. Indeed if that was applied to some of the cohorts we are talking about, then very shortly after the first dose - it is a one-dose vaccine - those people would be fully vaccinated. Let us wait to see what NIAC says on that.

Finally, I am aware people have been asking questions about AstraZeneca because of the restrictions being put on its use. We want to listen very carefully and respectfully to people who are raising those and come back to them with the best scientific evidence available.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: I thank the Minister for the commitment to go back and represent the issue of the 12-week gap and the understanding of it. My second question is on the clarity about supply of the 840,000 doses which will be required for this group. In the event of the date of 3 May not being reached what is the Minister's contingency plan? He should remember that everybody in the age group will have already registered and will presumably have been assigned a date at that stage.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: At this point we must wait to see whether the vaccines come in. While the Deputy quite rightly points out that there have been very significant volumes

moving around, they are only moving by a week or two. Thus, for April, May and June we are due to receive just over 800,000 doses of AstraZeneca and while the deliveries are moving by a week here and there, the task force, HSE and the Department are working very closely with the company to ensure the total volumes do still arrive.

An Ceann Comhairle: We move now to the Government slot. Deputy McGuinness is sharing with Deputies Calleary, Richmond and O'Connor, according to my list.

Deputy John McGuinness: I join the previous speakers in complimenting those who are on the front line in the delivery of the vaccines. I include those who are close to that front line and are managing it and so on. There is a growing confidence about the vaccines and a growing desire among a lot of people to have a vaccine and to have it delivered as soon as possible. However, there is an issue around how we deliver that message. The message has been confusing at the best of times. We must be clear on our messaging. We must inform people of what we expect is going to come, then we must inform them as to what is here and has arrived and out of what arrives who is going to be vaccinated next. People are watching this space very carefully because this is a health issue for them and they want to see that clarity. In the case of people who have received their first vaccination and have got an appointment for the second jab that appointment should be kept, not cancelled. There is a fear that it very well may be, so I would like to hear some clarity around that particular question for those people.

I am disappointed that we continue to hold the position that we will not deal with carers, those who are involved in the front line of education or Garda members. In order to gain the confidence of everyone we need to listen to what they are asking and to understand it, even to the extent that those who may not want a particular vaccine might be encouraged by the evidence to look at the vaccine they have been allocated or where that is not possible, that another vaccine should be considered for them. Therefore, I ask the Minister to listen more carefully to what is being said in this House and indeed in parliamentary party meetings. It may be a different point of view than his own or that of all the professionals he listens to but it is a point of view and if we want to bring the people with us that is what we must do.

Having one voice, in relation to the messaging, would be helpful. I appreciate that the Minister has his shadow Minister from his own constituency on his shoulder and that we have three parties in Government but we must respect the people and in respecting them we must respect their concerns and their issues.

On the reopening, I ask the Minister to look at the whole issue of religious ceremonies, at masses, prayers at the mosque and so on because it is hugely important for the mental health and well-being of people.

I ask the Minister to look at the mental health issues which are arising now and the fact that people cannot get appointments to be assessed, cannot get appointments to have their medication reassessed and are facing into a very dark space when they do not hear the Government speaking to their cases and making the appropriate changes necessary for their care.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I too join Members in commending everyone involved in the vaccine roll-out and particularly the registration portal which has worked very effectively.

I have two key questions. One is for the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, who I thank for her contact in recent weeks about the vaccinations for home-bound people. I am disappointed to hear there are still 300 people remaining as their vaccinations were all due to have been

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completed by last weekend. Can the Minister of State give me an idea of where they are geographically and will extra National Ambulance Service resources be assigned to those areas? I am concerned that the administration of second doses to some housebound people has begun before all the first doses in the cohort have been completed. Given what the Minister has just said about the protection offered by the first dose, surely it would be fairer to complete all the first doses for housebound people before commencing the second doses.

Turning to the Minister, on the vaccination centres, he previously assured me those signing up for the vaccine would be given a choice of either a vaccination centre or their local GP or pharmacist. Now, when one goes on the portal, one is assigned to the vaccination centre. In County Mayo that currently means a round trip of at least two and a half hours if a person is coming from Erris or a two-hour round trip if he or she is coming from Ballina. If we are sending people to vaccination centres then we need extra centres in Erris and Ballina in order to ensure people will keep their appointments.

I would like answers to those two questions.

An Ceann Comhairle: Maybe we will hear Deputy Richmond and then come back to the Minister.

Deputy Neale Richmond: I will take just a minute and hopefully the Minister and Minister of State will be able to fit in as many replies to myself and the preceding Deputies in the remaining five minutes or so.

I have two questions for the Minister. The first relates to the many people in the over-60 cohort who still have concerns about vaccines and the need to provide clarity on that and reassurance that they will be vaccinated in due course in a quick and efficient manner if they are unsure about taking certain vaccines.

The second question is far wider and something which has become very topical in the past week. I have raised it with the Minister a couple of times. I am referring to the absolute failure of a certain drugs company to meet its commitments to the European Union, and by extension to all Irish citizens, in terms of supply. Supply and safety are the only game in town. We must vaccinate as quickly and as safely as possible throughout this country and throughout the EU but we cannot do that if a company consistently fails to meet its contractual obligations for very many reasons. My very blunt question for the Minister is what are the ramifications.

What will happen to that company which has let the people of Europe down so spectacularly in their darkest hour?

Deputy Mary Butler: In response to Deputy Calleary, anybody who is housebound or over 70 will be getting the mRNA vaccine made by Pfizer-BioNTech or Moderna and the second dose will be given within 28 days. That is the process that has been taking place since we started the vaccine roll-out and it will continue as far as I know at the moment. That is why
2 o'clock the second vaccine is being offered. The Deputy mistook me. Approximately 300 to 400 new people have come on the list in the past week. To date there have been 3,500 referrals from GPs. A total of 1,800 people have been vaccinated successfully. I do not have some of the statistics yet for those who have refused. It is not that another 1,700 people are waiting. There have been many refusals due to issues I mentioned such as people having gone on to nursing homes or to hospitals, people who had already got the vaccine through their GP and people who, unfortunately, have passed away.

The National Ambulance Service is currently operating seven days a week and it has more than ten vehicles, each of which undertakes between 50 and 60 appointments a week. We are currently covering about 400 appointments. I will bring back the point the Deputy made about putting more National Ambulance Service jeeps on the ground. I have been repeatedly contacted in recent weeks. People are very concerned. The HSE is starting today to contact those who had not been contacted yet to let them know they will not be left behind.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: I thank all three Deputies for their very supportive comments on the vaccine programme and all those working on it. Deputy McGuinness asked, as several Deputies have, what the position would be for those who have already received the first dose of the mRNA vaccines. If NIAC recommends to me that we extend the four-week interval to eight weeks or 12 weeks, for example, what will happen to those who have already received their first dose and therefore know when their second dose is due? It is my position that those who have received their first dose would remain with the four-week interval. However, if NIAC makes an overwhelming argument to the contrary that it would be in the public interest and protect more people, obviously that is something we will consider. However, my position very clearly is that those who have had their first dose should get their second dose four weeks later, as scheduled.

Regarding religious services, I had a very constructive meeting with the Archbishop of Armagh on Monday. We went through many of the issues. I know concerns were raised about a recent statutory instrument. That statutory instrument did nothing new; it simply maintained the *status quo*. It is very important to let people know religious services and religious worship were not singled out in that statutory instrument nor in any other statutory instrument. All that was being done was that regulations were being put in place to maintain the *status quo* about not having large indoor or outdoor gatherings for public health reasons, which we all understand. The archbishop asked me if, for example, a priest could tend to a bereaved family. The answer is “Yes”. Could they tend to someone who is suffering in terms of sacraments? I said that they absolutely can. There is no measure in place targeting religious services. There are measures in place, it is hoped for as short a time as possible, targeting indoor and outdoor gatherings. In the coming week, the Government will look explicitly at religious services.

I thank Deputy Calleary for his comments about an additional vaccination centre in Mayo. I will pass that directly to the HSE for consideration. Obviously, we would prefer that people who may be very vulnerable would not need to make a 2.5-hour round trip.

Deputy Richmond spoke about the concerns over the AstraZeneca vaccine. As I said to Deputy Howlin, we need to listen very carefully and respectfully. We need to acknowledge people’s very reasonable concerns. We need to provide people with the best scientific advice. Based on everything I have seen, I would take the AstraZeneca vaccine today. NIAC is operating under an abundance of caution and in the context of multiple options being available in Ireland.

The European Commission has initiated a legal case over AstraZeneca. Earlier this week I joined Ireland as one of the parties to that legal case specifically relating to AstraZeneca’s complete failure to meet its contractual delivery agreements for April, May and June.

Deputy Patricia Ryan: Owing to the time constraints, I will ask my questions together. My office has been inundated with calls from people outlining very hard cases and highlighting the confusion that is coming from the Department of Health. This week we have strict following of vaccination groups. Last week the Minister flew a kite about vaccinating young people. Next

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week we might have something else; I do not know. People are fed up with the indecision and we need clarity. There is too much confusion and misinformation. The Department, the HSE and NPHE need to get on the same page. I listened to the Minister for Agriculture, Food and Marine on “Ireland AM” this morning. When asked a question, he described last week as a bit of a blip. However, it was a bit more than a bit of a blip.

The family of a lady in her 90s came to me last week. She had been in hospital recently and was unable to attend her vaccination appointment. Hospitals do not do vaccinations apparently; at least that was what I was told. Therefore, she is falling between the cracks. I find it bizarre that hospitals do not vaccinate people. Unfortunately, she is not in a golden circle and cannot rely on well-connected friends to look out for her. When will hospitals be able to vaccinate vulnerable people in hospitals as a matter of routine?

Teachers, SNAs and early childhood education workers have contacted me in recent weeks to express their concerns over the spread of Covid-19 in schools. They are particularly concerned about teachers who are medically vulnerable. Can this category be prioritised so that we can ensure continuity of education?

Deputy Tully asked about carers. I am very concerned about carers who are doing amazing work for little or no reward. When will we be able to vaccinate our carers to protect them and the people they are caring for? Those carers are saving the Government an absolute fortune by doing the work that they do.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: I thank the Deputy for her questions. She asked about the multiple changes causing confusion. The advice we are getting in a very fast-moving programme is changing. The advice we are getting from the EMA is changing. The advice we get from NIAC is changing. The delivery schedules we get are changing. We have a choice. We can listen to the experts and adjust our programme to ensure it follows the clinical advice which requires change, or we can ignore that clinical advice and run a vaccination programme against the best clinical advice and not make any changes.

I think we would both agree we always need to be ready to update the vaccination programme according to clinical advice. It is simply that that clinical advice is being updated quite regularly. It requires some very large logistical changes and changes to which groups get which vaccine. No more than the Deputy, I would love for there to be no changes and for there to be one message outlining when every cohort will be vaccinated and with which vaccines. However, on balance, it is far better for us to take the clinical advice and change the programme, sometimes regularly, and ask the people to stick with us. I think people accept all these changes are in an effort to put safety first.

The Deputy asked about teachers. Any teachers who are medically vulnerable and at high risk or at very high risk are being prioritised along with those cohorts. Indeed, there are teachers in cohort 4, comprising those whose underlying conditions put them at very high risk. About 104,000 people in that cohort have now received their first vaccine and we need to press on with that.

I agree wholeheartedly with the Deputy on the value of carers, the work they do and the contribution they make. It is absolutely phenomenal. If we had an abundance of vaccines and not a limited supply, there would be nothing that I nor anyone else in this House would want to do more than vaccinate important groups such as carers straightaway. The absolutely clear

advice we got from NIAC, endorsed by public health officials in my Department, was that the way of saving the greatest number of lives, protecting the greatest number of people and getting out of this pandemic as quickly as possible was to vaccinate according to vulnerability. Age is overwhelmingly the characteristic that increases risk so vaccinating according to vulnerability is what we have decided to do.

Deputy Patricia Ryan: I realise the Minister is against the clock but I have just one more question to ask. Is there anything we can do for the lady in the hospital?

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: Would the Deputy mind sending me on the details? I will ask the relevant officials directly.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy may communicate directly with the Minister.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: I wish to return very briefly to the issue of housebound people aged over 70. The response we have received is not adequate. I have had contact from the family of a 90-year-old woman who is housebound. Her general practitioner referred her case in January. She has two people living in the house with her who are in education – they are teachers – with all the risks that involves. The woman is not living in a remote area but in a major urban area in Dublin. It is really hard to understand why she has not had a vaccine yet. What the Minister has set out is not good enough. A substantial number of people are in circumstances similar to those of the woman. Saying to them that they should get their vaccination within the next month is not good enough. There are pharmacists, GPs and others who are ready and willing to vaccinate. The Minister really needs to revisit this because what he has set out is not adequate.

The Tánaiste used very different figures from those of the Minister of State earlier in response to a question. Can the various Ministers get their story straight and, most of all, ensure people in the circumstances in question will be dealt with within the next week? I ask for a commitment on that.

I join others in commending all those working on the front line in regard to the action programme. For those managing it, I completely accept it presents a major logistical challenge given all the changes that are taking place. There is momentum, however, and it is fantastic to meet people who have had their vaccine. They are so excited and relieved. We really need to keep that going. An important element of that is ensuring clear information is available to people and the data are up to date. That has not been the case.

There are four questions I want to pose on data. It took us a long time to get the Minister to commit to providing delivery information weekly. It used to be provided on the Wednesday night prior to the session. There has been no information provided since 22 March and then a somewhat outdated note was provided last night. We need the information weekly so everybody is clear on what the situation is.

My second point on data is that we have not had a supply forecast for a number of weeks. Given all the changes, I ask the Minister to commit to providing it at least on a weekly basis, again so people can know what to expect. People accept that there is a lot that the Minister and others do not have control over but he should at least make the information available so everybody will clear on what is proposed, when they are likely to receive the vaccine, and what the progress is likely to be. That obviously will have a significant impact on the opening up of various aspects of society and the economy.

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Many in cohort 4, the very high-risk group, have had their vaccination cancelled because of recent changes. When will they get a new appointment date? It is really important. They are extremely vulnerable and have been set back as a result of changes. When will the Minister be in a position to provide the exact dates on which they will receive their vaccines?

What is the protocol in the case of a person aged over 60 who has a personal or family history of severe clotting? How is this being monitored? What is the response to it? We are getting queries on it. It is very hard to know the situation. Is there a protocol? Where can the affected get advice? What are the options for them if their view is that their circumstances are too dangerous for them to receive the AstraZeneca vaccine?

Deputy Mary Butler: I have a couple of points. The Minister said that the GP referred the case in January. The roll-out to the housebound started in the middle of March, just in case anybody believes the person in question has been waiting since January. That is not the case. The figures I have were given to me an hour before I came in here and I know they are accurate.

We also need to point out, because I certainly do not want to play politics on this, that those in the group in question are very vulnerable. It is very difficult to get around to all of them quickly. National Ambulance Service staff never rush when they enter a home. They may have to spend an hour with a person and then travel for 45 minutes to respond to the next call, where they may have to stay another hour. There are ten ambulance jeeps on the road and we are trying to get to everyone as quickly as possible. We want to make sure the programme is safe and effective.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: I thank the Deputy for the various questions. I will answer the last question first. Several people have come to me with the exact same question on those over 60 with a history of blood clotting and I put it to public health officials. I want to be careful not to give medical advice as I am not a medic but the answer I got back was that AstraZeneca is safe regardless of any such history. That is the very clear advice I got back. If the Deputy would like, I would be more than happy to revert to her with a written position from the medics themselves.

With regard to data, we are always striving to do more. I understand it is a question of the delivery of numbers by week, although I am aware that someone suggested it is moving to every fortnight. With regard to forecasts, it is absolutely the case that we can publish them. However, it is worth saying that I published, last week, I believe, the delivery forecasts for all the vaccines for April, May and June and that within about six days of the information going out, almost every single number changed. I have a sheet to hand from the vaccine task force from Monday. The numbers do not really matter; it is about the colour. That shows the projected deliveries per week for each of the vaccines. In the past week, every single number for every vaccine to be delivered in every week changed bar one. It goes to show just how much the numbers are changing. My view, however, is that the more information we can put out, the better. I will go back to the Department and ensure that the weekly figures on what has been delivered are being published.

Deputy John Lahart: I have two points, but not questions, for the Minister and Minister of State. Since we are all so caught up – rightly so, and I absolutely get it – in the delivery of vaccines, it is so easy for us to forget that so many have died from the virus since January 2021. Even newspapers seem to forget. There were more deaths from the virus in January 2021 than for the entirety of 2020. We should somehow mark that and not leave it out of our sight. I am

not saying the Minister is doing so but there was a time when the newspapers were publishing names, obituaries and memorial pieces. It is funny how quickly we move on. I am just asking that we never lose sight of the fact that the virus has taken a significant toll.

A point that is not often made here is that the Minister and his Ministers of State have got more right than wrong. I hear colleagues in the Chamber thanking the front-line workers. We always thank the front-line workers and public health experts when things go right. The Minister has had a good week in terms of the public health consultants' contract, which will stand the test of time, but it is so easily forgotten. I know the impact of the recent decision the Minister made - he was the first Minister for Health to do so - on provisions for additional gynaecological assistance for women with endometriosis, which is very much appreciated. These matters can get lost very quickly in the sands of time because of the pace of change.

I do not think the public are really that exercised about timelines anymore because momentum is building, and people are getting the inoculations into their arms. I do not know why we are sticking so steadfastly to the commitment of 250,000 a week. It must heap a huge amount of pressure on the HSE. It has been promised for weeks. The Minister might reflect on that. He will not have much time to answer questions.

The Minister answered a question I was going to ask about people with underlying conditions. There were catastrophic, Armageddon-like predictions about the portal collapsing and not being able to cope, yet we are looking at the hundreds of thousands of people who have successfully logged on to it to date. The Minister has very little time to respond, but there are a few seconds.

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy O'Dowd. The Minister can respond at the end.

Deputy Fergus O'Dowd: I have an update for the Minister on the vaccination centre for Drogheda. I understand that five potential premises were visited on Monday, but I request that we look again at the Drogheda Institute of Further Education, which is effectively a hospital-orientated vaccination centre for high-risk patients in the community. It is urgent that the decision is made now.

The vaccination roll-out is very welcome. I am meeting a lot of very happy people, but I am also hearing about significant and serious concerns expressed by some medical professionals about the impact Covid is having in particular on the child and adolescent mental health services, CAMHS, in Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital, Drogheda. I will compare pre-Covid times to post-Covid times. From January to March 2020, some 47 children were admitted, but between January and March 2021, the number had grown to 74, an increase of 27 additional children and young people. The problem is there is no out-of-hours service after 4 o'clock in the evening. No qualified professional is available to deal specifically with CAMHS issues. Some 72% of admissions occur after hours so there is an urgent need to have more CAMHS staff in the mental health services in hospitals. The most serious point of all is that the average age of the children attending Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital, Drogheda with significant mental health issues has dropped from 16 to 14. That indicates there is a real crisis here. Rolling out the vaccine is one of the keys to the solution, but we need more qualified staff to look after these children.

Another question relates to Dealgan House nursing home where more than 22 people died more than a year ago. The families are still in great distress. They are still being charged €250 or whatever it is for freedom of information requests, almost a year later. That is unacceptable.

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The main question they have is what is happening to the request for an exceptional inquiry into the deaths. I would like to get an answer to it from the Minister today.

Deputy Pádraig O’Sullivan: I acknowledge the good work done by the Minister, Deputy Stephen Donnelly, and the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, in recent months on the vaccination roll-out. I concur with Deputy Lahart’s point that much of the time such work goes unacknowledged.

I would like to leave most of my time for the Ministers to respond so I will ask three brief questions. Rapid antigen testing has been a hobby horse of mine for several months. Are there any plans for a mass roll-out of such testing and to encourage its widespread use? I know it is intended to run a pilot scheme in universities and that it could possibly be in place for schools in September.

I understand a couple of hundred people who are housebound have still not been reached by the National Ambulance Service. I take it that the Minister is to contact those people in the next week. We must do that as expeditiously as possible. Could the Minister consider involving local GPs, if they can play a role?

My third question relates to the stand-by list for vaccination centres. Could the Minister clarify how those lists are currently compiled? We heard stories in recent weeks about people in schools or gardaí being contacted at short notice to avail of excess vaccines. Has the system been changed again to take age cohorts into consideration or has another process been put in place?

An Ceann Comhairle: I will have to ask the next two Deputies to be very brief if we are to get a reply from the Minister.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O’Connor: I too thank the Minister and the Minister of State for their hard work. I also commend the HSE on the vaccination roll-out, which is so important. It was announced today that the portal would be open tomorrow for the 60 to 64 age group. That is so important. I have had many queries about the HSE’s number, which is really good, because some people do not want to use the portal. I welcome that. The vaccination centre at Carlow IT opened yesterday, which was very welcome and important. Communication is the key here. That is something we need to work on.

The work to vaccinate those living with disabilities in residential services and those utilising day services is ongoing and welcome, but we need to complete the programme. St. Dymphna’s is another vaccination centre in Carlow that is doing great work.

I accept what the Minister said about carers. I know he is working with NIAC on that and on vaccinating gardaí and teachers. There was such confusion this week about religious services. I am delighted that the Minister answered the question in that regard and that he is working on it. That is so important.

What is the position regarding fully vaccinated people being able to avoid hotel quarantine? What vaccines are accepted? It is important to know that. We are all working so hard, including the Minister, Deputy Stephen Donnelly, and the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, and the HSE. It is important that we get the message out there that things are going to be all right. It is taking time, but communication is the key, in particular now that we are opening up the vaccination centres. If something happens to prevent a person getting his or her vaccination on a given

day, could the Minister look at the communication in that regard? That is the most important issue going forward.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy O'Connor has 30 seconds.

Deputy James O'Connor: I want to relay a very clear message to NPHE and all those in the HSE who are working on restrictions at the moment. In recent days I have been working closely with people working in the events industry, the arts, travel and air travel and they are very concerned about the Government's current strategy and the map for reopening in terms of our adaptation of technology. That is the critical point I want to stress. I call on the Government to start rolling out additional technological means by which we can scan for Covid-19 to allow for the reopening of society a little bit earlier than scheduled. We know that by the end of June 80% of the population will be vaccinated and we must try to reopen the economy for the summer. I urge the Minister to do that.

Deputy Mary Butler: I agree with Deputy O'Dowd that we have seen an increase in the referral of young people, especially since the turn of this year. Last week, for example, I met the mental health lead from every CHO in the country. I will come back to the Deputy in writing on his query.

I assure Deputy O'Sullivan that, starting today, the HSE will make direct contact with every single housebound person to let them know what the situation is and when they can expect to get the vaccine. I take on board all the comments made.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: I thank the Deputies for their support for the vaccine programme. I will feed in Deputy O'Dowd's question on the Drogheda Institute of Further Education.

Deputies Pádraig O'Sullivan and O'Connor both referenced rapid testing. I appointed the expert group and launched the report some time ago. It is being embraced by various Departments, including the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine. We are doing tens of thousands of rapid tests a week now. The Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment are both looking at this. I see rapid testing playing a greater role.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Minister. We are out of time.

Deputy Paul Donnelly: I also thank the front-line workers who have been working day in, day out on the roll-out of the vaccine. I understand that the roll-out process is very difficult but I would like to refer to an email I got from a member of the Garda. She and her partner are members of An Garda Síochána who live in my constituency and they have worked consistently throughout the pandemic in a support role on the front lines. They have two children and her mother was looking after the childcare. Unfortunately, they have not seen her since last March because of the role they are in as they do not want to put her mother into any difficulty. They have dealt, like all gardaí have, with protests, arrests and prisoners who they know have Covid-19. I know this has been raised time and again but it is important. Others on the front line have got the vaccine and then the system was changed. Yet, gardaí and other front-line workers such as prison officers do not even have a date because of the changes in the processes of the roll-out of the vaccine. If extra vaccines unexpectedly come into the State, could prison officers, gardaí and other front-line workers be vaccinated in a separate process to allow them to be safe?

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The vaccine register for those aged 65 to 69 was launched last week. Can the Minister confirm how many in that cohort have registered since last Thursday and how many people have had an appointment confirmed? I am aware of many people in my constituency who have registered using the HSE's online service last week but who have yet to receive an appointment.

Could the Minister comment on the concerns that there may be a need for a third vaccination with the Pfizer vaccine and would it be the same with the AstraZeneca vaccine? Is there a plan in place to test people who have been vaccinated to ascertain if they are carriers of the virus without showing symptoms but with the potential to spread the virus? That is important, particularly as we are talking about mandatory hotel quarantine and how we can open up safely.

The Minister mentioned earlier that this will be with us for at least a couple of years and probably forever. We are really concerned about the impact this will have on the budget. Are there implications for the roll-out of Sláintecare or other services that have been pencilled in for extra supports? Is there a plan to increase this in the next budget and to cover it as a separate entity, outside of the budget that is already in place for the HSE?

I ask the Minister to allow for GPs to prioritise family carers who are in need of vaccines. GPs know their patients in the community and are well placed to spot families that are struggling. I find it wrong that in the present vaccine roll-out process I could potentially get a vaccine before somebody like a carer, a garda or a prison officer. That is wrong and that needs to be changed.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: There is a substantial amount of money in the budget for this year in various different places. There is a contingency fund, which is a central Government fund, and then there is a significant amount in the health budget. An awful lot of the activities involved in the vaccination programme are being funded out of that such as testing, tracing, genome sequencing and pop-up walk-in centres. The Deputy makes an excellent point on subsequent years. I have no doubt that one of the line items that will be in the health budget, for example, will be around vaccinations and Covid-19.

I am sure the Deputy would join me in welcoming the historic agreement that was struck just last year with the public health doctors. We will, for the first time ever, have what we need here, which is public health consultants. That is something they have been seeking for over 25 years. As well as that, we are doubling the public health workforce and putting a lot of investment into upgrading IT systems as well as a national reform programme. On the Deputy's point, not only do we need the budget, which we do, but we need a world class public health system. In recent months, we have been putting the building blocks for that in place because that is what Ireland deserves and needs.

Deputy Gino Kenny: We start on a very positive note in the statement the Minister made today. Every week we come here and there are positive soundings from the Minister's statements. That is very good and there is no doubt but that the virus in Ireland is in retreat. The settings that have received it have been liberated by the vaccine because that is the way to get out of this situation.

Over the coming weeks and months a number of scenarios could play out in the roll-out of the vaccine relating to the recommendations by NIAC on the AstraZeneca and Johnson & Johnson vaccines. There could be a situation where if the recommendation for the Johnson & Johnson vaccine goes the way the AstraZeneca vaccine has gone, that will change the picture.

There could be a scenario where there are excess vaccines but only for a particular age cohort. There will be a stage where that age cohort will be reached in the roll-out but there could be an access issue around a vaccine, particularly around the Johnson & Johnson vaccine. That was in a report today on the *The Irish Times* online. Does the Government have a contingency plan if that scenario happens and if there is an excess of vaccines that we could possibly swap with other European countries or other blocs?

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: The situation the Deputy describes is not one we have at the moment. We are vaccinating several groups in parallel in order to make sure we are using all of the volume of all of the vaccines we get so that we have as fast and effective a programme as possible. However, it may well be the case that we will have excess vaccines as the Deputy said. Given that the countries that we could potentially swap with are in exactly the same position with the same vaccines, I doubt there would be an awful lot of room for manoeuvre. If we are in that situation, I would like to see what we can do in terms of our international obligations. We have an ethical and moral obligation to lead. We are a very small country but in things like international development we have always batted way above the average and we have led by example, even for a small country. If we have the situation the Deputy has discussed, I would like to see that we would begin to help provide vaccines to some of the poorest parts of the world. First and foremost, it is the right thing to do. Second, this has to be a global solution. It would ultimately be enlightened self-interest as well.

Deputy Mick Barry: Yesterday, the *The Irish Times* online ran a headline which stated: “Easing Covid restrictions: Ministers want as wide a reopening as possible”. This is not the first lockdown. We have had three lockdowns and a number of premature reopenings. We had two premature reopenings which had disastrous consequences. We should remember December and also last June. Last June the number of cases per day and per week was at quite a low level. If we had held out for a couple more weeks and had in place proper test and trace and proper international travel restrictions, we could have had zero Covid in this country. That does not mean zero cases but it means a very low number of cases that can be controlled. However, the Government reopened last June, under pressure from business interests and lobbies. Instead of having zero Covid, since then 3,000 people have died as a result of this disease. We should be in a position to be able to have a full reopening reasonably quickly if proper test and trace systems had been put in place by the Government but it has failed to do that. The reopening that is being discussed poses two questions. Is there a danger of another premature reopening? Is the Government in danger of opening the door to a fourth wave? The Government may say that this is different and that vaccination is under way. Vaccination is well under way in Chile. It has a target of 80% by the end of June, which is exactly the same as us. In fact, it has vaccinated almost double the amount of its population that we have. However, a premature reopening there has resulted in a major wave that has put its hospital system under pressure. Will the Minister comment on these points? My advice is to be careful. The Government should not lose the run of itself. I detect in the comments of one or two Ministers in recent days a little bit of a tinge of what we heard in December. I would like the Minister to comment on these points.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: I thank the Deputy for the question. I have a different view on his analysis on zero Covid and test and trace but I know that is not what he wants to discuss. My view is we need to be very careful right now. We are in a slightly risky position in that all of the indicators are very positive but we are not through this, to respond to the Deputy’s point. There is a risk that too many of us believe we are through this, and maybe we believe we do not need to be as careful and we can have more social interactions and meet our friends in our

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houses because Ireland is doing well. The reason Ireland is doing well is because we have kept to these measures and because we have been careful. I agree with the Deputy. Right now, we need to begin to open up. We have started to open up but we still absolutely need to be very careful because this needs to be the last time we do this.

Deputy Joe Flaherty: Notwithstanding the issue with supply, we are making real progress on the vaccine roll-out. I was delighted to take a call from a woman from Lanesborough in her 70s this morning who told me she was finally getting her vaccine this afternoon. I thank the GPs and their staff who have put in a massive effort and who are performing a real national service in the roll-out of the vaccine programme for the over 70s. I am delighted our vaccination centre in Longford will open on 3 May and will be administering more than 900 vaccines a day with a staff of 45 people on site. We do not get a county-by-county breakdown of the vaccine roll-out, but with 5,900 people aged over 65 in Longford in the 2016 census, it is reasonable to assume we are tracking the 22% national first dose average.

The public appreciates and understands there will be issues with supply, and in the main are appreciative of the huge logistic effort that has gone into the vaccine roll-out, which we have to remind people is the single biggest public health initiative ever undertaken in the country. What has continually frustrated the public in recent weeks is the mixed and negative messaging from senior figures in government regarding reopening our economy and a return to normality. A total of 90% of households in the country have put their lives on hold for the best part of a year. They have waited patiently, abided by an unnatural suite of restrictions and abided by the Government's every demand.

I appreciate that the process has required leadership from various Ministers, and I commend the Minister, Deputy Donnelly and the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, on the huge personal sacrifices they have made throughout this period. At this stage, the public wants to see them and their senior colleagues in government take the bravest of steps. We want to see a structured but defiant reopening against the backdrop of the escalation of the vaccine roll-out. Publicans, cafés and retailers throughout County Longford want to reopen. We want to return to mass and we want to play sport again. The reality is that normality will not come with the flick of a switch. With Northern Ireland escalating its reopening, it is not unreasonable to expect we should see a significant reopening of our economy by Monday, 24 May. For many, it has to be said, May is a line in the sand and I fear we risk losing the room after that date. It is often one of the best months of the year weather-wise and we are pinning a lot of our hopes on outdoor hospitality this year. In this respect, it is very important that the sector gets an opportunity to reopen in May.

We will see the easing of some restrictions on 4 May, including public worship, and I welcome the Minister's comments following his meeting with the archbishop. I earnestly feel that households and businesses throughout Ireland need to see a plan next week clearly setting out a timeline for the reopening of our economy throughout the month of May.

Deputy Colm Burke: My understanding of recent reports is that a glut of vaccines will be available in the United States, with 800 million doses in total from start to finish being available. Has there been engagement with the US authorities on accessing this supply from the US? I understand Moderna, Pfizer and Johnson & Johnson vaccines will be available. Will there be engagement on this issue?

The next issue I want to raise is with regard to maternity services. There are still a lot of

complaints from women in hospital maternity care whose partners and husbands cannot get to visit. In particular, I understand that even though a decision has been taken that partners can attend the 20-week scan, this is not being allowed in the maternity units of two hospitals. Why can we not have a common set of rules throughout the country? Recently, the Rotunda issued a directive and set out a clear timeline for people visiting their loved ones in a maternity setting. Will the Minister make a comment on this? Will the Department and the HSE issue a directive to all of the maternity hospitals on this issue?

With regard to the roll-out to those who are bed bound and cannot access their GPs, will the National Ambulance Service engage with the Army to see whether it can help to expedite the situation? Families are extremely concerned. They are not being contacted and do not know when their loved one, who may be in their 80s or 90s, and there has been one person aged over 100, will be vaccinated. I ask that this be expedited and a clear message sent back to families on this issue.

Deputy Emer Higgins: I support my colleague, Deputy Burke, on vaccinations and all of those women going through pregnancy in the middle of Covid-19 having their partners with them. I am so encouraged by the progress that has been made on the vaccination roll-out. The Government promised that in April we would see the roll-out being ramped up and we have seen exactly this. We have seen a huge increase in pace. We have seen it in vaccination centres such as my local vaccination centre in Citywest. Many of my constituents in their late 60s have now received their first vaccination. In fact, one fifth of all adults have received their first vaccination at this stage. It was announced today the portal will open tomorrow for those aged 64 and above. This is huge progress despite all of the challenges the vaccine roll-out programme has had to overcome.

In my constituency there is a clinic not administering vaccinations. Its patients over 70 have been left in limbo. At present, I am dealing with a couple in their very late 70s who feel completely left behind by the vaccine roll-out programme. Will the Minister open the HSE portal to those aged over 70 so those who are willing to take AstraZeneca can do so in centres such as Citywest?

I also want to point out that people in their 60s who have diagnosed blood clotting disorders feel they have been sent to the back of the queue because they do not want to take AstraZeneca and have not been offered an alternative. Is there anything we can do to assure these people it is safe to take AstraZeneca and allow them to get their vaccination as quickly as possible?

Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan: I will keep it short to give the Minister time to reply. Cork South-West is very lucky to have two vaccination centres covering the region at the GAA complex in Clonakilty and the primary care centre in Bantry. It is absolutely fantastic to have them and I thank the Minister for his work. I also thank the HSE and the local community healthcare organisation, CHO. The question people now want answered is when vaccinations will begin in them. People have seen footage of how they are set up and now they want to see vaccinations happening. Will the Minister give me clarity and an answer on this?

My next question is similar to that of Deputy Higgins on those aged between 60 and 69 who will be administered the AstraZeneca vaccine. I have been contacted by people in that age group who are concerned, because they see that in Denmark they have suspended the use of this vaccine. They see similar steps being taken in South Africa. All I am looking for from the Minister today is assurances, clarity and an explanation as to why this approach and these

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steps have been taken so that I can go back to them and say this is the rationale here. I would appreciate it if he could come back to me on those.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: I thank the Deputies for their questions. I will run through them quickly to try and get to all four.

I take Deputy Flaherty's point on wanting to get back to normal life as quickly as possible. We all want it. We are all desperate for it for ourselves and our communities, and our business communities are all desperate for it. However, we still have to proceed with care. One of the reasons Ireland is doing so well, our vaccine programme is going so well, we have one of the lowest virus levels in Europe and we have the strongest measures against the importation of variants is we have approached all of this from a safety and public health perspective. Even though it is harder now than ever, as the weather gets better, as case numbers are lower and as more people get vaccinated, we still must proceed with care and the caution that our public experts are still urging.

In response to Deputy Higgins's point, if she wants to give me the details of a clinic that is refusing to administer vaccines, I ask her to let me know because all of the patients from that GP practice must, of course, be vaccinated in their local community. The question on the portal is one I can take back.

A question Deputies Higgins and Christopher O'Sullivan both asked was around reassurance for AstraZeneca. What we can do is keep asking the experts to go on the radio and television. There is a great deal of advice online on gov.ie and the HSE and NIAC's own page. The reports underpinning the advice that comes in to me, and indeed the letters from the deputy CMO, are all available online. I will revert to Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan regarding the west Cork vaccination centres.

In response to Deputy Colm Burke on the maternity visitations - it is something that has been raised with me on several occasions - I am aware that for mums and their partners, it is important that they can get in, particularly sometimes when things may not be going as well as we would want. These are decisions being made locally by the maternity hospitals. They are obviously putting the safety of mums and babies first and they are aware that we want to relax those restrictions as quickly as possible.

Finally, the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, will take back the points on the Defence Forces and the housebound.

Deputy Imelda Munster: The HSE recently sent out an invite to all elected representatives to visit the vaccination centres in the midlands, Louth and Meath area and there was a list of eight vaccination centres. Drogheda was No. 8 on the list but it was on the list as "to be confirmed". They still have not identified a site. In fairness, they have had ample time to do that. I have been chasing it with them. Will the Minister get on to the HSE and ask them to expedite the identification and opening of the vaccination centre in Drogheda?

I also wanted to ask the Minister some questions about the vaccine roll-out in terms of tourism and hospitality. Public health experts have clearly stated that a rapid and efficient vaccine roll-out is the only way out of this pandemic and to allow the reopening of society, but I am sure the Minister will also be aware that representatives of the tourism and hospitality sector have been looking for some vaccine metrics as a way to guide them to the reopening. Does the Minister have a percentage of the adult population that will need to be vaccinated in order

that the hospitality sector can reopen and can he confirm that by the end of June 80% of adults will have received at least one vaccination? Has he a level of community transmission that will need to be met to allow for reopening? Finally, can he confirm whether there will be different rules for people who have been vaccinated as opposed to those who have not? If the Minister could answer those first, then, if I have a chance, I will come back in with some other questions.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: I thank the Deputy for her questions. With regards to the vaccination centre for Drogheda, I will take that back to the HSE later today. Deputy O'Dowd has asked the same question.

The short answer on the other questions is there are not precise numbers that public health follows. There is no single measure or metric in terms of the level of cases, the level of transmission or the percentage of people vaccinated that leads to certain measures being relaxed. Essentially, what happens is NPHET looks at all of the data in the round and brings a recommendation to me that I then bring to Cabinet. At the same time, Government looks at a wide variety of additional measures around the economy and various other social metrics as well. The Covid committee meets and then Cabinet meets. That is the process whereby decisions are made. Many different matters are factored in.

I hear loud and clear the same calls that we all are getting from our constituencies right around the country that people want society to open up as quickly as possible. Obviously, hospitality wants to open as quickly as possible. Hospitality, the music industry and the arts, for example, have borne some of the heaviest brunt of all of this. The reality is their worlds, the wonderful things they do for us, are to allow us to congregate to meet each other to experience music or whatever it may be and, unfortunately, that is where this virus spreads. We cannot give exact dates at present.

With regard to four out of five people who want a vaccine being offered one by the end of June, we are on track but, as the past week has demonstrated, it can be a very bumpy road. We had a lot of vaccines restricted and the next day we had more than 500,000 additional doses come online. At the same time Johnson & Johnson stated it was pausing delivery of its vaccine. People talk a lot about targets. Our target, my target and the HSE's target is that the vaccines are administered as they come into the country. If they continue to come in at the rates that we have been told, then we are still on track for four in five adults who want a vaccine to be offered one by the end of June.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Berry is sharing his time with Deputy Tóibín.

Deputy Cathal Berry: The House will be aware that I am a big supporter of the Covid-19 vaccination programme, despite all its obvious imperfections. Every Deputy recognises that this is our ticket out of this crisis and that every available resource that the State has at its disposal should be brought to bear on this problem and used to assist this programme.

I have two questions for the Ministers. They are not criticisms but rather observations and suggestions for improvement. The first relates to the appointment of the chair of the vaccination task force, Professor Brian MacCraith, who is doing a good job under difficult circumstances. Is he employed in a part-time or full-time role, and if he is not employed full time in this role focusing exclusively on this problem, might the Minister consider elevating his appointment to that of a full-time position in light of its importance?

The second question relates to the National Emergency Co-ordination Centre. That is lo-

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cated on a floor of a building on the Leinster House campus. The centre was established specifically to deal with a multi-agency response to a national emergency. It has served us well over the past ten or 15 years when it came to severe weather events and it can serve us well again. It is lying completely idle at present.

My own experience of the vaccination programme tells me that we are lacking a centralised hub, a one-stop shop or location from which to co-ordinate the national vaccination roll-out. It would make the Minister's job much easier. I empathise with his position; he is dealing with a very complex situation which is fast moving and has a lot of moving parts. We need a centralised location, manned 24/7 to co-ordinate the roll out of the programme because it is of such importance.

The National Emergency Co-ordination Centre was established for a very good reason, namely, to provide a nationwide co-ordinating facility. I find it unusual that we have decided to dispense with our national emergency response framework right on the eve of battle, when we need it most. I would welcome the Minister's comments on this. I have no further questions but look forward his response as to whether the role of chairman of the vaccination task force should be full time and whether he will consider using the National Emergency Co-ordination Centre to co-ordinate the vaccination programme.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: I thank Deputy Berry for his questions and can assure him that Professor MacCraith is working beyond what would normally be considered full-time. If full-time is 40 hours per week, although I know it is a lot longer for a lot of people, then Professor MacCraith is working well beyond that. I speak to him almost daily, including early in the morning and late at night and I commend him and the rest of the task force on the work they are doing.

I do not believe the National Emergency Co-Ordination Centre is the right place for the vaccination programme, which is a core competence of the Department of Health and the HSE. Notwithstanding what has been a bumpy road, with by no means everything done right, the vaccination programme rightly sits with the Department and the HSE. That said, the Deputy asks a very fair question in the context of a whole-of-Government response to an emergency like Covid-19 and it is something that we will keep under review.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Last week the Minister flew a kite about 30 year old people being vaccinated. I was shocked because I had just been on the phone to a family of a 92 year old who still had not had her first vaccination. I submitted a parliamentary question asking if all 85 year olds who wanted vaccines were fully vaccinated but did not get confirmation of same. When will those who are over 85 who seek vaccination receive their first dose and when will they be fully inoculated?

I also submitted a parliamentary question on a claim that has been submitted to the State Claims Agency by a family whose loved one contracted Covid-19 in a hospital setting and subsequently died. Obviously, we offer our sympathies to that family. I have heard of many people who have had similar experiences. I have no doubt that most hospitals did their best to keep the illness out. However, many front-line workers felt abandoned by the Government in terms of understaffing over the course of the pandemic. Such understaffing is incredible given that 74,000 people responded to the Be On Call for Ireland campaign, with only 54 employed by the State this time last year. I have also heard of situations of negligence by the HSE in terms of people contracting Covid in hospital and subsequently losing their lives. Have similar cases

been brought to the Department which have not yet made it to court? The Government indemnified vaccine companies against any adverse effects that might occur. Has anyone approached the Department regarding compensation for adverse effects experienced following vaccination?

There is no doubt that there is a need for caution but the Government's approach to lockdown right now is disproportionate. This is not December or January. Hospital admissions are now, thankfully, low, ICU occupancy is also low and 1.2 million people have had a vaccine. In that context, there is a necessity to open up elements of Irish society now. First and foremost, when will cancer, heart disease, stroke and mental health services be fully reopened? People in need of such services have been de-prioritised, even though many are in life-or-death situations. When will the provision of outdoor hospitality and pub services resume? We know that the levels of transmission of this illness in outdoor settings have been extremely low. Finally, every time I ask the Government about religious practice, I am told that it will resume at the same time that museum and gallery visits resume. Museum and gallery visits are important but religious practice is an international human right. Are they pitched at the same level by this Government?

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: I thank the Deputy for his questions. The over-85 cohort has been substantially completed but there is no doubt that across our country there will be people in that age group who are still waiting. Deputy Higgins, for example, said earlier that there is a GP in her constituency who is refusing to vaccinate his patients who are over 70 and that alternative arrangements need to be put in place. Similarly, the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, has given a lot of detail in this session about housebound people, the majority of whom have now been vaccinated, although not all of them. Can I tell Deputy Tóibín that every single person over 85 has been vaccinated? No, I cannot. What I can say is that the vast majority have been vaccinated. There is a relatively small number, some of whom are housebound, outstanding. If there are others, like those referred to by Deputy Higgins, they must be prioritised.

I will provide a note to the Deputy on legal cases. On the resumption of health services, Deputy Tóibín and I discussed this the last time we interacted in the Dáil and I wholeheartedly agree with him. In fact, I had a meeting yesterday with the chief executive of the HSE and one of the items we discussed was the resumption of services. All I can tell the Deputy, and I hope he believes the good intent of the Department and the HSE, is that we are acutely aware that so much important healthcare had to be paused during the pandemic. Many essential services have continued but we want to get them all back up and running as quickly as possible.

Deputy Cormac Devlin: I welcome the Minister and Minister of State and am grateful for the opportunity to examine the Covid-19 vaccine roll out. At the outset I want to place on record my own appreciation to the doctors, nurses, members of the Defence Forces, vaccinators and others involved in the critical effort to bring our nation out of this pandemic. News that more than 1.25 million vaccines have been administered is extremely welcome. We have seen the positive impact of the vaccination programme on our nursing homes and hospitals and internationally in countries like Israel, the UK and the USA.

The vaccination programme combined with other public health measures will bring us out of this dreadful pandemic and allows us to return to normality during the summer. The programme has generally been successful but there are challenges. Like other Deputies, I have also been contacted by people over 70 who are housebound. The National Ambulance Service has done a fantastic job in administering vaccines to approximately 1,700 people in their own homes but I understand that around 300 people are still awaiting their first jab. It is critical that

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good communication is maintained with those people and their families so they can be reassured that they have not been left behind.

Many people in the high risk and very high risk categories have also been in touch with me. Some GPs are not dealing with this cohort at all and in such cases, arrangements should be made for them to register with their local HSE area office. Finally, I understand that a number of genuine, front-line workers in category 2(g), who were registered through the portal may have been left behind. I hope that is not the case but will forward the details to the Minister's office.

Will the Minister investigate the possibility of including other vaccines approved by the EMA, the FDA and other regulatory bodies in the list of accepted vaccines for people entering Ireland?

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: I have been a long-time champion of walk-in PCR testing, particularly in hot spot areas. We have seen a reduction in case numbers over the last few weeks. Has an analysis been done of the impact of the walk-in test centres in hot spot areas on overall numbers? Does any such analysis suggest a role for such test centres or for more widespread PCR testing as we continue to vaccinate people, as well as in the post-vaccination period? We know vaccination alone does not end Covid, much as we would like it to be the case. Will increasing asymptomatic testing be available? I believe it has had an impact in my area. I can see it, anecdotally, and would love to see if there was data to back that up.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: I will speak about the vaccination roll-out. It may not be known by the public that the great majority of people will be vaccinated by Pfizer and Moderna, in the main. When does the Minister expect the European Medicines Agency to come back to NPHE in respect of reviewing and extending the second-dose period? Has he looked at information from Pfizer showing 80% efficiency-proof against the virus after the first dose? Has he looked at extending the second-dose interval period from four weeks to six, eight or 12 weeks and the impact that will have on the roll-out of a first dose to the population at the end of May and the end of June?

Deputy Cathal Crowe: I thank the Minister, the Minister of State, all in the Department and, moreover, the front-line staff who are helping to deliver vaccinations at huge speed at the moment. It is massively appreciated. I will speak briefly about mandatory hotel quarantine. It had a real high-value purpose in the early weeks of this year when there was a major risk of new strains of Covid coming into the country. The Minister has evolved and refined it in recent times but I am still concerned that the Sinopharm vaccine, which many Irish citizens domiciled as ex-pats in Abu Dhabi have received, has not been recognised in Ireland as a legitimate vaccine for exemption from the mandatory quarantine period. That urgently needs to be looked at.

In Ennis, our Covid vaccination centre at the West County Hotel opened yesterday. It is going fantastically except that there are long queues of people waiting. There needs to be a refined way of rolling it out, perhaps by waiting in the car park area. There is a no seating area about which many elderly people are complaining. That is just an administrative issue I hope the Minister will communicate within his Department.

The National Ambulance Service has been tasked with getting vaccines to the infirm and those confined to bed. However, Margaret Morgan from Kilmurry McMahan, a woman in Clare aged 101, is one of about 1,500 who are still a little uncertain about how this is working.

She is one of the oldest citizens in our country and is still awaiting her vaccine. I ask the Department officials to put her out of her anguish. Her family have been on the airwaves all week trying to find out what is happening for their mother. I do not expect answers today but maybe the Minister of State, within the chain of command, can try to rectify that for her.

On church and religious services, others have made the point that we need to look at churches for what they are. They are large, vaulted buildings. Most days of the year people in them are socially isolated anyway. Very few people are going to Mass, in the traditional sense, as they would have in years gone by. We urgently need to look at them in the next tranche of reopening.

Deputy Niamh Smyth: I thank the Minister and the Minister of State for making sure our country is seeing a massive ramping up of the roll-out in recent days and weeks. I particularly thank the Minister for the roll-out of the community vaccine centres. I had the privilege, last night, of meeting the staff who are ensuring that happens in Cavan and Monaghan. It was a fantastic sight and I thank those staff, who are all exhausted at this stage, who took time out to show Oireachtas Members around a state-of-the-art set-up in a hotel. It is unbelievable what can be done. A recovery area and booths are all set out in such a safe way I am sure they will have no difficulties. I thank Cara O'Neill, Celine Corcoran and Aisling Duffy for their time, care and professionalism in delivering vaccinations across Cavan-Monaghan. The ramping up has been incredible over the last couple of weeks.

I again echo what the Minister heard today regarding those who are housebound. We have had difficulties in being able to get clarity and information to people. It seems that information is being lost in translation. I do not know whether that has to do with systems. I urge that, if there is anything more to be done, it is speeded up for people.

I also draw the attention of the Minister and the Minister of State to maternity services. That was mentioned here today. I am delighted that the Minister has made the point that hospitals can make their own decisions on numbers, capacity and the extra pressures on them in this area. As the Minister knows from his visits to both Cavan and Monaghan, and seeing Cavan General Hospital, we are incredibly lucky to have both the maternity service and the midwifery led unit, MLU. It is critically important that we start to allow husbands and partners in for women, particularly for first-time mothers who find it traumatising to head into hospital without their loved one.

Finally, I came across a case of somebody who has spent a long time in hospital. Their GP missed the deadline, through no fault of theirs, in registering for the vaccine. This is a person who was brought home from hospital in the last number of days. The GP and I are finding it difficult to find out who in the HSE is responsible for ensuring somebody home from hospital will get the vaccine as well.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: I thank the Deputies for their questions and kind words for everyone working in the vaccination programme. As I know all Deputies will fully appreciate, the people running the programme right across the country, in so many different areas, are working flat out. I engage with them at weekends, at 7 o'clock in the morning and at 11 o'clock at night. They are working non-stop. It is a great privilege to be part of that. I would like to share with the House that it is fantastic to see such a national effort. The HSE, the ambulance service, general practice, everyone in the vaccination centres and the Defence Forces are all involved. It has been an incredible thing to watch Ireland at its very best rolling this out.

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As regards Deputy Devlin's question, the current situation on fully-vaccinated exemptions from hotel quarantine are only for EMA-approved vaccines. There are currently 12 vaccines in use around the world. To date, four are approved by the EMA and as of now they are the only ones that have an exemption. I will feed the Deputy's point into the Department so that it can be considered.

On Deputy McAuliffe's question, the walk-in, pop-up PCR centres have been a major success. We are launching another load of them this evening. I believe we are getting one in Wicklow. I know the Deputy has one in his constituency. The positivity rates out of them are, generally, in excess of 8%, which suggests they are very useful. About one in every 11 or 12 people going in is testing positive. Critically, people who are concerned and who may have friends or relatives who are more vulnerable to Covid are getting tested to make sure they are not infected at this point. There has not been an analysis on the wider effect. It is certainly something we can look at. There is much demand locally, we are doing more and more tests and they seem to be going very well on the ground.

On Deputy O'Donnell's question with regard to a decision on the mRNA vaccine, I expect a recommendation in the coming days. Exactly what the Deputy has suggested is being looked at, which is, what happens if we extend the interval from four weeks to eight or 12 weeks.

I thank Deputy Crowe for his comments. We are very aware of the issue he raised around some longer waiting times for the vaccination centres that have just opened. Every one of those centres is working to get faster and faster.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: Today I was approached by a group of Irish citizens working in Abu Dhabi. There are 10,000 Irish citizens living and working there. The United Arab Emirates is the fifth most vaccinated country in the world. The group which has been in contact with me will not be allowed into Ireland without mandatory hotel quarantine even though they have been fully vaccinated and can quarantine at home. In January they were offered Sinopharm as they faced significant local pressure to take the vaccine so they could keep their jobs. A number of these Irish citizens are tested weekly for their schools. One Irish citizen told me that he has had 37 PCR tests. This group has no issues providing antibody tests, prior to travelling, to show the effectiveness of the vaccine.

Sinopharm is currently undergoing approval from the World Health Organization and has been exported to more than 70 countries globally. The United Arab Emirates has a population of 10 million and has had 2,000 deaths, half that of Ireland's. To date, the United Arab Emirates has administered 9 million doses of vaccine. This group of citizens is looking for permission to return home without having to do a hotel quarantine, since they can quarantine at home. Please accept that they have been vaccinated and let our citizens home.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: I am aware of the situation. The current public health advice to me is that the exemption should apply to EMA-approved vaccines. I believe that list will grow. Sinopharm is one of the 12 which is not within the four that have been recognised by the EMA, but it is a reasonable question. The question being posed by Irish people who are in the Emirates right now is reasonable and I will seek a view from public health on it.

Deputy Michael Collins: To clarify a question Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan asked about when vaccination centres are opening in west Cork, I thankfully have the answer, for once in my life. My brother is a councillor and member of the south-west regional health forum. He

tells me that the Clonakilty centre will be open on 3 May, which is important for the Clonakilty, Bandon and the Skibbereen area. The Bantry primary care centre will be open on 28 April. That is a bit of clarity.

The Tánaiste said that anyone who refuses the AstraZeneca vaccine will have to go to the back of the queue. Many people I know in the 60 to 70 age bracket may have a history of clotting in their family. They should not be put to the back of the queue. What are the Minister's view on this?

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank Deputy Collins. It is good to see him be so generous with information for his constituency colleague.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: I thank the Deputy. The question has been put to me directly in the last week and a half. I do not want to stray into giving medical advice, which I am not qualified to give. I put the same question to public health and the Department and the answer I got was that the issue has been looked into in great detail, and the advice from NIAC is that there is no additional risk. However, I am conscious that I am not an expert or a clinician, so I would like to revert to the Deputy and, indeed, to other Deputies with a precise answer from those who are experts in the field to explain the position.

Deputy Michael Collins: Thousands of Irish people living in the United Arab Emirates got the Sinopharm Covid-19 vaccine at the first opportunity in February with the hopes of being able to travel back to Ireland this summer. They are now unable to get any other vaccine. On Sunday, the Minister, Deputy Donnelly, tweeted that people who are vaccinated will be exempt from the hotel quarantine. He listed Pfizer, Moderna, Astra-Zeneca and Janssen, with no mention of the Sinopharm vaccine. More than 70% of people in the United Arab Emirates are vaccinated but this seems not to be enough for the Irish Government to allow them to quarantine in their own towns. I am looking for clarity on this issue. I know my time has run out so the Minister cannot give it.

While I have the floor, since I do not have much chance to raise it, Vera Twomey and the medicinal cannabis issue is a significant issue and I would appreciate the Minister meeting us.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I ask the Ceann Comhairle to ask the Minister to reply to me in writing. I have never got a reply in writing and I have raised the matter with the Minister and with the Government Chief Whip, Deputy Jack Chambers. It is an insult to the people who elect me in Tipperary.

Why are the HSE and the Department of Health not collating figures of people who have a delayed diagnosis of cancer and a missed diagnosis? There are 38,000 people waiting for colonoscopies alone and many other diagnoses have been delayed. What are we hiding?

Regarding the AstraZeneca vaccine, in March, student nurses were forced to take it. The Taoiseach said they had to take it or their careers would be forfeited. In April, they were told that they should take it. In February, it was not safe for young people and in March they had to take it or their careers would be forfeited. In April, we see that it is only for over-60s. What about the nurses who have been forced to take this? How is the Government going to compensate them or give them any sense of fair play or respect?

The Taoiseach met church leaders last Thursday. On the same day, the Minister was signing into law penal sanctions against priests who say mass, hear confessions, go to mass or whatever

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else. What does the Minister have against the church and the Christian faith especially? It is time that he answered the question and told us.

I want to know about the UAE too. I know many teachers who want to come home. They are vaccinated. They have been tested numerous times. Why should they be quarantined? That question has also been asked.

When will the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, and the Minister, Deputy Donnelly, meet with Councillor Kieran Bourke and the action committee which they committed to meeting with, to save St. Brigid's Hospital in Carrick-on-Suir? It is a wonderful facility which the Minister shamefully closed down. It is a shame on the Minister of State, Deputy Butler. It is up the road from her own family who might be using it. They closed it down and turned their back on the people.

An Ceann Comhairle: That is a separate matter and not for today's discussion.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: It is. It was being used as a Covid centre and then it was unceremoniously closed down, so it is very much so.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: Deputy McGrath has come in here week after week and made contributions like he has just made. He has just said several things which are verifiably false, and importantly so. He has stated some quite outrageous things, such as the Taoiseach-----

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Why will the Minister not put the answer in writing and refute it?

An Ceann Comhairle: Let us not have an argument.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I am serious. I have never got an answer from the Minister.

An Ceann Comhairle: Can we hear the Minister and then we will see how we progress?

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: The Deputy has just stated some really dangerous things, such as saying that healthcare workers are being forced to take vaccines. The problem is that this is a questions and answers session. Every week, the Deputy comes in here and, every week, just like this, he has said many things, many of them false and several of them dangerous.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I asked questions for answers. I do not get answers from the Minister.

An Ceann Comhairle: Wait, please.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I asked questions. I did not say things. I asked questions.

An Ceann Comhairle: Can we hear the Minister?

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: Deputy McGrath has never once, just as with this week, left time for me to answer or address anything he has said. The protocol in this session is not that Deputy McGrath stands up and makes a list of false claims then gets responses in writing from me. It is a questions and answers session. If the Deputy wants answers, I am here, but he has to leave time for me to correct many of the dangerous and false things that he continues to say every week.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I am on the Business Committee. I understand quite clearly that we can choose to use our time for questions and written answers. That is part of the protocol. The Minister, Deputy Donnelly, is telling lies to the House as he did about the churches some months ago. We can ask questions and ask for written replies if there is not time. Is that right or wrong?

An Ceann Comhairle: I will try to bring some clarity to this. It would be better if we did not start accusing each other of acting inappropriately. My understanding, for everybody's benefit, is that this a questions and answers session and it is desirable that those asking the questions leave time for the questions to be answered, but in circumstances where people have more questions than they have time available to them, it is and has been my understanding that Members might indicate that they would be happy to have a response in writing. Deputy McGrath has raised this repeatedly at the Business Committee. It seems as though we will have to resolve the communications difficulty at that level because it has not been resolved to date.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: The Minister will excuse me if I leave out the "thank yous". We are dealing with a pandemic where we have had almost 250,000 cases and the up-to-date figure for deaths is 4,856. I have always said that vaccination is part of an overall programme. I stand here week after week in utter frustration that there is no overall discussion. I do not blame the Minister for that. The Taoiseach should lead an overall discussion about where we are on this.

I have a specific question for the Minister about the call centre. More than four weeks ago, he mentioned it as part of his speech. To sort out communication difficulties, he established a call centre. I do not wish to waste my time now. I ask the Minister to answer in one sentence where it is, what it costs and why I have not got an answer four weeks later.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: Are we referring to the call centre for GPs or the HSE Live call centre?

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I am not going to go through this and I will tell the Minister why. He included it in his speech four weeks ago. When he had finished his speech and I eventually got my turn, I asked him about that call centre. He said he would come back to me with the details. I emailed his office and it came back to say that it would tell us, but it did not. Then it came back to ask which call centre. We said it was the call centre that the Minister referred to in his speech. I will park it unless the Minister can answer me because I am not talking down the clock. The Minister referred to a call centre as part of the solution to the communication difficulties. The Minister was to give me all of the details. I have not got them. Can the Minister commit today to giving me all of the details?

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: The Deputy most definitely should have got those details if I committed to doing that. The only question I am trying to clarify concerns the fact that there are two call centres. There is one for GPs and one for the public.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I thank the Minister, but I will have all the details. It is not a question of how much knowledge the Minister or I have. It is a question of the Minister including it in his speech four weeks ago. I know nothing about that now because I am still waiting. I ask the Minister to please give me a commitment that he will do that, and I will be happy with that. Mind you, I have got a commitment twice already with no result. It is important, because at that point there was huge consternation among GPs regarding communications difficulties

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and the roll-out of the vaccination programme. The Minister said that this was part of the solution. I would like to know the details.

I thank the Minister and the Minister of State for their speeches. Regarding the ambulance programme and vaccinations, I would like to know how that is managed operationally. Does the National Ambulance Service work from Dublin or is it based locally?

Deputy Mary Butler: The ambulances are based in the various CHOs and are not just coming out from Dublin.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: Lovely. While the Minister of State is on her feet and regarding respite services, I know her heart is in the right place. However, more than a year later the families have no respite. They are going to go under. Surely, it is not beyond the ability of the HSE, or whatever is the appropriate organisation on the ground, to restore safe respite services

Deputy Mary Butler: Respite services are available in certain cases. Those services have not stopped completely. For example, I dealt with a case in Galway last week concerning respite. I also dealt personally with another case in Waterford where the person concerned had to have home adaptations and respite was provided for two weeks. Therefore, respite is still available, but on a case-by-case basis. The Deputy can come back to me on this issue.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: That is fine, but I am going to come back to this issue. I do not like doing this case-by-case, because I know that Ministers and Ministers of State are very busy. I must come back to it, however, because we have to know about the situation on the ground.

Deputy Mary Butler: That is fine.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: Turning to temporary accommodation for healthcare workers, I would like the Minister to address this issue. Briefly, why has this debacle arisen where two healthcare workers were sent home? I have tried raising this before referring to it here on the floor of the Dáil. I always try to do that first, but I have been told in a reply that that temporary accommodation scheme has not been stopped. Yet, the interpretation of that scheme allowed for two workers to be sent home. Can the Minister add to that or clarify the situation for me?

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: I apologise, I am genuinely trying to be helpful. I will need more details on the specific case. If the Deputy has not been getting the detail in writing from me through parliamentary questions or, indeed, through our debate here, she should be. It is something I will take back with me today.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: That was not my question. I had moved on from that. This is about an issue which arose, and that has been in the news on RTÉ and in various newspapers, about two healthcare workers being sent back to direct provision centres, as it happens, because temporary accommodation was not available. I have gone to the trouble of tabling questions on this issue and I am told that the temporary accommodation scheme is up and running. Yet, it is being interpreted that temporary accommodation will only be provided to workers in the case of a cluster or an outbreak. I will leave that issue with the Minister.

Turning to some general comments on vaccination, I think the comments by the Tánaiste that people would go to the bottom of the list were appalling and unacceptable. It is an insidious

interference with the doctor-patient relationship and the manner in which the programme for those aged 60 to 69 has been rolled out. They must go onto a portal, regardless of their medical history. I cannot tell the Minister how many calls I have received from people with different medical backgrounds, cancer being one of them, and who have had previous clots. Those people were told to go on a portal, take what they got or go back to the bottom of the list. The Minister did not say that, but that is the message coming from the Government. It is totally shocking and unacceptable. I would appreciate if he could take that message back.

I refer to a compensation scheme. A report prepared by Mr. Justice Charles Meenan was published in December of last year concerning alternative mechanisms for medical negligence. Part of that related to vaccinations. What progress, if any, has been made in that regard? What discussion, if any, has there been concerning these vaccines, which are very much in a trial mode given the pandemic? What is going to happen in respect of a no-fault liability scheme? What estimate has been made of the indemnity given to I do not know how many pharmaceutical companies at this stage regarding liability for the State in that regard? Only a few seconds remain, so I am simply raising this issue once again on the floor of the Dáil in the hope that in due course it will come up for discussion here or perhaps the Minister will be able to enlighten me in a reply on the issues of the indemnity, the actions taken following the published report and the implications for the current round of vaccinations.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank Deputy Connolly. I call Deputy Carey now, and then the Minister will wrap up.

Deputy Joe Carey: I commend the Minister on the vaccine roll-out, especially for those aged over 70 and front-line workers in the healthcare sector. In recent days, however, several cases have arisen in my constituency of Clare concerning elderly people who are housebound. These are the very people who were born just after the previous pandemic hit our country. I am aware there are technical details to be accomplished and that these cases were referred by GPs to the NAS in early March to deliver the vaccine.

The first case concerns a 98-year old woman, Sarah Ryan, who is housebound and waiting for the NAS to deliver the vaccine, but she has heard nothing. Her family are worried, and they have spoken on national media about there having been little or no communication from anyone. Ms Ryan feels she is now divorced from her GP. The family feel they have just been left twisting in the wind and Ms Ryan feels she has been forgotten about.

The second case is that of a 99-year old man, Joe Kinneally, living in Kilshanny, County Clare, who hopes to celebrate his 100th birthday in July. He was referred by his GP to the NAS, as directed by the HSE, in early March. Mr. Kinneally's family have heard nothing since. They are becoming increasingly upset and are seeking clarity on whether he will receive his first vaccination, and hopefully his second as well, before his 100th birthday. They do not seem to be able to get answers from anyone. In fact, when watching the President celebrate his birthday last week on the "The Late Late Show", they mused which would come first for Mr. Kinneally: the President's cheque for his 100th birthday or his vaccine.

The third person is a 100-year old west Clare woman, Margaret Morgan, from Kilmurray McMahan, who is also waiting on the NAS to deliver the vaccine. Ms Morgan is hoping she will receive both doses of the vaccine to celebrate her 101st birthday on 1 June. She is hoping to celebrate this occasion with her family as she could not celebrate her 100th birthday because of the first lockdown.

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Therefore, I am asking the Minister to investigate the progress the NAS is making with the 1,500 people referred to it by GPs. These people feel forgotten and lost in bureaucracy. My appeal is for him to direct the NAS to write by letter, and I emphasise write, to everyone on this list and confirm to each person that he or she is on the list and to also give those people an indication regarding when it is expected that it will be possible to deliver the first dose of the vaccine.

Deputy Mary Butler: I thank the Deputy for raising this important issue, which has been raised several times today. To date, we have received more than 3,500 referrals from GPs concerning elderly and vulnerable people who are housebound and not able to go directly to their GP for the vaccine. Due to the complexity of the triage process, which follows from the referral concerning the GP, the individual to be vaccinated and their families, it has proved to be the case that the roll-out has taken longer than originally anticipated.

The NAS is operating a seven-day service and deploys more than ten vehicles every day to undertake appointments. We are averaging 400 appointments every week. The time it has taken to complete the project is driven by the complexities involved. For example, the requirements regarding remaining for 30 to 40 minutes at each residence. In approximately 10% of cases, visits can take up to 50 minutes due to medical histories that require a 30-minute observation period. We have also found that when the NAS has arrived at some locations, people have been vaccinated already. In other cases, the person concerned might have been admitted to a hospital or a nursing home. Unfortunately, in other cases, a couple of people have gone to their eternal reward, while others have decided they do not want the vaccine. At the same time, the NAS has gone to that particular house. However, I take on board what the Deputy said. We will have an meeting in the next few days to see how we can expedite this. I want to highlight to the Deputy that nobody will be left behind. I know people are frustrated and angry. There probably has been a lack of information. We are telling people they will be got to, and they will be. At the same time, the National Ambulance Service is doing the best it can.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: There are four minutes remaining, should the Minister wish to use them, or we can conclude the item.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: I will be guided by the Leas-Cheann Comhairle.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We have come to the end of the list of speakers.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: Am I to wrap up on the item?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Yes.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: Or was that Deputy Carey's time? I am happy to do whatever the Leas-Cheann Comhairle thinks best.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The time is running now for the wrap up.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: I see. Thank you.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: When I came in for the changeover, Deputy Carey had finished.

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I thank Deputies across the House for their contributions. It is most valuable to hear them. Certainly, one of the things that the Minister for State and I will take away is the need to have an immediate conversation with

the HSE and the Department in respect of doing everything possible to get to the housebound. The National Ambulance Service is doing Trojan work, but we will engage, particularly after today's session, to see what more can be done. It is very clear, as we know from our own representations also, there are many people who are still desperately waiting to be vaccinated and protected.

I will summarise by saying that it has been a very difficult year as we know, and we do not need to get into it again. The Leas-Cheann Comhairle quite rightly spoke to some of the very dark parts of what has happened over the past year.

I will state that the plan is working. It essentially has three elements, namely, the virus at home, variants abroad and the vaccine programme. All three elements of that plan are working, thanks to huge efforts from thousands of women and men all over Ireland.

In respect of the virus at home, we now have one of the lowest rates in the EU. Cases are down below 400 a day. There is a 10% reduction in cases week on week in comparison with last year. The R number remains below zero, though I am going straight from this session to an update meeting with NPHET and we will see what the R number is now. There have been no new outbreaks in nursing homes in the past three weeks, which is phenomenal. The number of close contacts for positive cases has remained steady, at 2.6. This means the credit for case numbers staying low does not go to the vaccination programme - not yet - but to the public for following the public health advice and keeping close contacts low. Many of the meetings that are happening are taking place outdoors, which is making a huge difference.

We obviously need to be careful. I know there is a growing desire for things to open and to open quickly, but we have been here before and there was a big clamour to open everything as quickly as possible. We must be careful. GP referrals have gone up again this week. The positive test results coming out of the laboratories have gone up again, and nearly every new case is the B117 variant. That means the situation remains volatile. While it might feel very positive, and indeed it is, it would take very little for cases to rise again very quickly. Therefore, for the next number of weeks we need to continue doing what we have been doing as we carefully reopen, which is something we all want.

In terms of guarding against the variants coming into the country, we do not live in an airtight container and there is no perfect protection against that, especially given there are two jurisdictions on the Island. However, the barriers to the variants are working. Mandatory hotel and home quarantining, preflight PCR tests and genome sequencing are all together having the desired effect. Ireland still has a relatively low number of variants, but we are very conscious of surges in variants in places like Canada, France, and most recently, as discussed today, in India. We are constantly keeping those under review. We now have by a long way and of any country in Europe the strongest measures against the importation of variants. It is working.

Our vaccine programme is working. Ireland has the highest percentage of over-80s vaccinated out of any country in the EU. It is something we should be very proud of. We are one of a handful of countries that have fully vaccinated - at least with a first dose - healthcare workers.

I will finish by reiterating my thanks to everybody involved. It is a huge effort right across Ireland in every town, village and city, and right across the healthcare, voluntary and public sectors. It has been an immense task. We are dealing with repeated large changes to the programme which we have to work very quickly to incorporate so that we can keep the momentum

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going. Therefore, I want to express my thanks to every single person who is involved in this effort.

Covid Restrictions Support Scheme Regulations and Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme Regulations: Motions

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I move:

That Dáil Éireann approves the following Regulations in draft:

Taxes Consolidation Act 1997 (Covid Restrictions Support Scheme) (Date Adjustment) Order 2021,

a copy of which was laid in draft form before Dáil Éireann on 8th April, 2021.

I am pleased to move two resolutions today, seeking the approval of the House for the following draft orders which provide for the extensions up to the end of June of two support schemes, the employment wage subsidy scheme, EWSS, and the Covid restrictions support Scheme, CRSS.

Speed and scale of response to the supply and demand shocks created by the pandemic have been the focus of our economic response. Since March last year, we have moved rapidly, using the balance sheet of our country to replace lost private sector demand, to ensure firms, workers and incomes were supported and protected through wage subsidies, the deferral of liabilities and income supports. Our overarching objective has been to support homes and firms as well as to limit the scarring or permanent effects of the pandemic.

The schemes we are seeking to extend today are part of the broad range of supports provided by the Government to help businesses through the pandemic. The level of support provided to businesses has been unprecedented. Significant levels of support have been provided by way of direct income supports via the pandemic unemployment payment, PUP, and the wage subsidy schemes, which represent real payments to our citizens and businesses to help manage financially in these very difficult times.

The temporary wage subsidy scheme, TWSS, cost almost €3 billion, the EWSS has cost €2.8 billion with almost half a billion in PRSI forgone, the CRSS is approaching €500 million, and €2.3 billion of tax debt has been warehoused. This gives a total of €9 billion in supports for businesses under the aegis of my Department alone. In addition, €6.5 billion has been paid by the Department of Social Protection under the pandemic unemployment payment.

The wage subsidy schemes have been central to our efforts. The TWSS was in place until the end of August last year. It was replaced by the employment wage subsidy scheme, which began on 1 September 2020. In addition to these schemes, a number of other Departments are also providing direct supports.

Of course, we have to look at the motions before the Dáil today in the context of where we are in relation to the reopening of our country. We are already seeing the start of the reopening process, with the full return to schools from last Monday week, travel limits extended to 20 km or within the county, the resumption of residential construction, as well as early learning and childcare projects. This week, inter-county GAA training and elite athlete training was permit-

ted to resume. As we look towards this cautious reopening of our economy, it is clear from last week's stability programme update that the relationship between economic activity and public health restrictions has weakened with every wave. Much of this is due to the flexibility of domestic enterprises but consumers have adjusted also. Last month's VAT data was up 8.5% on the first quarter alone. Our consumers are buying local. They are buying online.

In the medium term, the speed at which the economy can recover depends uniquely on our vaccination programme. This was a consistent theme of the IMF and World Bank spring meetings that I attended recently.

Our vaccination programme will be the touchstone for our economic recovery. However, this will take time. In recognition of the challenges facing so many businesses I want to reiterate today that there will be no cliff edge in the removal of support. We will put in place supports to continue for as long as they are needed to ensure the beginnings and the taking hold of the strong recovery we all know is needed. We have not fought this pandemic and its economic fallout for just over a year on a scale that is unprecedented in Irish economic history to fall at the final hurdle.

The motions are required as part of the process of extending the schemes until the end of June. In the case of the Covid restrictions support scheme, CRSS, subparagraph (ii) of section 484(2)(a) of the Taxes Consolidation Act 1997 inserted by section 11 of the Finance Act 2020 provides that the Minister for Finance may vary the scheme by extending the end date of the measure beyond 31 March but not later than 31 December of this year.

The draft Taxes Consolidation Act 1997 (Covid Restrictions Support Scheme) (Date Adjustment) Order 2021 provides for this extension and was laid before the Dáil on 8 April. The legislation requires that the order shall not be made unless a resolution approving the draft has been passed by the Dáil.

In regard to the employment wage subsidy scheme, EWSS, section 28B(21) of the Emergency Measures in the Public Interest (Covid-19) Act 2020 provides that the Minister for Finance may vary the employment wage subsidy scheme by extending the end date of the measure beyond 31 March 2021 but not later than 30 June 2021. I have formally consulted my colleagues, the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputy McGrath, and, in respect of the EWSS, the Minister for Social Protection, Deputy Humphreys, and have determined it is necessary for both schemes to remain in place until 30 June.

It is fair to say, and I hope the House will agree, that the two schemes have provided much-needed support as they endeavour to help businesses cope with the effects of the pandemic. They have helped businesses remain viable as we start the process of reopening the economy.

The numbers are striking. I think we should recall them. As of today, 22 April, 22,100 businesses have registered 25,900 premises for the CRSS with Revenue. A total of 148,400 claims for CRSS payments of €478.9 million in respect of 24,600 premises have been made to date and €475.5 million of this has been processed for payment.

With regard to the EWSS, 48,900 employers have currently registered with Revenue and over half a million employees have benefited. A total of €2.8 billion has been paid and, as of last week, there were more than 420,000 people in receipt of the pandemic unemployment payment, PUP.

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I want to take this opportunity to acknowledge the huge amount of work of the Revenue Commissioners. Without their efforts we would not be where we are today.

I wish to say a word about the extension of the EWSS to 30 June 2021. This policy represents a substantial and key part of the Government's response to the pandemic. This is the second extension of the scheme, thus demonstrating that this is a successful and vital policy instrument.

The primary employer qualification for the EWSS is based on the employer's turnover in the current six-month period being less compared with the same pre-pandemic position period in 2019. The legislation provides that the employer must be able to demonstrate it is operating at no more than 70% in either the turnover of the business or the customer orders received by the employer by reference to the period from 1 January to 30 June 2021 compared with the same period in 2019. This is a very flexible policy tool designed to take account of potentially sudden changes in turnover. If there is a reduction in turnover in the future because of a change in circumstances, the employer may be entitled to make a claim for a later period. The amount of subsidy given to the employer is based on the number of paid workers on payroll per week combined with a flat, per head value rate which is applied based on prospective pay levels so that claims may also be made for new hires or seasonal workers.

Following the reintroduction of level 5 restrictions in October 2020, the Government decided that from 20 October the amount of the EWSS subsidy paid per employer would be up to €350 per week, graduated on the basis of the income of the employee. As set out in the Finance Act 2020, the enhanced rates were to be in place until 31 January 2021 after which they were due to return to the original rates of €151 for those paid more than €151 per week and €203 for those paid more than €203 per week. However, given the current circumstances with this pandemic, the Government decided on 23 February last to maintain the current EWSS rates to 30 June. This is aligned with the rates of payment of the pandemic unemployment payment. This is a very important alignment. Otherwise there would be a risk of migration of employees from the EWSS to the pandemic unemployment payment. That could undermine the very work of the employment wage subsidy scheme. It is also an important bridge between social welfare payments such as the PUP and regular employment, which is the ultimate goal.

The relevant legislation provides that, as Minister for Finance, I may vary certain aspects of the scheme such as the end date, the rate of subsidy and the criteria of the turnover test for qualifying employers by ministerial order. This affords the Minister sufficient flexibility to ensure the scheme remains agile and responsive. In terms of direct subsidy payments, the estimated cost of the extension of the enhanced rates for quarter 2 is €1.167 billion. This is to be met from the voted expenditure of the Department of Social Protection. In addition, it is estimated that a further €180 million will arise from the continuation of the 0.5% reduced rate of employers' PRSI, with an estimated total cost of approximately €1.3 billion.

Turning to the CRSS, this scheme has provided much-needed support to businesses that have been forced to close. The vast majority of businesses in Ireland are affected by Covid but the CRSS is intended to target specific businesses where access by customers is restricted. This was intended to be and has been implemented as a targeted scheme. It was never meant to be a general support measure. As I have said, the economy is only slowly and cautiously beginning to reopen and therefore the Government has agreed that the CRSS should be extended for now to 30 June. The restart week provided for in the CRSS, which allows a business to claim for an extra week upon reopening after restrictions are lifted, will be of particular benefit as businesses

start to reopen. The estimated cost of the extension of the CRSS is in excess of €240 million, to be met out of resources allocated for Covid contingency funding.

As we look forward to reopening the economy and our society in the coming weeks and months, we can and should expect an initial rebound, in part fuelled by pent-up demand, but this is not the same as a full recovery. I recognise that reopening will be costly and will pose new challenges that will need to be sustained by supports and corrective measures to allow us get the balance right between supporting the recovery and the cost to the taxpayer. I want to restate the Government's commitment that there will be no cliff edge to the supports at the end of June. We are conscious that continued support is required to assist sectors of the economy on the path to recovery and we will set out these plans in the coming weeks.

I am very much aware of the value of the supports I have outlined but I am equally aware of the huge level of strain many businesses are facing at the moment, particularly small and medium enterprises, SMEs, with all the major challenges they faced so suddenly.

I strongly contend the support plans in place have played a major role in helping companies to be viable when closed while also giving them the foundations they need to reopen. I know much needs to be done. Even yesterday, when I attended the Committee on Finance, Public Expenditure and Reform, and Taoiseach, I heard views of different colleagues regarding supports, how they should be changed and what their future should be. For example, I heard of the challenges retailers are facing and was reminded of the challenges being faced by the hospitality sector. I listened to those views and look forward in the coming weeks to working with other Ministers to bring forward plans that will play another role in getting the balance right between supporting our economy at this really difficult time, meeting the many public health challenges we have and which we are getting the better of while continuing to get the balance right between those costs and those that the taxpayer will ultimately pay.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I am thankful for the opportunity to speak to these important motions. There is no doubt that the extension of these schemes will give workers and businesses some certainty, although just for the coming weeks. I have spoken to people availing of these schemes, where they work, and they speak incredibly highly of them and are incredibly grateful for the assistance. We cannot lose sight of the fact that these are viable businesses that were closed for public health reasons. As soon as it is safe, they are anxious to get back to being the employers they were and making the contributions that they did. They want to be in a position to be able to bounce back.

The continuation of these schemes is essential and perhaps, as the Government speaks about easing the public health restrictions, greater clarity could be given to workers and businesses on how the schemes will operate as we move through the easing of public health restrictions and with increasing rates of vaccination. It would be remiss of me not to relay the problems that some businesses have raised for some time now.

The exclusion of many businesses from the CRSS is still significant. Since budget day, when the scheme was announced, many limitations within it have been highlighted and their effect has become more acute since businesses have tried to draw down funding. In the days following the 2021 budget, both I and my colleagues pointed out that the narrow nature of the scheme would mean suppliers, event management companies, taxi drivers, businesses without fixed premises and many others would simply fall through the cracks.

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Before the finance committee, my colleague, Deputy Pearse Doherty, has highlighted problems with the schemes directly to the Minister. At a meeting of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Enterprise, Trade and Employment last October, I called on the Tánaiste to expand the scheme to include businesses such as event management companies, the business event industry, artists, taxi drivers, suppliers and other businesses currently excluded. It took nearly six months for some of these difficulties to be addressed by the launch of the small business assistance scheme for Covid, SBASC, and I am thankful that scheme will offer some hope to businesses that they can continue to weather this storm. Unfortunately, that scheme, like the CRSS, does not address the exclusion of businesses without a fixed premises. As a result, a host of businesses will continue to go without supports. Sinn Féin still believes, in the interests of protecting as many businesses as possible, that the sensible action is to include all of those whose turnover fell by 75% or more.

The EWSS, along with the PUP, has helped workers significantly. A matter has arisen with workers in receipt of the EWSS, especially those in the aviation sector, who are due to lose their short-term work support payment because their entitlement is due to end under the current rules surrounding jobseeker's benefit. I ask the Minister to raise this with his colleague, the Minister for Social Protection, and seek that the rules surrounding jobseeker's benefit be extended beyond the current six and nine months, with the rules around requalification suspended so that workers can have access to this absolutely vital support. Such changes are badly needed by workers in the aviation sector, especially those in Aer Lingus, who are down 60%, 70% and, in some cases, 80% of their usual wages.

With regard to businesses and especially SMEs, I ask that the Minister and his Department look at the question of hidden debt to ensure it does not affect the ability of SMEs to bounce back to profitability. From speaking with owners of many SMEs and family businesses, I know there is a fear that hidden debt, such as warehoused tax debt and commercial rent arrears, will hinder the ability to bounce back to profitability when the current health crisis is over. Data provided by the Minister's office indicate that SMEs have warehoused more than €1 billion in tax liabilities under the debt warehousing scheme. This scheme is important for SMEs, microbusinesses and family businesses. It has improved the short-run cash flow for them but the Government must ensure there are some checks and balances in place so they are not hit with a tsunami of debt immediately after they try to reopen.

As we know, SMEs are the backbone of our economy, particularly with regard to employment. That they have warehoused more tax debt than any other sector should be of grave concern to the Minister. I encourage the Department, in conjunction with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, to examine this specific matter and assess the sort of structures that may need to be put in place so businesses can safely exit and bounce back. Many businesses have suggested solutions such as repayment of tax debt over an elongated period or reduced interest rates. I encourage both the Minister for Finance and the Tánaiste to begin these conversations immediately.

Commercial rent arrears are an extremely serious matter for businesses right across the State. The Government has published a code of conduct between landlords and tenants but some businesses have outlined that many commercial landlords are refusing to engage. There are sensitive constitutional questions to be gotten over, which we recognise, but I know that in some Nordic countries arbitration systems have been established to help address questions of commercial rents and rent debt. Looking at such systems may be a very good place to start as many of these firms are absolutely terrified of the debt that may await them. If we are to come

out of this crisis and be resilient, we must ensure such hidden debt does not hinder SMEs.

Yesterday we saw yet another company announcing a closure, with 486 jobs gone in Car-phone Warehouse. That is 486 people and their families getting some of the worst news at the worst possible time. Retail is facing an absolute crisis but we know the sector is the backbone of many of our towns, villages and cities. It is in crisis and the sector is crying out for some sort of certainty or help. The Mandate trade union has proposed a forum on the future of retail. I know that some people in the Government say, when asked, that retail and our habits are changing. That is true but our habits have changed out of necessity. With some encouragement, the Minister might be able to revitalise the retail sector and save hundreds of thousands of jobs. I urge him to consider seriously a forum on the future of retail to bring stakeholders together and really work hard to try to salvage jobs and the sector as a whole.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: I have written to the Aire a number of times on an anomaly in the CRSS and I have raised it in this Chamber. What I will say today is not something new but something of which he will be very much aware. My colleague, Deputy O'Reilly, mentioned it as well. Under the current scheme businesses without a fixed premises are not able to qualify. The Minister indicates the scheme is targeted rather than prescriptive but only those businesses with fixed premises that can show reduced footfall as a result of the restrictions will qualify. We know there are a great many businesses that cannot qualify for the CRSS as a result.

When it was introduced, we saw these anomalies and my colleague, Deputy Pearse Doherty, even tabled an amendment in January that would have changed the qualifying criteria for the scheme. Unfortunately, the Government rejected it. It seems, nevertheless, that some of the criticism has been taken on board with the launch of the new Covid-19 business aid scheme, which allows the likes of wholesalers, suppliers and caterers to be included. That should be welcomed, although unfortunately the new scheme does not address the exclusion of businesses without a fixed premises. It is an anomaly that needs to be rectified.

In the interests of protecting as many businesses as possible, it would be sensible to include all businesses that have seen turnover fall by 75% or more in this scheme. It would have been a simpler and more inclusive scheme that would acknowledge the businesses out there that are continuing to struggle with non-payroll expenses and fixed costs. Their future viability is in doubt. We saw in the recent stability programme update that the Government would have no role in supporting businesses that are no longer viable. The problem is there are large numbers of businesses that have been excluded from these schemes that are viable. I raised with the Minister before some of the businesses in my county of Galway, including Killary Fjord Boat Tours and a bus tour company on the islands. They have historically been successful. When matters return to normal they will probably rediscover that success, but they are under great pressure at present due to the lack of support because they do not have a fixed premises. Their businesses are threatened as a result. It should be remembered that these businesses are embedded in the community. They are very important for these rural areas and form part of the commercial ecosystem.

It might be easy to take the view that the exclusion of these businesses is only a minor matter, but it can have significant unintended consequences. Consider the example of the boat tours. As the economy begins to reopen and the tourism industry begins to see increased activity, these must be viable in order to attract people to the area so they will go to the shops and restaurants. While the Minister has saved money in the short term by excluding these businesses, it will more than likely end up costing him far more in the long term because of potential tax and

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business activity forgone. The CRSS has cost less than was projected so I urge the Minister to reconsider this, to allow these businesses to be eligible for it and to help them. It will help not only the businesses but also the communities.

Deputy Ged Nash: I am pleased to support the continuation of these important supports for jobs, businesses, our economy and our society generally. As the Minister has asserted time and again, and he reasserted the principle today, it is important that there not be a cliff edge through the withdrawal of these critical supports. As I did previously and as the Minister did today, I pay tribute to the staff in the Revenue Commissioners and across the public service and Civil Service for their hard work, innovation, dedication and effort in developing and implementing these important systems and schemes, literally overnight just over a year ago. They are owed a debt of gratitude from all of us. I hope that those who have made careers out of lambasting the public service reflect on that and on where the business community might be without these interventions, if the State had not asserted itself in the way it did when these awful circumstances arose just over a year ago.

When we say there will be no cliff edge to these supports we should also acknowledge that not all businesses will come through this period unscathed. That is true and we all accept it. I am anxious that efforts be made to establish a series of supports that will provide what I might call a set of stabilisers for businesses that can be viable again, but which will need customised and tailored supports over the next period of time to help them through the early phase of what we hope will be a successful economic and social recovery. What I have in mind, and the Minister will have heard me speak about this time and again, is a repurposed wage subsidy or support scheme based on the principles of the German Kurzarbeit model. This would help businesses and workers to get a shot at returning to profit, sustainability and viability. This is the type of scheme the principles of which should be embedded into our economy and labour market model, at least for a period of time to help us return to where we want to be. In addition, any such schemes that may be developed should have appropriate conditions attached to them with regard to job retention, minimum rates of pay, minimum hours and so forth. The State should not be taken for a ride and provide endless forms of corporate welfare into the future without using the resources that hopefully will be deployed to drive better outcomes for everyone in the context of our planned and hoped-for economic recovery.

In the time I have left I will turn to another matter related to Covid-19 business supports and the way in which insurance companies such as FBD Holdings and others are operating in respect of business interruption insurance claims. The Social Welfare and Pensions Act 2013 introduced a measure which provided for the deduction of certain benefits, such as illness benefit, from personal injuries awards obtained through a claim for damages. In such cases the law provides, effectively, that the money be returned to the State. In the case of business interruption claims and the actions of companies such as FBD Holdings, can the Minister outline his interpretation of which section of law the insurance companies are relying on to make deductions from awards, as is reported? Will he outline what plans he has to recover any such moneys reclaimed by insurance companies which should logically, and arguably in law, be reimbursed to the State if, indeed, the insurance firms are relying on the logic and principles enshrined in the 2013 Act in terms of the treatment of personal injuries awards?

I am not entirely clear about the plans of the Minister of State, Deputy Fleming, after listening to his interview on this issue on “Morning Ireland” this week. He appeared to want to see the difference between an award and the reduced award, based on the amount of Covid support issued, returned to the State and for the policyholder to enjoy the benefit of the full award at

the same time. I am not sure that is possible. I understand what he was driving at, but I am not entirely sure what he plans to do. Perhaps the Minister can clarify the position because this issue will come even more considerably into view over the next period of time. As these supports continue and as more business interruption claim issues are addressed by the courts, and potentially by the Financial Services and Pensions Ombudsman, there must be reassurance from the Minister that individual policyholders who require our support and those who are depending on State supports will have the Minister's and the Government's support in getting what they are entitled to. A message must be conveyed to the insurance companies that the type of behaviour they are involved in at present will be given short shrift by the Government.

Deputy John McGuinness: First, I welcome the Minister's statement on the continuation of the Covid support schemes and the fact that there will not be a cliff edge at the end of this. We had a good discussion in the finance committee this week in which, as the Minister said, various suggestions were put forward to deal with some of the shortfalls affecting the SME sector. I support that. In supporting it, I wish to take up the points raised by Deputy Nash when he spoke about FBD Holdings. It is time for the Minister to make a statement on FBD Holdings, the claims being paid and the deductions it says it is entitled to make. It is very important that we ensure the greed of the insurance companies is not allowed to continue to affect businesses, particularly those in the SME sector that require and are entitled to the claim.

The schemes have supported businesses. The Minister said the financial level of support was €12 billion. I would like the Minister to examine the very small businesses that are affected by turnover in terms of qualifying for some of the schemes. They need support, and they will need support to reopen. One of the biggest problems is that many of these small businesses have carried forward debt from the financial crash. They had made deals with their banks at high interest rates. Some of the bigger ones, particularly in the tourism sector, have been bought by vulture funds which are demanding their money. It would be helpful if there was a scheme in place whereby very small businesses and those that are affected by banks and vulture funds at the other end of this were able to access low interest rates and to rebuild their balance sheets and loans in terms of what they have to repay. If that happened, it would mean they could restructure their loans, they would have a reasonable interest rate and they would be able to continue in business and quickly respond to the reopening of the economy.

There is nothing like a family business and an individual in business to respond to the challenges of the time. They proved that in the financial crash and I believe they will prove it again this time if given an appropriate break. The commentary from the Central Bank indicates that some businesses will not reopen. I am making the case for the smaller ones. I ask the Minister to look at those that do not have a fixed premises. People aged 66 years and older who were enterprising enough to go into business and create employment should be given some benefit, perhaps the difference between the social welfare benefit and the €350. That is absolutely essential. At this time, with the commercial rates, for example, it would have been a great opportunity to introduce reform. We have missed that boat. It was a lost opportunity. Commercial rates, as far as businesses are concerned, are an unfair tax on them. It should be linked to turnover. That is the only fair way to do have that kind of tax. I am sure businesses would respond positively to that type of development. There is no doubt, however, that in spite of the €12 billion being spent, businesses are still not being supported to the level needed to get them into the space where they are reopening and are competitive once again. We will need them to pay their taxes. The warehousing of tax is fine but the day of reckoning will come when they will have to pay. That day will be difficult for them if they are not allowed to reschedule their

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loans and rebuild their books and there is not a proper banking system that will facilitate small businesses. I encourage the Minister to do this.

Deputy Brendan Smith: I endorse the comments of my colleague, Deputy McGuinness, particularly with regard to people aged over 66 and, in many instances, sole traders, self-employed and with smaller-scale businesses. I welcome the Minister's outline of the supports available, however. They are very significant. The figures the Minister quoted earlier regarding the economic cost of Covid-19 demonstrate very clearly the impact it has had on employment, enterprise and commerce in general. Of course, that pales into insignificance when we think of the cost in lost lives and people suffering.

I welcome those supports, however. I welcome also the fact the Minister said that certainty will be given. We need to ensure we help maintain viable business and employment and provide businesses with certainty to the maximum extent possible. I gather the estimated cost of the extension of the employment wage subsidy scheme, EWSS, amounts to €1.32 billion. That is a substantial amount of money.

Since the onset of pandemic, some €12 billion has been spent in direct income supports. Overall, the amount allocated for Covid-19-related supports across 2020 and 2021 is in excess of €28 billion. That demonstrates very clearly to all of us the awful economic cost of Covid-19.

The Covid restrictions support scheme, CRSS, is a good and essential support to businesses that have witnessed a major reduction in their turnover. Again, the EWSS supports employment and supports employers to maintain the link with the employee. For too long in this country, we did not value enough the corporate knowledge, expertise and experience that had been built up by employees, whether it was in the public or private sector. It is important that link is maintained between employer and employee so that, hopefully, these businesses can return to a trading position and become viable again. We need those experienced personnel back. We need the person back who knows the customer for their business, who knows the market and has expertise and corporate knowledge in that particular area.

I welcome the fact the small business assistance scheme, SBAS, was introduced last month. In quarter 1, that will allow a maximum payment of €4,000 to companies, the self-employed, sole traders and partnerships. I raised a number of queries with regard to this particular scheme. I am aware of a number of business owners who were deemed ineligible for this new scheme due to having claimed under the CRSS. The amount received was much lower than what they would receive under the SBAS. I repeat, and I know it is under the aegis of the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, that I would like the Minister to look at this again with his colleagues across Government. Such businesses, which will struggle to remain open in the future, should be allowed to avail of the SBAS. Any amounts claimed under other grant schemes, however, should be deducted from the final approved amount if they were to be allowed to participate in the new scheme.

Of the cases I have in mind, the applicants availing of a very small CRSS payment were not aware of the small businesses assistance scheme when claiming under the other schemes. They are small traders and one-person enterprises. Those are the types of business that populate the main streets in our smaller towns and villages. All of us know of the particular challenges facing retailers in our smaller towns and villages when we see nothing only delivery vans carrying goods to households in every estate in each town and county in the country today. That demonstrates very clearly the huge challenge faced by retailers to open again and make their

businesses viable. Again, assistance had been given through the local enterprise offices, LEO, to assist smaller businesses to go online and partake in the digital economy. I appeal for Government to place a particular emphasis on and give particular assistance to the smaller-scale businesses in order that they can develop an online presence.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I wish to raise a couple of issues with the Minister this afternoon. I ask that the Government look into them as soon as possible as they remain unresolved despite repeated requests for action.

The first issue relates to aviation workers, specifically Aer Lingus employees. My colleague, Teachta O'Reilly, referenced this point. The pandemic and resulting necessary travel restrictions have had a massive impact on workers in the sector. This hardship has been compounded by repeated failures of the social welfare system to support them when they need it most. Last year, we ran into issues where the airline refused to sign forms correctly for workers on the short-term work support scheme. Workers were continuously pushed from pillar to post by the company and the Department for Social Protection. This was eventually resolved for the temporary wages subsidy scheme, TWSS, after we raised it repeatedly with the Minister and with the airline. A satisfactory resolution or fair solution was never found for the EWSS.

Now, cabin crew and other staff are getting notifications from their social welfare offices that their period on jobseeker's benefit is coming to an end and they will have to face a similar further substantial cut in pay in the time head. What has been suggested for them? A further reduction in hours. That is entirely unsatisfactory as a proposal. It is absolutely brutal that this would be suggested. These workers are barely getting by as it is. It is scandalous that the rug is being pulled from under them at this point. They cannot get clarity on it. My colleague, Deputy Clarke, raised the issue with the Tánaiste earlier and, amazingly, he did not seem to understand that a Department, of which he was formerly the head, was responsible for Xs and Os.

We call on the Minister, therefore, to intervene and work with his colleagues in the Department of Social Protection to address this issue as a matter of priority to ensure aviation workers continue to be supported by the wage subsidy scheme, which is welcome, and other necessary social welfare supports. Aviation workers and their unions have called for a German-style wage support. I echo that call here.

My second point relates to another group of transport workers who have been severely impacted over the last 12 months. Taxi drivers have seen their business disappear and their income cut massively. These workers have had to continue to cover expensive overheads for their vehicles and the income supports put in place for them simply do not cover it. Thousands of drivers in the sector are over the age of 66, meaning they are not entitled to the pandemic employment payment, PUP.

We called for tailored supports for this sector to ensure taxi drivers are supported but this request has fallen on deaf ears. In the North, for example, there is a simple, targeted £3,000 grant. The Minister for Transport here seems to be living in a parallel universe to taxi drivers. The suggestion that the main initiative by this Government is a grant for electric vehicles, EV, is simply completely out of touch. A direct and focused support for this sector is needed or it will not survive. It is a case of survival and support rather than cosmetics on the outside.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: In the first instance, it is important to say that these supports are really essential. We are very happy to continue to support them. It demonstrates the im-

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portance of the State, particularly at times of crisis. SMEs are the primary driving force for our economy, employing some 70% of the workforce. These businesses shape the fabric of our cities, towns and communities, providing employment for 1.6 million people across the country, along with vital services without which this country could not survive. They are the very ones on whose doors we knock when it comes to sponsorship for everything from Tidy Towns to football clubs. It is way beyond what is immediately obvious. Our priority when considering those business supports must be ensuring as many of those small to medium-sized businesses survive and recover from this pandemic.

A particular cohort which requires support is young people in employment. Youth unemployment, for those between 15 and 24 years of age, has risen again and now stands at 59.2% according to CSO data. This was 11% at the end of 2019. Sectors which primarily hire younger people are still described as subdued in hiring activity. These would typically be hospitality, pubs, retail, etc. Up to 47,000 of pandemic unemployment payment recipients self-certified as students with almost 90% of these under the age of 25. It is crucial this payment is extended to help these students remain in education as their employment sector is likely to remain closed or severely curtailed for some time.

In a reply to a parliamentary question, I was informed that in past recessions youth unemployment levels typically fell quite quickly once economic activity returned. In addition, the jobs of many currently on the pandemic unemployment payment will not be permanently lost due to the pandemic. However, this is not a recession. It is a pandemic and these are completely different risks to our economy. It will take longer for some sectors to return which are those where many of our young people work.

On Monday, the Governor of the Central Bank outlined the risk that SMEs will face once the Government pulls State support away. A survey published by the Central Bank and the ESRI suggested that almost a quarter of SMEs could be in danger. The survey identified two groups as vulnerable to liquidation when the criteria for insolvency normalise. The first was those which were loss-making in 2019. The second was those that broke even in 2019. There is also deferred debt, rents and other issues which have not been factored in. These may well impact on companies not under pressure in 2019.

There has been great success so far in keeping many businesses afloat through support schemes such as the CRSS, Covid-19 restrictions support scheme, and the EWSS, employment wage subsidy scheme. When the Minister speaks about the cliff edge, June and the CRSS, does he envisage the scheme going beyond June? If so, will further legislation be required to cover that eventuality? None of us expected to be as long in lockdown as we have been or for some of these supports to be as necessary for as long as they have been.

Uncertainty is a real factor. We must also factor in changes to consumer behaviour. The hospitality, events and tourism industries experienced some of the worst impacts. It will take time for them to recover. It is important we design schemes that will facilitate and encourage people to spend the money they saved during the lockdowns in the domestic economy, particularly in the hospitality, events and tourism sectors.

The EWSS has been extended until the end of June 2021, which is welcome. There is an anxiety about the deficit and balancing books. We must be able at some point to balance budgets. However, talking about these two issues at the same time tends to give a degree of uncertainty.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I commend the Minister on his practical approach to this entire issue since the start of the pandemic and join with him in thanking Revenue. I also acknowledge the role of local authority staff who have been involved in rolling out the various supports to businesses locally. I give them credit for a job incredibly well done.

I welcome the commitment about the cliff edge, which is important. We need to continue to emphasise that, particularly as we, hopefully, move into a reopening phase. There are several issues about the scheme, however, I wish to raise. Many businesses are being affected by standing utility, IT and security costs. These are eating up much of their subsidy. I know the Minister cannot provide for everything. However, given that no revenue is coming in, the utility and credit card companies need to stand up to the plate in terms of working with businesses and providing them with support, particularly where there are standing charges not necessarily for the use of a service.

The hospitality sector is at the forefront of many of the restrictions. As hospitality begins to open up again, we will see that there has been a flight of experienced and qualified hospitality staff to more secure employment such as essential retail. Without that experience, we are going to find it hard to get our hospitality industry back up to the level at which it was. This will also affect the level of contribution the sector makes to the Exchequer. At some stage, consideration should be given to a key worker initiative to assist the hospitality industry retain or bring back experienced workers. I will be raising this with the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gael-tacht, Sport and Media, Deputy Catherine Martin. I hope the Minister for Finance will consider this as well.

Many retailers have been left with stock more appropriate to the winter and most definitely not appropriate to opening up for the summer. They must be able to sell that stock but their suppliers are not dealing with them. Again, that is an issue that is soaking up much of the money under the supports and the CRSS. Will the Minister consider this matter as well?

Several Deputies raised the issue of the older self-employed. We are quite ageist in our approach to this. Just because one is over 66, does not mean one does not have outgoings and may need the supports. The exclusion of this age group from many of these schemes is very unfair.

I endorse what has been said previously about insurance companies. They were dragged kicking and screaming to the courts to adhere to their commitments and to their liabilities. They are now using State supports to subsidise the payment of what they should be paying to their customers. We need a strong statement from both the Minister and Minister of State, Deputy Fleming, who is doing much in this area, that this will not be tolerated.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: I welcome the Minister's speech in which he reiterated there would be no cliff edge in the removal of supports and that they will continue for as long as is necessary to ensure a strong recovery. Given what we have gone through, we do not want to fall at the final hurdle and I welcome those sentiments today.

The point about FBD Insurance was a recurring one made by many speakers today. Will the Minister comment on reports last week that FBD is deducting the value of State supports from pay-outs? We are all aware of the landmark judgment in February. FBD was dragged kicking and screaming to stand over its policies. Now the insurer is attempting to use State supports and moneys to limit exposure of its own company in terms of pay-outs. This is wrong. These State schemes are supports for businesses. State-sponsored supports are not tailored to mitigate

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against the losses of private insurers. If FBD succeeds in what it is attempting to do, pay-outs to struggling businesses will be significantly reduced, making it more difficult for viable businesses to re-establish themselves once we reopen.

I was heartened by the comments of the Minister of State, Deputy Fleming, last week that Government pay-outs are made to help businesses struggling through the pandemic, not to reduce the liability of insurers. I would welcome a response from the Minister regarding the same.

Deputy Joe Carey: I too commend the Minister on his work in delivering these schemes and working on a very hands-on basis with business people and his Government colleagues. I also thank the staff of local authorities and of the Revenue Commissioners. Businesses have endured an unprecedented year, and without these vital supports, many of them would have folded. Schemes like the CRSS and the employment wage subsidy scheme are vital, therefore, and it is vital that they are extended. It is equally important there is no cliff edge, and I welcome the Minister's comments again today on that. For many of the sectors that have been so badly affected, such as aviation, hospitality and tourism, there should be a specific sectoral support tailored for these specific industries and those supports should be made available for the rest of this year and indeed into next year.

If you look at County Clare, the mid-west region and Shannon Airport, we have a huge number of people involved in aviation. Indeed, the Minister and I met a company on the vital nature of the employment wage subsidy scheme and the company asked that it be extended to the end of the year. I plead with the Minister and the Government to make the commitment that these particular companies, which employ so many people in County Clare and the mid-west region, need to give them certainty to plan for the future so that they will be able to survive into the future.

I also lend my voice to the case in relation to insurance. It is regrettable the insurance industry would stoop so low as to try to reduce the premiums awarded to businesses that have been shut down and after the business interruption they have endured. It is regrettable the industry would seek to reduce the premiums awarded to businesses by reducing the award due to the State supports they have received. I, too, call on Ministers to make a strong statement to the insurance industry on this issue.

Deputy Patricia Ryan: I appreciate the opportunity to speak today on the CRSS and the EWSS. I have had many conversations with business owners over the past year and they all speak with one voice in saying the Department is unsympathetic to the many hard cases that are out there. Even when they are present themselves in large numbers, the Government is slow to make changes to accommodate them. It is slow to accommodate businesses that do not pay rates, slow to accommodate businesses without fixed premises, and slow to accommodate rural-based businesses whose usual customers could not legally travel to them outside of their 5 km up to last week. The Government needs to do more or these businesses will not be here this time next year. I ask if the small business assistance scheme for Covid can be extended to non-rateable businesses whose turnover is below 25% of their 2019 figure. It is a matter of survival for these businesses and a matter of survival for rural Ireland that we stop the chain reaction that will happen in the rural economy if these businesses close.

On the EWSS and TWSS, Revenue has publicly stated that for certain employees whose employer paid net weekly earnings of between €586 and €960 pre-Covid, the full amount of

that subsidy due to such employees may not have been paid through the payroll process during the period the TWSS was in operation. The process of identifying those employees who qualify for an additional subsidy is currently in progress. Revenue intends to offset any additional amount against an individual's outstanding income tax and USC due for 2020 or by way of direct refund if the person has no 2020 arrears. It is hoped this process will be implemented by the middle of the year when all the relevant data from employers have been reconciled and the required IT systems developments have been completed. More needs to be done and it needs to be done more quickly. I ask the Minister when people who have received huge bills can expect to receive TWSS reviews?

We need to ensure the bespoke version of the EWSS which has been made available to early years and after-school settings remains in place until at least the end of the year. We must support this vital but struggling sector.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Since the very outset of this pandemic I have been arguing for specific supports for those sectors disproportionately hit or indeed just closed down by the impact of the pandemic. I reiterate those calls because while some of the supports the Government has bought in have been very good and have kept businesses alive and wages going into people's pockets, certain groups have not seen the benefit of those supports to the extent they need to.

Next Thursday, I think at 10.30 a.m., the taxi drivers of this city and a number of others will once again be gathering around Leinster House and around the cities to protest about the continued failure of the Government to extend grant supports to them. They will remain in their cars so they will not be breaching the public health regulations. They have, in the estimate of one survey, €11,000 a year in fixed costs, car repayments, insurance, maintenance of the cars and so on. Some, because of the ten-year rule, which has been extended to some extent, still face a cliff edge as they must replace a car in spite of having had no income, or virtually no income, for the past year and a half and very likely very little income for the coming months at least until we are beyond this pandemic. Despite this, they have been excluded from the CRSS and from the Covid-19 business aid scheme, CBAS, and they do not even get the restart grant if they are still on the PUP. It is just not fair. If the Government is giving other businesses support, it must give the taxi drivers grant support so they can survive, cover those costs and not leave them in extreme debt positions and without the money to replace their vehicles when they reach the point where they must replace them.

I should point out that many of them are very willing to move to electric vehicles as part of the move to address climate change but the grants are totally inadequate. They are between €20,000 to €25,000 whereas a new electric vehicle costs about €50,000. How are people who have had no income, or virtually no income, for the past year and a half supposed to be able to buy electric cars? I therefore appeal to the Minister once again on that. By the way, the taxi drivers are having a meeting tonight and most of the relevant Ministers have received invitations to that. Some politicians are going. It will be online and start at 7 p.m. I issue an invitation to the Minister. He needs to hear what 20,000 taxi drivers and their families are going through.

In the remaining 15 seconds let me just shout out for another group - the musicians. Some in the music, entertainment and events industry have benefited from the grant support the Government has given, but again there are a lot of musicians who work out of a van, who do not have a premises and so on. Their incomes have been decimated but they have fixed costs and are not getting the grant support they need.

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Deputy Mick Barry: I raise an issue that pertains to Aer Lingus workers. I am going to read from a letter I have:

I am a cabin crew member working for Aer Lingus. As you know, myself and my colleagues have been on reduced wages and working hours since March 2020 when the pandemic hit. Since November of 2020 up until now I have been on 60% of my wages and working hours. My employer is currently paying me through the EWSS and I am paying PRSI stamp A contributions since 1 September 2020. I have been claiming jobseeker's benefit since 1 September 2020 on the days I am not working. Myself and my colleagues have been begun to be notified by our local offices that this payment is now coming to an end. My local social welfare office informs me that I must experience further substantial loss of earnings from the 60% working hours I'm currently on in order for me to be able to requalify for casual jobseeker's benefit as per the law. I am writing to you today as we need an additional or alternative urgent income support to the EWSS to be set up for employees whose working hours are affected by Covid, in particular aviation workers. The EWSS alone is not effective in delivering for aviation. I ask you please to deal with this as a matter of urgency so myself and my colleagues do not have to experience weeks on the breadline with no additional welfare payments while a decision is made.

I ask the Minister to comment on that. Is he aware of that situation and what steps, if any, is he prepared to take?

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I am happy to support these motions, which are important. It is important at this stage to give reassurance to the small business sector, in particular, which has been severely hit on three occasions in the past ten years. The first was the economic crash, the second was Brexit and coming along in tandem with that was Covid.

One of the issues that has emerged in recent days is that the Central Bank has opined that many businesses will not be able to open again. This is a prediction that seems to be running right through the stream of thoughts coming from the Central Bank and I want to warn against it because it could become a self-fulfilling prophecy. We should be careful to ensure that the people who assess the future viability of small or medium businesses should have particular business acumen, have shown they can run a business, know all about those businesses and be in the best position to restore those businesses to their former standing.

There is also a question of a number of businesses, or sole traders as they have been referred to by other speakers, who have been severely hit by virtue of their inability to qualify for supports in some areas. They have also been hit through the fact that they have been shut down for quite a long time and have to recover. Those businesses will be able to say that other businesses, including larger stores, have been able to operate throughout the pandemic. It is important to recognise those businesses and their particular ability to restore themselves on the basis that they have the wherewithal and the business acumen to be able to do what is necessary at this particular time. They will do so if given a chance.

Credit will be a big issue when the country gets back to work. It is hugely important that credit is made readily available to the business sector and that assurances are given to it to ensure that it has the confidence to restore itself to its former glory and continue.

I want to make a point about employees. They and their employers have been equally affected by Covid. I hope that with the ongoing supports, they will take the reassurance that

Government has given them to date, which has been well-intentioned and targeted. I acknowledge also the announcements by the Minister for Social Protection in recent months. What has happened was right. The job the Government undertook was right and the supports that were put in place at the time were right and are still valid and required. I hope this continues and that the fruits of the efforts made by all involved will be seen in the near future.

Deputy Cormac Devlin: I wish to acknowledge the unprecedented support the Government has provided to support businesses and maintain jobs throughout this pandemic. I welcome the Minister's commitment that there will be no cliff edge to these supports and that Government support for businesses and jobs will continue well into the year. As he will be aware, some industries will need additional support to restart as Ireland fully reopens.

I recently held an online meeting with the Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, Deputy Troy, mainly focused on the hospitality sector in Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown. The message from that sector was straightforward; they welcomed the supports given to businesses by Government during the pandemic but they also called for certainty around the timeline for reopening and asked for key supports such as the reduced VAT rate and the commercial rates waiver to be continued until they get back on their feet. Larger hospitality businesses in particular, such as hotels, need adequate notice to prepare their premises, buy stock and rehire staff. They have also asked for flexibility with supports such as the PUP so that staff can return on a phased basis. I ask that the Minister has regard to these points as the Government finalises plans to reopen the economy.

On the credit guarantee scheme, I understand €2 billion has been made available to Irish businesses. Can the Minister advise the level of uptake of this scheme? Can he also provide an update on the uptake of the enterprise support grant scheme, which provides a once-off grant of €1,000 to self-employed people?

I join other Deputies in urging him to work with colleagues to introduce fast-track business insolvency arrangements to support entrepreneurs who need to wind up businesses that are no longer viable and allow them a fresh start. As we have seen with other downturns, both here and abroad, supporting efficient structural adjustment of non-performing sectors ultimately aids entrepreneurs and the wider economy to rebound.

Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan: We have to acknowledge that the Government supports for businesses have been good, so much so that even Deputy Boyd Barrett acknowledged in his contribution that some of the supports have been good. That is a little highlight reel that I will keep for myself but I also agree with some of his statements on those sectors that have been left out. They have been good and the star of the show for so many has been the CRSS. It has been the lifeblood and support that has meant survival for so many businesses so to see it extended until June is welcome.

At every opportunity I try to speak up on behalf of the hospitality sector because it is such a big employer where I am from. The hospitality sector had some simple asks that we should take seriously. There is the extension of the 9% VAT rate until 2025, something we should consider to give the sector security. There is the continuation of the EWSS, which is vital for the hospitality sector, particularly in the retention of skills and staff because there is a fear that the hospitality sector will lose staff and skills to other sectors unless it can retain them in employment. The EWSS is key to that. The other ask is for the extension of the CRSS, not just until June but until the end of the year, and even to look at the possibility of increasing the CRSS,

particularly for the hospitality sector to allow it to flourish and to make sure there is a sector there going forward.

Coming back to Deputy Boyd Barrett's point about those sectors that have been left out, I have to mention outdoor activities. I am thinking about companies involved in golf, driving ranges, boating activities and other outdoor activities that have not paid rates and that may have a turnover below the €50,000 per year requirement to qualify for the small business support scheme. Everywhere they turn, when it comes to restart grants there is nothing there for them. We have had a couple of opportunities to address that anomaly and we have not done so. I implore the Minister to look at this, whether it is under the CRSS or the small business support scheme, to accommodate those businesses because they are crying out for help.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I welcome the Minister's commentary that there will not be a cliff edge in the EWSS and the CRSS. Many supports have been provided in recent times that have got businesses and families through what was a difficult gap and that is welcome. I want to add my voice to what Deputy O'Reilly said earlier. We had the issue of Carphone Warehouse and the job losses there, including in my town of Dundalk. We need to look at a forum on the future of retail and to build whatever that conversation is on a similar conversation on how the future planning of our towns will leave them looking. That is all necessary.

There have been many supports but certain sectors have been failed. There have been people who we have been consistently talking about having fallen between stools when it comes to supports. There has been mention of taxi drivers and the man or woman driving a van. I have had representations from many viable businesses in my locality.

Some of them are leisure companies and some of them are mobile beverage and food units, of which some individuals may have a number. In some cases, the business premises or offices of people just happen to be in a location that is not rateable, such as in a community centre. The problem with all of this is these people missed out on the CRSS and the Covid-19 business aid scheme. They still carry huge amounts of costs, whether a huge fleet or insurance, and a number of them also have employees. While they may be able to draw down the EWSS, they still have huge costs which will be incredibly difficult for them to bear. We are speaking about opening up, but because they have missed all of these supports, it will be incredibly difficult for them to ensure they are in a position to be able to do that. We need to have a conversation on this. We need to have supports.

Many Deputies have said there have been a number of instances where we could have dealt with this but we did not do so. This is a failure we need to take off the table. We need to deliver for these people. The whole idea of the supports was that we would maintain viable businesses throughout this period so that, when we got a roadmap, as we have at this time, for getting into a better time, these businesses would survive and the families and those working for them would be in a better situation. It is the whole idea of all being in this together. I have spoken to the Tánaiste about this and there is a viable option for a support scheme that could be run through the local enterprise offices. There could be an element of discretion whereby the criteria would not be as tight with regard to rateable premises and would take into account the costs. It could even take into account how viable these businesses were beforehand. If the Minister came back to me on this, I would appreciate it.

Deputy Verona Murphy: I welcome having time to speak on the CRSS. There is no doubt those eligible will be very glad to hear of an extension. I do not believe those who are ineligible

will be very pleased to see nothing is being announced for them today. The eligibility criteria set by the CRSS have been far too narrow and exclude far too many important businesses. It has seen numerous small local indigenous businesses excluded. People have seen their life's work go down the drain because they do not meet the eligibility criteria.

I want to talk about charter skippers. They are part of the lifeblood of rural and coastal towns and villages, particularly the tourism sector in those coastal towns and villages. They also contribute greatly to training young people who are boat or sea enthusiasts for the future. The charter skippers have small well-kept boats to facilitate people who wish to explore, for instance, the Saltee Islands in Wexford, or perhaps do a spot of angling or fishing between Kilmore and Duncannon along the coast of County Wexford. Most of those involved are aged over 66, in receipt of a pension, and therefore not eligible for the PUP. They all have insurance, harbour dues and the maintenance and upkeep of their boats. This is estimated to cost €8,000 to €10,000 per annum, and this is their second year to pay these costs without business. They were ignored by the Minister, Deputy Catherine Martin. In turn, they were ignored by Fáilte Ireland. Will the Minister please acknowledge they are a valuable asset? They are as significant as garden furniture or outdoor furniture. Can we acknowledge we need them by providing support and assistance to keep them in existence, because when they are gone, they are gone. None of the schemes announced was delivered to charter skippers. They do not qualify for the small business assistance scheme for Covid either because they do not turn over €50,000 a year.

Many other cohorts have been left out of supports or schemes, such as event catering companies, which have invested heavily in work premises and transport fleets to cater for concert-goers. They provide the food we love to eat when we go to concerts but they have not had events. They have been excluded because they do not pay rates but they have greatly invested in their premises.

I sent the Minister an email, and I sent it to all of the Cabinet some months ago, in respect of the EU's temporary framework that allows member states to use full flexibility under state aid rules to support the economy through Covid-19. This framework allows the Government to grant compensation to companies and businesses for damage due to and directly caused by the pandemic. I ask the Minister to consider the thousands of retailers, especially boutique owners, who are carrying the stock of three seasons because we have had the longest pandemic closure in Europe.

Deputy Matt Shanahan: I join with other Deputies welcome the extension of CRSS and EWSS. We also need to acknowledge Revenue's forbearance on debt warehousing. We must also acknowledge that, as we open up the economy, many small to medium-sized enterprises will open with significant debt attached to their businesses. With regard to the EWSS, we know there needs to be a 30% reduction in turnover or unit orders from a six-month period in 2019. This can be very difficult for businesses to chart. Some businesses have tried to access the scheme and are now afraid that having done so, they may be over the threshold and are concerned about how Revenue will treat them at a time when cash flow will be difficult for them.

The Minister highlighted how he has kept the EWSS in line with the PUP, but he needs to be very cognisant when we go to open the economy that the supports given for those unemployed and furloughed at present do not keep them so. We need to get people back into the workforce and back working. These supports must not act as a disincentive for employees to return to work.

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CRSS is a large-scale payment which, as a number of Deputies have outlined, is tied to rateable premises. Along with many other Deputies, I have made a number of representations to the Department regarding people who are not able to access payments and supports, particularly in my area. I mentioned to the Secretary General of the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment that people in the showmen's guild do not have rateable premises but provide a lot of employment in the summer season. Many of them carry significant lease costs on equipment. They have had no support whatsoever from the State. It makes it very difficult.

I welcome the announcement of the live entertainment fund, but we need clarity on how it is to be administered and what are the criteria to access it. The schemes being extended and the fact there will be no cliff edge, as the Minister outlined, is very helpful and I applaud it but we must now place particular emphasis on the SME sector. The Minister outlined a number of times how foreign direct investment has remained robust through Covid, but this is not the case for the SME sector, in which a large amount of regional and rural employment in particular is based. What other supports does the Minister envisage for the future? What are his thoughts on how future debt will be carried after the period of forbearance? What interest rates will apply? What benign aspects might Revenue take on this? In essence, I support the extension but we will need to do more and for longer to support the SME sector as the economy tries to open up.

Deputy Jackie Cahill: I acknowledge the exceptional effort the Government has made in recent months to pump finances into our national economy in an effort to save jobs and protect businesses. In doing so, the Government has supported businesses and undeniably saved jobs, helping to prevent tens of thousands if not hundreds of thousands from having to sign on the live register throughout the country. I acknowledge these supports cannot last indefinitely and they are emergency measures to shore up our economy until we can reopen fully and recover the economic ground we have lost over the past 13 months.

Hospitality and tourism have been among the sectors worst hit by the pandemic. I draw the attention of the Minister to FBD. I am getting reports from publicans in my constituency that FBD is not honouring the claim awarded against it in the court case in February. I urge the Minister to look into this and ensure FBD deals fairly with its customers.

When we do reopen, hospitality will still be under severe pressure. I ask the Minister to double the CRSS for the four weeks prior to reopening. That would allow these businesses to have a reasonable cash flow in place so they could open their doors in a viable manner. There will be restrictions when they reopen. There will be a need for continuous support for these businesses when they open their doors. We have put so much into the economy and into these businesses, so it would be a shame if some of them were not able to reopen because we did not go the last leg of the journey with them. The tourism sector, whether it is bus operators or people who operate golf tours who depend on tourists coming into the country, will have another difficult year, continuing into next year. Some of these businesses will need support far beyond 2021.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: I acknowledge the unprecedented level of support for the creation and support of employment, and that is because that is a core value of the programme for Government. It probably will not be fully understood, perhaps given the mechanism in which it is paid. Sometimes there is not transparency around how much support Government is giving. However, we have a problem. When Members supporting the Government and Members opposing the Government are indicating that people who are not rateable-based self-employed business operators have no support, the Government must act. From speaking to the Tánaiste

and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment, Deputy Varadkar, and the Minister of State, Deputy Troy, I understand the difficulty is in how we administer a scheme that supports such non-rateable, perhaps vehicle-based, employment. We must find a way. If one wrote down on a piece of paper how much the Government has given a taxi driver in the past year compared to how much it has given many other sectors, it is obvious we have not provided equal support. It is obvious also that we must go much further to help them meet the fixed costs they have. They have fixed costs but they do not have fixed premises. I urge the Minister, the Taoiseach and the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment to find a mechanism that allows us support these businesses. We all support the small business man and woman and yet we have left them behind in how we have supported businesses. I urge the Minister to match the ambitions we have had for CRSS, EWSS and all the other schemes in targeting those people who have been left behind.

Deputy James O'Connor: I thank the Minister for being here. While I welcome the decision to continue the Covid restriction support scheme and the employment wage subsidy scheme until the end of June 2021, it is important there is not a cliff edge when that date comes around.

I have spent the past number of weeks engaging with employees in different sectors and with management in different areas, including yesterday when Deputy McAuliffe and I engaged with workers in the aviation sector. There is a deep degree of worry about what this date at the end of June will mean, and Deputy McAuliffe would share this view with me. I refer to workers in industries, such as the aviation industry which faces unprecedented levels of difficulty and will face remarkable difficulty in restarting and returning to some degree of normality in terms of what was the case before Covid-19 and the recovery period to get it to that stage. We have to make sure that, as a Government, we do more to protect workers in those sectors and to ensure sector-specific supports are available for those working in aviation, whether pilots, baggage handlers or airport staff. I had the absolute privilege of visiting Cork Airport recently to engage with staff and management there. I would very much appreciate if the Minister, Deputy Donohoe, could look into that particular issue for me.

It is also worth noting that in addition to the 140,000 livelihoods that are supported by aviation, there are also hundreds of thousands of people supported by tourism. Whether they are working in tourism companies or operators or in hospitality in hotels, restaurants or pubs, they are going through extraordinary hardship because of Covid-19. There is no end in sight over the summer months with the current Government plans, some of which I would disagree with. To be honest, we could be much more adventurous in our provision of technology to help live with Covid. I would very much appreciate if the Government could show extra specific supports to those industries.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: Supports for businesses are very welcome and have been a lifeline for so many over the pandemic. I agree with my colleagues. I have spoken to taxi drivers, those in the hospitality sector and small and medium-sized businesses, SMEs, in particular. I have a case in my area where a man has machinery that he bought over the years. He cannot hire out that machinery because there is no work and yet he does not get any grants as he does not have a fixed premises. That is a huge issue that needs to be addressed. We will have many hardship cases going forward. We need to make sure our economy is opened up. I ask the Minister to look at these cases and at hardship cases.

Payments under the original TWSS, treated as salary and wages for tax purposes, were not

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subject to PAYE during the operation of the scheme. The amount received by the employee is now liable to PAYE and USC and thousands of employees have been hit with enormous tax bills. These were employees who put their shoulder to the wheel and stayed working during the pandemic. Revenue has made provision for employers to pay this bill on behalf of employees but I want to ask the Minister about the communication here on how these employees can be assisted.

Will the bespoke version of this scheme be made available to the childcare sector and remain in place until at least the end of 2021? Childcare is the only essential service that had to rely on a wage subsidy scheme in order to operate throughout the pandemic. The EWSS contributes at least 70% of salaries for childcare staff. There is cause for significant concern about the survival of childcare settings, if this scheme does not continue or is withdrawn suddenly. This should be available to the childcare sector until at least 2022.

I ask the Minister to look at individual cases and at different sectors. I understand these grants have been valuable and businesses have appreciated them but we are facing hard times and we need to look at that.

Deputy Carol Nolan: I acknowledge and welcome the extension of the Covid restrictions support scheme and the employment wage subsidy scheme. I also point out that, to date, 22,000 businesses have registered for the Covid support scheme with Revenue but it is clear that for a number of businesses, especially those which do not an annual turnover of €50,000, and this has been mentioned here on a few occasions and it is a big issue, it is extremely unfair. If those businesses are in small towns which do not at the same advantage as other businesses which might have an advantage of being in a better location, it is totally unfair. I ask for the criteria to be broadened or for a greater range of schemes to suit those other businesses that do not have turnover of €50,000 be devised. By that, I mean schemes with a decent amount of money and not some tokenistic scheme. We must be realistic. We have to ensure that our businesses survive and, more importantly, thrive as soon as this pandemic is over. We need to give them every chance. I would be grateful if the Minister could respond to that. Will the CRSS criteria be reviewed to allow businesses with a turnover of less than €50,000 apply?

Many outdoor activities providers in the midlands are not eligible for the €15 million funding provided through Fáilte Ireland simply because they do not have a minimum turnover of €50,000. The unfairness of this is that counties in the midlands, such as Offaly, are only getting their tourism strategy together. We are at a disadvantage and one cannot compare the midlands to areas on the coast that have established a tourism base and, indeed, a tourism initiative over many years. It is predicted that they would have a much greater turnover than those in the midlands. That tourism scheme is available through Fáilte Ireland and I would be grateful if this could be urgently looked at in terms of the turnover and discrimination against regions, such as the midlands.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I too acknowledge the extension of these schemes until the end of June. I would like to see them extended but at least it is tús maith leath na hoibre. I thank the local authority officials and, indeed, the social welfare officials and the Minister's officials who have worked on these schemes for businesses which, through no fault of their own, found themselves in the situation of being forced to close by Government regulations. I acknowledge that but the schemes are very rigid. At this stage, we should be able to tweak them. Applicants must have a turnover of €50,000 to avail of some of the schemes which is just far too high for some small, self-employed people. There are so many such people, including the man with the

van, taxi drivers, self-employed lorry drivers, hairdressers, barbers and so on. The situation is particularly difficult for clothing retailers. They have stock from two winters, from spring, summer and autumn of last year as well as spring of this year. All of that stock is still there and they cannot get rid of it. We are talking about some wonderful businesses and we need to look after them.

There is a large cohort of business people who do not have a rateable premises. I already referred to the man with the van and lorry drivers. This cohort also includes artists and wonderful entertainers who give us so much joy and so much tuition and support, which is so important for people's mental health in these difficult times. There are many such people but they get no allowance. They are self-employed. They might have a machine for hire, a tractor, a lorry or a van but because they do not have a rateable premises, they are ruled out. A year or 13 months on, we need to be able to tweak these schemes as well as extend them because large cohorts of people are being left out. The tourism industry, including motor coach drivers, is being left behind. Many dance teachers and dance schools have not received a bob either. The schemes need to be tweaked. I do not know for how much longer we will be in this situation but I am appealing to the Minister and the Government to adapt the schemes. When churches were open, only 50 people were allowed inside, no matter the size of the church but one size does not fit all. Another group being left behind are those bookmakers who do not have premises but who take bets at race courses. They have been denied any help and have not received aon phingin amháin. There are so many areas that need to be looked at. I know it is not easy but we need to widen the net and be fair to everybody. Fáilte Ireland is not distributing money for the music industry fairly either.

Deputy Joan Collins: I support the two motions before the House. Obviously it is necessary to extend these schemes but I believe the Government should go further. It should consider tapered measures as workers return to work. Many will not go back to work full time initially. Many will go back on 20 hours per week or will experience some reduction in their hours but no worker should be left short of money or struggling to survive.

I wish to raise the issue of grants and supports for certain sectors. There is a sports complex in Ballyfermot that I have raised a number of times in the Dáil. It is a not-for-profit organisation that does not pay VAT. It has not received any grants or financial support over the last period. Taxi drivers, circus and fairground owners have also been left to flounder in the community.

I seek clarification from the Minister on one specific issue related to the TWSS which I raised with the Taoiseach in March and again recently. I sent an email to the Taoiseach about it and received a reply telling me that it had been forwarded to the Department of Social Protection. Then I received another email telling me that my query had been forwarded to the Department of Finance. The TWSS is a very necessary scheme which I fully support. I will outline my understanding of the scheme. The Government and Revenue devised the scheme in order to keep companies open and to keep workers as close to their workplace as possible. Let us say the gross pay of a worker is €100 and after tax the net income would be €80. The Government agreed to forfeit the tax revenue from the €100 and that the State would subsidise the wages of workers up to €410 per week. Companies could top that up if they so wished. The normal 11.5% rate of PRSI was reduced to 0.5% and there was a facility under Revenue's TWSS for the employer to pay that but the fact of the matter is that very few companies are paying that tax. Workers are now experiencing this as a pay cut, in effect. These workers have been on the front line since March 2020. They can be considered essential workers and they see this tax on their net income as a pay cut. Workers are facing tax bills of between €1,000 and €2,500. This must

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be dealt with. If the Minister could sit down with the Revenue Commissioners to introduce this scheme and agree to forfeit the tax on gross pay, surely he can consider forfeiting the tax on net pay. Failing that, he must put something in place to assist these workers.

Workers in McAuley Pharmacy are calling on their employer to pay the tax but the employer will not do so. Staff have met and are discussing conducting a ballot on industrial action. They feel really let down. These are workers whose health and well-being was tested in March, April and May of last year. They were afraid when going home to their families in case they would bring Covid home. These are essential workers who were in meat plants and other important areas. We have clapped for them so many times and wished them well but they are now facing tax liabilities on their net pay, as such.

I urge the Minister to make a point of dealing with this. These workers should not be facing tax bills and I do not think the Government foresaw these workers having to take what amounts to a pay cut in the form of a tax obligation. I ask the Minister to respond on this. Workers want to know what is happening in this regard. They will react. I have had many workers contacting me about this matter. I have heard of multinational companies making profits of €1.5 million whose workers are obliged to pay this tax. It is absolutely shocking that workers are in this situation.

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I thank Deputies for raising many issues with me relating to the WSS and the CRSS. I also want to acknowledge and thank the Minister of State, Deputy Fleming, for all of the work he is doing in the Department of Finance in dealing with many of the issues that have been raised by colleagues this afternoon.

I want to begin by answering a number of questions that were put to me in the course of this very important debate. Deputy Devlin put a number of questions to me on the operation of a number of our schemes. In particular, he posed questions regarding the operation of the credit guarantee scheme. He asked how many applications were submitted and the value of same. A total of 5,929 applications were submitted to our banks under that scheme, with a value of €410 million. To date, 4,170 applications have been approved, with a value of €254.8 million.

Another issue was put to me which I have become aware of in recent times relating to the interplay of the short-time work support payments and the operation of the EWSS. This is of particular concern to those who have been or are still working in our aviation sector. This matter was raised during the week with me. The operation of those jobseeker payments is a matter for the Minister for Social Protection, Deputy Humphreys. I will be raising the issue with her in order to understand it better and I look forward to being able to provide the House with a report on it if it is raised with me again.

On the sectoral issue that was raised by many Deputies, the Government made a choice, given the scale of the shock we were facing as a country, to respond by implementing broad, big schemes and that was the right choice. That choice has worked. It has saved livelihoods and jobs. That response was only possible because of the support we are receiving from the European Central Bank, ECB, and because of the health of our public finances and our economy prior to this terrible pandemic. If the Government had decided to respond with a multiplicity of different sectoral support schemes, we would have spent the last year debating comparisons between those schemes, asking why one scheme was different from the other, why that was the case and why there were differing levels of payment. In the meantime, as we consumed ourselves with those everlasting debates, we would have seen jobs lost, our economy suffer and

employers go out of business and face even greater challenges than they already have. We did not want that to happen.

Instead, what we have done through the employment wage subsidy scheme is to protect employers, in all circumstances, whose businesses go below a certain level and through the Covid restrictions support scheme is to support businesses that are closed. These are strong, big, simple schemes which, due to the excellent work of the Revenue Commissioners, we can administer with speed, and which have worked.

When one puts in place schemes that are clear, there are, despite the best efforts of all, companies that will not be able to participate and employers that will not meet the qualifying criteria. To deal with that, the Government has rolled out an array of additional sectoral schemes to respond to those issues, from the Covid-19 business aid scheme, CBAS, implemented by the Tánaiste to various schemes implemented by the Minister, Deputy Catherine Martin. All of these schemes were designed with the objective of responding to the issues raised by Deputies in this debate today.

As the Government considers the supports needed for our economy in the latter part of the year, we will consider what the appropriate design is for those support schemes and what changes are merited in our employment wage subsidy scheme, the Covid restriction support scheme and the various sectoral schemes in place.

The tourism business continuity scheme was brought in, in particular, to deal with those businesses that do not have a fixed premises and do not qualify for the Covid restrictions supports scheme but still face significant cost and business difficulty. It is implemented by Fáilte Ireland and has a fund and value of up to €55 million, which is being deployed. It was brought in to deal with these issues and it is working. The CBAS scheme, which was brought in by the Tánaiste, provides additional payments to businesses that find themselves in this challenge.

The debt warehousing scheme was raised. I remind the House of the qualifying criteria for the scheme. The 12-month 0% period only starts two months after the businesses are allowed to reopen. Therefore, many businesses are still in the first phase of the liability warehousing scheme and, for many businesses, the deferred liability phase has not yet commenced, so the clarity of these schemes and their impact is demonstrated in how many jobs are, and how much income is, still being protected and saved.

In terms of the challenge we face with our aviation sector, I absolutely recognise the challenge the sector faces. It is why the Government, the Minister, Deputy Coveney, and the Minister, Deputy Donnelly, are working so closely together to ensure the schemes we have in place are proportionate. People have called for these schemes to be implemented and while it is completely understandable why there is a need for them from a public health point of view, of course, they also have huge consequences for those travelling in and out of our country and for those working in the sector.

The aviation sector has been a substantial participant in our employment wage subsidy scheme. The scheme has made a huge difference to those sectors. My colleague, Deputy Carey, spoke at length about the impact the employment wage subsidy scheme had on the aviation sector, which is particularly concentrated in his area.

The Minister, Deputy Ryan, made additional support schemes available for national and regional airports to support the sector. An extensive array of supports were brought in to sup-

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port the aviation sector, but, of course, we are aware of the many issues and the need to get that sector open. However, no Government or support scheme can take the place of normal revenue created by normal travel in and out of our country. The Government will continue to work to get the balance right between our public health imperative and how we can have access for an economy that depends so much on being open.

Deputy Collins raised the issue of bills and tax liabilities created by the operation of the temporary wage subsidy scheme. The Revenue Commissioners indicated there were many options regarding how that bill can be paid. I know that for many the arrival of this bill came at the end of a very difficult year but the temporary wage subsidy scheme was created in the most difficult of circumstances and at speed and the employment wage subsidy scheme deals with the issue of taxation at source. It has been raised by others who are concerned about it but the principle of income being taxable is one that is critical to stand by, even if the income is made available directly by the State, which is what happens in the wage subsidy scheme.

I thank the Deputies for their contributions and I commend both these motions to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Minister for Finance(Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I move:

That Dáil Éireann approves the following Regulations in draft:

Emergency Measures in the Public Interest (Covid-19) Act 2020 (Covid-19: employment wage subsidy scheme) (Date Adjustment) (No. 2) Order 2021,

a copy of which was laid in draft form before Dáil Éireann on 8th April, 2021.

Question put and agreed to.

Sitting suspended at 5.38 p.m. and resumed at 5.58 p.m.

European Defence Agency Project: Motion

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): I move:

That Dáil Éireann approves Ireland's participation in the European Defence Agency Project - Maritime Surveillance (MARSUR) Networking - Operational Support and Development (MARSUR III) pursuant to section 2 of the Defence (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2009.

I appreciate the opportunity to present the motion to the House following discussion at the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence on 30 March. In commending the motion to the House, I will briefly outline the function of the European Defence Agency, EDA, and the background to the programme that Ireland wishes to participate in. The agency was established by a joint action of the Council of the European Union in 2004, to support the member states and the Council in their effort to improve European defence capabilities in the field of crisis management and to sustain the European Security and Defence Policy as it stands now and develops in the future.

On 6 July 2004, the Government approved Ireland's participation in the framework of the

European Defence Agency. Ireland has participated in a number of EDA projects since it commenced our participation in the agency in 2005 in the areas of force protection; chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear; counter-improvised explosive devices, C-IED, training; military search training; cyber ranges; a joint procurement project for satellite communications; and indeed the previous projects related to maritime surveillance. As Deputies will be aware, all projects related to the EDA are voluntary and countries decide to buy into them if they want to, but certainly are not forced to.

6 o'clock

The proposal put forward by me today is to seek approval for Ireland to participate in the follow-on EDA project relating to maritime surveillance, MARSUR, networking, operational support and development, MARSUR III. This is the third iteration of the MARSUR projects. To give some background on what the MARSUR project is, the main objective of the EDA MARSUR programme is to further develop a recognised maritime picture, RMP, exchange network among member states. An RMP is a picture or map that shows all vessels and activities that are present in a particular maritime area. It links to national and international data and information on vessels, the marine environment, infrastructure, etc., that have been compiled from various monitoring and surveillance systems.

The MARSUR project continues to enhance, upgrade and develop the capability for participating member states to share different levels of classified information across the network. The MARSUR projects have assisted member states, including Ireland, to combat drug trafficking, smuggling, illegal immigration and migration and international terrorism. Better exchange of information plays an important part in protecting maritime trade, the maritime environment and natural resources. This sharing of information, which is stipulated through the EDA MARSUR projects, also contributes to safety at sea. MARSUR III is an excellent example of where member states can come together, work with each other, and deliver a capability that can match the emerging threats in maritime surveillance.

Participation in this project will also allow the Naval Service to consult and compare best practice with other member states in developing the RMP and analysing it. Without the MARSUR III technical support, the systems in the Naval Service will be negatively impacted, and the expertise and technological advances that have been achieved to date will quickly become redundant. The MARSUR III project will last for six years with the possibility of extending for a further two. I will seek approval for Ireland's participation in the project for the life of the project, including any extension. The cost of participation is €50,000 per year for the life of the project. There are 15 other members states preparing to join the MARSUR III project, which is another indication of its value and importance. These include Belgium, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Malta, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Spain and Sweden. It is a real mixture of countries, including quite a number of other neutral states.

As the State's principal sea-going agency, the Naval Service provides a unique sea-going capability. The Naval Service is tasked with providing a fishery protection service, general maritime patrolling and surveillance, and is ready to respond to, for example, an aid to the civil power request, a pollution incident, or search and rescue and recovery missions. The search and rescue and recovery mission is particularly pertinent given the recent support that the Naval Service has provided to the crew of the *Ellie Adhamh*. Having access to both national and international data on maritime surveillance through the EDA MARSUR projects is essential for the Naval Service to continue to discharge this important role.

The system has also supported the Naval Service in discharging its role in the Mediterra-

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nean Sea in association with other member states. Participation in this project will, therefore, enhance the capability of our Defence Forces to undertake the roles assigned to them by Government, both at home and overseas. I thank the members of the select committee from all parties for their engagement in the debate last month. As I said before the committee, Ireland's participation in this project in no way undermines our military neutrality. Ireland's participation in this project is about strengthening our Defence Forces' capabilities. I hope we had a good opportunity to give people the reassurance they needed at the committee.

The programme for Government and the White Paper on Defence are very clear on this issue. Our participation in projects like EDA MARSUR makes a lot of sense with regard to capacity building and support for our Defence Forces in the future. I commend the motion to the House.

Deputy John Brady: While we are here to discuss the motion relating to Ireland's participation in the European Defence Agency project on maritime surveillance, we cannot separate the MARSUR project from the larger and more substantive issue of Irish neutrality. We have heard, and will continue to hear, arguments about the benefits to Ireland of participation by Ireland in the EDA. What we will not hear from the Government parties is how this participation comes with the continuing price of undermining our military neutrality as a nation state.

We cannot debate MARSUR without an examination of the continual erosion of neutrality that has steadily taken place since the early 1990s, when Ireland failed to take the opportunity to follow the example of Denmark in establishing protocols that would exempt our country from involvement in the mounting campaign for the militarisation of the EU. Since then, the Government has committed Irish troops to EU- and NATO-led military missions, and to EU battlegroups led by NATO member states. We have witnessed the deployment of Irish troops to overseas training missions without Dáil approval in the service of foreign governments, which are guilty of some human rights abuses. A real danger has re-emerged following the departure of Britain from the EU, with the advent of Brexit, that the issue of an EU army will be once again allowed to rear its head.

It is a matter of record that leading figures in the EU are committed to the creation of a continental army. We in this House have a duty to protect the principle of Irish neutrality, a principle that has served our nation well. We in Sinn Féin believe passionately in the contribution that our Defence Forces have made and continue to make to our standing as a nation on the world stage. We believe passionately in the principle of neutrality. We believe passionately in the role that a militarily neutral Ireland can make internationally as a potential initiator of peace in war-torn regions as a nation with its non-aligned reputational status intact. Neutrality is one of the elements in the combination of factors that contribute to the strength of the soft power that Ireland can wield in international affairs. It is soft power from which our country accrues a level of influence otherwise unattainable to a nation of our size. We owe our election to the UN Security Council to our non-aligned, honest broker status.

I do not believe that neutrality is a passive affair. It is not an abdication of responsibility within the sphere of international relations. It is the licence we possess that offers us the opportunity to make a difference. This Government seeks to continue on a path that would lead to our Defence Forces' submersion within a larger continental force, where we would possess little or no influence and our Defence Forces would be subordinate to the command of foreign leaders in pursuit of geopolitical gains that heretofore were not our concern. This Government seeks to continue on a path which would lead to our Defence Forces being submerged within a

larger continental force, where we would possess little or no influence and our Defence Forces would be subordinate to the command of foreign leaders in pursuit of geopolitical gains that heretofore we did not consider our concern.

The actions of the Government will undermine the standing, credibility and effectiveness of our nation as an honest broker on the international stage. To this end, Sinn Féin believes we must oppose this motion. While it may offer some tactical gains in respect of technical nous in the area of maritime surveillance, it would come at the larger strategic and moral price of our status as a neutral nation state.

Deputy Sorca Clarke: At a time when our Naval Service is shockingly understaffed and the working conditions of our service men and women are in dire need of being addressed, we should be seeking to make our Naval Service fit for purpose and to look after those personnel and value them appropriately. The Commission on the Defence Forces is well underway. We have a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to chart the course of the Naval Service and our Defence Forces in general.

Instead, we are debating Ireland's participation in yet another joint EU exercise within the framework of the European Defence Union, EDU. This is being cloaked as a means of modernising the Naval Service to compensate for decades of underfunding by giving it access to new software and allowing us to collaborate more closely with our European neighbours. There is some innocuous language around a common maritime picture, whereby we will create a common image or map of vessels in EU waters under the European framework and access to the new MARSUR exchange system, MEX, software.

This all seems very positive and, indeed, some of it would be. Some significant issues and concerns remain, however, regarding the new elements being introduced to MARSUR. First, there would be the option of exchanging classified information within the network following implementation. While we should always desire close co-operation and friendly relations with all our international neighbours, questions remain concerning what types of information can be exchanged and what limitation will be placed on this protocol.

Worryingly, the stated aim of this initiative is to enhance MARSUR's operational use of Common Security and Defence Policy, CSDP, missions and operations. This could gradually erode Ireland's capacity to act independently in foreign and defence policy. This only makes sense under the presumption that Ireland's interests will always align with the EU bloc in this area. The fact that the majority of EU countries are also members of NATO should give rise to questions about aligning ourselves entirely with EU policy in the field of foreign affairs and defence, which could undermine Ireland's position of neutrality.

What makes this even worse, however, is that the stated policy of CSDP is to allow the EDU to take over certain areas of capability movement and security in respect of terrorism and natural disasters, but which will allow NATO to handle the defence of territorial integrity. In this way, the EU CSDP acts as a support to NATO strategy and policy, where they both act interdependently. Under current arrangements, Ireland is already acting in the Mediterranean with EU forces. While our activity there is absolutely honourable and saves the lives of many migrants every year, the fact is that it is done under Permanent Structured Cooperation, PESCO, arrangements, meaning that NATO troops are freed up to take part in warfare elsewhere. Ireland does not need to be acting in a supporting capacity to any country participating in warfare abroad.

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Under MARSUR III, the participating countries will share software in the context of the MEX system. We will have a common EU database, common EU maps and a common operating system. At what point will our services become so interdependent that it will be impossible to pull back? I was deeply concerned to find out at a recent briefing that Belgian military personnel could not remove themselves from international naval and ground force operations if they wanted to for this exact reason.

We should always collaborate with our neighbours. Joint development and procurement of non-deadly weapons and software, while maintaining our independent system, has a lot of merit. Joint actions in helping migrants have their merits, so long as it is not done with the intention of freeing up NATO forces for other actions. Data protection and cybersecurity collaboration, so long as Ireland maintains independent systems, absolutely has its merits. However, we can work with our partners without losing that independence and without losing our stated non-alignment.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: Under the Defence (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2009, we are obliged to approve formally any European Defence Agency, EDA, projects and that is why we are debating this motion. I am not a member of the select committee, but I read the report of the debate on Committee Stage. Some of the issues just raised were not raised at that time, certainly not in those terms. My understanding is that we must be very careful in measuring our involvement in any EDA project, and that is why it requires the approval of the Dáil.

As the Minister has indicated, the projects we are involved in include cyber defence training, which is very important, because I think we are very vulnerable to cyberattack and it is something we must take seriously; satellite communications; counter-improvised explosive device, IED, training, which is an area we are expert in and in which we could give training; and military search capacity building to enable us to be involved in sea rescue etc. These are all things which merit deep consideration in respect of co-operation to develop our skills base.

Everybody I have heard in my time in this House defends Irish neutrality. It is a fundamental principle of our constitutional stance and our international role. Neutrality, however, does not mean being neutered. We do not take defence seriously. We talk about neutrality, but we have extraordinarily weak Defence Forces. Concerning the notion that we are going to be subsumed into a greater army, we do not have the capacity to be subsumed into very much right now. The real concerns I want to put to the Minister, which he will probably not have an opportunity to respond to now, so perhaps he will do so in writing, relate to the capacity of our Naval Service to do the various tasks it is assigned. Those tasks have now been extended because of the requirement to do additional fisheries patrols in the absence of Britain from the European Union.

I am deeply worried. I understood that in our own time in government, with virtually no money, we managed to provide four state-of-the-art, new vessels for the Naval Service, but several others now also need replacement. The flagship, the *LÉ Eithne*, has been scheduled to have been replaced since 2015. I understand that consultants are now to be appointed, or tendering for consultants to be appointed is underway, with a view to designing a ship. A huge amount of thought has already gone into that aspect, so why can we not go ahead and provide that vessel? I also understand that two former Royal New Zealand Navy vessels are being considered for fishery protection. Perhaps that is a good idea and maybe the details of that proposal will be given by the Minister. I state that because we certainly need to increase greatly the number of vessels we have.

There is no point in having new vessels, however, if we do not have the crews to man or person them. Last month, *the Irish Examiner* reported that the Naval Service had just 862 trained personnel. The agreed manpower level for the Naval Service is 1,094, which is already small, but some 24 more people are seeking to leave. I understand that at least two vessels are now docked for want of trained personnel.

All these wonderful projects are great, obviously if we have co-operation within the very strict confines of Irish neutrality. We debate that, and we should not exaggerate when we do not trespass beyond it. We should be co-operating with other neutral nations which are participating in these projects, like Sweden and Malta, with a view to developing and proudly seeking to promote our view of and approach to international affairs. I think that approach served us well in our campaign for the seat on the UN Security Council.

We are outgoing, we are supportive and we want to have the best training available for our personnel. My real fear, however, concerns the development of the skills needed now in a growingly technological world. We need to have a new focus on defence because we are very vulnerable to incursions into our airspace and our seas, and we do not have the capacity to identify and resist those incursions without external help. I hope the Minister will begin to set out his plans to begin to rectify that in the immediate term. There is no point in having very elaborate agreements in terms of co-operation, upskilling and training if we do not have the personnel to man the vessels in the first instance and the adequate number of vessels to provide for the various tasks that we give our Naval Service.

Deputy Gary Gannon: We had a detailed discussion of this motion at committee. The conversations we had were thorough and well-thought-through. At the time, I felt that the responses from the Minister were quite adequate in terms of why this motion is being brought forward and what we stand to benefit from it.

The contributions I made then have not changed. I will reiterate them here. There is a substantial difference between Irish neutrality and self-isolating for the sake of it. What is on the table here is not a threat to our neutrality. I am adamant in respect of fighting back against that suggestion. That has ramifications beyond this Chamber and I would not like to give the impression that it does.

On the idea of collaboration, we all agree, and it has been asserted both here and at the committee, that the idea of collaborating in respect of our defence and defence in a multitude of forms is massively important. However, we cannot just use rhetoric alone as a form of collaboration and say we would like to collaborate only on the conditions of X, Y, and Z, which will exist, without actually specifying how it will be done. What is being suggested here is quite reasonable, namely, the idea of collaborating on cyber attacks, against satellites, on bomb disposal and military sea rescues. To me, that sounds absolutely fine. I made the point at the committee that it does not go far enough.

When we think about the incursions into our spaces that have occurred over the past 18 months, they have occurred beneath our seas through fibre-optic cables, which represents a genuine threat to Ireland's space as a centre of power in respect of data and infrastructure. We have seen other powerful nations actually focus in on that. My criticism of MARSUR is that it does not go far enough in terms of protecting us against what have been genuine real threats to our space over the past 18 months. I ask the Minister how he intends to come up with a strategy by which we can defend ourselves when this happens, because it is actual threat. I also ask

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what the expectations of our involvement in MARSUR III will be. We are not paying a huge amount of money in respect of our contribution to being involved. We do not have sonar or massive vessel capability, for example, so what exactly are we offering or will we be expected to offer into the future?

There is also the very real issue of morale and the retention of staff in our Naval Service. We must highlight that issue and bring it to the fore in our concerns. When we table proposals such as MARSUR III, we should always be taking into account that to meet the relevant criteria we will have to improve X, Y and Z when it comes to the retention of staff in our Naval Service. I know the Commission on the Defence Forces has been established. On the issue of the European Defence Agency, EDA, I would also like to ask how we can ensure our vessels are manned, operable and the actual threats we face in respect of our air and sea spaces can be catered for.

I know that MARSUR III is an on-the-surface plan. I genuinely think that we have missed an opportunity here to consider what is going on below the surface, and that we are not yet capable of defending ourselves there. We need to be standing strong on that front, because I imagine that it is something that will represent a greater threat to us in the decades to come. It impacts our position as a centre of communications.

Deputy Mick Barry: What is at stake here? At the committee, the Minister said this was about avoidance of duplication and the enhancement of co-operation. More generally, Government supporters of these proposals have argued that they deal with less controversial issues, namely, military searches, bomb disposal, maritime surveillance, etc. The message really is that we should move along and there is nothing to see.

There is a context to this, which relates to the tasks of the European Defence Agency. Part of the discussion must be around defining what the European Defence Agency is, whose interests it represents and what it does. Before I get into that, I would just make the point that if we are saying that it is about secondary or tertiary issues, the Irish State taking on those issues frees up resources for other nations to deploy in the European Defence Agency's more overtly militaristic projects. I choose my words carefully.

What is the European Defence Agency? It was set up in 2004 with the mission to improve European defence capabilities. The total defence spend of the 26 EDA affiliate nations at the start of 2019 was €186 billion, representing an increase of 5% on the 2018 figure. Defence military spending had risen in those combined nations for five consecutive years at that point.

Who benefits from that? The arms industry benefits from that. The great German anti-militarist and socialist leader, Karl Liebknecht, once said: "For capitalism, war and peace are business and nothing but business." That is as true today as when he spoke those words. To be clear, we can talk about this being about maritime surveillance and military searches and so on. However, in reality, the Irish State is proposing to take on some of those tasks, which will free up the other nations in the European Defence Agency to engage in the more overtly militaristic tasks of the EDA.

I see the Minister looking over with interest at the points that I am making. I am not surprised in the slightest that Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil are supporting the proposal. I take my hat off to both of them. They are consistent in their support for proposals of this kind. However, attention needs to be drawn to and light shone on the fact the Green Party is supporting this proposal. That is not what the Green Party is meant to be about. That is not what many people

who have built up the Green Party down through the years are about. It is not what many young people who vote for the Green Party are about. It should reverse its position and oppose this proposal for what it is. If it does not, people should note exactly where the Green Party stands on the issue. The same point applies in relation to the Social Democrats. I listened to the comments of Deputy Gannon when I came into the Chamber. I had - perhaps naively - thought the Social Democrats would be opposing this proposal.

It is a proposal that helps and assists the European Defence Agency, which has a militaristic, pro-arms industry agenda. Neither the Green Party nor the Social Democrats should have any truck with that.

Deputy Cathal Berry: I thank the Minister for coming to the Chamber to debate the final stages of this motion on the EU maritime surveillance programme. It is a project that I am very much in favour of. I am in favour of it for three reasons, primarily. First of all, it is very simple. From Ireland's perspective, it consists of just a single computer and a single telephone in the naval base in Cork, which will allow our navy to communicate securely with both voice and data to like-minded navies across the European Union. It really is that simple. It is modelled on the same carbon copy on which the Garda Síochána's interaction with Europol is based. If the Garda Síochána can discuss matters from a security perspective with like-minded colleagues throughout the EU, I see no reason that the Naval Service cannot do the same on constabulary matters relating to the high seas. A cost of €50,000 a year is peanuts when one considers what we are getting in return.

The second reason I am in favour of this motion is that, as an island nation, it is absolutely in our interest to maintain law and order on the high seas, particularly in our territorial waters. The programme will assist the Naval Service to deter, detect and intercept rogue vessels beyond the horizon, before they make landfall in this country. It will interdict the smuggling of drugs, people and weapons. All Deputies know that every town and village in rural, regional and coastal Ireland has a drugs problem. The product is coming across the Atlantic in large shipments, at which point they are easier to detect. Once the shipments make landfall, they are broken into smaller consignments that are much harder for the Garda Síochána to detect. We must intercept these vessels beyond the horizon, before they make landfall to save the public from the scourge of drugs.

The third reason I support this motion is that, as a result of Brexit, our maritime security has never been more important. We now have a third country on our doorstep with a massive sea border. The land bridge is gone and we are much more reliant on our sea lanes of communication. We also have massively more responsibilities from a sea-fisheries protection perspective.

Those are the three reasons I support the motion. I am pleasantly surprised by the enlightened comments of Deputies Howlin and Gannon on the motion. They gave an accurate assessment and appraisal of the situation. I suspect their comments have not gone unnoticed in military communities and constituencies up and down the country. They are hugely appreciated.

The one concern I have about the MARSUR project is not the project itself but our ability to contribute to it. It goes back to the crewing of our vessels, as Deputy Howlin rightly pointed out. I fully appreciate that the Minister is working very hard on this issue but we have yet to see tangible improvements. As he is an accomplished mariner in his own right, he knows that a ship is only as good as its crew. We have a problem in the Naval Service from a crewing perspective. How is it that if we need an additional 600 customs officials for Brexit, an additional

400 Covid contact tracers or an additional 600 vaccinators, we can recruit and retain them, we cannot seem to recruit and retain sufficient sailors? I fully accept there is a multitude of reasons, but the dominant factor is that they are not being paid enough for the job they are expected to do. There is no point in tinkering with the peripheries on this issue. The elephant in the room is pay and it is an issue that must be resolved.

The reason this problem exists in the first place is that our sailors have no access to the Workplace Relations Commission or the Labour Court. They have no access even to pay talks to negotiate and barter a better deal. They cannot engage in any industrial action whatsoever and, as a consequence, they have absolutely no bargaining power. They are relying on this House and the politicians in it to defend them. The navy is in a very unusual spot in this regard. It is very capable of defending everybody else but it is incapable of defending itself from an industrial relations point of view. That is where we step in.

The Commission on the Defence Forces offers an essential opportunity to solve this problem. I am a little concerned, however, that the chairperson of the commission, when he was before the defence committee earlier this week, was very circumspect, which I understand, about solving the pay issue in the Defence Forces. It is very clear from the terms of reference of the commission that pay structures and pay systems can be recommended or advised against by it. I encourage the Minister, if there is any clarification required from a terms of reference point of view, that such clarification be given to ensure the commission has the appropriate powers, independence and autonomy to solve this problem once and for all.

Deputy Michael Collins: I am sharing time with Deputy Mattie McGrath. Ireland's involvement in European Defence Agency projects is underpinned by the Defence (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2009. It is important to note that the legislation states that any participation in such projects can be only for the purposes of enhancing capabilities for UN missions. In addition, our participation is contingent on those UN missions having the stated aim of peacekeeping, crisis management and conflict prevention.

The Government has consistently advanced motions such as this one through the Oireachtas while, at the same time, not showing a similar level of urgency in dealing with the concerns of the Defence Forces. It is deeply disappointing that the issue of pay and conditions, which we have often discussed in the House, does not receive the same level of attention. There have been many promises by this Government and the previous one on this issue, but there has been little progress. Will the Minister outline to the House the situation regarding pay and conditions and the core issues around defence-related expenditure?

These issues must be addressed. The time for rhetoric and empty promises has long passed. Our Defence Forces have a proud history of peacekeeping, yet they are being let down by the Government, with levels of remuneration well below the minimum wage. It is vital that the men and women of our Defence Forces have access to the very best training, expertise and modern technologies in order that they are properly equipped in their peacekeeping duties. Our Defence Force members have world-class skills and abilities in the area of peacekeeping.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I am delighted to have an opportunity to speak to this motion on the European Defence Agency. The Government is good at bringing these motions forward and having them passed in the House. Like other Deputies, I have the utmost respect for our Army and navy. We need to support, respect and pay their members. We are doing none of that other than paying lip service to it. We have seen during the Covid pandemic how important the

Army has been to us in helping with quarantine arrangements and God knows what else. The Army is always there, its members out on the roads and everything else, getting a fraction of the subsistence payments members of the Garda Síochána receive. It is downright insulting.

The Commission on the Defence Forces is looking at pay and conditions. Action must be taken on these issues. We have seen a flight of very experienced personnel. I suspect there might be much more of that when the airlines reopen and some pilots have gone on to different careers. Our Defence Forces personnel are highly trained and skilled and have spent decades of their lives in service. They simply cannot afford to stay *in situ*. That is a fact, not a political point. We are good at supporting the types of projects we are discussing and linking up with our European colleagues, but we are not so good at supporting our own. *Ní neart go cur le chéile*. Where is that attitude when it comes to our Defence Forces?

I have a further concern for this neutral country of De Valera, God rest him. I am worried by the things that are going on in Europe and have been going on for a long time. If we have European vaccine passports, this surveillance system will be used to spy on our own people, who must have vaccine passports to travel. Where will our freedom be gone? It was dearly fought for by the men of 1916, 1921, 1922 and 1923. We have talked about vaccine passports during the Covid debates in this House. However, in 2018 and 2019, committees of the EU were looking at vaccine passports, before we ever had a pandemic or so-called pandemic. The issue was being discussed at that time and the minutes of the meetings are on the record. It is known that the EU was discussing those proposals and how to roll them out. I have a deep suspicion now of the EU and of our participation in what is going on. Are we serving the people? I do not think so. We are serving greater masters, greater powers and greater countries. We also have Brexit and all the troubles associated with it. Is it any wonder we have it? The UK was not going to put up with that nonsense. It is a proud nation and we had many difficulties with it over the centuries.

We have to re-examine the situation fully. Just passing motions like this one without having a full understanding of what they are is not good enough. We certainly do not have that full understanding of this motion, although the defence committee looked at it and talked about it. Everything in here is gone very strange lately. To think that the Green Party is supporting this motion is amazing. I suppose it is a *quid pro quo* for Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael being forced to support unpalatable measures in the climate action Bill. We are getting a Dolly Mixture or a Christmas cake. It is a damn bad mixture and I would say it will be a long time before the dough rises up to suitable proportions for the eating of a nice cake. It is not a very pretty cake. I say we should make haste slowly on this matter and ensure we have a greater understanding of what are the real issues behind it.

Deputy Thomas Pringle: I am thankful for the opportunity to contribute briefly to the debate.

On 19 February 2019, in the previous Dáil, we debated a motion on the European Defence Agency. The now Government Chief Whip and Minister of State and then front bench spokesperson for defence, communications, climate action and environment, Deputy Jack Chambers, took part in that debate from the Opposition benches. He said at the time:

I note the breath-taking speed with which the Government and the Minister of State have advanced this business through the House. It is disappointing the defence matters of pay and conditions that we often discuss do not receive the same level of attention. We have had

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many promises about deadlines around quarter 1 and quarter 2 and we have had continuous delays, yet this proposal is being advanced within a two-week window. Perhaps the Minister of State could address pay and conditions and the core issues regarding defence-related expenditure in this House with the same degree of urgency and at a similar pace.

I wonder what progress has been made on pay and conditions for our Defence Forces since Deputy Chambers's party got into Government?

I also spoke during that debate more than two years ago. I spoke against the motion and at the time said "militarisation, EU defence integration and the overall global militarisation agenda is being pushed and shaped by private sector interests". That statement remains true today. The contribution of another Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, also makes for interesting reading. I wonder what happens when people enter Government? Is there a cloakroom to hang some principles and policies and they get left behind as people move into fancy offices, surrounded by admiring advisors? Is it the cloakroom of electoral promises and morals?

The Twitter biography for the EDA states "The European Defence Agency (EDA) is the hub for #EUDefence co-operation". The word "hub" makes it sound like a cosy little get-together, planning military moves over tea and biscuits. On Tuesday this week, the EDA held a large conference entitled "Impact of Disruptive Technologies on Defence". It had 15 speakers lined up for panels on disruptive technologies, artificial intelligence and autonomous systems. The robots are coming so everyone be sure to be nice to your Alexa.

I have linked with some colleagues and activists on this motion and was informed that things have been very quiet recently. There is an aura of opacity around this area that is not acceptable and does nothing to build trust. Artificial intelligence gets a mention as well. One take on the matter is that the EU must be ambitious if it wants to match the Chinese military. The chairman of the EU military committee, General Claudio Graziano, stated "the prospect of slashed defence budgets and cancelled training missions has weakened the EU's ability to defend itself." The four-star general told the *Financial Times* that the 2017 launch of a multibillion euro fund for military equipment and tech research was a step in the right direction, "even if not as fast as I would like", while calling for a greater focus on technology and expanding international maritime co-operation, the latter being one of the PESCO tasks the Government has signed up to.

General Graziano's remarks come as many EU nations ponder how to pay for the vast debts run up as a result of the coronavirus outbreak. Military budgets across the EU are likely to be slashed to help cover the costs of the health crisis. There may be some benefit to this crisis if that is the case. According to the defence publication *Janes*, there is a forecast of a "noticeable slowdown" in military spending this year. Budgets across the EU continued to increase in 2020, up almost 5.6% on the previous year but they are likely to weaken in 2021, according to the magazine. Global defence spending increased 1.9% to \$1.9 trillion in 2020.

General Graziano suggested the EU must continue to be ambitious if it wants to keep up with Chinese military reforms, stressing that the EU should focus on technological research and development in response to the potential threats posed by cyber and hybrid warfare, which involves political and economic aggression. He also warned of the future use of disruptive technologies such as artificial intelligence, which is all grist to the mill of the European Defence Fund and its military-industrial cheerleaders. He noted that the EU would have to bolster its maritime security powers to help counter China's claims to disputed territories in the South

China Sea and the Taiwan Strait. General Graziano stated the EU needs to play a greater role in the area with a “more systematic presence”. So, can we look forward to the Irish Navy, when it gets crews ready, heading to the Taiwan Strait to protect “our” interests?

Other news reported that the European Union has approved its first defence research budget. The 2021 to 2027 budget is estimated at over €7 billion and has been “designed to foster an innovative and competitive industrial base to increase Europe’s military autonomy”. First there was a pilot programme, designed by Brussels, called the Preparatory Action on Defence Research, which was “to test the ability of European companies to undertake defence research projects”. A Spanish research institute, AITEX, based in Alicante, has been awarded the contract.

What exactly is our role in all of this? Do we participate at EU defence meetings? What is our contribution to the EU defence budget? How does our Government protect our neutrality in this? Perhaps the Minister and Government can explain that as well. So much money. What a waste.

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): I thank everybody who took the time to participate in the debate. I do not agree with all the views but it is certainly appropriate that with any of these projects, we have a debate and make an informed decision on the back of that.

We had the opportunity to discuss many of these matters and I thought, naively, that the conversation, including questions and answers, in committee had addressed some of the genuine concerns that Members expressed. For some Members it was as if we did not have that discussion at all. The same matters raised then were raised again today as if somebody else has written the script. Of course, everybody is entitled to make their views known but it is important for us to try to deal with the facts. What we are asking today has no bearing on Irish neutrality. Today we are supporting what the Defence Forces would like to see us do, which is to give them the advantage and opportunity to be able to share information via a secure piece of infrastructure that would allow them do their job more effectively.

Some Deputies seem to be suggesting that Irish neutrality equates to Irish isolation from all co-operation with neighbours, friendly states and member states that share the EU with us. A number of other neutral countries are part of this project, including Sweden, Malta and Finland. I presume their ministers are being asked the same questions before they opt into projects like this. It is what we are doing. Nobody is forcing Ireland into this space. We are choosing to want to be part of this along with many other countries because we think it makes sense.

Deputy Berry outlined three reasons for supporting this and they sum up the matter. This is essentially a secure database and communications system that allows countries to co-operate and give each other a heads-up because we share waters. As vessels cross boundaries at sea, we can share information about what is coming and going. That does not undermine our neutrality or lead to a European army or more investment in military activity by other countries. It does not happen because we are co-operating in sharing data and efficiencies, becoming better at stopping drugs coming into the country or giving us better search and rescue capacity. It is about giving us the capacity to choose to go to the Mediterranean to opt into a mission that saves lives. That is what it is about.

Of course there is a political debate around European security and defence policies and it is legitimate to have it. My position is and will continue to be that Ireland can be of most use

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globally and to itself by remaining a neutral state and not aligning ourselves militarily with any alliances.

Deputy John Brady raised the example of Denmark and suggested we should do what it does. Denmark is a very active member of NATO and totally unapologetic about it. It does training exercises with NATO. What is the Deputy talking about? This is not about compromising our independence or neutrality. It is about co-operating in areas where we choose to co-operate because it means a safer environment for our Defence Forces. Let us consider the idea that we would not co-operate with other friendly member states that we co-operate with on so many other issues, that we share the Single Market, a customs union and a political union with, and that we would not co-operate with them on cybersecurity threats, on understanding what is at sea and potentially coming into Irish waters and on search and rescue capacity. Let us have a real discussion about what I am seeking the Dáil's approval for today, as opposed to having a debate on what is not being asked of the Dáil today. That is what I ask. I thought we had got to that point in the committee, where we addressed the issues of genuine concern. I believe there were genuine concerns about neutrality issues and whether there were compromises in this project of which we are seeking to be a part.

I take the points made. Believe me, I am in the middle of this in terms of the capacity issues in the Defence Forces, and particularly the Naval Service, in respect of human resources, recruitment and retention. We are taking that issue extremely seriously. It is a major priority for me. The commission is examining that as well. We are working with the commission and certainly not waiting for the commission to report to continue to work on the recruitment and retention issue. However, for the purposes of today's debate, I ask for approval from the Dáil to co-operate with other member states, some of which are neutral and some of which are not. I commend the motion to the House.

Question put.

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

Common Agricultural Policy Reform: Motion [Private Members]

An Ceann Comhairle: The Minister is now present. I will just point out, and I mean no offence or challenge to the Minister, that it is increasingly becoming the case that Ministers are turning up late for the commencement of business. The day is long and difficult enough, and we are 20 minutes behind schedule. This is the second time today that we are late commencing a debate because we have been waiting for a Minister.

I call Deputy Pringle.

Deputy Thomas Pringle: I move:

That Dáil Éireann:

recognises that:

— the correct management of Good Agricultural and Environmental Condition 2, GAEC 2, land is vital as they are, in the main, low input managed landscapes and farmland habitats that must continue to be farmed if they are to provide the water quality, biodiversity and carbon capture that we need;

— calling into question the status of GAEC 2 land as eligible hectares is completely counterproductive, given that the definition of eligible hectare is quite broad:

‘is used for an agricultural activity or, where the area is also used for nonagricultural activities, is predominantly used for agricultural activities, and which is at the farmer’s disposal. Where duly justified for environmental reasons, eligible hectares may also include certain areas for agricultural activities only every second year’

it is extremely concerning that the Council of the European Union (the Council) foresee actions that will result in farmers being unable to carry out an ‘agricultural activity’, which itself is not a restrictive definition and to be deemed to have zero agricultural activity on the land (if there was any activity it would be an eligible hectare as a right) would have major implications for farmers in the future, amongst which would be access to:

— eco-schemes;

— Pillar II environmental schemes; and

— the status of the farmer as an ‘active/genuine farmer’;

— the European Union definition of an ‘agricultural activity’ is both:

— the production of agricultural products which includes actions such as raising animals or cultivation including by way of paludiculture, where agricultural products means those listed in Annex I to the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) with the exception of fishery products, as well as cotton and short rotation coppice; and

— the maintenance of the agricultural area in a state which makes it suitable for grazing or cultivation, without preparatory action going beyond usual agricultural methods and machineries;

— in the implementation of GAEC 2, a new GAEC in this reform, it is absolutely key that the land remains as ‘agricultural area’ maintained by ‘agricultural activity’ and can qualify as ‘eligible area’; and

— the amendment proposed by the Council, as a result of the implementation of a standard under GAEC standard 2 listed in Annex III of this Regulation, and the positioning of this amendment in the text, implies that the land will fall outside this definition as a result of the management practices that are to be prescribed for it in meeting GAEC 2 and this is unacceptable as if we are to ask more of farmers and raise the bar of what is required of them then the rules and standards governing this must reflect this;

believes that:

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— all GAEC standards should be developed within the context of the European Union Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) Strategic Plan with achievable goals for the farmers, and in meeting these targets their land should be eligible for payment as a right, not as some sort of derogation; and

— as this is a new GAEC for changed circumstances, new thinking must come with it, and, if necessary, legislation amended to meet the new goals as the current Council position on this would allow the Member State to abdicate their responsibility to put in place a structure so that farmers can remain fully compliant with new requirements; and

calls on the Government to call for the amendment tabled by the Council of Ministers to the CAP Strategic Plan regulation in Article 4(1)(c) to be withdrawn, in order to maintain and protect the ‘agricultural area’ status of these lands, with the amendment being: ‘as a result of the implementation of a standard under GAEC standard 2 listed in Annex III of this Regulation’.

This motion relates to the Common Agricultural Policy, CAP, legislative proposals and specifically the proposed draft of the eligible hectare in Article 4, which is of major concern. There are massive implications for farmers on carbon-rich soils, including peatlands and wetlands. These farmers have managed these environmentally sensitive landscapes for generations, as all Ireland’s uplands and peatlands are managed landscapes and have evolved in harmony with traditional agricultural activity.

In the current proposals for the CAP strategic plan, some areas being addressed are quite positive for farmers on high nature value land with carbon-rich soils. Convergence or flattening of payments is moving forward, with current proposals to set convergence at 85%, at least, of the national average, to give a fairer distribution of payments to all farmers. It is disappointing that the Irish position is still at 75% of the national average given the fact that the majority of farmers would benefit from further convergence of payments. The unfair system of variable greening in the 2013 reform, in which farmers were paid different rates of payment for complying with the same regulations, is being replaced with an eco-scheme payment. It is vital to ensure that the eco-schemes will be paid at an equal rate to all farmers who comply with the regulation.

To counteract these positive moves towards a more equitable CAP, we are faced with an attempt to remove carbon-rich soils from the CAP payment system to undo all the work that has been done to achieve a fairer CAP. Over the past number of months, I have been made aware by some of the farm organisations of the serious implications outlined in these proposals. They have engaged extensively with me at national and EU levels and sought clarity from officials in the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine on the Council amendment. In assessing the detail, I have major reservations relating to the Council of Ministers amendment of Article 4, which states: “... as a result of the implementation of a standard under GAEC standard 2 listed in Annex 111 of this Regulation”. This amendment gives the member state the tools to set unrealistically high standards for GAEC 2 and in doing so removes agricultural activity from the land. This leaves farmers carrying out an agricultural activity on these soils in a very precarious and uncertain position.

In the implementation of GAEC 2, a new GAEC in this reform, it is absolutely key that the land remains as agricultural area maintained by agricultural activity and can qualify as an

eligible area. The amendment proposed by the Council, and the positioning of this amendment in the text, imply that the land will fall outside this definition as a result of the management practice that is to be prescribed for it in meeting GAEC 2. This is unacceptable. If we are to ask more of farmers and raise the bar of what is required of them, the rules and standards governing this must reflect the new requirements. I believe that all GAEC standards should be developed within the context of the CAP strategic plan with achievable goals for farmers, and in meeting these targets their land should be eligible for payment as a right, not as some sort of derogation as is suggested here.

The correct management of these areas is vital. They are, in the main, low-input managed landscapes, farmland habitats, that must be continued to be farmed if they are to provide the water quality, biodiversity and carbon capture that we need. Calling into question their status as eligible hectares is completely counterproductive. The provisional definition of eligible hectare is quite broad. It states:

...is used for an agricultural activity or, where the area is also used for non-agricultural activities, is predominantly used for agricultural activities, and which is at the farmer's disposal. Where duly justified for environmental reasons, eligible hectares may also include certain areas used for agricultural activities only every second year.

It is extremely concerning that the Council foresees actions that will result in farmers being unable to carry out an agricultural activity, which itself is not a restrictive definition. To be deemed to have zero agricultural activity on the land - if there was any activity it would be an eligible hectare as a right - would have major implications for farmers in the future, among which would be access to eco-schemes, Pillar II environmental schemes, areas of natural constraint, ANC, payments and the status of farmers as an active or genuine farmer.

The question must be asked and clear answers given. If a member state sees a need for this amendment then it must be visualising the implementation of measures that will remove all agricultural activity from this land. In what scenarios does the Minister see the need for this derogation?

Currently, these lands are predominantly farmed with livestock through low intensity sustainable farming systems. It is my strong opinion that any proposal that removes or eliminates farming activity will have negative implications, both in terms of biodiversity and carbon sequestration, as lands risk becoming unmanaged and overgrown, which will create a fire hazard and other negative environmental outcomes.

I ask that the Minister support the commission's original proposal and the Parliament mandate as I believe the inclusion of the Council amendment puts the agricultural area status of this land at an unnecessary risk. The farmers who manage these lands have always recognised the importance of the correct management of these valuable farmed ecosystems. The threat they see in the current Council position has motivated them to campaign on this issue and they have brought it to my attention.

Any possibility of this land losing its agricultural status in return for providing this valuable public service is unacceptable to me, especially with the prospect that the sequestration activity could be used to offset unsustainable activity elsewhere. The treatment of farmers here is in stark contrast with the treatment of farmers availing of the derogation of the nitrates di-

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rective, whose eligibility status has never been questioned. This planned unequal treatment of farmers, based on soil type, directly contravenes the principle that CAP must be implemented in a non-discriminatory manner and in accordance with the charter of fundamental rights of the European Union.

The final wording on the GAEC 2 is not yet agreed. The Minister will no doubt draw attention to the three existing positions and the importance of these. While they are important, they are not the critical issue. The critical issue is the insertion of the amendment, which would hand the member state much broader powers in the implementation of GAEC 2.

The Minister may well say that it is not his intention that the land will lose its agricultural status but this amendment gives him and future administrations the power to do so. He will no doubt talk about this document protecting farmers and giving Ireland maximum flexibility. However, who are we protecting farmers from? Who is endangering the farmer? Ireland will be setting all the standards so do we need protection from our own authorities?

The EU will not be setting the standards. Brussels will not be telling us what to do here. If we want to protect these lands, the people who will provide protection are the farmers who have managed it for generations, supported by good agricultural policy.

We will also be told we are misrepresenting the facts and that this is not a derogation. I have statements from EU officials, however, who have called it a derogation from baseline eligibility standards and have acknowledged we have legitimate concerns. This needs to be resolved and this House can play a role in that by debating this fully tonight and making sure it supports this amendment.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I dtús báire, ba mhaith liom a rá go bhfuil mo thacaíocht 100% taobh thiar den rún seo. Ní saineolaí mé ar an ábhar seo ach tá an t-uafás léite agam agus cloiste agam ó chuir an Teachta Pringle an dua air féin an rún seo a chur os comhair na Dála agus é faoi bhrú.

Ba mhaith liom a rá gurb é an rud a léimeann amach ná go bhfuiltear ag déileáil leis na feirmeoirí mar chuid den fhadhb seachas ag déileáil leo mar chuid den réiteach. Sin an rud atá ag teastáil, do na feirmeoirí beaga ach go háirithe, in iarthar na tíre, ó Thír Chonaill síos go Ciarraí.

Is gá déileáil leo mar chomhpháirtí ar an leibhéal céanna toisc gur cuid den réiteach iad. Bhí an Bille maidir le hathrú aeráide os ár gcomhair inné agus beidh deis agamsa, an tseachtain seo chugainn, labhairt faoi. Tá an Bille sin ró-lag agus, mar sin, tá mé 100% taobh thiar de bheart a chur i gcrích maidir le hathrú aeráide agus maidir leis an rud atá taobh thiar den rud seo. Ach tá an leasú atá feicthe agamsa baolach amach is amach do na feirmeoirí mar go mbeidh siad ag brath ar cibé cén Rialtas atá ann amach anseo agus cibé cén tAire atá i gcumhacht chun maolú a thabhairt dóibh. An chéad uair eile, nuair a bheidh na cainteanna ar siúl maidir le CAP nua, i gceann cúpla bliain eile, beidh siad thíos. Beidh siad ar chéim níos ísle mar nach mbeidh an zoning talmhaíochta i gceist.

I thank my colleague, Deputy Pringle, for doing this. He was under time pressure for other reasons within our group and he managed to get this tabled for discussion tonight. I am certainly no expert when it comes to this matter but I have read in preparation for tonight and I have listened. I have talked with Irish Natura and Hill Farmers Association, INFHA, and indeed, over the last number of years, I have attended all of their meetings in Conamara and throughout

County Galway. I have listened to them carefully and they come across to me as a very reasonable organisation. They also come across to me as protectors of our environment, who seek to farm in a sustainable way.

Before I go any further, I want to preface my remarks to say that next week, I will be speaking on the new climate Bill. I listened carefully yesterday when it was up for discussion. I believe it does not go far enough. I am, therefore, absolutely 100% determined to force this Government to take serious action on climate change.

Equally, I would not support any organisation that did not have that to the fore. I see this organisation doing exactly that. If this amendment goes through as part of the CAP negotiations, it will allow this Government or a future government to take away the status of agriculture from their land. It seems to me that in dealing with the farmers like this, we are dealing with and looking on them as part of the problem rather than as the most important part of the solution on how to farm sustainably and how to deal with climate change. If we remove that agricultural zoning from the land they have farmed for a very long time in a sustainable way then we are creating terrible problems. We are also dealing with those small farmers in a most unequal way to how we dealt with bigger farmers and various derogations on various issues, as has been mentioned by my colleague.

I ask the Minister, and I see that he is listening carefully, if he is opposing this motion or accepting it. Would he look at this with the view to not letting this amendment go through? Who is pushing this amendment? Is it himself as a Minister on the Council of Ministers or who is doing it? I understand he has a very important say in this and he can stop this going through. I do not know; perhaps I am being unfair to the Minister and it is not coming from him.

Certainly, however, when I look at what the farmers have presented to me and what they have argued, I cannot see any reason for going ahead with this. They specifically ask a number of questions, which I believe are very reasonable. They ask why baseline conditions are being created under the good agricultural and environmental conditions, and they are only talking about GAEC 2, which farmers cannot achieve without undermining the eligibility of their lands. They ask why, after this has been pointed out, the Council is still determined to continue on this route. This is important and something we must address. I say this as someone who is absolutely 100% behind climate change legislation. Their third question relates to how much of this is driven by the urgent need to offset carbon emissions for the benefit of other sectors of society. What is Ireland's position, as represented by the Government, on this?

Unfortunately, I am speaking before the Minister of State. I hope he will tell us that he is not opposing this motion. It is a specific and practical motion which urges the Government to work with the small farmers and the organisations who are asking that the zoning is not taken away. The Minister of State may indicate that he is not going to do that. However, if the amendment is made to GAEC 2, it will allow the Government or those which succeed it to remove that in the future. The farmers to whom I refer would then be left in a position where they would be obliged to seek a derogation in order to get their payments. They are now at a disadvantage working from a much weaker position, as opposed to being equal partners in our fight for sustainable farming methods and in tackling climate change.

Again, we have a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity this year in the aftermath of the pandemic and the declaration of the climate and biodiversity emergency in 2019. We also have the data from the international agency which drew our attention to the high emissions rates, notwith-

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standing Covid. We are going in the wrong direction on every level. We need to work with the farmers. We particularly need to recognise the small farmers who have struggled year after year to maintain a sustainable type of living which benefits all of us and the environment. I appeal to the Minister of State not to oppose the motion and to work with us.

Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Martin Heydon): I am sharing time with Deputy Ó Cuív.

I must express my surprise at some of the comments, particular those from Deputy Pringle. I consider myself a proud European and I believe that Ireland benefits from being at the heart of Europe. I also believe passionately in the principle of subsidiarity, enshrined in the Maastricht treaty, with member states having power over as many elements as they can rather than having all powers centralised. I was shocked to hear the Deputy state that he would prefer power to be centralised in Brussels rather than the Government having a say in such matters.

I welcome the opportunity to speak on this important matter. This Private Members' motion will allow me to provide greater clarity regarding the Council's proposals for GAEC 2. This is important because the motion demonstrates that there may, unfortunately, be a misunderstanding about the proposed Council text as set out in the draft CAP regulations. The proposed text, which is intended to provide certainty to farmers that vital direct payments will continue to be paid, appears to be misinterpreted in some quarters as indicating intention on the part of member states to prevent farming on such lands. This is simply not the case. That is not and never has been our intention.

The motion is not being opposed because it is vital that we use this opportunity to build a better understanding of what is, admittedly, a complex drafting issue. Most importantly, I want to ensure all parties have a clear grasp of what we intend to put in place under the proposed GAEC 2 for Irish farmers.

The next CAP has many goals to achieve. As has always been the case, it needs to support farm incomes. However, it must also ensure the schemes implemented under the new CAP strategic plan deliver significantly improved environmental outcomes. The European Commission's proposals for the next CAP have been subject to ongoing debate in the European Council and European Parliament since their publication in June 2018. Both institutions agreed their respective positions on the proposals in October 2020. Trilogue discussions between them and the European Commission commenced in November 2020 which are still ongoing.

The new CAP has an increased environmental ambition. It must also help achieve the ambitious targets outlined in the European Green New Deal through, for example, the farm to fork and the biodiversity strategies. I support this. Likewise, I support the protection of our farm incomes. Sustainability of farm incomes is as important as sustainability of our environment and society as set out in the draft 2030 strategy for our agrifood sector. This increased ambition was a key factor in reaching the final agreement on the CAP budget last year, when, in the face of planned significant cuts, the Government achieved an increase in it. As a result, the way in which farmers receive support is changing with the emphasis shifting much more definitively to a focus on better environmental outcomes, delivered through the green architecture.

This green architecture combines greater environmental and climate ambition with Pillar 1 payments with further environmental achievement through Pillar 2 schemes. As part of the increasing climate ambition, it includes new standards such as the introduction of a new GAEC

2 which aims to protect peatland and wetlands due to the importance of these carbon-rich soils. The protection of such areas is important for climate change mitigation and adaptation, as well as for biodiversity.

The Council's proposals for the new CAP set out clearly that it is member states which will define these areas and set out the appropriate management practices to be deployed. I, along with the Minister, Deputy McConalogue, have consistently called for appropriate national flexibility in this regard. Together we have succeeded in ensuring that the Council's position provides for that.

We need to be able to consider how best we can implement the new standards to take account of our own farming structures. When we set this new standard, it will relate to how people will continue to farm these lands and not to the prohibition of all agricultural activities in these areas. With our feet on the ground, we as Ministers know what is needed in Ireland better than anyone else.

GAECs are minimum standards. That is how they are defined in the Council text. It is the stated intention of the European Commission that the other elements of the green architecture, such as eco-schemes and multi-annual agri-environmental schemes, should also be made available to farmers affected by GAEC 2 standards to reward farmers who implement further actions which achieve an additional environmental benefit. It is my view that this will be the case. The Council text does not prevent this from happening in any way.

To support this increased environmental ambition under the new CAP, the Council general approach aims to provide certainty to farmers that direct payments will continue for these lands, regardless of any issues which might occur due to the introduction of new schemes such as the new eco-scheme. The Council text includes proposed language that guarantees that farmers' lands will continue to be regarded as eligible hectares for the purpose of direct payments regardless of any requirements of eco-schemes or the standards of GAEC 2 and GAEC 9 with regards to non-productive features and landscape features or land managed under paludiculture. However, this additional language in Article 4 of the draft CAP strategic plan regulation has no bearing on what the actual requirements of the GAEC 2 standard will be. This, as I have said, is up to member states to define. We are essentially asking farmers to commit to new basic standards. We are also seeking their participation in additional actions under eco-schemes and multi-annual agri-environmental schemes.

As we embark on the next CAP, farmers are surely entitled to have certainty that payments will continue. This desire on the part of member states at Council to provide certainty for farmers, as well as having it reflected in the regulations, is being misinterpreted as an intention to introduce standards that would prohibit farming on these lands. This is simply not the case.

The standards for GAEC 2 will be set out by member states, with national flexibility, under the language in Annex III of the draft CAP proposal. When the Commission made its proposals for this new GAEC, the suggested text was "appropriate protection of wetland and peatland". The Council wanted to ensure the protection under this GAEC, while effective, also clearly left scope for subsequent eco-schemes and multi-annual environmental schemes to be implemented on these lands. We also recognised that additional time would be necessary to put the new requirements in place. Accordingly, the Council has chosen to amend the wording to read "minimum protection of wetland and peatland at the latest by 2025". Far from including a text to ban agriculture, the Council has proposed a text that allows additional time for the new standard

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to be introduced, while, at the same time, recognising that further environmental programmes, such as eco-schemes, are capable of being implemented on these lands.

I consider that it is the European Parliament's suggested language, "effective protection of wetland and appropriate maintenance of peatland", that places greater demands about what the new standard will consist of than the Council's text. The European Parliament's text also demands the immediate implementation of the new standard at the beginning of the new CAP which it continues to press for in trilogue negotiations.

Those who have raised their concerns about the new standard should consider this aspect carefully. They should highlight these issues and raise their concerns with MEPs. We need a better understanding from the European Parliament that more time is needed to allow farmers and member states prepare for this new GAEC, as well as asking it to support the Council's wording on minimum protection.

Despite the misunderstanding at the heart of this motion, there is a key point that I fully share with the proposers. We need to ensure appropriate and effective national GAEC standards that farmers can clearly understand and implement as they go about their day-to-day farming on these lands. It is the Minister's intention to establish an appropriate and effective GAEC 2 standard which will allow continued appropriate agricultural activity, as well as voluntary environmental practices on such lands, through participation in annual eco-schemes or multi-annual agri-environmental and climate measures. We are both committed to this. I consider that the Council wording provides the appropriate flexibility to set minimum standards, allows for sufficient time to implement the new standard and continues to provide certainty regarding farmers' payments. As the trilogue process continues, the Minister and I will remain fully engaged on all aspects to ensure the best overall outcome for farmers and the agrifood sector.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: We all have the same objective, namely, to ensure that in the future farmers can continue to farm in a sustainable way that they know best on the peaty soil of these lands. Some of this is in the lowlands and there is a fair amount of it in places such as Connemara. Having sat down with the Minister today and considering the complexity involved with the different institutions, he is following a very clear path to ensure the objective of having farming continue in these areas. I accept that there are people outside of government, such as in the NGOs, who have a different vision for these lands but the Minister is not one of them. Deputies on all sides of this debate want to ensure a good CAP. I respect the Irish Natura and Hill Farmers Association, INHFA, which has raised this issue. I am delighted it is being debated today because it is not often that the poorer farmers get their day in the sun in Dáil Éireann. We need to work together, keep talking and negotiating and present a common front in Europe. Our MEPs and the Government need to build a common front to ensure the interests of small farmers are protected and people can continue to farm these lands in a sustainable, as they have done for generations.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this motion. The first thing to be said to the Minister, Minister of State, Government and officials is that we do not believe they are intentionally trying to take people away from the CAP. However, it is possible that none of them will here in five or ten years' time. That is not to wish them bad luck. Let us be very clear on what is happening; the Department is saying this is an amendment whereas the European Union, in the documents we have seen, is saying very clearly that this is a derogation. Deputy Ó Cuív, the previous speaker, talked about a derogation on the bogs, and they got that. What happened nine years later, when Deputy Ó Cuív was no longer the

Minister? What happened with the water derogation? This is not a derogation agreed between a farmer and Europe but one that a Minister in this country will ask Europe for, not in this CAP but in five or ten years' time. It is not that people are having a go at the Government. This is, unfortunately, the way that things have worked down the years, no more than with the animal remedies at the moment. The consequences of what was signed ten years ago and what was done nine years ago are now known.

This will be the first time ever that there will be two systems under CAP, from the hills of County Donegal to the bottom of County Cork, and from the hills of County Dublin to Connemara and the wetland and peatland areas. That is the reality and no one can deny it. There is a front door. Someone in the Golden Vale is sure to be in but someone living in the hills of County Donegal - it is not all bad land there and I come from worse land than anyone else - or another peaty area is being mapped out at the moment, right across this country. Every county has a bit of this land. Take below in Listowel. Reclaimed bog there is where the best of cows are giving milk. The fear is about what is down the road under this system, especially if one looks at Pillar 2. The Minister of State talked about eco-schemes and how he wants people in them. Let us say I have land where there was once habitat and I go into an eco-scheme or the old rural environment protection scheme, REPS, and let the briars grow and let everything be great for biodiversity. I defy a Minister to tell me that in five years' time, when the Pillar 2 scheme is over, I can go in with a digger and make that into good agricultural land to qualify for the single farm payment. I would not be allowed to touch it under the rules and regulations coming from Europe and the biodiversity strategy the Minister of State, Deputy Noonan, and the Government has signed for 2030.

What is coming on the right hand that is going to run along with the left hand? Let us say the agricultural policy is the 2030 one whereby 30% of our country, both land and sea, is to be designated and 10% of that will be what people will not stand on. With the best will in the world, we will not have enough land owned by the State to cover that. This is the fear, and the Minister understands it because he understands County Donegal and the west. The fear among farming families is that they will be put in this section and told their land is not good enough to qualify under the normal single farm payment but that because of the derogation, they can come in the back door and it will be sound. That will work and I do not doubt the Minister's and Minister of State's honesty in trying to ensure farmers are looked after. However, this is the first thing that has happened under GAEC. Whether the word "minimal" or some other wording is used, there will be a new wording for peatlands and wetlands. That affects large swathes of many counties right around the country. I am not leaving out any county. This is not the south against the north or the west against the east; it is about all farmers and small family farms. If one looks at the farms that are on or near areas that are peaty, they are generally small family farms where people are trying to make a living.

Let us look into the glass ball to see the future. What if we get a Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine like the Minister for Transport, Deputy Eamon Ryan, and he or she decides whether we go for the derogation and whether we ensure this land is eligible and that land is not or that we will leave land basically uninhabitable? This is the fear that needs to be addressed and now is the time to talk about it. What will happen then is those farmers fear that down the road they will be looking at what I call a theme park where they once farmed their sheep or their cattle. We should bear in mind that most of these areas are suckler and sheep areas. These people once farmed, sent their children to school and went to the local shop in these areas but, unfortunately, from then on, there will not be a need for any of it. That is the genuine fear.

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This is not scaremongering by the INFHA or anybody else. There is a document which we have seen, and I will give a copy to anyone who wants to it. The word “derogation” is written in it in four or five places. When we have the word derogation, we must be very careful because of what the word means about what is down that road. This will not be between the agricultural farmer and Europe but between Europe and the member state and the Minister then has to go and look for it. The Department is saying it is an amendment. Why is one person saying one thing and others are saying the opposite?

We welcome that we will be more in control of our future because too much stuff comes from Europe. The only problem is that if a Minister has his tongue out to ask Europe for something, he is on the back foot. It will be a sad day that we have a two-tier system and where someone comes from decides where he will be in the CAP that is going to come in.

Let us look into the glass ball and look into the future. What happens if we get a Minister for Agriculture and the Marine like the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, deciding whether or not we go for the derogation and whether we ensure that that is not eligible or that is not or that we will leave it basically uninhabitable? What will happen then is those farmers - and this is the fear, it needs to be addressed and this is the time to talk about it - those farmers fear that down the road they will be looking at what I call a theme park where they once farmed their sheep or their cattle. We should bear in mind that most of these areas are suckler areas and sheep areas. Where these people once farmed and where they once sent their young kid to school and where they went to the local shop, unfortunately from then on there will not be a need for any of it. That is the genuine fear. This is not scaremongering by the INFHA or anybody else. There is a document which we have seen, and I will give a copy to anyone who wants it. In four to five places in the document the word “derogation” is written. When we have the word derogation, we must be very careful about it because of what the word means about what is down the road. Let us be clear on this because it is not between the agricultural farmer and Europe. It is between the member state and one has a Minister who has to go back and look for it. The Minister’s Department is saying it is an amendment but why is one person saying one thing and the opposite being said the other way? We welcome that we will be more in control of our own future because too much stuff comes from Europe. The only problem is, if a Minister has his or her tongue out to ask Europe for something then he or she is on the back foot. It is a sad day really, that there will be a two tier system in the CAP that is going to come in which depends on the land u come from. It will probably be more or less a regional system that depends on where one comes from.

If the Council of Ministers does not agree it when the Minister goes to Europe, then it will not be agreed. I am asking the Minister to make sure that the wetland and the peatland farmers will not be told they came in the back door and were given a few pounds and that it was not that they were great farmers or that they have great land. The day the Minister does that will be the day we will go down a wrong road in farming. I wonder if there is a theory and a ploy somewhere - I am not accusing the Minister of this - that we will get areas of the country with less and less farming going on, which might help the other areas that might be in a little bother with the carbon they are emitting. That is the danger and the worry and it is not scaremongering to point that out.

The word we are hearing is that this will be nailed down one way or the other in May. The Minister has the opportunity. Given where he comes from, the Minister is well familiar with the situation with land on which mountain ewes live, where family farms have survived for years and from where the greatest of people have come out. Regardless of whether it was the

Golden Vale or a hill or mountain where heather grows and from where mountainy sheep come out, if a family was reared in either of those places, they are both entitled to the same chance in life and the same application for the single farm payment. Those families should be under no obligation that they will be brought around this way into a scheme for the time being but that they will not do X, Y and Z. There is even a part of that document that talks about not being able to clean a drain. How have we farmed in the past on boggy or marginal land? We had to shore the land and clean the drains because that was the only way to get the water off it to make sure people earned a living on it. A lot of people will not even bother if that stuff comes in on the single farm payment. I hope some European is not thinking that where people brought the sweat of their brow for years to drain their land and make it workable to rear a family, they will no longer do so now.

Deputy Matt Carthy: I commend the Independent Group and Deputy Pringle on bringing this motion before the House. The specific proposal within the good agricultural and environmental condition 2, GAEC 2, framework with which this motion has an issue is one which, for the first time in the history of the Common Agricultural Policy, will differentiate agricultural land, calling into question whether carbon-rich soils will qualify into the future as eligible hectares for payment.

In the context of European regulations and directives, as has already been alluded to, exact words are incredibly important and they carry specific meanings. The Council has adopted what many would consider the most extreme wording of any of the parties to the negotiations that has threatened the agricultural status into the future of many of our family farmers. That agricultural standard is what is used to determine whether these lands are eligible hectares. Under the CAP, “agricultural status” and “eligible hectares” are the words of crucial meaning. Both are sacrosanct to farmers because without them, many farmers would no longer be economically viable. Farmers receive their basic farm payments and access to virtually every single agricultural scheme based on their land having agricultural status and thus being deemed as eligible hectares. No section of our farming community would accept a move against the agricultural status of their land. By differentiating those farmers from others, we are opening the door to further differentiation down the line.

Farmers, particularly those in the north and the west, have been down similar roads with the Department before. Natura 2000 designations came with a derogation but in 2017, of the 927 that were assessed, only 13 were deemed eligible. With a record like that I can understand why the Department is not inclined to use the term “derogation”, even though the assistant secretary referred to it as such at a meeting of the agriculture committee last week. The simple truth of the matter is that the wording of this proposal bears a striking resemblance to that same derogation in the Natura 2000 derogations. It is a derogation that, along with the old rural environment protection, REP, scheme, was used as the carrot to the designation’s stick, a derogation that, in the end, screwed and continues to screw farmers with regard to that directive. Here we are again with the Department lining up to give those same communities another kick in the teeth and telling them it is orthodontic.

The Department may ask 50,000 farmers to essentially trust it. That is what the Minister has asked us to do. If it is a choice between the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, with its record, or an organisation such as the Irish Natura and Hill Farmers Association, INHFA, I trust the members of the INHFA. They are the people who are familiar with how new regulations override old derogations and they are familiar with the explanations as to why an existing derogation can no longer be used, explanations that often only make sense to mysti-

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cal interpreters of directives and regulations in the Department itself. Farmers are being asked time and again to meet ever-rising environmental standards and Irish farmers have risen to the challenges time and again and absorbed the costs, by and large, within their margins. What is required in the next CAP is not another attack on Irish family farms but a guarantee that we will support our farmers to continue to deliver for rural Ireland, the Irish economy and the environment. Farmers have always delivered for us and what they need now is a Minister and a Department that will deliver for them.

As well as honesty and an upfront and determined attitude, we need a fair CAP. The Minister has yet to give the commitment that he will undo the gross inequality at the heart of the Common Agricultural Policy that allows people like Larry Goodman to draw down €500,000 per year while farmers in the Minister's constituency are struggling to make ends meet on pittances. That needs to be addressed in the next CAP and the Minister needs to give a commitment that he will deliver that. Farmers need fair prices, not the tokenistic and minimalistic approach the Minister has outlined for the unfair trading practices and regulations, which were unimaginative and insufficiently ambitious in the first place. They need a meat regulator with real teeth to break the stranglehold of the retailers and processors and they need fair play from the Department.

The Department needs to start seeing the family farmers of Ireland as partners, not as enemies and people to catch out and put another penalty on. It needs the three Fs, as I have mentioned to the Minister on a number of occasions, namely, fair play, fair prices and a fair CAP. This has to be a new departure for Irish family farmers.

Deputy Martin Kenny: I commend the Independent Group on bringing this motion. The issue at the heart of this is one of fair play for farming communities, particularly those on poorer marginal land across the west and the areas from the Minister's constituency right down the whole west coast and across all of the country. These are places where we have land in highland areas and where there are shallow bogs where farmers continue to farm. It is not as if these areas are left to run wild. We see that happen across areas of commonage and there are vast areas of that nature in my constituency. Yet, there is a perception out there that these areas somehow or other need a fence put around them and to be let go wild, as if that will solve some kind of ecological problem. It simply will not and we have seen that from various tests that were done in different parts of the country. Various pilot schemes were done from the Burren right up to Donegal.

We understand that what needs to happen is that farmers cannot have a section of land of this nature, particularly peat lands, designated. We cannot have that land being set aside as separate and different and not being considered as agricultural land. If this is done under a derogation then that can be reversed. That is the fear farmers have. While I am not suggesting that the Minister or the Government are setting out to do that at this point, clearly this wording leaves the option open for that to happen in the future. The Minister needs to be responsible and to close off that option in order that it cannot happen in the future. That is what needs to happen here. I mention the farmers, particularly those on marginal land, most of whom are family farmers. Usually they rear suckler cows and sheep. They are at the bottom end of the ladder. They are the people who make the least money at all times. They need to make sure they get fair play. If the Minister delivers fair play for them he will do a good day's work but what has been the case in the past under successive Governments is that the Minister with responsibility for agriculture is seen as the Minister for the food industry rather than for the farmer. The primary producers are who the Minister needs to look after. In this case, the primary producers

are those on the worst land in the north west and other areas of the country, which this particular legislation will damage. The Minister needs to close it off to ensure these producers are not damaged. I appeal to the Minister to ensure he stops this before it goes any further and change the wording. It cannot be a derogation. If it is a derogation it can be reversed and that is totally wrong.

Deputy Martin Browne: I thank Deputy Pringle and the Independent Group for tabling the motion. Detailed scrutiny is foremost in determining whether an obligation signed up to on behalf of our rural and agricultural communities will work for or against them. For the purposes of ensuring that the fears of those farming on carbon rich soils are on public record, I will relay a number of questions and concerns to the Minister. If these concerns are not addressed in the course of the remaining negotiations, then the Department of Agriculture, Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Green Party will have to answer to rural Ireland for their failings. Signing off on a course of action that is such a threat to the sector it affects the most is not something anybody here should be willing to do.

Fundamentally, the motion deals with the need to maintain and protect the agricultural area status of the lands referred to in GAEC 2. The Minister must acknowledge the wording of GAEC 2 proposed by the Council of Ministers has the potential to leave farmers powerless regarding the agricultural status of their land, and at the mercy of future Ministers when it comes to their entitlements for basic income supports, for which farmers are paid per eligible hectare of agricultural land. It has already been acknowledged that if the amendments proposed by the Council of Ministers were signed off, a member state derogation would be needed to receive payments. This already acknowledges the fundamental problem with the wording. It also raises concerns that if such a derogation, or whatever other term is used for this instrument, is put in place, any future Minister or negotiations could effectively abolish activity on these lands permanently. This level of uncertainty simply cannot be tolerated.

As I have said, I want to relay a few of the many questions I have received from farmers to give the Minister an idea of their concerns and the faults they see with the current wording. They have asked the following questions. Will the Minister give examples of what he means by “maximum flexibility” as regards the Article 4 amendment? The Minister is acutely aware of how in 2017 maximum flexibility failed for more than 98% of 927 Natura farmers who sought it. How will GAEC 2 flexibility or derogation work in a commonage situation with multiple farmers on the same derogation-eligible hectare? Is land subject to GAEC 2 flexibility on the eligible hectare automatically eligible for the eco scheme, the areas of natural constraint scheme and pillar 2 agri-environmental schemes? If, as a result of a GAEC 2 derogation to eligibility, land loses its status as permanent grassland established under local practices, what timeframe does the EU allow to re-establish local practices traditional to the area concerned? We cannot allow the Minister to accept decisions that undermine the agricultural area status of these lands and risk so many livelihoods. These are the reasons I am supporting the motion.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: We have a real opportunity with CAP to introduce fairness to farming. I will not go over the many years when farmers have been let down. I am speaking particularly about farmers in Mayo and the west of Ireland. A Minister from Donegal should understand what I am speaking about. I am very concerned about the complete breakdown of trust between farmers and the Minister and the Government at this particular time. The fear is palpable among the farmers I have spoken to. What they are afraid of is the derogation that we have been speaking about and the two-tier farming system they see coming down the track. If the Minister is saying to them there is nothing to worry about and everything is guaranteed,

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then he needs to tell them and communicate with them, the INHFA and others who represent the farmers and who know what they are going through.

A derogation is not a guarantee. The Minister is asking the farmers to trust, and to trust into the future. Farmers with wetlands and peatlands will not be left behind. I will tell the Minister what was said to me this evening. I was told that regardless of Covid or restrictions, farmers throughout the country will march if something is not done to allay their fears and provide a guarantee and give them the respect they need and demand. It is about issues such as not being able to clean a drain, as has been mentioned. The first time I mentioned in Mayo that people would need planning permission to put up a fence, people thought I was absolutely crazy but it very quickly came to fruition. I commend the Independent Group for giving us this opportunity to speak about these issues.

I need to talk to the Minister about the results based environment-agri pilot project, REAP, being brought forward as we speak. The planners were briefed on it the other day. Farmers with commonage and mountain grassland are being excluded. The commonage has been included in all previous agri-environmental schemes. There cannot be any degrading of payments made on commonage and mountain land in the new CAP budget.

As part of the climate action plan, there is an effort to designate even more land and put in place even more severe designations and restrictions. We cannot allow this to happen. There has been no consultation with farmers on how they will work or what levels of compensation will be paid. Serious negotiations must be carried out with the farming bodies before any designation is done. Farmers must be paid for the land that has already been designated. We are not just speaking about the land that has been specifically designated, we are also speaking about the buffer zones around it. We are speaking about the sterilisation of land along the western seaboard. We have seen it happen over the years since the original directive. It has to be halted and debated properly.

Approximately ten years ago in the Mullet Peninsula in Mayo, which is from where I come, there was a designation for the corncrake. Again, this was with very little consultation with farmers in the area. The knock-on effect of this has been huge. At the time, farmers were assured they could continue farming practices as they were. Now they see their dates for cutting have been altered, as have other things, which prevent them from maximising their land. Their land is where they produce their income. I have thought for a long time this raises a real constitutional issue with regard to the right to own property. Farmers own this land and we tell them that they own it but they cannot use it as a factor of productivity to earn an income.

The issue of planning restrictions due to designation has had a catastrophic impact on farm families and rural development. As the Minister knows, many landowners now have to produce an environmental impact statement when applying for a dwelling house, an agricultural shed or even a new fence. How can this make sense? The Minister is asking these same farmers to trust that a derogation will protect them in future. They were told all of the costs would be borne but now we see all of the costs must be borne by the landowners because of designations they never asked for. They were misled about it. The habitats directive designated land.

Government agencies know everything about the designation of land but they have conveniently forgotten the second part of it, whereby the landowner was to have been compensated for the loss of income or the costs incurred in the designation. This has never happened. This has caused trust to break down along the western seaboard. If the Minister takes REAP as the

way forward, farmers on designated land will receive no compensation whatsoever for adhering to the restrictions imposed on them because of the designated land. I ask the Minister to go back and speak to the INHFA and listen to it, and speak to the other farming organisations and the farmers themselves to repair the trust that has broken down between the Government and farmers. I am afraid the buck stops with the Minister. It is the Minister's job to fix it and I am asking him to do it. I know the Minister is only in the job six months but I am asking him to fix this.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I commend Deputy Pringle and the Independent Group for bringing this motion forward. It is one of those rare occasions when one can agree with almost everything that is being said in this room from the point of view that there is a responsibility on the Government to deal with the INHFA. A number of us have been contacted by it and other farming organisations. It is a lack of trust that they have. It is these protections that they demand. All of them are talking about it. We cannot create a situation where we have even more non-viable family farms. Family farms are an absolute intricate part of rural living in Ireland and we need to protect them.

I thought the whole idea of CAP was twofold - to protect family farms, particularly so that we can produce high-grade food to the highest specification, and that GAEC would be absolutely guaranteed. Deputy Carthy, in particular, has spoken about the inequalities that exist in CAP. He has said that we have to go back and negotiate better to deliver for the people who live on and derive their business from farms and the rest of us who get the benefit of that. We need to ensure that is done.

It is beyond doubt that we cannot have a differentiation in types of land. We cannot have a situation where farmers will be unable to use that land into the future and will not get the benefit of payments that are required to ensure we maintain viable family farms and a top-class food supply.

In fairness, I would like to reiterate the point Deputy Connolly made about farmers. We had the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Bill yesterday and an element of what is missing is partnership. Along with Deputy Carthy, when he was still a jet-setting MEP, I attended an eye-opening IFA regional meeting in Monasterboice. A group of people who were there started talking about the moves that would need to be made as regards agriculture and farms to deal with the climate crisis. They are up for that conversation. There is an absolute need for the Government to have that conversation and to deliver a roadmap for something that is sustainable for all of us. It needs to be done as soon as possible.

Deputy Holly Cairns: Every time I talk about agricultural policy to people who have no interest in farming, I can see their eyes start to glaze over. I get it. It can seem like a niche subject that has nothing to do with the vast majority of the public but this could not be further from the truth. We do not often view the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine as a public service, as we do the Department of Health or Housing, Local Government and Heritage, but it is. Agriculture is how we feed ourselves as a nation. It is how we use our land. It is how we sell ourselves as a country to the world. What could be more fundamental than that?

As consumers, we have a right to know that our food is produced in a fair and ethical way and I can tell the House that at present it is not. That is at the expense of the majority of Irish farmers, migrant and Irish workers, consumers and the environment. This is a direct result of the policies implemented by CAP and the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine.

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The power the Department wields is considerable and it needs to be held accountable by politicians and the public.

I thank the Independent Group for bringing forward this motion which enables us to talk about this matter. It raises a larger point about the role of the Dáil in relation to the Government's position on agriculture and marine policies at an EU level. The forthcoming CAP will shape not only farming practices but also the Irish landscape for potentially the next decade. It is unbelievable that there has essentially been no time devoted to discussing the Government's approach. The Minister and his officials are representing farmers and the State, with no oversight or scrutiny from this House.

I have had to rely on parliamentary questions to get clarification on the Minister's position at the trilogue negotiations on CAP on issues such as convergence. The Commission seems to be pushing 75% convergence whereas the European Parliament proposed 100% convergence. What is the Minister's stance on this? I am unsure. In response to my parliamentary question, the Minister informed me that his Department is analysing the effects of all proposed changes and engaging with European colleagues and farmer organisations which will inform the decision-making process. This implies the Minister does not have a position. This implies the Minister is sitting at the Council of Ministers saying nothing. This implies no real representation of Irish farmers in the negotiations. However, representatives from farming organisations have informed me that the Minister and his officials have a position that they are pushing the minimum convergence, and for member states to have a greater function in setting the levels. Either the Minister does not have a position, or he does and he is not willing to make it known. Either way, there is no scrutiny.

I have also sought that we would have an opportunity to vote on the position the Minister is taking in the negotiations but he informed me, also through a parliamentary question, that this will not be voted on by the Oireachtas. The reality of the matter is that decisions are being made about measures that affect farmers across the country with practically no input from Deputies. Reduced Dáil sittings have decreased our opportunity to question Ministers but I am seeking that the Minister will ensure that a session is added to the calendar as soon as possible to allow him to present his position on CAP negotiations and for opposition Deputies and, indeed, back-bench Deputies to ask questions. This large point relates directly to the motion before us. The only reason we are talking about this part of the new CAP is thanks to the Independent Group using one of its few Private Members' business slots for this. This motion is doing what the Government should be doing. It is outlining a clear position in support of Irish farmers, allowing the House to discuss it and directing the Minister to adopt that stance in the negotiations. It is clear, simple and transparent.

This motion highlights the GAEC 2 category, which refers to land with carbon-rich soils, such as uplands and drained peatlands which form significant portions of farmland in the west of Ireland and in the midlands. One could draw a line from halfway through my constituency to the Inishowen Peninsula and most of the land to the west would fall within this category. It is the land of small farmers and the land of families who depend on basic payment schemes. Through the work of the INHFA, Deputy Fitzmaurice, Mr. Luke 'Ming' Flanagan MEP and others, it has come to light that the CAP proposals could exclude this land from the basic income support for sustainability, BISS, scheme, which will succeed the basic payment scheme. This proposal from the Council of Ministers has implications for farmers' ability to access other payments because this land would no longer be classified as an area in which agricultural activity could take place. Deciding land is ineligible flies in the face of anything that resembles a just

and fair transition.

For too long, we have seen small farms become more and more unviable. We have seen farmers' protests the length and breadth of the country, the inhumane treatment of workers in meat plants and so many more injustices in our food system, while a small few big players reap the lion's share of rewards. This issue falls in the same failing system. As the INHFA points out, this move essentially separates carbon-rich land from all other farmland in terms of CAP. It will remove the right of certain farmers to payments, with eligibility dependent on unclear derogations of which there is no guarantee. This motion rightly calls for the Government to oppose this amendment to protect the agriculture area status of these farms. Speaking at the Joint Committee on Agriculture and the Marine last week, Department officials provided a passive summary of CAP negotiations. It was as if events were happening around them and they had no influence on them.

We remain unclear on what the official position is on GAEC 2 land. I would be grateful if the Minister could outline, in plain language, if will he will be opposing this motion at the Council of Ministers. Will he do everything he can in the negotiations to ensure that these lands will still be classed as agricultural - we all know a derogation does not go far enough - and that families farming them will retain their right to earn a living? My constituents in Beara and Mizen, around Bantry and on the islands, who will be affected by these proposed changes, are eager to hear his response.

The beef plan protests and subsequent beef plan task force epitomise the way the Department treats farmers and avoids meaningful engagement with them, as we are seeing this week. As a bit of background, there used be a law which banned below-cost selling of produce to protect primary producers and smaller retailers.

The Government got rid of this in 2006, so understandably the Beef Plan movement has been eager to include an independent regulator on the agenda of the negotiations they fought very hard to get. They want a regulator that can set rules to ensure fair trading practices but they have not been able to get that onto the agenda. Instead, the Government is planning to introduce a food ombudsman which, while welcome, will only oversee existing rules which are quite clearly not working.

Like many, I have always been beyond baffled at the special treatment that Larry Goodman and Meat Industry Ireland get. This treatment has never been afforded to small farmers, food producers, workers in meat plants or consumers and it is high time that changed. The Minister can change it.

Deputy Seán Canney: I thank the Independent Group for bringing this very topical issue to the floor of the Convention Centre so that we can debate it. It is the first time in a long time that we have had a discussion on an issue so important to Irish farming. We all know farming is under severe pressure in this country, particularly in the west of Ireland and the regions where we have small family farms of between 40 and 50 acres. These are family farms in which entire families are involved but I have noticed in recent years that the younger generation is walking away from farming because it is too much hassle and trouble. Farming, which was once a very simple way of making a living, has become so complicated.

We use a lot of wording now that has been borrowed from Europe. There are two words in

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particular that Irish farmers do not like, namely, designation and derogation. Designation is a bad word in farming and derogation has let people down, no end, in the farming sector. A new CAP provides the State with an opportunity to address some of these issues and to achieve some rebalancing so that farming can become enjoyable again rather than being such a difficult task for everybody. It is an opportunity to rebalance what we are doing and to get back to basics. What is farming all about? It is about producing food, including beef and dairy products. We are doing that and are one of the best beef and dairy producers in Europe. What really galls me is that when one looks at the way farming is going right across Europe, one sees that more and more people are leaving the land. Farms are getting bigger and bigger and we will eventually end up with huge ranches right across Europe. One must ask how and why that is happening and the CAP has a lot to answer for in that regard.

I am also worried about the fact that farmers in my constituency who may have a fairly high unit rate will be penalised heavily under the new CAP. They could end up losing up to 50% of their entitlements which is something that must be addressed as a matter of urgency. We need to make farming more attractive but instead, we are bringing in more and more rules and complications which is leaving people scratching their heads. As mentioned earlier, the new pilot REP scheme that was introduced this year is causing huge problems for farmers and farming organisations right across the country. It is leaving agricultural advisers in a predicament because they have to choose up to ten farmers for the pilot scheme. It has been communicated so poorly that farmers are asking why they should bother with it. There is nothing in it for the farmers as far as they can see. Their principal concern is that the scheme will create a lot of work, with no particular gain for the farmer. I want to work with the Minister to make sure that the family farm becomes attractive once again. I will now hand over to my colleague, Deputy Verona Murphy.

Deputy Verona Murphy: I thank my Independent colleagues for bringing this motion to the floor of the Dáil and giving us the opportunity to debate it. At the outset, in the context of CAP reform, I would like to discuss convergence. In principle, convergence is a great idea but it should not be used in agriculture. Where it should be tested is in the Civil Service and I would urge the Minister to introduce a pilot scheme in the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine. For those who might not know how convergence works, I will provide a short explanation. Applying convergence in the Civil Service would mean that the upper Civil Service staff such as those at Secretary General level would take a sizeable reduction in their salary, which would then be redistributed down to the lower echelons of staff, to clerical officers and cleaners, for example. The money lost at the higher levels would be redistributed down to the lower levels and that would be done on an annual basis. When that is piloted in the Civil Service and accepted by civil servants, then maybe it will be time to try it in agriculture.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Hear, hear.

Deputy Verona Murphy: There is no other sector in this country that would be asked to move money from the top to the bottom and be expected to accept it. Our teachers would not accept it, nor would our nurses or other medical staff but our very own Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine thinks that the farmers of Ireland, using our natural resources to the best of their ability, should accept convergence. They should accept money being taken from the good, productive farmer and given to where it can never be of any benefit. For example, in the Civil Service, the idea would be that those who receive extra would not do an extra ounce of work. The Secretary General would not deserve to be paid for the hours he or she worked and for his or her productivity but money would be given to the cleaner who would not be asked to

do anything extra. That is the model that the Government and the EU expects Irish farmers to accept. I cannot believe that it is still on the table for discussion.

If there is anybody in this country who thinks farmers are getting money, hand over fist, let them think again. The Department is stopping them from doing their job in the way they did 50 years ago. Everything farmers put on the land is questioned. The Minister spoke about derogations. When he was in opposition, he lobbied for a derogation for diquat for potato farmers in this country but now he is telling us, as Minister, that the derogation is only for one year. We are discussing derogations tonight as if they will go on forever but derogations are meaningless. They are an entrapment of sorts, to get people to agree to things until the Department decides to change them, in line with the EU. That is why I have no faith in anything that becomes derogated; it either is or it is not.

I can assure the Minister that if the pilot scheme on convergence goes ahead in the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, it will be the end of the idea in the agricultural sector. That is where we should start and that is where it will end. The EU and the Department should wake up because the farmers of Ireland are not asleep.

Deputy Carol Nolan: The proposal from the EU in the form of the new CAP is not sustainable for small farmers and the Minister knows it. We know that proposed changes to CAP include making 10% of money available for landscapes that benefit biodiversity, 35% for environmental and climate related measures as well as direct payments for eco-schemes. The problem with all of this has been well flagged by bodies such as the ICMSA and the INHFA. Indeed, the latter has welcomed the fact that this motion calls for the amendment tabled by the EU Council of Ministers to the CAP strategic plan regulation in Article 4 to be withdrawn in order to maintain and protect the agricultural area status of lands. The EU Council of Ministers' amendment, if included in the final CAP legislative document, will have the effect of separating out this type of farmland for the first time in the history of the CAP. This is dangerous territory but for some members of the Green Party, it is not enough. One Green Party MEP, when speaking about this reform, said that "farming today is part of the destruction, and part of the problem". That kind of mindset, which we are dealing with here, is dangerous for agriculture. There is an onus on the Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael Parties to show leadership and stand up for farmers. The Minister knows there are enough problems already in agriculture. I brought up the issue of the independent regulator, as the Minister did when he was in opposition. Now that he is in the Department some magical transformation has happened. It happens to Ministers when they go into the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine. I ask him to reflect on that again.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: Although the CAP is almost two years away, crucial decisions are being made now. However, decisions made now will affect farm payments from 2023 until 2027. I am particularly concerned that the EU recently signed a trade agreement with the South American trading bloc, Mercosur, covering a range of sectors, including agriculture. The concerns generated by this deal, particularly in the beef sector, show the EU wants to force Irish farmers to reduce production and engage in red tape green programmes, in which up to 99,000 tonnes of beef is imported from a high greenhouse gas emission country in South America. This is doublespeak again and demonstrates Government hypocrisy on climate change.

It seems that leasing of lands is escalating at an alarming rate and that grants given to younger farmers are putting older farmers out of business. By older farmers, I mean those who are only 35 years of age. Younger farmers are getting a grant of up to €160 but there is noth-

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ing for people who are 35 years of age upwards because it is reduced. For instance, if a grant is given to reseed our existing grasslands, primarily to those up to 50 years old, which require much fertiliser and high yields, what advantages would this achieve? This extends seasons, thus reducing meal feeds. Reduced meal feeds cuts back fertilisers and before the Green Party starts complaining, grass is now stitched into the ground thus not releasing any carbon from the ground.

A few weeks ago, the department of agriculture in Canada gave farmers a carbon tax exemption so they could compete in the world market. We penalise farmers here for competing. A Teagasc report I read recently showed that carbon tax has a direct impact on farming.

Our fishing rights were sold to increase the number of fish farms by 30%, even though they emit more methane gas, using climate change as a front to destroy Irish farming.

Deputy Michael Collins: The Common Agricultural Policy was introduced to provide economic security for the farming population. To be honest, it looked after the huge farmers and made them bigger but failed miserably to help farmers on low incomes. Year in, year out, different CAPs came and went. Farmers who had substantial ground, much of it rough hill and heather, were left on small payments while the large farmers continued to receive huge amounts in CAP payments to add to what they had already.

To add insult to injury, the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, a number of years ago, sent out massive fines to farmers who had heather on their grounds until a case, which is still ongoing, was taken. The delay in CAP decision-making means it will be at least one year before the new CAP comes in. That is really unfortunate as we need new schemes in which ordinary farmers can participate.

What has changed? The Minister's Government is going to run a pilot scheme in this country, the results based environment-agri pilot project, REAP, originally called the rural environment protection scheme, REPS, from which farmers will get a measly €4,700. This is after Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael promised a REPS-style scheme to farmers in the last election of more than €10,000. Just in case hill farmers or farmers in rural Ireland might be able to apply for this grant, the Government is making sure that farmers who have heather in their ground will be exempt. Where is the Green Party now? Has there been a nod-and-wink deal done on this scheme, like the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Bill, to get it across the line? This is nothing short of a scandal.

The very same Deputies, many of them Fianna Fáil, who were in the House yesterday criticising our massive concerns on the climate action Bill are now screaming foul in their constituencies about the REAP scheme. In the name of God, who do they think they are coddling? They are in government and they support it in bringing this new anti-small farmer scheme forward, knowing full well it will penalise the small farmer. They think they can hoodwink their constituents by giving out and saying the scheme is not good enough. I know the scheme is not good enough so these Fianna Fáil Deputies and Fine Gael politicians should stop supporting the massive, wealthy farmer and look after the farmers I represent in Cork South-West.

It is not good enough that fishing has been driven to the edge. Is the ordinary farmer in Cork South-West next? The Minister should not just take on board my views on the disastrous REAP scheme. I have been riddled with calls from the Irish Farmers Association, IFA, the Irish Creamery Milk Suppliers Association, ICMSA, and farmers to demand change to this scandal-

ous scheme, which I ask the Minister to make immediately.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I offer my sincere thanks to Deputy Pringle for his hard work in bringing forward this motion. It is very timely because this is a three-card trick as far as I am concerned. I am from the Golden Vale and proud of it. I will declare an interest. I happen to own land with lots of heather on it, which was reclaimed by my forefathers. They earned their living from it and fought for freedom in respect of it. Now, the right to farm that land is being taken from people. We do not know what is going on here. One would want to be up night and day watching the Green Party and what it is up to with the statements it makes and the way it has hoodwinked Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. It is a shocking con job. This derogation, *mar dhe*, is a con job. The derogation might be there and gone again. This is a three-card trick.

Where is the IFA? There is not a word out of it because it is supporting the big farmers who have the big CAP payments. We always wanted a fair and just transition for smaller farmers to support them, but there is not a peep out of the IFA. There is not a peep out of it either about the so-called Green Party carbon emissions Bill, another sleazy deal done with Government by this big organisation and others. I salute the Irish Natura and Hill Farmers Organisation, Luke 'Ming' Flanagan in the European Parliament and other individuals who are awake to this three-card trick going on to fool people and get them off the land.

Cromwell came to Clonmel. We kept him out of it for about two weeks and he failed to get in. This Government, which is now in the shape of Green monsters, is creeping around everywhere. The Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, Senator Pippa Hackett, will not allow people with forests to cut them down. That is the blackguarding of people that is going on.

I salute Deputy Verona Murphy for what she said. This fancy scheme should be tried out with the Secretary General and officials who are always breathing down on the people who want to work and use the land, who want to have the land and air that God gave them, and have produce growing on it, carefully, while nurturing the environment. We want to keep our farms and live on the mountains beside the heather and not be driven to hell or to Connacht, which is the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan's point of view.

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): I thank all the Deputies who have contributed to the debate which has been a very useful one. It has been very open and wide ranging. I welcome the genuine engagement from all parties on what are, after all, complex proposals for future EU legislation. I hope our debate has managed to shed some light and to develop a greater understanding, both with regard to the Council's proposals and, importantly, with regard to my approach concerning the GAEC 2 standard. As we finalise the negotiations on the future Common Agricultural Policy and prepare Ireland's CAP strategic plan, I intend to continue to ensure broad consultation with all stakeholders on all aspects of the new framework.

Before I get into the meat of things here, I want to set the scene for the Deputies who brought forward the motion this evening. I thank them for bringing it forward as it is important to get clarity on things. GAEC 2 is important for farmers right across the country but, perhaps, most important for farmers in my own county as well as counties along the western seaboard, in particular.

I come from the west coast, from an area with some of the most beautiful and rich peat soils

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anywhere in the country. I am the son of a farmer from the hills and lowlands of Donegal. I grew up near the north Donegal coast in Carndonagh and we keep sucklers and sheep on what are some of the more challenging lands in the country. The sucklers and sheep on these lands played no small part in raising me and the rest of my family. I feel extremely lucky and privileged to have been able to farm these lands, in my own right, before coming into politics.

I find it disingenuous that either I, as Minister, or the Department would stand idly by and allow such a crucial cohort of farmers to be excluded from CAP. Both I, as Minister, and the rest of the Government are absolutely and unashamedly committed to the hill and upland farmer. Farmers on these lands are hugely important. They play a key role in managing the upkeep of these hills, they produce top-quality stock that is central to our €14 billion export sector and they help drive a regional and balanced economy. All of these are crucial to me, as Minister, and to the entire Government.

I believe in the long and sustainable practice of hill farming. Along with the rest of the Government, we stand by our hill farmers as we stand by our lowland farmers. I, as Minister, continue to engage with all farmers and farm organisations through the CAP post-2020 stakeholders consultative committee. We update those on the committee regularly about the ongoing progress of the reform at EU level, but there have also been frequent and focused discussions on different elements of the overall CAP plan. In the case of the latter, the committee has put a lot of thought into the principles that should underline our approach to conditionality, to eco schemes and to agri-environmental schemes under Pillar 2. Dedicated workshops discussed these issues at the end of 2020, and further discussions are planned shortly, but we have to bear in mind that the legislative proposals themselves are still under discussion between the three institutions, so we cannot be definitive yet about the final outcome.

There remain some issues to be worked out about Pillar 1 as well as Pillar 2 but we will continue the process of developing Ireland's CAP strategic plan and we hope we will be in a position to finalise it later this year. Members can see that we have been having a deep engagement with all relevant organisations and farmers' groups.

I need to be frank and say that I remain concerned that the substance of the Council approach is not fully understood by some. It is not clear to me why the Deputies would continue to call for the removal of text that expressly provides assurance regarding farmers' payments. Let me set out again the benefits of the Council's approach in four clear steps. First, we have the necessary national flexibility to make our own decisions. Second, we will set our own minimum effective standards for GAECs. Third, we will have time to implement the new standard for GAEC 2. Finally, farmers will have certainty regarding eligibility for payment.

I know this is the most beneficial approach for farmers. As mentioned by the Minister of State, Deputy Heydon, I consider that this approach will serve farmers much better than the alternative approach by the Parliament, and I would urge all parties who continue to have concerns to re-examine the Parliament's text. I am sure many Members have contacts in the Parliament. To be serious about defending the rights of farmers in GAEC 2 regions, I ask Members to get on to these contacts in the Parliament and ensure they take the approach the Council of Ministers is taking and that I am backing. This approach is the best one for Irish farmers. I assure Members of that.

Let me address the issue of the so-called derogation, which was raised by a number of contributors. The text proposed by the Council in Article 4 confirms that, where lands are partici-

pating in certain environmental schemes or meeting the standards of certain GAECs, they are eligible hectares. Deputies have expressed concerns that there will be a requirement to seek permission or exemptions for activities on designated lands, as is normal in the context of the operation of a derogation. That is simply not a part of the Council text and that is why it cannot be described as a derogation. I want to clarify that the Council text does not require anyone with these lands to apply in such a fashion to be considered as having an eligible hectare. There is no provision proposed in the Council text to require a system of seeking approval from any Minister or official. The Council text simply states that areas are automatically viewed as eligible hectares. It is as straightforward as that. There are no applications and no decisions to be taken. They are eligible hectares.

I hope I have explained clearly that it is not the case that the Irish national standard for GAEC 2 will prevent farmers carrying out agricultural activities. Introducing the standard will require us to consider what management practices can best support good farming practices that protect our environment, taking our own local farming conditions into account.

I hope this debate has led to a better understanding of these issues for all of us. I have listened to everything said today and I will continue to focus on this issue in the ongoing debates at trilogue. I remain firmly convinced the Council's approach is the one that will best ensure Ireland will be able to design an appropriate and effective GAEC 2 standard that will allow farmers to continue to farm these areas.

Farming in these regions played a significant part in me being able to stand here before the House today as Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine. I support everything about farming in these areas and I assure the Deputies and the House that I will not take any action that will halt farming in these areas. I hope I have provided reassurance about my absolute commitment in this regard and the appropriateness of the approach by the Government in following that.

Deputy Pringle mentioned he wants the European Commission to make the decision about this. I believe it is essential, with regard to how CAP is formed, that we have the subsidiarity to set our own destiny with regard to this matter.

The commitment of this Government to farmers has been demonstrated over the past year, especially over the last six months since I became Minister. There has been an 11% increase in the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine budget to support farm families this year. Yesterday, I launched a pilot agricultural environmental measure, which will run between now and December next year, which can deliver almost €13,000 as a maximum payment for farmers on 10 ha of land, again supporting farm family incomes. As I comprehensively pointed out in this debate and as the Minister of State, Deputy Heydon, pointed out before me, there is an absolute commitment to deliver a fair, well-funded CAP which ensures all our farmers, both lowland and hill land, fully participate in the next CAP and are fully supported for the significant work they do on behalf of their local communities and on behalf of this country too.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: For the record, the Minister said that there was no such thing as a derogation. I have a document from Europe dated 16 March 2021, regarding the Council proposal GAEC 2, about the derogation to the eligible hectare standard rules. During the exchanges with the European Parliament, including the ITM, meeting on 16 March, the European Parliament expressed concern regarding the Council's proposed GAEC 2 derogation from the standard eligibility. I want that read into the record because this is not just me saying

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it. Four times in this document, the word “derogation” has been used and I think people need to know that. I hope the document from Europe is wrong but that is what it stated.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: That is not the actual text of the-----

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: It is quoting the European Council. If the Minister wants a copy of it, I will send it.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: The European Parliament.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: I will send the Minister a copy if he wants.

Deputy Thomas Pringle: This has been a useful debate. It has been useful to hear all the comments and contributions from everyone. I thank all Members for their support. The vast majority of Members have supported this important motion. It is topical, with where the negotiations are, that we should be debating this in the Dáil, because it is vital we debate and discuss this and that it is as open and transparent as possible so that people can see the decisions that have been made.

For the first time in the history of the CAP, this proposal has the potential to remove land from three baseline categories of land, which are arable land, permanent crops and permanent pasture. If land does not fall into one of these categories, then it loses its eligibility for all payment. I firmly believe this is not acceptable for farmers, who we are asking to deliver exceptionally high environmental standards. These farmers, often working in difficult conditions, deserve our full support, legal certainty and clarity about access to all payments in future. It is absolutely in our power to do this. The amendment proposed by the Council, supported by Ireland, is completely unnecessary. We must consider the wider implications of this. Without properly-managed landscapes, which require farmers and agricultural activity to achieve, what direction are we headed in? Will it be a depopulated landscape or will we have unmanaged land which is ravaged by wildfires and that will actually increase carbon dioxide release and cause more emissions? Land stripped of any CAP support will become an environmental waste land with all biodiversity threatened.

It is essential to get this right. Farmers want to farm and will respond best when measures are designed around farming activity. Generations of experience have shown that traditional low-intensity farming practices are the best means of managing these lands. We have been here before when forestry was seen as the panacea to all our ills and this has proved to be a disaster under all the three pillars of sustainability: social, economic and environmental.

Equally, the imposed Natura directives, imposed without consultation, have not delivered for the farmer or for biodiversity. Consultation with and involvement of farmers is essential. I have consulted widely, and farmers are asking us and the Minister to remove this amendment as it is counterproductive and will not achieve anything other than putting farmers' livelihoods and rural communities at risk.

In recent days the details of the new results-based environment agri pilot programme, REAP, scheme have been unveiled with much fanfare by the Government. This scheme has been promoted as being a pilot scheme for future environmental schemes. Is the blatant omission of commonage land and land containing heather an indication of the direction of policy and that these areas are to be denied access to CAP payments and simply used as a carbon sequestration tool to offset emissions from other unsustainable practices?

The Minister has highlighted the proposed wording of this GAEC 2 as the key issue. It really is not the key issue, and I think the Minister knows this as well. The wording is open to interpretation, but the critical issue is the wording of the Council amendment. That is the key to this matter.

The focus on the three positions, including those of the Council and the European Parliament, is disingenuous as well. We are talking about the conditionality of the Council position and that is what the focus has been about. The Minister of State, Deputy Heydon, mentioned that it was the position of the European Parliament which was untenable. Why then did all the Fine Gael members support it? Maybe the Minister of State could answer that question.

The fact is that it is the Minister who will set the standard for an eligible hectare. He will be setting the standard for GAEC 2. It is completely within the Minister's power to designate when a farmer meets these standards and that when a farmer meets this GAEC 2 standard that his or her land is eligible as a right. Alternatively, will the Minister set the GAEC 2 slightly above the eligible hectare to exclude and discriminate some lands? That is the problem. That is also the problem in respect of what this amendment proposed by the Council does. It allows the standard to be set slightly above to allow land be excluded from an eligible hectare.

What we need is the Minister to set the standard definitely and to have that land there but to have it eligible as a right. That is all farmers are asking for and that is all they are interested in. I do not think that is a whole pile to ask. The land should be eligible, and eligible as a right. Then we can deal with environmental standards and with environmental protection from that point on.

Question put and agreed to.

Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters

An Ceann Comhairle: I wish to advise the House of the following matters in respect of which notice has been given under Standing Order 37 and the name of the Member in each case: (1) Deputies Neale Richmond and Jennifer Carroll MacNeill - to raise issues concerning the operation of the Passport Office during Level 5 restrictions; (2) Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan - to discuss an update on plans for St. Gabriel's special school in Bishopstown; (3) Deputies Mattie McGrath, Carol Nolan, Michael Collins, Danny Healy-Rae, Michael Healy-Rae, Richard O'Donoghue and Jennifer Murnane O'Connor - to discuss the need to resume theory tests, driving lessons and driver tests and steps to clear the backlog of driver tests; (4) Deputy Neasa Hourigan - to discuss what steps will be taken to prevent illegal evictions; (5) Deputy James O'Connor - to discuss investment in primary health care facilities in the east Cork area; (6) Deputy Brian Stanley - to discuss what steps will be taken to protect turf-cutting for domestic use; (7) Deputy Alan Farrell - to discuss the occasion of Earth Day on Thursday, 22 April 2021 and the need for Ireland to play a leading role in the fight against climate change; (8) Deputy Cormac Devlin - to discuss the need for the 2020 annual taxsaver tickets for public transport to be extended to the end of 2021; (9) Deputy Michael McNamara - to discuss the retention of teachers in primary schools in County Clare; (10) Deputy Niamh Smyth - to discuss the development of Cavan Institute as a hub for further education and training; (11) Deputy Chris Andrews - to discuss the necessary environment for a return to outdoor sports for adults; (12) Deputy Brendan Griffin - to discuss the risk of delayed diagnosis for endoscopy patients in Kerry; (13) Deputy Brendan Howlin - to discuss the provision of capital works including an

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MRI facility and the promised 75 bed-unit at Wexford General Hospital; (14) Deputy Jennifer Whitmore - the need to discuss funding for Arklow as Wicklow's decarbonisation zone; (15) Deputy Jim O'Callaghan - to discuss the return of spectators to sport in accordance with the Ferguson report; (16) Deputy Gary Gannon - to discuss the urgent need for public restroom facilities throughout our cities, towns and national parks; (17) Deputy Bernard J. Durkan - to again raise the ever-increasing daily incidents of worldwide human rights abuses which have accelerated while the global community is preoccupied with Covid-19, clearly illustrating the need for a co-ordinated international response utilising Ireland's position on the UN Security Council as a means of focusing on and bringing to justice the perpetrators given the situation in Myanmar, Hong Kong and numerous other conflict and non-conflict situations; (18) Deputy Matt Carthy - to discuss the appointment of the new Secretary General of the Department of Health; (19) Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin - to discuss the increasing concern regarding a shortage in places, long waiting lists and numbers of students with no places identified in second level schools in North Dublin for this September; (20) Deputies Darren O'Rourke and Ruairí Ó Murchú - to discuss Louth-Meath mental health services, including the shortage of acute beds, which is the lowest across State, the shortage of specialists to deal with psychological and-or neurological disorders and lack of access to specialist residential units for these disorders, such as eating disorders etc., and to discuss this in light of the increased need and difficulties caused by Covid-19; (21) Deputy Paul Murphy - to discuss the decline in bird populations and the biodiversity crisis; and (22) Deputy Martin Browne - to discuss access to mental health supports for children with disabilities during the pandemic.

The matters raised by Deputies Richmond and Carroll MacNeill; Martin Browne; Gannon; and Jim O'Callaghan have been selected for discussion.

Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

Passport Services

Deputy Neale Richmond: I greatly appreciate the opportunity afforded by the Ceann Comhairle to raise this vital issue. Over the last four months, nearly five months now, the Passport Office has been closed. The reason we are raising this is nothing to do with travel. It is not like anyone is expecting to be going abroad any time soon. It is, instead, the sheer fact that a passport is a vital piece of identification for so many people, not only in this State but also for many Irish citizens abroad. This issue has come to a critical point now where people are desperately in need of getting their passports renewed or their passports back out of the passport system. We are talking about Irish citizens who applied for passports for their children in other jurisdictions and now not only do their children not have identification but they do not either. This is prohibiting those people from doing ordinary, everyday business in this State and wider afield. It is stopping people making many plans and having that form of identification which would allow them to be a part of a functioning society. It is vitally important that the services which are provided are reopened as soon as possible.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Carroll MacNeill has arrived just in the nick of time.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I thank the Ceann Comhairle and also the Minister of State for attending to listen to us raise this significant issue for people. Obviously, passport

services have had to be decreased and the Passport Office closed for this period. What I want to ask about is the contingency planning for reopening. There is a significant backlog in excess of 80,000 applications. We were getting queries at an early stage where some people concerned had genuine life-and-death emergencies where they needed to access a passport. I thank the Passport Office for facilitating people in those situations.

Over time, however, it can be seen that the balance and the pressure on people, through their human experience, has been different. I refer to situations such as requiring a passport to open a bank account or to apply for or accept a college place, for example. These more natural things have revealed themselves as the pandemic has gone on. We need to know the contingency planning for addressing this situation quickly. What are we going to do to ensure we can address this backlog? Will there be longer working hours and more working days? How are we going to ensure we get the passports to those people who will need them in the coming months?

Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Martin Heydon): I thank Deputies Richmond and Carroll MacNeill for raising what is an important issue which is being raised with Deputies in constituency offices the length and breadth of the country. It has happened for several reasons, as the Deputies outlined. I am pleased to report that the Passport Office continues to provide a high quality, essential service in line with the Government's public health guidance outlined in our national framework on living with Covid-19.

At the outset, I express the apologies of the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Deputy Coveney, who has asked me to stand in for him. However, I had a good conversation with the Minister on this issue today to get the most up-to-date information regarding the situation for the Deputies regarding passport services. The Passport Office has been operational in respect of five key essential fronts during the pandemic. These have included providing passports for emergency and urgent cases. More than 40,000 passports have been issued this year, including approximately 3,000 in response to urgent requests from our citizens at home and abroad. Customer service information has also been provided to more than 40,000 citizens via our web chat service, as well as consular services to our citizens overseas through our consular helpline. The staff of the Passport Office have also been assisting in contact tracing for the HSE as part of the wider national response to Covid-19. They have also been assisting the Department Social Protection to facilitate the processing of essential Covid-19-related benefits.

I emphasise to the House that throughout the pandemic the Passport Office has been open to serving citizens in its highly professional manner. The service is fully committed to assisting citizens who have been or are required to travel due to the death or serious illness of a family member and or who give evidence of a reasonable cause for travel, as defined in the recent amendment to the Health Act 1947, which came into effect on 1 February. The Passport Office is continuing to process renewals and first-time applications where the citizen is only entitled to Irish citizenship or legally required to hold a passport for residency purposes. The urgent service also assists citizens who are resident abroad who require a valid passport for visa purposes or citizens who require a renewal for work purposes.

On behalf of the Government, I commend the staff of the Passport Office for their dedication to their mission of providing a front-line public service during this pandemic and also contributing to the national response in these unprecedented times. I take great pleasure in commending the Passport Office for that work and for its contribution to the national response, which has tested our communities overseas and our people here also.

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Were it not for the current pandemic, the Passport Office would be fully operational and the award-winning service would be operating at full throttle. Several organisational adaptations have already been made which have increased efficiency and output, while maintaining the necessary health and safety protocols. This is already making a difference. The Passport Office has a plan in place which will become operational in the near future as restrictions are eased and which will quickly clear the backlog of passport applications. In the meantime, urgent passport applications will continue to be dealt with expeditiously and the webchat service is available to answer queries about specific circumstances.

On the specific points raised by Deputy Richmond about people who need a passport for reasons other than travel, it is a real issue, and I know that it has been raised with Deputy Richmond in his constituency on a number of occasions. It is one that we are mindful of and it is why we want to get the service back up and running as quickly as possible to make sure we get the full amount back to everybody else.

That leads on to the point raised by Deputy Carroll MacNeill in respect of the plan for clearing the backlog. I can assure the Deputy that the passport service expects that most applications received this year will come from adult renewals and we anticipate to return to a five-day turnaround for these applications within six to eight weeks of reopening. The Central Statistics Office survey from 1 March indicated that 15% of people expect to take an overseas holiday in 2021. In addition, while it is projected that most adults will have received their first dose of vaccine by the end of June, the timeline for children is longer, and we expect that this will impact on the number of families travelling overseas this summer. Therefore, the number of applications received for children are expected to remain low.

As articulated by the two Deputies, there are many reasons people need a passport. We are acutely aware of that. We want to get the service back up and running. We are dealing with emergency cases as it is and we will get back to full service quickly.

An Ceann Comhairle: We will return to the Minister of a State in a few moments. We short-changed the two Deputies in the first round, so we can give them two minutes each in this round. I call Deputy Richmond.

Deputy Neale Richmond: The Ceann Comhairle could never short-change us. I appreciate his magnanimous approach to the clock.

I fundamentally and absolutely agree with the Minister of State that the passport service to date has been excellent. We all remember, as public representatives over the last decade, how difficult it used to be and how swift the new scheme has been, particularly with online renewals, and the amount of effort that was put in by officials in the Department of Foreign Affairs and outside individuals to ensure that we have, as the Minister of State rightly describes it, an award-winning service.

However, crucially, we do not have a service at the moment. We have a bare-minimum emergency service that is operating at a fraction of the capacity at which it operates in normal times. Even though people are not travelling, the issue is nothing to do with travel. It is about the fundamental right of access to the most important document, I would argue, that any citizen of this State needs to hold. Not everyone drives a car. People cannot even get a driving licence now if they need it because of the backlog. However, a passport is vitally important.

I wish to stress again the absolute limbo that Irish citizens abroad are stuck in, particularly

when trying to apply for a passport or register the birth of a new Irish citizen aboard. I will be quite frank. My passport has long expired and I do not know when I am going to be able to get it renewed. It is not that I intend to leave the jurisdiction any time soon. There are hundreds of people, not just in my constituency and those of the Minister of State and Deputy Carroll MacNeill beside mine, who are genuinely worried. They worry that if they apply they will lose documents and passports for weeks and months on end if they are applying for a passport for their children.

At the end of the day, I appreciate the Minister of State's comments and the intervention by the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Deputy Coveney. He spoke with me directly today on the issue. However, ultimately, the system as is, regardless of level 5 restrictions, is not good enough. We need to be able to provide a credible, real service to which the citizens of this State are entitled. It is not something that can be afforded to them - it is their right.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: A passport is a bit like a security blanket. It is something that we need to know is in a drawer for the day when something happens and we need it. We do not know why we will need it in future. Perhaps it may be to travel to see a relative. That is what I am trying to articulate.

People have understood that the service has had to be closed. I thank the Minister of State for confirming that the backlog will be addressed. It is about the communication around that to reassure, for example, the lady who contacted me today, whose passport expires in July. She is not worried about it today but come June, she will be genuinely stressed about it. While some might assert that she will not be travelling as none of us are planning travel at this stage, we do know that there are cases where people need to travel for essential reasons, such as a death in the family. It is about providing that security to people and communicating clearly that the service will resume, it is recognised that there is a backlog and a plan is in place. It must be communicated to them that their concerns are understood and attempts are being made to address them. People should be given timelines so that they know when they will receive their passports.

However, I do want to thank the Passport Office for the exceptional work it has done under pressurised conditions. Of course, the staff have been taken to do more urgent work for the State in response to Covid and in processing the PUP. I thank the staff for being available in those emergency situations and for resolving issues in cases where they have been brought in and asked to consider various applications.

We are moving into a new phase in the pandemic. Some day we will see discretionary international travel return, rather than just emergency international travel. Understandably, people like to have their passport in their back pocket. It is a fundamental document of the State and a person. It is important to them that they can get it back and put it in their drawer, up-to-date, ready for the day when they either need it or want it.

Deputy Martin Heydon: Both Deputies Richmond and Carroll MacNeill have outlined very well the reasons we need to get back to full service. Nobody wants to do that more than the staff of the passport service in a safe way as soon as public health guidelines allow.

It is helpful to put on the record that the volume of applications received in the past year has been significantly impacted by the pandemic. As a result, the number of applications currently in our system awaiting processing is quite low in terms of a normal year. That is not to in any

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way underestimate or play down the concerns that have been raised and well articulated here. They are very valid concerns. People are concerned about getting their passports for a variety of reasons, not just for travelling, as outlined by Deputy Richmond.

Currently, there are just over 92,000 applications in the system, most of which have been received in the past three months. While this might seem like a large number, in the context of the passport service, it is quite small. In the same period in 2019, approximately 420,000 applications were received, and in 2020 approximately 260,000 applications were received. Two thirds of applications are for renewals of passports. That is important because once services are resumed fully, these can be processed quite quickly because of the technological advancements in the passport service over the past four years. First time applications take longer due to the volume of associated documentation and the stringent verification process that must be carried out to ensure that we maintain the integrity of the Irish passport.

It is important to bear in mind that the Irish passport is considered to be one of the most valued in the world due to its visa-free status in 186 countries. Approximately one third of the applications in our system are for first time applicants.

The fact that the Irish passport is such a prized document was at the heart of the points made by Deputies Carroll MacNeill and Richmond. We take that on board. We want to get back to full processing as quickly as the public health guidelines allow. That is our determination. I commend the staff in the passport service for working under the difficult circumstances of the pandemic over the last year.

Mental Health Services

Deputy Martin Browne: I thank the Minister of State for taking the time to hear this matter.

I am becoming increasingly concerned about the ability of children and young adults with special and complex needs and disabilities to access the psychological services they need. This is an issue that has presented itself to me on a number of occasions since the first lockdown last year, when I was approached by the families of children with special needs who were beside themselves with worry about their young children.

Recently, I was approached by a parent in my constituency whose family has found itself in this situation. Jack, on whose behalf I am speaking today, is a young adult with special needs. However, like so many others around the country, his ability to interact on a social level has been restricted. These restrictions have resulted in him not being able to attend the local centre that he has used so much in the past, and whose contribution to his life has been immeasurable. He loves GAA but restrictions have prevented him from accessing this social outlet as well. In designing these restrictions, what has been forgotten about are the measures that need to be in place to help families deal with the consequences that these limitations have for their loved ones.

During the first round of restrictions last year, Jack's anxiety increased and his sleep patterns changed. He was given some medication to deal with this but soon the benefits began to wear off, which brings me to the situation as it is right now. Six weeks ago Jack's anxiety increased to such a level that he could no longer sleep. For four days and four nights, he did not get a wink

of sleep and his levels of anxiety continued to increase. His parents were burning the candle at both ends and a doctor's appointment could not be secured for a week and a half.

However, when he got that appointment, his emotional needs were not addressed. Jack, of course, was in need of psychological assessment and counselling. His mother has told me that every avenue she went down ended in a brick wall. There were no accessible or immediate psychological services available for her son because he has special needs. The more she tried, the more disheartened, worried and desperate she got. She described it to me as like drowning. Finally, through the supreme efforts of the local MooreHaven Centre, which, she said, went above and beyond in helping her, she managed to link up with a psychologist. The Minister of State might think that I am now going to detail a happy resolution to this issue. In fact, Jack is now on a three-week waiting list. All the while, his level of anxiety has to be dealt with by a family that are struggling and feel let down and left out because their son happens to have special needs. The family is trying to remain positive for him, keep his spirits up and keep him well, but they are fearful of the consequences of all of this for their son if his needs remain unaddressed.

The Minister of State will appreciate that in all situations like this, time is of the essence. If the family gets the scheduled appointment for Jack, this episode in their lives will have gone on for nine weeks. I have reason to believe it is not an isolated case. If Jack's family were here today to tell the Minister of State about all of this, what would he say to them? Could he tell them the extent to which he foresaw this type of eventuality and what measures he took to deal with such? Can he tell me what he intends to do to resolve Jack's situation and the similar situations countless families are experiencing? When the Covid restrictions were being considered, was enough done to deal with the impact the measures would potentially have on people's mental well-being? Jack's mother has described the system of accessible psychology supports for people like her son as atrocious.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan): I thank the Deputy for articulating the very difficult situation of Jack and his family and the issues they are dealing with, especially during the Covid crisis. Developing all aspects of mental health, including improving links with other care programmes such as disabilities, is a priority for me and for the Government. This is underpinned by our new mental health policy, Sharing the Vision, the HSE service plan for 2021 for both mental health and disability care programmes, and the range of initiatives developed by Government to maximise all healthcare provision in the light of Covid-19.

Recommendation 48 of Sharing the Vision aims to improve intensive supports for people with complex mental health difficulties and intellectual disabilities. The HSE and its service partnership agencies, particularly their front-line staff, have met various serious Covid challenges so far and will continue to do so. If the Deputy sends in the details of Jack's situation, we will try to address the issues. The Department and HSE continue to plan for the evolving situation overall, including any surge in demand as it arises.

In line with Government recommendations to minimise the spread of Covid-19, children's disability services were stepped down, as the Deputy noted, in March 2020. In July, the HSE issued guidance to support resumption of the services. Throughout the pandemic, specialist mental health services have operated at 80% to 90% of pre-Covid levels, but the remaining 10% are causing issues. Children and adolescent mental health services, CAMHS, intellectual disability teams have continued to work with children with intellectual disabilities and their families, with the aim of offering the best possible service throughout the pandemic.

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However, service delivery has changed, based on restrictions and considering the additional physical needs of service users. There has been a significant shift to online service delivery, teleconference clinics and meetings, including the Attend Anywhere initiative, and telephone consultations. Where needed, face-to-face appointments and hospital visits have been maintained. Families are being facilitated by not having to travel to clinics for prescription collection, as this can be done with pharmacies via secure health mail accounts. Where there are appropriate facilities, regular medication reviews with families, schools and teams are taking place via telemedicine arrangements. Due to school closures, school assessment visits were not happening. However, any new assessments are similarly being held via video consultations. Before the school closures, there were online forums and teleconference meetings to provide school observations and meetings with teachers and special needs school staff. This approach was also taken to liaise with respite services and other services, as needed. CAMHS intellectual disability teams also aim to maintain care through regular contact with residential homes in their areas. In addition, all telehealth and online cognitive behavioural therapy, CBT, supports are available to people with disabilities. Counselling for those with sight impairment can be delivered by telephone.

I do not have all the answers to the issues the Deputy has raised but if there is any way we can address the situation for Jack and his family, we will try to do so. I ask that the Deputy send the details to me and I will try to address the matter as quickly as possible. He has articulated a very difficult situation and I thank him for taking the time to come in here and do so. I hope it can be resolved.

Deputy Martin Browne: I thank the Minister of State for his response. The problem I have raised is an example of how the importance of mental health provision in this country is continuously overlooked. We discussed that during the debate on Deputy Ward's motion that was passed earlier in the week. People like Jack are suffering because of a poorly provisioned mental health service. The World Health Organization advises that 14% of a country's health budget should be set aside for mental health provision. We fall way short of that in this country. Successive Governments have fallen short by ignoring the issues and allowing them to pile up year after year.

I appreciate that the Covid crisis has set the situation back and everything had to be done in that context. However, that is little comfort to parents like Jack's, who have been up four nights on the trot. I know the family well and his mother came to me a couple of years ago, at the start of all of this. The issues are continuous. They started when he was underage and, when he reached 18, he fell between the cracks. There are families like Jack's all around the country, in my constituency and in those of the Ministers of State, Deputies Feighan, Rabbitte and Butler. People are falling through the cracks because there is not enough funding for mental health services.

If the Government does nothing else before it finishes its term, I ask that it address this issue and ensure that families like Jack's, when they go looking for services because they are worried about their children, will find that the help is there for them. It should not be a case of scraping the bottom of the barrel. In Tipperary, all our services were taken away. If people have a mental health issue and need help, they must go to Kilkenny if they are in the south of the county and to Ennis if they are in the north of the county. Tipperary is the largest inland county in Ireland and it does not have health services for people like Jack. I plead with the Minister of State and his colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, to get control of this situation. Allocating 14% of the health budget to mental health should be the aim of this Government before the end

of its term.

Deputy Frankie Feighan: I thank the Deputy for keeping this important issue to the fore. He can rest assured that my colleagues, the Ministers of State, Deputies Rabbitte and Butler, and I will continue to do likewise, particularly in the context of the Government roll-out of the Covid vaccination programme nationally, as this will, in turn, benefit our respective care sectors. The Deputy described how Jack's parents are awake four nights a week. It is a very difficult time for them and I hope their situation can be addressed. It is essential that children with disabilities have access to timely and appropriate mental health and other services. We are committed to ensuring that such supports are developed and enhanced through the implementation of national policy, including Sharing the Vision, mental health clinical care programmes and the HSE's national service plans.

There is much good work being done and I pay tribute to the people in the front-line services, especially these particular services. It has been a difficult time for the people providing services and a very difficult time for people like Jack and their families. Whatever we can do in this House to iron out those difficulties, we will do it. I hope we can ensure, in the coming days, weeks and months, that the Deputy will not have to come in here again to articulate the situation of Jack and his family. I thank him again for raising it.

Public Services Provision

Deputy Gary Gannon: I thank the Ceann Comhairle for facilitating this debate. It took a pandemic, with people, in effect, spending more than a year indoors, for us to realise what is needed to enable us to enjoy the outdoors and our public spaces. The last public toilets in this city closed 21 years ago. With that closure, a crucial part of what makes the city living and accessible was lost. Many people have been campaigning for public toilets for years. Like so many things, the lack of these very basic facilities in our country is something we cannot continue to ignore as we emerge from the pandemic.

The Minister of State is aware that today Dublin City Council gave us some very welcome news by saying it would open all its buildings so people could use their public bathrooms. This is not just a matter within the cities, although it may be felt most keenly around the centre of the capital city. I know even in the Minister of State's constituency in Dún Laoghaire, whether in the People's Park or elsewhere, it is a matter causing much discomfort and problems for people.

This is not a trivial or insignificant matter. The UN special rapporteur on the human rights to safe drinking water and sanitation wrote in 2019 that access to water and sanitation in spheres of life beyond the household, particularly in public spaces, is an essential element of human rights and that a failure of states to include access to water and sanitation in public spaces is inconsistent with the commitment to the sustainable development goals, with which the Minister of State, as a Green Party member, will be very familiar.

The lack of access to adequate toilet facilities is also a gender and accessibility matter. We can consider how this affects people who are menstruating, those who are pregnant, families with toddlers or those with disabilities who are assisted by carers. Toilets are essential not just in our city but across towns and national parks so that they can be enjoyed by all to the full.

The Office of Public Works, OPW, manages more than 2,000 buildings spread across 1,700

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properties throughout the country. I have a very specific request, which is that the OPW follows the work of Dublin City Council and opens its buildings so there can be greater access to public toilets and facilities.

I highlight the special case of the Phoenix Park. I am very lucky as I have the Phoenix Park and St. Stephen's Green within my 5 km zone. The Phoenix Park has 1,752 acres and it is the largest enclosed public park in any capital city in Europe, but it has only three toilet facilities. Hyde Park in London, which is a fifth of the size of the Phoenix Park, has more facilities. I had the opportunity to visit the Phoenix Park once again over the weekend and there was a 20-minute queue for the restrooms at the tea rooms there, which is simply unacceptable and an affront to basic decency. There is much we can do, including opening the cricket clubs and installing temporary toilet facilities. We can open the facilities on Infirmity Road.

Not having public toilets kills liveability and enjoyment of cities, towns and national parks. The Alice Leahy Trust has been campaigning for public toilets and showers since 2006. Up to the 1970s there were 60 staffed public toilets in Dublin. There are currently two temporary public bathrooms in Dublin city that cost approximately €182,000 each per year to staff and maintain. The OPW manages over 2,000 buildings and in most there is a staff member on duty over weekends who could simply open the door and allow people in.

This is a matter of public health and comfort. If we are innovative and pragmatic in our solutions and if we get this right, it will work in the long term not just for my city, which I love, but every city, town and village or every park and beach in the country. The pandemic has allowed us the opportunity to get away from trying to unsee things we have allowed to fester in the country, and one of those is simply not providing comfortable spaces where people can use the bathroom. It is basic dignity in how we live in cities, towns and villages.

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Osian Smyth): I thank the Deputy for raising this matter. As he said, this is not trivial at all but a matter of basic public health. The level 5 restrictions have had the side effect of bringing more people out from indoor amenities to public and natural outdoor amenities, with the consequence of preventing people from using toilets they would have used in commercial facilities like pubs, restaurants and hotels, as well as public facilities such as those in libraries and so on. It has led to there being increased pressure on remaining public toilets.

I welcome the announcement by Dublin City Council today that it will open 22 of its public buildings on a toilets-only basis. It is a very practical measure and I understand councillors in Dún-Laoghaire Rathdown will bring similar proposals to their executive management. I urge councillors around the country to follow suit.

I am answering this matter on behalf of my colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy O'Donovan, who cannot be here. The national heritage estate is managed by the Office of Public Works and includes parks like the Phoenix Park and historic gardens such as the National Botanic Gardens. In those locations, all public toilet facilities are allowed to open under the Government restrictions relating to Covid-19. They are fully open and operational to the public.

There is increased demand for use of all our historic sites by the public in this period, but the existing facilities are, by and large, coping with demand and there are no significant capacity issues. Locations include popular local parks such as Doneraile Park, John F. Kennedy Arboretum in New Ross, Emo Court parklands in Laois, St. Enda's Park in Rathfarnham and Kilkenny

Castle parkland. Visitors may have to queue during exceptionally busy periods and we ask the public to be patient with both our local teams and their fellow visitors if and when they might be required to queue to use toilet facilities.

In respect of the Phoenix Park, as the Deputy is aware the park is experiencing unprecedented demand in recent months. Large volumes of visitors are availing of the wonderful amenity of the 1,752 acres of park for health and well-being. The existing public toilet facilities in the Phoenix Park have been developed to date where there is suitable water and wastewater infrastructure at locations, including the Phoenix Park visitor centre and the tea rooms referred to by the Deputy, along with Farnleigh house and estate.

The Deputy will acknowledge that the park is primarily a green space and the network of wastewater is limited to certain areas. Therefore, it is not possible to install additional permanent facilities at many locations across the park. However, I am pleased to advise that the park management is progressing a plan to add temporary Portaloo-type facilities at additional locations in the Phoenix Park, including at the Papal Cross car park. There is some concern that some of these facilities may be subject to vandalism, and I have seen this in my local authority, especially as the park is open 24 hours per day. Park management will keep temporary toilet facilities provision under constant review.

The OPW has played a significant role all through the Covid-19 pandemic in ensuring our national heritage estate can be accessed and enjoyed by our citizens in the coming months. As restrictions are eased, we look forward to opening our heritage sites more fully to include those indoor museums, castles, houses and visitor centres which are currently closed because of on-going Government restrictions. The OPW has no role or function in the provision of restroom infrastructure in towns and cities throughout the country. As the Deputy is aware, local authorities are responsible for all matters relating to public amenities in their respective local areas. I suggest that my colleague, the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, is best placed to respond to the specifics of those aspects of the Deputy's query.

The OPW has no role in the management and operation of our national parks. The National Parks and Wildlife Service is responsible for the operation of national parks at Glenveagh, Wicklow, Connemara, Ballycroy, the Burren and Killarney. That service forms part of the heritage division at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage and so, once again, I suggest that my colleague, the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage would be best placed to respond on facilities in national parks.

An Ceann Comhairle: I suspect the public may sometimes find it rather difficult to queue patiently for these facilities.

Deputy Gary Gannon: Would you believe I wrote down those exact sentiments? I echo those comments that some people find it easier than others to wait patiently. For example, there are people with Crohn's disease, and there are any number of reasons a person may find it difficult to wait patiently.

It is not often we get a positive announcement with a Topical Issue matter but the fact the Phoenix Park will have temporary toilet facilities at the Papal Cross is very welcome. I thank the Minister of State for making that announcement. I will engage with the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage on further facilities because this is so important. We cannot let it pass us by, especially when there is more demand than there had been.

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I challenge the assumption that commercial facilities, when they reopen, will solve this. They will alleviate the problem to a degree, but many people who want to see cities, towns and villages and use the bathroom while doing so may find it uncomfortable to ask to do that. They often have toddlers and people need nappy changing facilities. We need facilities where a person with a disability can hoist himself or herself if necessary. We need to take collective responsibility on this.

I appreciate the Minister of State suggests the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage may be more appropriate but we can all work together on this. The Opposition and the Government can engage with Departments and local authorities to bring a satisfactory conclusion to the matter on a national level. Dublin City Council's announcement on this demonstrates a template for what the OPW can do with its own buildings. Working across Departments, we can alleviate discomfort being experienced by people, especially as the weather improves. I thank the Minister of State.

Deputy Ossian Smyth: As the pandemic draws to a close, I hope that one of the things which will continue is that people will go out in large numbers to their local parks. Many people have been forced to explore their 5 km range and have discovered all kinds of natural things in their local areas from which they have gained great pleasure. I expect that there will be more people outdoors and that this will create a lasting demand for toilet facilities. I accept that we cannot rely on commercial facilities and that we must have public facilities.

With regard to people with more complex disabilities or who require a greater level of accessibility in toilet facilities, Marley Park installed a changing places facility which includes a hoist. It is 12 sq. m and provides space for somebody to help a person to use it. That allowed people who had that type of disability to expand where they could go and for how many hours they could leave their home. It meant they could go to the park and enjoy a day out there whereas, previously, they could only go a certain distance away from home before they needed to reach a toilet. It empowered people. It is expensive, but it is something we can deploy across the country. I would love to see that. This year, we are in an era of capital investment and I would be pleased if money went on that. The provision of toilets is not a trivial matter. It is important and is a matter of public health. I am glad the Deputy raised it.

Covid-19 Tests

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: Last year, the Minister for Health established an expert group to report on the use of rapid Covid-19 tests and to make recommendations on how such tests could be used in different settings. In fairness to the Minister, he put together talented people to form the group to advise him on these matters. The group was chaired by Professor Mark Ferguson, the Government's chief scientific adviser, and comprised two professors of infectious diseases, Professor Mary Horgan and Professor Paddy Mallon, Kingston Mills, professor of immunology at Trinity College Dublin, Dr. Lorraine Doherty, national clinical director with the HSE, and Dr. Darina O'Flanagan, an adviser to NPHE. The Minister put together what could only be described as a super league of immunologists and medical personnel to give advice to the Government on this topic.

The report was released earlier this month. It recommends that rapid Covid-19 testing, such as antigen testing, should be used to complement PCR testing. It did not suggest that we get rid of PCR testing, but it pointed out that antigen testing and other forms of rapid Covid-19 testing

should be used in certain settings. For example, it recommends it should be used in certain medical spheres, such as in care homes to enable people to get back to visiting those care homes. It also recommends that it should be used in certain workplaces, particularly workplaces that are high risk such as meat factories. It recommends that rapid testing be used in universities. One thing every Deputy must agree with is that we must get third level students back on campus as soon as possible. However, the report further recommends that rapid Covid-19 testing be used in sport. It said it should be used to get people back participating in sport, but what is relevant to this matter is that it recommends that it be used for the purpose of getting spectators back at matches and at outdoor events. If this happens and applies, it will not just be for the benefit of outdoor sports because we will also be able to use it in an indoor context. In particular, it would be beneficial to accelerate the return of cultural and artistic events, which have been decimated as a result of the pandemic.

The report, which contains several recommendations, has been released. It recommends that the Government start seeking to apply them immediately. The reason I refer to it is that one of the organisations referred to in the report, the IRFU, has decided to expedite it through the Leinster branch making a proposal to the Government. The Minister of State, Deputy Chambers, will be aware that the Leinster branch has submitted a proposal to the Government that on 15 May next, when a rugby match is due to take place between Leinster and Ulster in the Royal Dublin Society, RDS, that 2,000 antigen-tested spectators be permitted into the ground. It has set out a mechanism by which it will do this. It involves people arriving a number of hours before the match is due to kick off. They will be antigen tested and then leave. Later in the day, they will get a message on their telephone and they will return and be admitted if they record a negative Covid-19 test. The benefit of this is not just for the purpose of trying to see a match in Dublin in the near future. It will be of great benefit to the GAA, soccer and other outdoor sporting events, as well as cultural events. The Government must engage with the Leinster branch on this issue to ensure we get this up and running as a trial spectator event.

Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Jack Chambers): I appreciate the Deputy raising this matter. Under the Government's living with Covid plan, spectators are permitted to attend sporting events in limited numbers when the relevant area of the country is at level 1 or level 2 of the measures in place to keep us safe. As the country is currently at level 5, no spectators are currently permitted at sports matches or events, but certain professional and high-performance sports are allowed to take place behind closed doors. The Government's plan for living with Covid states that for very large purpose-built event facilities, for example, stadia, specific guidance will be developed with the relevant sectors to take account of size and different conditions for events such as large national and international sporting events. This would apply in respect of sporting events taking place if we were at level 1 or level 2 in the plan. Notwithstanding the current level 5 restrictions, the finalisation and application of this guidance remain absolute priorities for me.

A working group was established to investigate how a safe return of some spectators could be facilitated. It comprised representatives of the FAI, the GAA and the IRFU, as well as stadium operators and event managers, officials from my Department and Sport Ireland. The group reviewed international guidance, considered lessons from spectator events hosted elsewhere in Europe and consulted independent health and safety experts. The collaborative approach of the group saw contributions from all parties. I have reviewed all the work of the expert group on the return to sport. Officials from my Department are consulting with the relevant public bodies on the report and its draft guidelines are receiving their support. I reiterate our thanks to the

working group that brought it to this point.

With regard to the Ferguson group, the Minister for Health published its report on 1 April last, as the Deputy mentioned. I understand the main tenet of the work on the report was to examine how rapid testing can complement other public health measures, and that rapid antigen tests are primarily aimed at identifying asymptomatic cases. According to the report, antigen tests can become part of a suite of measures, such as social distancing and the use of face masks, which mitigate the risk of spreading Covid-19. The report can be considered to broadly propose three phases of development: use antigen testing regimes already in place to verify their usefulness; move antigen testing into new areas; consider the use of antigen tests to assist with the return of spectators to events. For example, recommendation B 1.9(e) reiterates the premise that rapid testing should begin first with participants in sports and then with spectators. The report will be among the materials that will help inform us for the return of spectators to sports grounds when it is safe to do so.

It is worth noting the UK experience, where there will be a trial event next weekend with antigen testing. Approximately 8,000 people will attend a football cup final and the use of rapid antigen tests will be trialled as part of that. That test follows experience gained earlier this year in managing attendance at matches. This latest test event will also be supervised under an academic study package. In addition, all attendees will take a more reliable PCR test before attending the game to assess the accuracy of antigen tests. Attendees will also take a PCR test after attendance at the game to monitor any effects. Officials in my Department are in regular contact with our counterparts in the UK to learn from its experience.

My Department, with other health authorities, will continue to monitor closely the progress of trials of rapid antigen testing for Covid-19 at scale. In the meantime, we will continue to be guided by health officials on how best to allow safe attendance at sporting and cultural events. I am optimistic that test events can be undertaken over the summer. We all are ambitious, as is the Deputy, for the return to sport generally and also to ensure that spectators can return over the summer. We have to give people that hope. The caveat to all that is the overriding epidemiologic situation. With a ramped-up vaccination programme, we can be positive about the return of spectators during the summer.

Deputy Jim O’Callaghan: I thank the Minister of State for his answer. I am fully aware of his commitment to getting people back playing and watching sport. Obviously, the Minister of State is correct in saying we are at level 5 at present and limited in what we can do. We need to recognise that hope is out there, however. We cannot continue to live with this sense of doom and dread, listening to numbers every evening. Hope is out there in the form of the vaccination. Societally and epidemiologically, we will have changed to a much better place by the time May comes, and more so by June and July. We need to recognise that we need to plan ahead for this.

As the Minister of State said, the Ferguson report referred to fact that we need to use antigen testing for the purpose of getting people back participating in sport but also back watching sport. I agree with that. Obviously, the priority should be to get people playing sport, no matter what type of sport it is, particularly younger people who have been deprived of sport now for nearly four months. I agree with the Minister of State in that respect.

The Minister of State said we need to be guided by public health and that is correct also. We need a vision for the future, however. The Minister of State will regret this just much as I do but it looks like we have lost the UEFA matches from Ireland. I am disappointed about that because

it is intended that those matches will take place in June. We need to try to make sure we have a pathway in place to ensure that spectators can get back to sporting events in May, June and July. Those are great months for the GAA in this country as well. We want to see people being able to go the championship and to attend their hurling and football matches, and indeed, other outdoor events. My fear is that unless we give an indication to the sporting bodies that we are behind the proposals in the Ferguson report and that we believe antigen testing is the way to go, we simply will not get there.

Deputy Jack Chambers: I thank Deputy O’Callaghan. As he mentioned, we are at level 5 and we need to see ramped-up vaccination levels and continued suppression of the virus. As I said, the Ferguson report offers the prospect of building on the work the expert group has done with the FAI, IRFU and GAA on a plan regarding the return of spectators. I believe we will see that this summer and we will be able to start to pilot and to test events. We would all like to see spectators back at one of the all-Ireland matches or even at League of Ireland games this summer. I am positive and optimistic about that. It is about timing, however. We have had planning on this since autumn of last year with the draft return of spectators and test events underpinned by that. The Ferguson report complements our capacity to do that. As Deputy O’Callaghan mentioned, antigen testing will play a key role, not only around sport but also third level education and other key areas of society that we want to see reopen and stay open.

The Deputy mentioned that we have been in a difficult position with the Euro 2020 matches. We have not been able to give the assurance of 25% spectators in the Aviva Stadium for those games. That will obviously have an impact on UEFA’s decision. It is very difficult to be able to give certainty at this point and tell people that we can have 11,000 or 12,000 spectators present in June when we have such an overarching degree of restrictions.

I share the Deputy’s view, however. We need to get sport prioritised and reopened and we are doing so. Next Monday, we will see our kids back playing in pods of 15 again. Hopefully, we can extend that to a greater extent in May and then, through the summer, as I said, see not only the return of all-Ireland and League of Ireland games but also the broader return of competition in sport, which many young people and adults have missed out on for many months. I am ambitious about that and we all want to see it return and continue. Physical and mental health is important and outdoor activity is being prioritised by Government.

Written Answers are published on the Oireachtas website.

The Dáil adjourned at 9.25 p.m. until 10 a.m. on Wednesday, 28 April 2021.

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