



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE  
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

**DÁIL ÉIREANN**

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(OFFICIAL REPORT—*Unrevised*)

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# DÁIL ÉIREANN

*Déardaoin, 6 Bealtaine 2021*

*Thursday, 6 May 2021*

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

*Paidir.*

*Prayer.*

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## **Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Bill 2021: Second Stage (Resumed)**

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

**Deputy Alan Dillon:** I appreciate the opportunity to discuss a Bill that has real potential to benefit, not just our generation, but future generations. I would go as far as saying that this Bill has the potential to be transformative for Irish society and to instil a real sense of pride in our response to climate action. I know this is an important Bill for the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, and his party, for which his colleagues have shown a real passion and determination. I also acknowledge the contribution of the Joint Committee on Climate Action for its input on the Bill. I watched the Minister being heckled two weeks ago when introducing this fundamental Bill but I, for one, wish to thank him for bringing it before the Oireachtas.

Agriculture is one sector that has raised some concerns and while many challenges exist for it, this sector also has the potential to positively address climate action. There will be a need for real and meaningful engagement to address the concerns of this sector. The Bill will provide for extensive consultation in the development of carbon budgets and future plans and strategies, ensuring effective public and stakeholder participation at all key steps of the process, which I welcome. It is also important to look at the prospective benefits when farmers engage proactively on climate change. For example, the results based environment-agri pilot project, REAP, is an important step. I am specifically thinking of farmers availing of REAP who choose to use more renewable energy in their farms, as I suspect this would increase their environmental scores. This, in turn, would lead to greater payments under schemes such as REAP, which I suspect we will see expanded over time. I welcome this.

At constituency level in Mayo, I was impressed with the efforts of local communities in their work on becoming decarbonisation zones. It shows there is a real appetite among community groups to take this issue seriously and raise awareness of it. Some specific issues have been raised with me by constituents about this proposed legislation and they need to be addressed. For instance, there is a need for more detail on the principles of climate justice and a just transi-

tion. There is a demand to provide more clarification on the interpretation of the 2030 targets, which is an important step. There also seems to be a lack of targets set for aviation, shipping, non-territorial emissions and offshore mitigation.

The regional airports programme, which is of significant benefit to small airports, also supports sustainability objectives. It may be worthwhile discussing how sustainability funding under the programme can be increased and indeed, putting in place similar sustainability funding increases over time for other transport modes and sectors. One that comes to mind is the western rail corridor, which is an important piece of infrastructure.

This is a critical junction for Ireland, at which we need to choose the right path and grasp the nettle versus failing to act. In doing so, we need to put our money where our mouths are on climate change. I note that the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, acknowledged the significant level of investment required by ESB for our electricity network assets and renewable generation assets in previous debates on this Bill. I was glad to hear that plans are in place to increase the statutory borrowing limit of the ESB from its current level of €6 billion to €12 billion to support this.

I acknowledge the thousands of young people and students around the country who stood up and said that now is the time for action, urging Government to prioritise measures to protect against the ravages of climate breakdown. This ranged from the Youth Assembly on Climate Change coming into the Dáil to the school strikers and the many green activists who lined our streets. This Government is listening, and more importantly, acting. I welcome this Bill and look forward to supporting it.

**Deputy Michael Creed:** I thank Deputy Dillon for sharing his time with me. I also welcome the opportunity to say a few words on what is a significant Bill. The Bill is not in itself the outline of the challenge but it is the framework within which the challenge of climate change will be addressed. It is important in that context, no matter what position we come from as long as we are not climate change deniers, that we are open to debate and consideration. There is a great deal of prejudice, propaganda, misinformation and ideology. There are also many instances of big business trying to shape, inform and influence the direction of this debate. To be honest, there is also quite a lot of nonsense being spoken in the context of this legislation and some of that is being done in this House. It is important that we have a calm and rational debate on what is the challenge of our generation. In that context, I welcome the legislation.

I have reservations, particularly regarding the responsibilities being laid at the door of the Climate Change Advisory Council. I draw the Minister of State's attention to the difference in the ask of the council and the ask that we have successfully had for several years of the Irish Fiscal Advisory Council, IFAC. The IFAC does not introduce the financial budget. However, it does exert extraordinary and positive influence in ensuring that we maintain the public finances in good stead. Instead, what we are doing with the Climate Change Advisory Council is outsourcing the responsibilities, which should rest in the Executive and ultimately for approval in the Oireachtas, for carbon budgets. I would like the Minister of State to address that issue in his reply to the debate because the council, as I understand it, will propose the budget. The Minister may amend it in the context of engagement with the council and the Government will subsequently approve it. Simply put, that is a slight on the function of this House and on its primary duty and accountability for budget matters, be it for fiscal or carbon budgets. Lest there be any doubt, carbon budgets are the right way to go. People might argue that this is a moot point. I do not think so but I would be interested in hearing, in particular, the Minister of

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State's rationale behind the difference in approach with the IFAC and the Climate Change Advisory Council. I welcome other provisions in the Bill. In particular, I welcome the obligation on the Climate Change Advisory Council to be cognisant of a number of issues, for example, the requirement for a just transition. In this context, I allude to a decision on something that is already a closed issue in the Government's approach, which is licences for exploration. I have yet to be convinced we can achieve a just transition and the targets to which we aspire, and they are rightly ambitious targets, while at the same time putting ourselves at a significant disadvantage by virtue of being reliant to the extent we are on imported fossil fuels, in particular what is recognised as a transition fuel, which is natural gas. I cannot fault the ambition but I wonder how realistic it is and I would like to hear the Minister address this matter.

I am also glad to see in the context of the Bill that the Climate Change Advisory Council is obliged to be cognisant of leakage, notwithstanding that the weaponised wing of the environmental movement disagrees, and An Taisce came before the Oireachtas committee on agriculture and dissed the issue of carbon leakage. In other words, if we were to sacrifice the national herd on the altar of climate change, the reality is that on a global scale, and this is a global challenge, there would be no net gain because we are one of the most efficient producers of food globally. The Climate Change Advisory Council is also obliged to be cognisant of biogenic methane and its specific characteristics regarding the requirement for a just transition and the impact on the rural economy. All of these are important steps.

It is understandable that Irish agriculture attracts a lot of interest because one third of the emissions in the Irish economy comes from the agricultural sector. It is marginally over one third at 34%. It is important to put this in context. If we were to lift Irish agriculture, lock, stock and barrel, and put it into any other developed country in terms of its *modus operandi* and its production systems, it would be far more efficient than the production system of any of those jurisdictions. The emissions profile, because of the historical industrial heritage other countries have, would be in single digits. It is because of this significant percentage of 34% that we attract unfair heat in the agricultural sector.

That said, the agricultural sector needs to embrace the concept of climate change. I can honestly say that, in my time as Minister with responsibility for agriculture, this was abundantly apparent. Why do I say this? It is because we export 90% of what we produce. The international marketplaces are increasingly cognisant of consumer asks in terms of sustainability. The future of Irish agriculture in this context is inextricably linked with efficiency economically but also efficiency from a climate change and sustainability point of view in terms of productivity. We need to continue with these improvements. We need to accelerate the pace of these improvements. More importantly, the sector must be seen to embrace the challenge of climate change. There must be no more mealy-mouthed resistance to every step along the journey. I would say this to farm leaders, for whom I have the greatest of respect with regard to the challenges they face, they need to step out front and lead in this debate. This is where the long-term interests of Irish agriculture are.

It is a sad state of affairs that it has come to pass, even within the Oireachtas, that the farming community is now fair game for unfair criticism in many respects from members of all political parties and none. This is a significant fact that should be taken on board by farmers and their leaders. As a declaration of interest, I am a farmer's son, I farmed myself and I represent a largely rural constituency. I have the greatest time and respect for the work and commitment of the farming community. Equally, I know that they hurt because of unfair criticism and that they are doing everything that has been asked of them, much of it unknown to many of the people

who are highly critical of them today.

It seems that everybody is now an expert on agriculture. It appears to be almost the case that there is a willingness to turn a blind eye to a fundamental fact. Whether people are vegan, vegetarian, flexitarian or are meat and two veg people, in the production of food, greenhouse gases are produced. This is an inescapable scientific fact. What we should be aspiring to is a move to be a part of what is already under way, which is a global shift to those who are the most economically and environmentally efficient producers of food. In essence, this is the question that has to be answered not just here but globally. Who should produce our food? In the context of this debate, it is inescapably the answer that those who should produce it are first and foremost those who do it efficiently from a climate change and sustainability point of view.

In this context, it is worth pointing out that the Joint Research Centre of the European Union has said the Irish dairy industry is the most efficient not just in Europe but, along with New Zealand, globally. Why would we sacrifice our dairy industry on an altar of expediency when that opportunity would then be taken up by others? Would we prefer a shedload of 10,000 cows in California or the deserts of north Africa or Saudi Arabia or 1,000 cows across a parish in rural Ireland that are grass fed, outdoors for nine or ten months of the year and whose sustainability credentials, by any stretch of the imagination, are far better than anybody else producing dairy? It begs the question as to whether the criticism is ideologically driven by a resistance and objection in principle to meat and dairy in people who would prefer that we drink almond juice. They might like to call it almond milk. A litre of almond milk, or almond juice more correctly, requires 6,000 l of water to produce. This is something that is very often lost.

With regard to methane, it is imperative the Climate Change Advisory Council, with its scientific basis, does the scientific analysis. Carbon in the atmosphere lasts for 1,000 years. The 100 cows being milked on the average dairy farm today are not adding to the problem of climate change because those 100 cows only produce methane similar to cows of 12 years ago. Methane gas has a finite lifespan. It is a flow gas which, as it is emitted, is expiring. It has a 12-year life cycle. This is very different from carbon. This is why the challenges for the agricultural sector need to be very different from the challenges for the built environment and the transport sector. This is something that very often is not appreciated. The net point is we are not adding to global warming by virtue of our herd. Methane makes a finite contribution as it is a cyclical flow gas and this needs to be taken into account.

The importance of the rural economy and Irish agriculture to this country was abundantly manifest in the last crash in the economy when it was one of the bedrocks upon which we rebuilt. Globally, our reputation is second to none and I have seen this at first hand. It is regrettable that people resort to name-calling with regard to the Irish agricultural sector when internationally we have a reputation that many would seek to knock off us, and we need to be very careful about this.

Irish agriculture needs to embrace wholeheartedly the challenges of climate change. There have been improvements in herd genetics and soil fertility and in reducing the use of chemical fertilisers through better use and application of slurries. Not many people know, for example, that we measure the carbon footprint of approximately 50,000 farmers involved in the green low-carbon agri-environment scheme run by the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine. The Irish agricultural sector is doing a lot. It is willing to take further steps and to embrace and accelerate the changes required but it cannot be asked to fall under a Dublin Bus, an Iarnród Éireann train or, God forbid, a four-wheel drive in suburbia. We will carry our share,

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and in terms of the public goods we are asked to deliver, there is nobody who will shirk in the agricultural sector provided farmers are adequately remunerated for those challenges. That is a big challenge for my successor in the context of the next reform of the Common Agricultural Policy.

This debate should not be seen in the context of agriculture as a binary choice between meat on the one hand and vegetables or plant-based diets on the other. We have seen in recent days the *safefood* report on meat substitutes which will be interesting in terms of the debate around public health. I referenced earlier big business seeking to influence the climate change debate. Anywhere one looks, in terms of research online, it is abundantly clear that this is big money chasing economic opportunity and trying to undermine the reputation of farmers and those involved in primary food production.

I believe that the agricultural sector can and will play its role. It has a very positive contribution to make, not as the problem in the context of climate change but in the context of the solutions. Nobody in this country is more aware of the consequences of climate change than the farming community who make their living from the land and who are out there every day witnessing more extreme weather events, droughts and flooding. If they are treated appropriately and with respect, and if we can step back from our individual prejudices and ideology, we can collectively meet the challenge which is imperative for our children and grandchildren's sake, for financial reasons because of the fines and from the farmer's point of view because the marketplace is demanding it also.

**Deputy Aindrias Moynihan:** Climate change is a hugely significant challenge for humanity and there is a real urgency in dealing with it. This Bill sets out to take on the challenges. People are making efforts in their everyday lives and there is goodwill there in taking on those challenges. The burden varies from person to person but it is appearing to fall disproportionately on some people more than others. This is a real concern. Any transition must be a just transition and the State has its role to play in that just transition as well.

There are households who heat their homes with solid fuels - turf, timber or coal - and they want to insulate their homes. They are being pushed to the pin of their collar with the cost of fuel yet they are kept waiting for the opportunity to insulate their homes and to get funding through the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland, SEAI. It can take up to two years for SEAI to inspect a house, not to mention to get the work done subsequently. In the meantime, householders are paying more for fuel. There needs to be a greater energy in terms of SEAI in rolling out those housing grants. It is not the only example of where the State is dragging its heels.

Where people want to develop green tourism in terms of our clean green environment and have public electric car-charging points at different places around the country, the local authorities are just not advancing the infrastructure. I have raised this previously with the Minister. SEAI has funding to build public electric car-charging points yet less than half of the local authorities have made inquiries about that funding, and no more than two or three local authorities have drawn down funding to put in place infrastructure. This is despite there being funding available and it being part of the local authorities' development plans to put in place electric infrastructure.

Transport networks need to be advanced to give people an alternative to driving to work or college, and I have raised this repeatedly with the Minister. One must realise that even when

this is done, in many rural areas the car will still remain the only realistic option for many people. It is difficult to expect people who do not have alternatives to keep paying more and more for basic everyday journeys. It must be taken into consideration. A just transition is necessary and the State agencies must play their role in delivering that.

On wind energy, for far too long some communities have felt that they have been carrying more than their fair share of wind farm developments, with more and more being built in the same areas and putting pressure on those communities. There needs to be a greater emphasis on moving to offshore options. Offshore must be explored more. There is an emphasis on that now and that is a positive. It is good to see that movement. Can the Minister of State, Deputy Ossian Smyth, clarify whether that emphasis will exist for new and-or existing developments because we see a great many of the wind farms around us moving into the second third of their life span and they will need a renewal of their planning permission in the five to ten years ahead? Where will they stand? Will the emphasis push them out into the sea or will they be taken down as part of an offshore move? That needs to be clarified.

Many farmers feel victimised in the whole situation. They have been the custodians of the countryside over many generations. They are providing clean green food locally yet they are perceived as damaging the environment and needing to scale down livestock numbers, which, in turn, would result in the need for food to be transported long distances from other countries. It is a lazy criticism of agriculture and does not take into account the huge work on the environment that farmers continue to do. Science has been applied in numerous different ways, whether it is in the genomics or in fertilisers. There are further opportunities there for agriculture. It does not have to be a lazy option of reducing numbers, on which farmers feel threatened.

Credit should also be given for hedgerows. Teagasc estimates that 7% of the countryside is covered by them yet the hedgerows are not getting the recognition for their carbon sink value that they should be.

Through its passage in the Oireachtas and the debate and the engagement with the Members, I hope that this Bill will be amended and strengthened because there must be buy-in from all different sides and people must have ownership of it if there is any chance for it to be successful, and we need it to be successful.

Tá dúshlán mór roimh an bpobal i gcoitinne ó thaobh athrú aeráide de agus tá dea-thoil ann, i measc an phobail, chun dul i ngleic leis an dúshlán sin. Tá sé fiorthábhachtach a aithint nach bhfuil an dúshlán nó an t-ualach sin ag titim go cothrom ar gach aon duine. Níor chóir an clonadh sin a bheith ann. Chaithfidh cothrom na Féinne a bheith ann i gcomhair gach aon duine. Má tá aon just transition chun bheith ann, ní leor labhairt faoi. Chaithfidh é a chur i bhfeidhm i gcomhair an phobail. Mar a luaigh mé, bíonn tithe atá cóngarach dúinn, agus tá aithne againn go léir orthu, ag úsáid breosla ar nós guail, adhmaid, nó móna chun an tigh a théamh. Fiú dá mba rud é gur theastaigh uathu insliú a dhéanamh ar an tigh, bheidís ag feitheamh thart ar dhá bhliain chun go gceadódh an Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland, SEAI, deontais dóibh. Níl sé sin sásúil in aon chor. Ba chóir don Stát a bheith ábalta brostú ar aghaidh agus daoine a chur ar a gcumas an t-athrú sin a dhéanamh, nuair atá an dea-thoil ann agus nuair a theastaíonn uathu é a dhéanamh.

Ní hé an SEAI an t-aon ghrúpa Stáit atá ag déanamh faillí ann ná a bhfuil leisce air. Tá sé le feiceáil chomh maith i measc na gcomhairlí contae leis an lagéileamh atá ann chun car chargers leictreacha a chur ar fáil i measc an phobail.

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Níl fiú ach leath dóibh tar éis fiosrú a dhéanamh mar gheall ar na deontais seo agus níl ach dhá nó trí chomhairle tar éis airgead a éileamh chun na chargers a chur i bhfeidhm in ainneoin go bhfuil sé mar chuid den phlean forbartha sna contaetha éagsúla.

Ní leor a bheith ag labhairt mar gheall ar just transition nó chothrom na Féinne a thabhairt do dhaoine. Chaithfí é a chur i bhfeidhm agus tá ról ag an Stát maidir leis sin.

Maidir le gaoth, braitheann an-chuid pobail in áiteanna a bhfuil an t-ualach ag titim san áit chéanna arís agus arís eile agus go gcaithfí druidim amach i dtreo na farraige chun fuinneamh a chinntiú.

Is rud dearfach é go bhfuil an iarracht sin á déanamh. Chaithfí a aithint go raibh an-chuid feirmeacha gaoithe ann anois le 15 bliain agus níos mó agus go mbeidís ag druidim leis an tréimhse a bheadh athnuachan ag teastáil ar an gcead pleanála. Mar sin, an bhféadfadh leis an Aire Stáit an scéal ansin a shoiléiriú?

An mbeidh an claonadh i dtreo na farraige ag cur isteach ar na ceadanna pleanála sin? An mbeidh an athnuachan sin ar fáil nó an mbeidh ar na feirmeacha gaoithe, a bhfuil cuid acu ann le thart ar 15 bliain agus níos mó, an athnuachan a thógáil anuas agus rudaí á mbrú amach i dtreo na farraige? Ba mhaith liom soiléiriú air sin.

Ní bhaineann an gné eile seo go díreach leis an mBille ach tá sé tábhachtach aird an Aire Stáit a tharraingt air agus tá sé mar gheall ar na deontais phobail a bhíonn ar fáil ó na feirmeacha gaoithe. Le fada an lá, cuireann cuid acu, luaim cuid mar nach bhfuil sé acu go léir, deontais ar fáil don phobal. Tá nasc díreach idir an pobal agus an fheirm ghaoithe.

Tá gluaiseacht anois atá ag cur eagraíochta eile eatarthu, chun go mbeidh na deontais sin á scaipeadh i measc an phobail ag eagraíochtaí eile amhail coistí forbartha cosúil leis na grúpaí LEADER agus mar sin de. Braithim go gcuireann sé sin bearna ann nó go n-osclaíonn sé spás idir an pobal agus na feirmeacha gaoithe agus na daoine atá ag baint brabúis as an infreast-ruchtúr.

Anuas air sin, braitheann go leor den phobal nach bhfuil aon scrúdú ceart ná oversight ann maidir leis an gcaiteachas a bheidh ar fáil agus go bhféadfadh thart ar 10% de na deontais a úsáid i gcomhair administration costs agus i gcomhair na deontais a scaipeadh iad féin agus nach bhfuil aon eagraíocht le oversight air sin agus is cailliúint don phobal é sin.

Mar sin, tá dhá dheacracht ann agus is fiú iad a scrúdú mar is amhlaidh go bhfuil an tAire Stáit ag briseadh an naisc dhaingin, má tá aon nasc ann, idir pobal agus na feirmeacha gaoithe atá ag baint brabúis as. Tá sé fiorthábhachtach, má tá a leithéid d'infreastruchtúr i gceantar, go bhfeiceann an pobal go bhfuil tairbhe leis agus nach mbíonn siad ag brath ar rud diúltach an t-am ar fad ann.

Ba cheart go mbeadh nasc díreach ann, fiú dá mba rud é go raibh deis ag daoine a bheith ag charging an ghluaisteán sa chlós go mbeadh a fhios acu go raibh an leictreachas ag teacht díreach ó na muilte gaoithe a bhí thuas ar an sliabh os a gcionn. Ba cheart go mbeadh tairbhe ann go díreach ansin sa mhuilleann.

De réir mar a bheidh an Bille seo ag bogadh ar aghaidh, beidh roinnt athruithe ag teastáil ann. Tá sé fiorthábhachtach go mbeidh an comhoibriú ann; go mbeidh deis ag na grúpaí leasmhara éagsúla go léir éifeacht a bheith acu ar an mBille; go mbeidh aon leasuithe riachtana-

cha ann chun a chinntiú go mbeidh an buy-in ann; go mbeidh gach duine ar aon aigne agus chun go mbeidh deis ag an mBille dul chun cinn.

Beimid ag coimeád súil ghéar air. Teastaíonn uainn go mbeidh dul chun cinn ann. Is gá go mbeidh dul chun cinn ann maidir le cúrsaí timpeallachta. Caithfidh an Stát agus an just transition sin a bheith ag feidhmiú chomh maith agus caithfidh an Stát a ról a dhéanamh ann chomh maith.

**Deputy Joe Carey:** I welcome this opportunity to contribute to the debate. This island is but a small dot on the world's surface but we have been part of the developed world since the first farmers cultivated lands around the Céide Fields and other communities constructed Newgrange and the other monuments in the Boyne Valley. The cultivation of the land and the building of homes and towns over the following 7,000 years of human activity did not affect our climate or damage our environment. It was only with the invention of the steam engine in the middle of the 19th century that we start to record small changes to our environment and effects on our climate. It was another 100 years before we started to see a noticeable increase in CO<sup>2</sup> levels but over the past 70 years that rise, year-on-year, has been dramatic. CO<sup>2</sup> pollution levels have increased by 43% globally during our lifetime.

Ireland has been part of this explosion in CO<sup>2</sup> levels, with emissions per person reaching 13,300 kg in 2017, the third highest in the EU, just behind Bulgaria and Luxembourg, or 2.5 times the global average of 5,500 kg per person. To put this in context, it is suggested that I may have produced more than 70 kg of CO<sup>2</sup> by travelling by car to the Dáil this week to carry out my parliamentary duties and returning home to Clarecastle at the weekend. However, I am now driving a hybrid car so I have started to play my part in reducing my carbon use.

We have all witnessed the effects of carbon use on our climate. The past decade in Ireland has been the wettest in the past 300 years, with average rainfall rising from 912 mm in 1971 to 12,024 mm in 2018. Ireland's average temperature varied by 8.2°C in the 1960s but this had increased to 10.1°C by 2018. Over the past five years, Ireland has experienced its wettest winter and its hottest summer on record. We had the stormiest winter in 147 years, as well as our first taste of a near-intact Atlantic hurricane. We are designing and constructing almost 100 flood protection projects throughout the country to protect our towns and cities from severe climactic events, including in my own constituency of Clare. Significant projects are planned along the River Shannon and its tributaries, such as the River Fergus, to protect homes and businesses in Ennis, Shannon and Springfield, Clonlara.

Scientists have set out many strategies to correct the situation and put the global community back on the best path to restoring our climate. Put simply, the increased carbon that we created over the past 70 years must be reserved in the next 30 years, before 2050. While some see this as dramatic and harsh, there is no doubt that we have to take numerous small steps as well as many large steps for the good of mankind, our environment and our climate. The main changes seem to be in our use of carbon fuels and energy to provide heat, light, transport and the production of consumer, industrial and food products. I want to express my reservations about the effects of these measures on two particular sectors, namely, the aviation sector and the agricultural sector. The aviation sector is a major component of the economic activity in County Clare and the entire mid-west region, with Shannon Airport at its hub. The aviation sector has been signalled as a contributor to increased CO<sup>2</sup> levels. I am aware there are many research projects in developing electric and solar powered planes, but these projects are going to take many years to come fully into operation. We may need to see increased investment in these projects, along

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with reduced targets in the early years, while retaining the overall targets for 2050. I believe that with the possible development of these new modes of air travel, Shannon, as an aviation hub, will have a bright future into the next century.

These measures are necessary in order to protect Shannon Airport, the aviation-related industries based around Shannon, and the tourism sector for the entire west coast. While talking about Shannon, I must also mention Moneypoint power station and its transition from a so-called dirty coal-burning power producer in a deepwater facility to becoming a major base for renewable energy with the building of two major wind farms off the coast of County Clare. It will see Ireland's first move into the production of green hydrogen fuel with a view to exporting the fuel from the deepwater berth at the facility in the Shannon Estuary. There is also the possibility of the manufacturing of wind turbines at this facility for wind farms and possibly the manufacturing and exporting of turbines to all corners of the world. This is a good example of how County Clare is making a major contribution in transforming from the old technology to the new green economy and the opportunities it can bring to all of us.

Regarding agriculture and the agricultural sector, there has been much shouting at and lecturing of farmers in this whole process, but we must remember that farmers have been the greatest environmentalists and that they have nurtured their land for many generations. We must also recognise that the Irish dairy sector produces the most environmentally efficient dairy products in the world. The same can be said of the Irish beef farmer. Irish farmers have responded positively to changed circumstances over recent decades, especially since we joined the EU. I have no doubt that Irish farmers will respond positively to the measures we need to take in the coming years, but we must engage with the farmers on the ground. We must create a greater awareness and understanding of the measures that we need to take in order to preserve our world. Farmers do not respond well to lectures from those inside the M50, taking absolute positions against their livelihoods. I have no doubt that with an improved awareness programme the agricultural sector will respond positively. Perhaps we need to create greater awareness and understanding of these measures among the whole community. In the next Bill on this subject, we should include an environmental education programme not just for our schools, as they are far ahead in their response to and thinking on climate change, but one that is focused on the general population.

I want to compliment the work of the Citizens' Assembly on climate change. While I know it was given valuable resources and education on this subject before coming to its conclusions and report, I suggest that we must do something similar with the whole population. I also want to mention oil and gas exploration, and gas fracking, about which I have received a large number of emails, seeking the inclusion of a ban on these in the Bill. While I understand that these are not included in this Bill, I would appreciate if the Minister, in his concluding remarks, would confirm that these measures will be included in the programme for Government and will be dealt with in separate legislation.

The framework for change has been set out. The fewer number of steps we take now, the greater number of steps we will have to take in the future to meet our targets in 2030 and 2050. I commend this Bill to the Members of the House.

**Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan:** I welcome the Minister of State. I wish him well in his time ahead and, in particular, with this climate action Bill. Most of the Members are fully aware of the challenges that lie ahead in this regard, but also the necessity of this Bill in ensuring Ireland becomes a carbon-neutral economy by 2050. The importance of this Bill cannot be overstated.

It is a clear signal of intent by the Government as to where it aims to stimulate employment, focus investment and how we reach our climate targets as agreed under the Paris accords.

I will focus on a number of specific areas today that warrant some attention and consideration. We understand the Bill recognises the special economic and social role of agriculture, but it also recognises that reducing emissions will, in turn, make farmers here more competitive and sustainable in the future. Our agriculture sector has among the best work practices in the world in terms of its agrifood offering. As Deputy Creed alluded to earlier, if Irish farmers do not continue the key work they do in this sector, then other countries with a far more inferior product and offering will pick up the slack. In that respect, everything needs to be measured and focused on bringing stakeholders with us. Just as we negotiated a fair deal, or a just transition, for those with peat and bogs in the midlands, we must ensure those engaged in farming receive similar treatment in terms of a fair deal.

I want to raise some issues on transport, which I think are worthy of raising. The transport sector accounts for more than 20% of our national emissions, with in excess of 51% of these emissions coming from the passenger car fleet. Under this Bill, there will be a focus on shifting to electric vehicles and alternative fuel technologies. We will also see a promotion of public transport and active travel initiatives which will also contribute to decarbonising society. Looking at my constituency, I know the Minister of State is aware of the efficiency of the Cork-Cobh-Midleton rail line which offers people viable public transport options but, unfortunately, on the northern side of the city, we are not as lucky with our current railway offering. I hope that with a renewed focus on public transport espoused in this Bill we will, in my lifetime, see the expansion of the rail line from Cork to Blackpool to Monard and on to Blarney. We can talk about the need to get people out of their cars and on to public transport but unless we offer something tangible and practical, we are only shooting ourselves in the foot in terms of meeting our climate targets.

I refer to Government initiative's such as the active travel funding and other grants under the town and village schemes and outdoors recreation grants, etc. While I have been engaged with a number of community groups and both local authorities in Cork in delivering some of these projects, we need to see a greater emphasis on what can be achieved by these relatively small, in budgetary terms, initiatives which have the capacity to dramatically enhance and change the transport practices of small villages and communities. I ask that we continue to roll out these successful schemes and that funding would be ring-fenced within the carbon tax intake to ensure we can adequately fund these programmes in the future. These are not just words.

In the area in which I live, Dunkettle, I see first hand the transformative impacts of cycle lanes and greenways which have been facilitated by the State. Every week, hundreds and thousands of people can be seen walking and cycling on these routes. We are hopeful that in the near future, the NTA will allocate funding to Little Island and provide designated bus and cycle lanes in an area which employs approximately 15,000 people. How Little Island, an area developed as a workplace for many years, is without such a provision, in terms of transport arrangements, baffles me but thankfully progress is finally being made on this front.

The next issue I would like to raise is waste water, an issue I have raised here before. We talk about the Environmental Protection Agency and the need for the State to provide appropriate legislation to take action against not just State agencies, for example, Irish Water for malfunctioning treatment plants, but also private developers. It is something we must look at as part of the wider discussion on climate action. There is still raw sewage going into Cork

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Harbour. The Carrigrennan waste water treatment plant, which is the largest one in Cork and is run by Irish Water, is in breach of its licence since 2015 in terms of its nitrate emissions. It is fine for us to speak about climate action and what we need to do as a society, but in some cases, State and semi-State bodies are not compliant with the regulations we are setting down. That is something we as a Government need to take very seriously and keep an eye on because it is not acceptable that we are only asking stakeholders, whether farmers or others, to change what they are doing in their choice of transport and travel. It is fine for us to ask them to be compliant or change their practices but, at the same time, State bodies such as Irish Water need to get their act together in the case of Carrigrennan waste water treatment plant.

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan mentioned the wind energy guidelines. That is something we have trumpeted for quite a while and the review of those guidelines seems to have been on the long finger for quite a while. I raise it to emphasise that we are in favour of wind energy - or most of us here are. Some Deputies in the Independent ranks still believe the world is flat but the vast majority of Members are in favour of wind and solar energy. Communities up and down the country have been waiting for those guidelines to be published since 2015. We need to grasp the nettle now, publish those guidelines and give people some reassurance that the concerns they have about wind energy will be taken on board. That is all I have to offer today. I thank the Minister of State for his time.

**Deputy Cormac Devlin:** I am very pleased to participate in the debate. I am a member of the Joint Committee on Climate Action and we have had a lot of discussion on this matter. It has been quite amicable among Members across the Houses, which is to be welcomed. This Government committed to bringing this Bill forward in a relatively short period, which is being done.

The Bill sets out the legal framework for Ireland's transition to a climate-resilient, biodiversity-rich, environmentally sustainable and climate-neutral economy by no later than 2050. It provides for a 2030 interim target, five-yearly carbon budgets, sectoral emissions ceilings, an annually updated climate action plan and a long-term climate action strategy. As the Minister of State will be aware, the local authority is going to take the lead on the climate action plan in our shared constituency of Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown. It is important that elected members of the local authority and other elected members, irrespective of level, feed into that plan because at the end of the day, while the Government can guide this plan, ultimately its implementation lies with local authorities. It is crucial that they play their part in that.

The legislation also places on a statutory basis the commitment to achieve a climate-neutral economy no later than 2050, which will be known as the national climate objective. Of course, this does not mean that Ireland will cease to produce carbon emissions by this time; it means we are committing to offsetting all the carbon we produce by 2050. A large part of this will involve reducing emissions by changing practices in sectors such as energy, housing, transport and agriculture and by sequestering carbon through methods such as rewilding parts of our country.

The Bill will ensure Ireland meets its international commitments under the Paris Agreement. Working internationally with almost 200 other countries including the US, China and India, the agreement aims to substantially reduce greenhouse gas emissions and to limit the global temperature increase in this century to 2°C, while pursuing means to limit the increase further to 1.5°C. Over the next decade we will see revolutionary change when it comes to green infrastructure and technology. We are seeing this in the UK, which is embracing green tech and leading the way. Global capital and investors are following suit by abandoning old carbon

intensive sectors and earmarking funds for green tech development. We can see that here in Ireland too. Ireland cannot be left behind and the Bill will ensure our country is at the forefront of this green revolution.

These changes will be challenging. We heard from Deputies earlier about the concerns within various sectors and this will require fundamental change in many parts of Irish life. We have to accept that, though at times it will be difficult for all of us. In rising to the challenge, we will be able to improve the health, welfare and security of our country. I have raised my concerns about energy security for Ireland with the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications previously and have submitted a parliamentary question on that matter. While we must rule out certain types of energy, it is imperative that we satisfy ourselves that we have energy security for the next decade and beyond. It is not just for our generation but for the next generation and those beyond them that the Bill must deliver the changes we want it to.

Once the legislation passes, we will then prepare the climate action plans which will set out the actions that must be taken to ensure we deliver on our commitments to reduce total carbon emissions by 51% by 2030 and achieve carbon neutrality by 2050. This will make Ireland a world leader in responding to climate change and improve our country and our living environment immensely. The next step is to prepare the new climate action plan, which will set out the actions that must be taken to ensure we deliver on the commitments in the programme for Government, including making sure we achieve our 2030 targets and neutrality by 2050. This would make Ireland the world leader to which I referred.

The legislation underwent significant and intense scrutiny at the Joint Committee on Climate Action. I was proud to be a part of that committee and I pay tribute to our Chair, Deputy Brian Leddin, for his steering of the committee and for improving the draft text as the committee worked over the past number of months to do so. I welcome the fact that the Minister has included the majority of the 78 recommendations proposed by the committee, which will significantly strengthen the Bill. Language has been amended to ensure obligations are clearly stated, and the relationship between the various mechanisms is also more explicit. In line with the programme for Government commitment, the Bill stipulates that carbon budgets should provide for a 51% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2030. Key principles such as just transition, climate justice and protection and restoration of biodiversity are matters to which the Minister and Government will have regard when preparing the various action plans. Importantly, public participation provisions have been strengthened, with the Bill providing that for each of the relevant plans, strategies, and carbon budgets the Minister will consult with the public so they can have their say. A public consultation is currently under way, which closes on 18 May. It is very important that at this time, before this Bill is enacted, the public have their say in how those action plans are shaped and what is contained in them.

As I mentioned, the next phase will be to develop a climate action plan. In housing, we must move quickly to retrofit homes. A commitment has been made to retrofit 400,000 homes. The Minister of State knows that the local authority in Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown also made a commitment and made great strides in improving local authority housing stock, and retrofitted quite a number of them. There is more to be done in just transition and retrofitting. There are private homeowners who cannot afford to retrofit and that is why it is key that we bring them along with us and that homes are made warmer and more secure. Retrofitting is an important part of that. It will save energy, reduce energy bills and make homes more comfortable for the owners and inhabitants.

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Pilot schemes such as those provided by EnergyCloud provide innovative technological solutions to reducing the instance of fuel poverty and ensure we use wind energy to its full potential. I raised this at the committee last week. We must also ensure that all new housing stock is fit for purpose and we need regulations to ensure the reuse of grey water to reduce pressure on our national water network and conserve our precious drinking water.

On transport, we need to invest in our public transport network. Major infrastructural projects such as the DART underground and the upgrading of the Luas green line are critical. Equally, we need investment in walking and cycling infrastructure, where there must be a renewed focus by local authorities to complete projects such as the Sutton to Sandycove cycle track and ensure that it is a coastal route. That route has been planned for approximately 30 years and I fear we are moving away from the original coastal plan and proposing an on-road solution. It is imperative that the majority of that route be coastal. The funding is in place now and we have to ensure, collectively as a Government with the Deputies of this House, that this is achieved, as well as the Lee to Sea coastal routes.

The shift to electric cars must be supported with practical measures, such as more on-street charging points. The Minister of State will be aware our development plan specifies that all new developments would have charging points. It is important that is replicated throughout the country in the current drafting of other local development plans.

On land, we must ensure we continue to develop our forestry programme and I welcome the Government's commitments to plant native forestry and to enhance and support biodiversity. It is the energy sector in which Ireland has the most potential to make significant progress. We are well placed to become a world leader in offshore energy generation. This must be supported by an upgrade to the national grid and the completion of the international interconnectors. This is again something I raised with the Minister before, and it is important we stay on course with it.

While these changes will be challenging, I have no doubt they will improve our environment. Ten years from now, it is to be hoped we will be living in a healthier and cleaner Ireland as well as in cleaner cities. Biodiversity will have been improved and we will be on track to meet our international commitments and, more importantly, our moral commitments to the next generation of Irish and global citizens. I support the Bill on that basis. It is important that we, collectively here in the House, and notwithstanding further amendments, ultimately see unanimous support for such a measure.

I spoke earlier about retrofitting 500,000 homes and installing 400,000 heat pumps in existing buildings over the next ten years. Ambitions like that are crucial, not just in respect of retrofitting but across the board. When people see the tangible benefits of this ambitious and brave programme, I think and I hope they will buy into it. Ultimately, however, they will be the beneficiaries of it. This crisis is happening now and we cannot afford not to do this. To those who deny there is any need for climate action, I say we should all strive to reduce our carbon emissions, irrespective of our views. This plan will meet with that ambition. The targets are ambitious but we must start now. The sooner this Bill is passed, the better we will be. I commend the Bill. I thank the Minister of State for his time and I ask him to relay some of the comments I made to the Minister because I am waiting to hear a response.

**Deputy Ged Nash:** I welcome the opportunity to speak on the Bill. My remarks will refer to several broad issues and I plan to limit them to ten or 11 minutes. However, I may not use my full allocation of time.

The challenge we face to get to net zero emissions by 2050 is simply enormous. We have an existential threat hanging over us and there is a very real danger that the scale of the task ahead could overwhelm us. It is still the case that the threat hanging over our country and our planet is viewed in the abstract by far too many people. Climate change is happening before our very eyes. The evidence is there to see, but there are none so blind as those who do not wish to see. Shamefully, there is a cadre of ignorant, anti-science and unenlightened representatives in this Parliament who refuse to see what the rest of us can. They lay claim to representing rural Ireland and to having some unique insight into the ways of our countryside and rural communities. The ignorance which has often been displayed does rural Ireland and the decent people they claim to represent an enormous disservice.

If we continue to travel in the direction we are going, the rate of destruction climate change will wreak on rural communities will be incalculable, and I know which side I am on. For some time now, society has been grappling with the challenges presented by what is known as the fourth industrial revolution. Before the pandemic, and without even factoring in the changes demanded of us by climate change, it was clear that artificial intelligence, AI, and a whole host of other disruptive technologies could and would lay waste to hundreds of occupations which until now we have taken for granted. Covid-19 has put that disruption on steroids. We have seen decades of change collapsed into a year. Many business models have changed forever, never to return. Many jobs may not come back in sectors where consumer behaviour will not return to the norms of pre-March 2020.

If we are to have any prospect of meeting the challenges of net zero, our economic model must change and change fundamentally. The idea of a just transition for those whose jobs and businesses are increasingly vulnerable to the changes required of us as an economy and a society needs to become much more than a pithy slogan. Impending changes to the global corporation tax system will impact on our system of foreign direct investment, FDI. However, an even more fundamental driver of economic change will be, and should be, climate change. It is clear we must commence a fundamental, top-down, review of industrial policy in Ireland. No review of any scale or significance has been done on our national industrial strategy for a long time. A massive paradigm shift is needed to decarbonise our economy. Due to changes in the corporation tax environment and in respect of the job we need to do in the context of climate change, it is now urgent that such a review takes place.

I remain concerned that this issue of the climate and the economy is not sufficiently understood nor is it being tackled on a whole-of-government basis as a primary economic positioning issue. This is not to say this Bill and the demands it places on Departments, agencies and all of us does not represent real progress. Of course it does. In the paradigm shift away from the current carbon-intensive model, agencies such as IDA Ireland, Enterprise Ireland, EI, and Science Foundation Ireland, SFI, need to embed the climate agenda into their make-up and their approach. A new industrial policy needs to be less about FDI at any price and more about focusing on what we can do uniquely and well here. I refer to how the entrepreneurial state can invest with the private sector in new innovations and technology and in scaling up our SME sector to export and go global from Ireland. We need to see the same State-led response to the pandemic applied to the development of the kind of entrepreneurial state that social democrats like those of us in the Labour Party believe in and can trust. Professor Mariana Mazzucato's ideas need to be brought to life in the transition to a new and more climate-friendly economy and labour market model.

To meet the serious task ahead, our Departments and State agencies will need to be repur-

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posed. With carbon budgeting, the old ways of making annual budgets will have to change. I had an interesting exchange on this point two weeks ago with the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputy McGrath, during oral parliamentary questions. It is still not clear to me how, in practice, the relationship between the Departments of the Environment, Climate and Communications and Public Expenditure and Reform will change. Will the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications have a more formal role in driving overall budgetary policy? How are Departments that do not meet sectorial emissions targets going to be brought into line when they fail?

One of the most striking and worrying aspects of climate change is the impact on our treasured biodiversity. On a related matter, is the Minister of State aware of any plans in respect of the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications to better protect our national parks from the gorse fires experienced in recent weeks? We saw fires raging in Killarney National Park and the Mourne Mountains two weeks ago, and the impact on our flora and fauna and our native habitats is enormous. What we all witnessed is heartbreaking. Fires of this kind are all too frequent in parts of my constituency, namely, the Cooley Mountains in County Louth. I am not all that clear if anyone is ever held responsible for starting these acts of monumental vandalism and destruction. Our legal code must make it clear the book will be thrown at anyone responsible for these kinds of depraved acts of wanton violence and vandalism visited on our environment and natural habitats.

Finally, and I appreciate that the Minister of State may not be familiar with this issue, I raise for the ears of the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications, Deputy Ryan, in the context of our attitude to planned liquified natural gas, LNG terminals, the question of how we are going to approach these propositions in future. Via parliamentary questions, I raised the issue of a proposed floating LNG terminal off the coast of Louth. The company involved is aptly named Predator Oil and Gas. Let me make my own party's position crystal clear. In our last manifesto, we proposed to ban the importation of fracked gas and offshore drilling or any further extraction of fossil fuels from Ireland's land or waters - no "ifs", no "buts", no ambiguity.

I was disappointed a number of weeks ago to read the response of the Minister, Deputy Ryan, to the question I submitted in March 2021. I asked him if he planned to actively oppose proposals for floating LNG terminals in Ireland. Specifically, he referenced that his Department "is carrying out a review of the security of energy supply of Ireland's electricity and natural gas systems", and stated that he "will consider if it would be appropriate, or not, to develop LNG terminals in Ireland and, if any such terminals were to be developed, if they should only be in order to provide an emergency backup to existing supply infrastructure".

To be frank, by all intents and purposes, this appears to be paving the way for LNG terminals through the back door to provide what he has referred to as "emergency backup". We are faced with another emergency, namely, the climate emergency. We do not need another Government review of LNG. The evidence is clear and the Government must be clear that it is fully committed to ensuring that no LNG terminals are developed in Ireland. There needs to be absolute clarity on that point, because I did not receive clarity on it and the threat to the east coast in respect of the question I posed to the Minister in March. I hope that he will have the opportunity, perhaps in his response to this Stage later if he is here, or in another forum, to address that question much more fundamentally.

**Deputy Fergus O'Dowd:** This is a most important debate, and one which we should use

to enlighten people and make sure that the important points in respect of climate change are articulated and supported in a constructive engagement with all sides of this House and the community. The most important thing we can do is to educate and inform and tolerate other points of view and bring people round to understanding what we need to do to bring about the change to save our climate, our industry and our jobs, and to have a quality of life for future generations that will be sustainable and acceptable to everybody, whether they are rural or urban residents.

One of the criticisms made of rural people concerns the question of single housing and so on. The fact is that farmers and people living in rural areas have protected and nurtured the environment they live in for generations. They hold their farming and their beliefs sacred and true, and they carry them through from generation to generation. It is hugely important that we understand, appreciate and acknowledge any of the issues the IFA and other rural spokespersons articulate to us, and bring about change with their support. In that respect, in my experience in County Louth, I have met with representatives of the IFA on a number of occasions recently regarding climate change, and farmers are very much engaged in finding alternative crops and ways of making a living, while at the same time sustaining, protecting and supporting the rural environment.

One-off rural housing is a big issue in many areas. We must ensure that those who work and are reared in the countryside can live there. It is a key issue that is arising in many county development plans, as I speak.

I return to the question of how we educate, inform and bring about change. I have been in the House for more than 20 years. The biggest change in our thinking that I can recall was in respect of how we dealt with our waste. I can recall, as I am sure Deputy Nash will, that when the then Drogheda Corporation decided to change the waste management system in our town, thousands of people marched on the streets. Indeed, I recall that the mayor of Drogheda was sitting in his chair - as the Acting Chairman is now - happily wearing an orange shirt. When the crowd broke into the meeting, the first thing they shouted at the mayor was that he was an Orangeman. That was the extent of the anger at a change in waste management, which was not properly sold. However, the pace changed with the race against waste campaign. The race against waste campaign was one of the most informative and effective campaigns we had nationally about changing our ways and the environment. It was extremely effective. Now people understand why we have to deal with our waste, Wheelie bins and so on as we do, and accept and acknowledge that. That is what we must do in respect of the other controversial issues relating to climate change. We must educate, inform and support.

One of the failures in our country - and I include myself and I did my best - has been the failure to persuade the public that we need to change the way do deal with our water resources, how water is affected by climate change, how it will change into the future as the levels of rainfall and the patterns change regionally and so on, and the problems that will bring. Currently, as far as I am aware, there is no Irish Water or Government policy in place to encourage people to use less water and to conserve it. I ask the Minister of State to address that issue with the Minister, Deputy Ryan, in terms of information and how changes can be made and ensure that the impact of climate change on our water resources is reduced, scare as they will be in the future.

I also welcome the decision of Departments to have decarbonising zones in our counties. I have a criticism of that in that there is only one such zone in each county. In County Louth, the county council, in its wisdom, chose Dundalk. I have no problem with Dundalk being chosen in this respect because it has been a centre for renewable energy and the SEAI for many years.

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The choice of Dundalk is welcome, but a decarbonising zone would be equally welcome in Drogheda. I ask the Minister of State to address the issue that when towns such as Drogheda are named in the national planning framework as future major urban growth centres and cities, the leadership role that comes with becoming decarbonisation zones and all the policies, incentives and changes involved should apply to towns in that special area. Drogheda is one such town, so I call on the Minister of State to seek to encourage and change the rule on decarbonisation zones and for Drogheda to be included in that. It would make a difference in terms of our climate change and public transport policies, our active travel, our public and civic buildings, our use of green spaces, biodiversity, air quality and so on. Therefore, there is a lot of work to be done, and it is our job as politicians to ensure that the Government listens to what we are saying. More attention must be focused on decarbonisation policies in our towns, and particularly the town in which I and Deputy Nash live. It is unacceptable that my town is not included in that zoning. It is appropriate that this be looked at again.

In respect of land use and planning and the way that we build and zone, there is a major issue with zoning in development plans up and down the country. I welcome the policies of the planning regulator, which has been attacked unfairly regarding its vigilance. We must ensure that when we are developing our towns and cities and the rural areas, it is sustainable, makes sense, is thought through and does not just come out of the blue as a result of pressure from a developer or God knows who to change or to add to a development plan something that is not at all acceptable. I have seen examples of that in my constituency. There have been examples of unrealistic developments being imposed on the community where hundreds of houses were built with no infrastructure, footpaths, recreational spaces, amenities or green spaces. That has to end. That is the role we all have to play.

I commend the planning regulator on the vigilance and the prudence it applies in its office to ensure that there is thought-through, effective planning in my area. I live in a large commuter town. There is nothing good about Covid, but the only good thing I can think of is the fact that people are working from home.

That is what we must do with the other controversial issues. It should be Government policy to reverse the commute. People in Drogheda, east Meath, Dundalk, Ardee and so on should be able not just to live in those places but also to work there. Reversing people's commute by enabling them to work from home is a hugely important climate change policy. The more sustainable life is for people, the happier they are and the more time they get to spend with their families.

There are more cars going through Julianstown every day than there were before the bypass was built. It is unacceptable that people living there face long delays and are suffering because of the accumulation of traffic and the discharge from cars. We need to look at the pattern of transport in Julianstown, east Meath and Drogheda. We need an appropriate and proper inner bypass of Julianstown to relieve the pressures there and the environmental issues arising from the accumulation of toxic gas from vehicles.

There is a lot to be done in the area of climate action. This is the first time in a long time I have had ten minutes to speak in the Chamber. I welcome the return to three days of sittings next week, which is what we all want. It will better enable us to listen and understand how our country is changing and show the leadership we all have to offer in articulating our views on these issues. I welcome the Bill and the debate around it. I look forward to contributing further on Committee Stage. The world is changing and we must change with it. Our most important

role is to inform and educate. I cannot overstate that point. I say emphatically to the Minister of State that we need public opinion on our side in this matter. The way we will get it is not by attacking but by informing, educating and encouraging.

**Deputy Cathal Crowe:** I want to tell the Minister of State at the outset that his colleague, Deputy Matthews, who is a major railway advocate, has challenged me to try out the train. I have done so a few times, including today, and will do so again tomorrow. I am glad to admit that it works. I still travel to Dublin by car some days but it takes ten or 15 minutes to cycle to the train station and an hour and 50 minutes on the train. I get through a lot of emails, have an apple and a mug of tea and come off the train refreshed before cycling into the city. I encourage everyone to try it. It does not work every day and there are some pitfalls to this form of travel. I am dreading the day the clouds open up and it pours rain on me. I will have quite a miserable day in Dublin when that happens. However, I am happy to say on the record of the Dáil that this new way of getting to work in Dublin from County Clare works, by bicycle and with a lot of help from Irish Rail, and I am happy to embrace it into the future. The Acting Chairman might see me pedalling away from here in a while. Perhaps some day he will take his bike and we can cycle together through his constituency on my way to the station.

This is very progressive legislation that sets an objective for the Government and the nation of achieving climate neutrality by 2050, with an interim target of a 51% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2023 relative to the 2018 baseline. It sets out a number of key provisions, including annual climate action plans, five-year climate action strategies, five-year carbon budgets, sector-specific ceilings and a national adaptation framework. Since the legislation was drafted, we have had really groundbreaking news in County Clare regarding the green Atlantic project to develop colossal offshore wind energy capacity off the coast of counties Clare and Kerry. The project involves a partnership approach by the ESB and Equinor, a private company. It has breathed huge life and hope back into our county. We have been looking at a cliff edge for far too long, with Moneypoint slowly winding down its coal-burning capacity and transitioning to we did not know what. There has been uncertainty for the Moneypoint workers and the economy of the county in not knowing what was happening. We now have a future pathway. However, it is important the county is not forgotten about in terms of the just transition. It will take five years or so to get to our wind energy goal. There will be tough days for the community and the workforce at Moneypoint as we move from the coal-burning phase to wind energy. That needs to be taken into consideration.

There is huge potential along the Shannon Estuary for tidal energy electricity generation. I understand that potential is being explored. I visited the University of Limerick a year or two ago to see one of the testing devices being developed there. That technology has been embraced by other countries. The tidal differential coming into the Shannon Estuary is quite significant. It offers a way by which we could be generating guaranteed electricity every day of the year. That potential needs to be explored. In the context of the infrastructural overhaul taking place in west Clare and along the estuary, we definitely need to be looking at tidal energy as well.

I implore the Minister of State to move ahead with finalising the new wind energy guidelines, which were published by the Government in draft format in December 2019. A hell of a lot has happened since then, including a general election and the Covid crisis. The guidelines need to be properly ratified and issued to all local authorities. In their absence, we are left dealing with guidelines dating back, I understand, to 2006 or 2008. They are totally antiquated and do not reflect where the infrastructure and the whole sector is at now. More importantly for communities, they do not give adequate protection to people who are living their lives peace-

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fully. We have had a number of applications put in haste through the planning process in Clare County Council in anticipation of the new wind guidelines. There is one in my home parish of Parteen that has gone up in breach of planning. That is totally wrong. We must strive for the production of renewable energy but we cannot suddenly start lowering the bar and allowing projects to go in willy-nilly. It is an affront to communities not to follow the best planning process. The sooner we get the new guidelines in place the better.

This year marks 96 years since construction of the ESB's station at Ardnacrusha got under way. It is an incredible facility located in my home parish. It was once the largest generating plant in Ireland but now contributes only some 1% of all electricity generated and pushed onto the national grid. It is nearly a century old and was called the seventh wonder of the engineering world when it was first developed. It will continue to operate, although perhaps not for electricity generation for now, and to have a very important role in controlling the Shannon waterway. The Government needs to look at ways of increasing the output at Ardnacrusha. The turbines are not always turned on and the service offered is quite intermittent. It is operated remotely at the moment but there is potential for increased capacity. Nothing much has changed there. The demand for electricity has increased hugely, however, and Ardnacrusha can contribute more to the national grid. I implore then Minister of State to look into it.

A number of years ago, when I was a Clare county councillor, I was one of a number of councillors who fully backed proposals that our county become fracking-free. We were the first local authority in the country to do so and, six or seven weeks later, the Government declared that Ireland would become a fracking-free country. We now have a very difficult situation, as articulated by Deputy Nash, where LNG plants are still lingering around and we are not sure how they are being treated. That is not accounted for in this legislation and the Government needs to be clearer in this regard. We may be a fracking-free country but where do we stand on imported fracked gas? We have a position on it, as declared by Government when the terms of the programme for Government were being negotiated. That position needs to be enshrined in law and made very clear to the public. We in County Clare have understood the importance of this for many years ago because of our karst landscape in the Burren. When you start drilling down into deep rock, you interfere with aquifers and the underground water system. That is unhealthy, unsafe and environmentally unsound.

On forestry, there are far too few native trees being planted. We need to look at increasing the threshold and obligation on new forestry applications. The existing threshold is way too low. In my county of Clare, I am part of a group that is leading an initiative to reintroduce the native sessile oak to Cratloe Woods. Those trees are very special and there are very few of them left. Anyone looking at proceedings in the Houses of Parliament in Westminster will see a roof over Boris Johnson's head that was built with oak out of Cratloe Woods. Yet, if one goes up to those woods these days, it is conifer, spruce and Scots pine all over the place. We need to get back to this heritage variety of tree that was native to Ireland. Those trees built the hull of HMS Victory, the Royal Palace of Amsterdam and the roof of the Palace of Westminster. We need to get back those native species and move towards heritage forestry. There are parts of the country, especially uphill and upland areas, that are conducive to conifers, spruce trees and straight-pole timber, but there are other parts, Cratloe Woods being one, where we need to look at native species of trees.

On the matter of damage to the environment, I want to raise the issue of waste water output. Doonbeg got a great announcement yesterday from the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, but there are other villages in Clare, such as Broadford, Carrigaholt, Cooraclare and Doolin, where waste

water gets flushed down the toilet, goes out into soakaway gravel pits or septic tanks and, in many cases, is discharged directly into lakes, rivers or the open sea. That practice must end. Irrespective of party politics or who is in government, I have often wondered whether this problem is fully understood in Dublin and urban Ireland. In small rural communities, every drop of sewerage goes out into the open landscape when you flush the toilet. It goes into the water supply that people will drink later that day, following a filtration process. There is something askew and wrong with that.

The Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, has dual briefs relating to the environment and transport. I implore him to push back at every opportunity against suggestions that aviation taxes be imposed on the carbon output of airplanes. Aer Lingus, through its parent group International Airlines Group, IAG, has invested in 142 carbon-efficient aircraft. Ryanair has a plan to spend €20 billion on 210 new aircraft. We need to be kind to these industries and certainly do not need to be putting more impediments and barriers in their way as we try to get airplanes back in the sky.

This is positive legislation. There are other aspects of how Ireland embraces climate change, beyond legislation, that need refinement. When I left home this morning, 6 May, I noticed the windscreen of my wife's car was covered in frost and ice. Let the Healy-Raes or anyone who says climate change is not happening look at my social media pages this evening where they will see me scraping ice off my wife's car in the driveway with a credit card. Climate change does exist and is very real. The seasons are totally out of sync. We have an opportunity to do the right thing by the environment now for ourselves and the generations to come after us, and that starts with this legislation.

**Deputy Bernard J. Durkan:** It is great to have an opportunity to speak on this important legislation. I have listened with interest to the previous speakers and have agreed with some of them, though not all. It is necessary to put into the public arena the various views because whether we agree with them or not, they are part of the debate.

Whenever we come to the issue of climate change, we seem or tend to descend into totally polarised positions. Some say it is not taking place at all. That is not true and the scientific evidence is there. We may at some stage improve the situation, having taken the necessary action, and I hope we will. Some say that we have to stop living in order to comply with the regulations intended to arrest the issue of climate change. That is not true either. We do not have to stop living. That applies particularly to the agri-food sector. It is true to say that the agricultural community has a significant role to play on the issue of climate change. It has played that role in the past and will continue to do so, with the support of Government and incentives. It can play that role and make a major contribution.

We need to get recognition for what we are already doing in this country in the agri-food area. On the basis of our current carbon footprint, we produce food for approximately 42 million people. That is a sizeable achievement. We can continue to do that and, in fact, can improve and are improving. In comparison with other jurisdictions, we are way ahead. Deputy Creed already made an interesting contribution in that regard that was scientifically based. We need to recognise that a sector does not have to close down in order to achieve a needed contribution on the whole issue. We can, however, improve and that is what I hope is going to happen.

I do not necessarily agree with my colleague from County Clare on the issue of forestry. We

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need a variety of species of tree. That has always been the case. For those who say the Scots pine is not a native species, there is evidence of it in the Céide Fields, dating from 5,000 years ago. At what stage does it become a native species? The point is that it was not possible to isolate the species in Scotland or its adjoining countries.

I know there are many imported species, such as redwoods and so on. I am an amateur grower of trees and have looked at the area quite a bit. Some species are not suitable for this country but there is a lot of space and we need to recognise there is space for both soft and hard woods. The best way to grow and develop forestry is through growing a variety of species, some of which will shelter others and expedite their growth. Non-deciduous species, for example, will remain a part of the shelter which is important. There are parts of this country where a fairly stiff breeze is blowing most of the time. We need to recognise that in order to encourage forestry and the growth of trees, we should encourage the interspacing of trees that retain their foliage throughout the year. That is possible to do while, at the same time, we make a major contribution to the fight to address climate change. Some species, such as the much-maligned Sitka spruce, have the capacity to absorb something like four times the amount of carbon dioxide of an oak tree, ash tree or any of the harder species. We should not toss them away or dismiss them. We need to recognise the role they have to play. They have played that role for millions of years and will continue to do so.

We have heard a lot concerns from our various constituents about the demise of the peat industry and, in particular, its effect on the horticultural sector. I and many others have said before that the horticultural sector needs a certain amount of peat product, or something similar, in order to continue to provide services, including nurseries for the production of trees and shrubs throughout the country. It is not a good idea to rely on imported material in that regard because all we are doing is creating further carbon miles in order to bring in something we can produce ourselves. I ask the Minister to keep in mind the possibility of ensuring that we have carbon-free access to a product at home, or whatever, in order that we do not have to import from other areas within a 5,000 mile radius, or whatever the case may be. We can and should do that.

The next issue relates to the transport sector and the fuel used in that area. I strongly support the move towards electric vehicles. There has been considerable progress in that area, although many of my friends and some of my opponents do not agree with me. The fact is that we will ultimately, inevitably and inexorably move in that direction. If we do, we will be making a major contribution to the fight against the changes that are taking place to our climate. One of the arguments that is put up is that we do not have enough charging points for motor vehicles. Why not? That is not something outside our reach. We can produce the necessary electrical charging points to ensure motorists can travel up and down the country without having to stay overnight somewhere, as an extreme example. The radius it was possible for those vehicles to travel ten years ago was approximately 180 km or 200 km, or so garage people tell me. That is now up to 450 km and is growing. It is obvious that there is considerable benefit to a switchover to electric cars. The sooner that comes, the better. I compliment An Post and other companies that have already moved or changed over and have a carbon-free policy in their respective organisations. We need to realise that the world is competitive and does not stop. We must use what we can to our advantage to advance our own cause, while at the same time maintaining best practice insofar as dealing with carbon is concerned.

Retrofitting has already been mentioned. We need to do more of that. There is no sense blaming ourselves and beating ourselves up, while at the same time saying it would be good if we had more retrofitting but we cannot afford it. If we cannot afford it, perhaps we should be

able to justify the means of affording it and appeal to the international communities. We should ensure that whatever is done, everybody makes the same sacrifices, and we do not become the only ones either to sit in the cold hoping for benefits in the future or that we do not have to close down parts of our industries to claim our rightful place in the changes that are taking place.

Some of the changes that have been made without any great upheaval are obviously those regarding motor engines. The internal combustion engine, of course, was not the first one. The electrical engine was the first for different reasons. People say that it was a changeover. My view is that the development of the petrochemical industry was a major factor in that and still continues, something to which previous speakers also made reference.

I hope that over the course of our lifetime, we will use the need to comply with international targets on carbon emissions well, first, to justify what we are doing already and what we do naturally with the levels we have achieved on food production and emissions. We are said to be outliers. To be fair, that is not entirely true. As I said before, we produce an awful lot more food per carbon footprint than anybody else can. That is beyond denial. I ask that the Minister tries to ensure, insofar as is possible, or ensures, full stop, that we get full credit and understanding for what we are delivering when compared with other jurisdictions. Some other jurisdictions obviously cannot achieve the same results. We are not blaming them for that. We want to get credit for what we are doing ourselves, however.

I made a note to remind myself of the issue of rewetting, which can make a major contribution to carbon reduction. Everything that grows requires an intake of carbon, which remains sequestered until such time as a tree is cut. It should also be mentioned and remembered that the only carbon that is released is the amount that the tree has sequestered over its growing lifetime.

Rewetting will have different meanings for different people. Some parts of this country contain large areas that are well-wetted enough already. If one asks people from different parts of the country how they feel about rewetting what is already wet land, they will quickly tell you. It is not that there are very small areas which are already in this condition. There are large tracts of land all over the country, but particularly in the midlands and along the west and south west. There are, therefore, areas we need to promote as currently making a major contribution to the issues we are trying to address.

The development of alternative energy also requires, obviously, wind energy. There was much resistance to wind energy, pylons, overhead cables and so forth. I ask people to try to remember that whatever energy we use has a cost. If we make it too difficult, the cost increases. Whether or not we are happy with it, we need to recognise that our industry in the future will be highly dependent on electricity and whatever way that is generated will be hugely important. Whether it is onshore or offshore, there is a necessity for infrastructural investment in that area now.

I have been hearing about wave development for last 20 years, for instance, and there is not very much of it around yet. There are other alternatives, however, some of which are achievable in the short-term. There is a renewed interest in solar energy. I am not certain that will be the ultimate answer because wind energy requires some other fallback or reliable source. The wind does not blow all the time in all parts of the country. There are those who say that as a flaw. Of course, it is not, because it can be countered by a grid that covers large tracts of this and other countries. Access to our own grid and to the international grid is, therefore, important. While very little wind may be blowing in one particular part of the country at a particular

time, one can be absolutely certain that in some other area a fairly stiff breeze is blowing that keeps the turbines turning, which as a result keeps generating electricity.

If we build the grid and link into the international system in such a way that is possible and in line with renewable principles, we can become self-sufficient very quickly. We will only need an alternative for unforeseen emergencies. Wind and hydro energy are, of course, well-proven. When we go for bigger generating capacities, however, wind is probably the best option. Solar energy requires more space. Consider, for example, Moneypoint power station, which has 1,000 MW productive capacity. We need more of that nature. We need alternative energies capable of producing electricity to the same scale without using the entire country, which brings me to biomass.

To provide sufficient electricity for the entire country in the future, we would probably need to cover the whole country in biomass production. While people might say that would be a great thing, it actually would not. We still have to eat and we would have to import food. It would not, therefore, be such a good idea. Reference has already been made to this. There are those who say we should import and that artificial food is every bit as good; it is not. All things do not produce a balanced and varied diet, which is necessary. We need, therefore, to look at the areas in which we can produce reliable sources of energy without any detrimental effects to the environment and at same time retain in every way possible the full extent of our productive sectors in order that we can deliver to future generations something on which they can rely.

I have covered everything I intended to with the exception of the local authorities. It has become populist and popular in local authorities to say that people should not live in rural areas and that it is bad for the environment and so on. That is not true. It is simply a refusal to accept that it is possible to live in rural areas. It is possible to build houses in rural areas without polluting the rivers or waters of the countryside. In fact, all these things are possible provided we apply ourselves to them. A previous speaker made reference to the pollution of rivers and waterways and he is correct. The numbers of rivers and waterways in this country that are polluted and in receipt of untreated or insufficiently treated sewage on a daily basis is appalling. When that argument is trotted out in comparison, as it was with regard to Irish Water as its foundation, everybody said we cannot have any changes and we must make absolutely certain that we continue to pollute the waterways by doing nothing. We must recognise that if we are serious about what we must do, then we have to make changes to deliver to the community, whether urban or rural. We have to produce a system that enables a person to live wherever they wish, within reason, while at the same time ensuring he or she can avail of the best available means and conditions for dealing with the impact of living in that area.

Peat in dealing with sewage treatment has a proven record, as have reed beds and so on. In order to meet the challenges of the future, no one single remedy will resolve the problem. A combination of remedies, alternatives and effort by all and sundry throughout the country and the globe will ultimately succeed.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy John Lahart):** The Deputy is still making waves. I thank him for that. I call Deputy Ó Laoghaire to take us to midday.

**Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire:** I am glad for the opportunity to speak on this Bill. Climate change is one of the greatest challenges of our generation and is, undoubtedly, an emergency. I speak as one of the younger Deputies in the House. It is very possible that I, and certainly my children, will see the severe impacts of the climate emergency unless significant

and radical action is taken, not only here but on a global level. In that regard, we have a role as an exemplar to the world. There is no doubt that, if the climate emergency accelerates and-or even continues at its current rate, it will cause profound inequality at a national level but more particularly at a global level.

We are at the minute facing the enormous and profound challenge of Covid. There is the Irish phrase, “An gad is giorra don scornach is túsce is ceart a scaoileadh”, “The knot closest to the throat is the first to untie”. Often that can be case with our priorities in this House. That does not mean, however, that we can ignore the profound and growing challenge of climate change. It will have severe impacts. It will potentially immiserate large parts of the world which are already poorly able to adapt to it. If the right approaches are not taken in Ireland and other developed countries, it may possibly immiserate some of our poorest citizens as well. We need to make sure the actions we take will leave no one behind. The policy we take to reduce emissions must ensure those who are most able to carry the burden do so while those least able to carry the burden are spared some of that weight.

I welcomed the Bill when it was published. The pre-legislative scrutiny by the Oireachtas joint committee was limited. However, there was substantial engagement from the Sinn Féin team, which included Senator Lynn Boylan and Deputies O’Rourke and Cronin, and others on the committee. I pay tribute to them and the active role they played in bringing in experts to address the inadequacies of the draft Bill, especially in the area of just transition. Our team was proactive, bringing forward 78 recommendations to the Minister to strengthen the Bill. As a result of the recommendations, not only from Sinn Féin but many other organisations, the redraft is a significant improvement and strengthening of the legislation.

Social justice needs to be at the very heart of how we tackle climate change. There are still concerns about the Bill, especially around section 6(5)(a) and whether the Bill enacts the programme for Government commitment to reduce emissions by 51% by 2030. These concerns have been raised by climate experts such as John Sweeney, Andrew Jackson and Barry McMullan. We will continue to engage with them.

The issue of climate justice and the just transition were not explicitly referred to in the earliest draft but have since been included. It is not properly defined, however. For example, my mother is from Banagher in west Offaly, a community in which Bord na Móna is a significant employer and an integral part. The concern is that you cannot have the same impact in these towns and villages like what was had when Margaret Thatcher closed the coal mines in the Durham and the rest of the north of England and Wales. Misery and deprivation were created when this employment was just whipped from these communities with no investment put in place to replace it. It left profound misery. It is vitally important we get that right. That applies not just on a localised basis but on a state-wide level in terms of policies we enact. We must ensure it is not people on the lowest incomes who face the hardest burdens and that they are protected. We must ensure those who pollute the most and who can most bear the cost do so.

As well as all of this, there is opportunity. There are areas where the transition to a low-carbon economy can aid us. One area which I noted in Cork City Council is housing. When I am canvassing, I note the housing conditions in many private rented and local authority houses are absolutely desperate. In many instances, they are the modern equivalent of squalor, being cold and with damp on the walls. This has an impact on respiratory illnesses such as asthma. We need to move the retrofit programmes on from the apartment schemes to some of the older local authority housing developments. A development in my own city, Mount Sion Road in Green-

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mount, was built in the 1950s and is a considerable job which urgently needs to be done. There are also old developments in Cherry Tree Road and the area around the Five Star in Togher, as well as in Mahon, Passage and Carrigaline which are urgently needed. The apartments are being retrofitted, which is welcome, but we also need to move on to the houses. An enormous amount can be done in this regard to save energy and to protect the incomes of these tenants. We need to make it easier as well for the private rented and the owner-occupied sectors. Some of the grants are welcome but sometimes they can be difficult to navigate.

How we imagine our cities plays a crucial role with emissions. We cannot keep expanding outwards and adding to the burden with an increasing number of cars on our streets. We need to develop on a denser basis within our city centres. Crucial to that is adequate public transport. I have been vocal on light rail. We need it in Cork. We used to have a tram system which was substantial at one stage. We need to get back to that. However, before we do, we need seriously to upgrade our bus system. Bus rapid transit is required along bus corridors and all communities need to benefit from that. Good work has been done in Cork with cycling and protection of pedestrians.

The taxi industry feels excluded and ignored in the transport area in general. It is also the case in the climate change area. We need to start talking to taxi drivers as partners. There are schemes for electric cars which are a welcome support for the transition to an electric fleet. However, these cars are way beyond the reach of most taxi drivers, especially after almost two years of no income for them. We need to remember they are key enablers in public transport. When I travel to Dublin by train, which I do quite regularly, it is a taxi which brings me to Kent Station in Cork and a taxi which brings me from Heuston Station in Dublin. We need to treat taxi drivers as partners in this and give them greater support.

Local authorities have large estates of property. They need to do more to ensure they are generating energy from their buildings and from their lands. Some local authorities are good in that regard. The role of green apprenticeships is crucial as well with significant potential to create a great deal of employment.

On the point made by Deputy Durkan about the grid, there are huge potential opportunities for local authorities to generate income for themselves if they can sell it back to the national grid. There are opportunities also for local communities to establish trusts to generate their own energy, to benefit from it and sell it on to the local grid. We must do much more in that regard. We will continue to critically engage with this Bill.

Debate adjourned.

### **Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions**

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I will now take Leaders' Questions under Standing Order 36. Again, I ask Members for their co-operation in relation to the time limits.

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** Le beagnach seachtain anuas tá deireadh tragóideach agus cuibhdhe tagtha le polasaí páirtí an Tánaiste agus polasaí an Rialtais. Tá mórchuid na dtithe in eastáit chónaithe sa Stát ceannaithe ag ciste infheistíochta idirnáisiúnta. Le beannacht an Rialtais seo, ní íocann na cistí seo cáin ar bith ar an phroifid a dhéanann siad. Le beannacht an Rialtais seo,

tá siad ag glasáil teaghlaigh agus oibrithe amach as úinéireacht tithe.

Last weekend, Round Hill Capital, an international investment fund, bought up most of a newly-built estate, Mullen Park, County Kildare. After years of working and saving, first-time buyers who had managed to save a deposit were told last week that 135 of these family homes were no longer for sale and had been sold to an international investment fund. Yesterday it was reported the same fund had bought an entire Dublin estate, Bay Meadows, of newly-built family homes and it will now rent these homes at a staggering €1,975 per month. The response of the Tánaiste's Government over the past few days would suggest that this is something new, something that has fallen out of the sky. This has been happening for years, and well the Tánaiste knows it. It happened in Dundrum and in Leopardstown, where a single fund bought 295 properties. It happened in Lucan last year, where Cairn Homes, one of the biggest developers in the State, sold 229 properties to a single investment fund and it has happened in many other areas.

Not only have the Tánaiste and his party's policies facilitated this, they have actually encouraged it and incentivised it through the taxation structure these funds enjoy. They pay no corporation tax, no capital gains tax when they sell the properties and little stamp duty. They pay no tax on the sky-high rental income they charge people in this city and beyond. The Tánaiste's party gave these funds the tax advantage, it designed it with the support of Fianna Fáil. They have created this situation where these international investment funds are snapping up family homes and locking first-time buyers out of the market. That is the reality. These parties have frustrated the hopes, dreams and aspirations of many workers and families who aspire to own their own homes.

I have been raising the issue of the tax advantages and exemptions enjoyed by these funds year after year. As late as last year, I submitted amendments to the Finance Bill so the Government would examine how these tax breaks are impacting on first-time buyers and how they are pushing up house prices. However, Fine Gael, Fianna Fáil and Green Party Deputies all walked in to that committee and voted against even looking at this issue. Every one of them opposed looking at this area and voted to keep the *status quo* and to ensure these funds enjoyed the tax exemptions they have been able to utilise to lock and push first-time buyers out of the market. Now that the horse has bolted, the Government is scrambling to contain the damage it has caused. In its end of year results in February, Glenveagh Properties, one of the biggest developers in the State, stated its strategy is to sell 43% of properties to these types of funds, and this is growing and gathering pace. The reports this morning of the squabbles in Government parliamentary parties, of Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil taking swipes at each other, finger-pointing and blaming each other, are simply not good enough. Both parties are to blame but they must now grow up, take responsibility for their actions and undo the damage they have caused. Will the Tánaiste do what Sinn Féin has argued for over the years and take away the tax breaks and advantages Fine Gael gave to these funds so first-time buyers have a chance in the housing market? What actions will the Government take after the horse has bolted to end the block purchasing of family homes by these funds?

**The Tánaiste:** Ba chóir go mbeadh gach duine ábalta úinéireacht a bheith aige nó aici ar a theach nó a teach cónaithe agus ní mór dúinn an deis sin a thabhairt do dhaoine. Is muidne an Rialtas atá i bhfabhar úinéireacht ar thithe cónaithe agus creidim gur maith an rud é go mbeadh úinéireacht ag duine ar a mhian nó a mian féin agus ar a theach nó a teach cónaithe féin. I am somebody who strongly believes in home ownership. This is a Government that believes in home ownership. We think it is a good thing that people should be able to own their own home, should be able to acquire private property, that they should have an asset they can borrow

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against, extend if their family grows and something they can pass on to their children when they themselves pass on. Given his party's policies I am not sure Deputy Doherty believes that but we will leave it for another day. At the moment in Ireland, somewhere between 65% and 70% of people own their own home. We in Government want that to be a reality for people who are in their 20s and 30s now, so they have the same opportunity to own their own home as their parents did. That is why we have brought in things like the help-to-buy grant, giving people tax back to help them raise a deposit, it is why we have brought in the rebuilding Ireland home loan, to help people who could not get a mortgage from the banks, it is why we are investing in infrastructure to free up land for housing development and it is why we have established the Land Development Agency.

What happened in Maynooth and in Hollystown in my constituency is not consistent with that policy. It is not consistent with a Government policy that promotes supply and home ownership. We will act on it, and as I speak the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, and the Minister for Finance, Deputy Donohoe, are developing proposals for a solution. It must be a solution that resolves this problem but also one which does not have unintended consequences. We all know that when we pass a law or adopt a policy, there is always the law of unintended consequences and we may do something in good faith to solve a problem but actually create another one. That is why the Ministers need a little bit of time - and only a little bit - to come up with a workable solution.

Investment funds generally have a role to play. There are housing developments in this city, mainly apartment blocks, mainly high-density developments, which would not have been built if not for finance from investment funds. Such developments were not able to get funding from the banks. If they had not been built we would have fewer apartments, higher rents, higher prices and perhaps even more people in homelessness. We, therefore, need to get the balance right. People need places to rent, and well-managed developments to rent from. As things stand at the moment, less than 1% of the housing stock in Ireland is owned by investment funds and that is much lower than would be the case in most other developed countries. However, their correct role is to finance the construction of developments, not to swoop in and buy housing estates or developments that are already substantially complete. That is what we need to change and what the Government intends to change with the actions it will take in the coming weeks.

On the tax position, what Deputy Doherty said was misleading. He listed a whole bunch of taxes these investment funds did not pay and not the ones they do. He tried to create the false impression no tax is paid by investment funds - that is not the case. They pay tax on the dividend income and that is how these investments are structured. Furthermore, there have already been changes. There were changes in the budget last year, changes in the Finance Bill adopted and there may well be further changes required.

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** Fine Gael created this system, it supported it, it cheered for it, it rolled out the red carpet for these funds to come in, it turbocharged them and now they are, and have been for years, snatching properties from first-time buyers. The Tánaiste mentioned taxes and dividend withholding taxes. Pension funds do not pay them. The Tánaiste must get real here. We have been raising this issue year after year after year. Indeed, it has not just been us. Last February, the Department of Finance argued for increasing taxes on these funds. We can see from freedom of information requests that an official did so. However, the Minister voted against that when we put forward that type of proposal. In 2019, the Department carried out a report which said these funds were buying big swathes of property, talked about locking people out of home ownership and the rental market. Despite this, Fine Gael did nothing but cheerlead

for these funds. The question, therefore, is what is the Government is going to do. The Tánaiste said we should give it a little time. For six years we have been raising the fact that Government parties have been on the side of these funds over ordinary first-time buyers who are locked out of the market.

Maynooth is not a flash in the pan. As I said, this has been happening in Dundrum, Leopardstown, Lucan, Lusk and many other areas for years. Last year more than 25% of all purchases were after construction. That is hundreds of millions of euro and the Tánaiste's Government cheered for it. He stood in this Chamber just two weeks ago and said he believes it would be wrong to restrict these funds.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I had not been looking at the clock so the Deputy has benefited

**The Tánaiste:** That is a further misrepresentation. I did not say "restrict". I said it would be wrong to ban them outright and I explained the role they have to play and have had to play. I was interested to hear Deputy Ó Broin on "Prime Time" only the other night, for the first time ever that I have heard him, advocating for private investment and long-term investment by pension funds in housing. It is interesting to see a Sinn Féin spokesperson make that argument and I welcome him doing so.

Let there be no doubt that this Government is on the side of home ownership. We want people to be able to own their own home.

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** That does not appear to be true.

**The Tánaiste:** We want people to be able to have a private property in which they can live and raise their family before passing it to their children when they pass on themselves. That is not the policy of Sinn Féin or many of the left-wing parties in this Chamber, although they try to pretend otherwise. What happened in Maynooth and Hollystown is not right. We do not want investment funds in any form coming in and buying substantially complete developments that could have been bought by first-time buyers, upgraders or even approved housing bodies, but they have a role to play in financing high-density developments that might otherwise not be built.

**Deputy Róisín Shortall:** The Government has become what can only be described as a circular firing squad. Fianna Fáil Deputies are blaming Fine Gael for the housing crisis and Fine Gael Deputies are blaming Fianna Fáil. I would like to settle the dispute between the coalition partners because both points of view are correct. Fianna Fáil crashed the housing market the first time around and Fine Gael then let vulture funds loose on the carcass for a decade with tax incentives and fast-track planning. Now both parties have joined forces in government and have been destroying the housing market.

Two weeks ago, my colleague, Deputy Cian O'Callaghan, stood in this House and told the Tánaiste that 435 apartments in Ashtown, Dublin 15, had been bought in bulk by an investment fund. He expressed concern that an entire generation was being locked out of home ownership and asked the Tánaiste to act immediately to stop funds bulk-buying homes. His response was to accuse the Deputy of being "ideological" and to say the Government had no plans to introduce legislation to rein in investment funds.

If we fast-forward two weeks, another global fund has gobbled up more homes. This time

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it is 135 homes in Maynooth. During Leaders' Questions yesterday, the Taoiseach professed surprise about this development. He said it was a new departure and that usually funds confine themselves to hoarding properties in cities, not suburban areas. Does the Taoiseach not think young people in Dublin and other cities deserve to own a home? Does he believe the mass acquisition of homes by funds is somehow okay as long as they restrain their purchases to every new build in Dublin and other urban areas? In any event, the Taoiseach was wrong. These funds have been block-buying estates and apartment blocks, and now second-hand homes, in urban areas and the commuter belt. They have been doing this for some time.

Since 2018, such funds have spent €4 billion on residential property in this country. Did anybody in government even notice? The Tánaiste might not understand the Social Democrats ideology but it is really simple. We believe ordinary workers on average salaries should be able to own their own home. We are not disaster capitalists. We do not want to see young people spend their entire lives paying extortionate rents to cuckoo funds that pay very little or almost zero tax on investments. That is the ideology of the Tánaiste and that of Fianna Fáil. Tax loopholes and sweetheart deals for developers and investment funds while ordinary workers and families are sacrificed on the altar of greed and profit is just not acceptable.

Two weeks ago, the Tánaiste was disinterested in funds hoovering up the country's limited housing supply.

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

**Deputy Róisín Shortall:** Does he now deign to care about that? If he does, what will he do about it? Talk is cheap so what action will he take?

**The Tánaiste:** With the greatest respect to the Deputy, it is the ideology of everybody in this House that people who work hard, with a decent average or lower than average income, should be able to buy their own home. It is the case that in this country, 65% to 70% of people own their own home. That was not achieved by the Social Democrats; that has been a feature of long-standing policy by Governments led by Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. We must ensure that can be a reality for people now in their 20s and 30s, which very clearly it is not.

What is ideologically extreme is the view from some, including, as I understand it, the Social Democrats, that we should have outright bans on some forms of housing and housing investment. That would be a mistake as there would be less housing as a consequence of that. When ideology is put over practicality, we end up with those kinds of results. If that is the policy of the Deputy's party, it is wrong. I nonetheless agree with the Deputy that the objective of all parties in this House should be to make home ownership a reality for people. It should be a reality for people in their 20s and 30s, as it has been for generations that came before.

The responsibility for dealing with the housing crisis lies with the Government now. It does not matter about the past as Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Green Party, now in government together, must work to solve this crisis. In areas like homelessness, we are making good progress and although the number of people in homelessness is still too high, it has been falling for some time now. That is largely down to the Housing First policy initiated by the former Minister with responsibility for housing, Deputy Coveney, and brought through by former Deputy and Minister, Eoghan Murphy, during his time in that ministerial office.

We have seen a substantial increase in the volume of social housing built in recent years in Ireland. There were as few as 600 units built in 2016 and there were up to 6,000 units built in

2019. The rate of building has been hit by the impact of the pandemic but we are heading to the target of providing 12,000 social houses per year. A large proportion of housing now being built in Ireland every year is being built by the State. I do not remember the last time such a percentage of housing being built was social housing. It often goes without comment that so much of the housing now being built in Ireland is social housing. It may be as much as half and the Deputy refuses to acknowledge that.

Investment funds have an appropriate role, which is to finance developments that might not otherwise happen, therefore providing supply that would be lost otherwise. There are people such as developers and construction companies trying to build homes who find it hard to get finance to build development, particularly high-density and apartment developments, and that is where investment funds may have a role to play. We all agree that the cases in Maynooth and Hollystown exemplify the wrong approach, where funds bought most of a substantially complete estate, making it impossible for first-time buyers, upgraders, the local authority or approved housing bodies to do so. That is what we are seeking to change.

**Deputy Róisín Shortall:** It is extraordinary that the Tánaiste did not seem to be aware of this happening right under his nose. Two weeks ago, he denied this was the case or that any action was needed. Yesterday, the Taoiseach also seemed to be taken by surprise by this.

This evening, the Dáil will debate Second Stage of the Social Democrats Bill to help end the practice of the State entering into long-term leasing deals with developers and institutional investors instead of building and purchasing social and affordable homes. That is happening but the Taoiseach again seemed to be unaware of this yesterday. We are proceeding with this Bill because, unlike the Government, we recognise there is a serious problem that must be urgently addressed. Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael thought the people would be thrilled when they published their affordable housing Bill and saw €450,000 as the price of an affordable house. The Tánaiste is so out of touch if he thinks that is the case. Prices of €450,000 for a house or €500,000 for an apartment are not affordable by any means.

The Taoiseach told us yesterday he would take action on this. I ask the Tánaiste to spell out if he will support our Bill this evening by introducing the measures in it as a matter of urgency and not simply paying lip service to it.

**The Tánaiste:** I may be incorrect but I thought that Bill relates to a different matter, which is the leasing of properties for social housing.

**Deputy Róisín Shortall:** Yes, it does.

**The Tánaiste:** That is a different matter. As I understand it the Government is not opposing that but it is a separate matter and it is wrong to conflate the two.

**Deputy Róisín Shortall:** It is part and parcel of the same thing.

**The Tánaiste:** What the Deputy said about affordable housing is a bit misleading. The average home in Ireland changed hands last year for about €270,000. We would envisage that the vast majority of affordable housing scheme properties that are provided would be in and around that figure or lower. There are parts of the country where house prices are high, however, and the false impression and misrepresentation, which is always a tactic the Deputy uses, is to make out that all of the affordable housing scheme houses and apartments will be €400,000. That is not the case at all. Most will be a lot less than that.

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**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** The Tánaiste is acting as if the rampage and plunder by cuckoo and vulture funds and investment vehicles - these terms are too polite; they should all just be called bloodsuckers - is some sort of isolated incident or inadvertent mistake that the Government is going to rectify. Why does he not admit the truth? When the Tánaiste was Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport in the Fine Gael and Labour Party Government, the former Minister, Michael Noonan and his officials from the Department of Finance had 65 meetings in 2013 and 2014 with vulture funds where they invited them in to commence the rampage.

In a deliberate policy, the National Asset Management Agency, NAMA, was told to sell off, which it subsequently did, more than €40 billion worth of land and property assets to these bloodsuckers. They have now moved on to buying up new estates as well. The consequence of that is they are almost entirely pricing ordinary working people out of the market to buy their own homes. We have an extraordinary situation that beggars belief. It is so bad that the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage is describing affordable housing as costing €400,000 or €450,000 when one would need an income in excess of €90,000 or €100,000 to be able to afford the affordable houses, never mind the houses that these people are providing at full market price. We have tents littering the city as a result. We have extortionate rents being charged by these same entities in my area of no less than €2,000 per month and up to €3,000 and €3,500 per month. This is a result of a direct and deliberate - and indeed "ideological" to use the Tánaiste's favourite word - policy of Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil to facilitate, incentivise and encourage these bloodsuckers.

I want to ask the Tánaiste about the next chapter of all of this, which is the Land Development Agency Bill. It is bad enough that this Government and past Governments have let these people rampage and plunder the private housing sector, whether it was for purchase or rental properties. However, with the Land Development Agency, the Government will allow them to rampage and plunder through the entire public land bank. It will invite them in to do the same thing to the public land bank that they have done in the private housing market. The one thing that could help us address this crisis and deliver public and affordable housing to rent and purchase is by doing it ourselves on our land bank. Far from doing that, the Government will invite those entities in to plunder that land bank with the Land Development Agency Bill. I beg the Tánaiste to stop the madness and to start next week by abandoning the Government's plans with the Land Development Agency.

**The Tánaiste:** We were in a different situation ten years ago. There were no homes at all being built in Ireland and there was no property at all moving. The policy solutions that might have been required ten years ago may not be the same as we require now and that may change again. Going back to that period ten years ago misunderstands the situation we faced then when no homes were being built and no property was moving, with all the consequences that arose from that.

As I mentioned in my reply to Deputy Shortall, the average price of a home changing hands last year in Ireland was €270,000. The affordable schemes will be pitching around that figure or lower. The Deputy picked the figure of €400,000 or €450,000 but that is at the top end in a particular area and it is misleading to make out that somehow all, most or even many of the affordable housing scheme homes will be priced in that range.

The purpose of the Land Development Agency is to be a major State intervention in the housing market, using public and private land and buying up parts of land where necessary to access that land and develop it for a mix of social, affordable and private for purchase housing.

It is a similar model to the one we had with IDA Ireland, for example, in developing industrial parks, which it was then able to use to entice investment and bring about job creation. That is the model we are pursuing and it is a good one.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** What happened ten years ago is important because some of us stood up in this House at the time and begged the then Government not to sell off the NAMA portfolio but instead to use it for social and affordable housing. Had the then Government listened, we would not have the crisis we face now. I am appealing to the Government not to do the same with the Land Development Agency.

The Tánaiste said that €450,000 is at the top end but Dublin, Dún Laoghaire, Galway and Cork are not small places. These are the epicentres of the housing crisis and €450,000, €400,000 or €350,000 is not affordable in anybody's language for the vast majority of workers. How could the level of what is affordable be different in different areas anyway? If it is affordable it is based on people's incomes, not on the area they live in so why are there different caps in different areas? It is because the developers in those areas told the Government that under no circumstances should it sell houses as affordable houses for €200,000 or €300,000 if the developers are selling them for €400,000 and €500,000 on the open market. The Government is dancing to the tune of the developers and the result is that affordable housing will not be affordable, even on public land, which the Government will let these vultures, cuckoos and bloodsuckers plunder.

**The Tánaiste:** It is great rhetoric but there is little reality behind that. It has been the case since time began that houses and apartments cost different amounts in different places. There are places in the country, in Dublin and in the world-----

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** Not on public land.

**The Tánaiste:** -----where there is a higher demand for housing and where there is a lower demand for housing.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** Not on public land.

**The Tánaiste:** There are places where there is no public land and in those places the land cost impacts on the price of affordable housing. It is not that affordable housing will only be built on public land. It will also require the acquisition of land in some cases and it may be built on private land as well.

I will go back to the NAMA portfolio, which was not mentioned by the Deputy. It is the crucial point that he left out. Why would somebody leave the crucial point out of one's argument? The crucial point about the NAMA portfolio, properties and land is that they were all held against borrowings. In order to pay down those borrowings the land was sold off. If the land had not been sold off those borrowings would have fallen onto the taxpayer, the Exchequer and the public balance sheet.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** They would be generating revenue for the State.

**The Tánaiste:** They would have had to be serviced, at the cost of public services or higher taxes for ordinary people.

**Deputy Cathal Berry:** It is amazing how time flies. Next week is the anniversary of a useful exchange the Tánaiste and I had in the Dáil Chamber in Leinster House during a debate on

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the lack of strategic airlift capability in this country. I remember being quite heartened by the Tánaiste's response at the time. He specifically said:

Military air transport is a real weakness for us. We are unusual as a country, in that we cannot get to our own troops in Lebanon or in Mali. We rely on commercial aircraft or the defence forces of other countries. That works, but it is suboptimal in my view.

The Tánaiste then went on to say he would get the Chief of Staff to make policy proposals and give formal advice to his office on how best to proceed with this proposed project. Now that a year has passed it is prudent that we should review any progress in this regard because, on the surface at least, there does not appear to have been any major events, bar the pandemic. We have had difficulty getting PPE into the country, we have had troops and citizens stranded overseas and Ireland is transporting a lot of oxygen and oxygen equipment to India, which is a fantastic thing to do. Also, by year end, it is likely that if we have surplus vaccines, we will be transporting them to resource poor countries all over the world.

As an island nation in particular and as a sovereign state, the case that Ireland should have this sovereign independent autonomous capability is self-evident. It is particularly obvious this year because the cost of aircraft is on the floor. We could get a propeller-driven Airbus 295 type aircraft for less than €20 million if it is picked up second hand or almost new. That would represent massive savings for the taxpayer over time and we would not have to be chartering commercial aircraft on an *ad hoc* basis at very short notice.

Has the Chief of Staff furnished advice or recommendations to the Office of the Tánaiste? Is the Tánaiste prepared to publish the advice of the Chief of Staff for the benefit of the House so we can all see what is contained in it? Is the Government prepared to consider acquiring a strategic airlift aircraft before this year is out, if financial circumstances allow?

**The Tánaiste:** I have not changed my mind on this since last year. I still think it is a weakness that our Defence Forces do not have an aircraft available at all times that could get our troops out of Lebanon in a hurry if we had to, carry out a major evacuation of Irish citizens from somewhere in the world if we had to, or to have an aircraft available that could, for example, bring supplies such as personal protective equipment, PPE, into the country at short notice were it needed. We are reliant on commercial operators and other countries to assist us in this regard.

At the time, the Chief of Staff did provide a position paper. That was last year when I was Taoiseach. It was a position paper relating to the acquisition of a strategic airlift aircraft as a concept, but this project was not put forward onto the civil military five-year equipment development plan in the list of identified equipment priorities. I suppose, essentially, there were other priorities that may have had a higher order in the view of the Defence Forces. The publication of that report is a matter for the Minister for Defence. However, as with all capital investment decisions, the requirements of the public spending code and all the various steps required in informing a decision to proceed in a project life cycle would need to be met and set out by the Defence Forces for any such project to proceed to decision-making and public investment in any additional aircraft.

The equipment priorities for the Army, Air Corps and Naval Service are being considered in the context of the lifetime of the White Paper on Defence as part of the capability development and equipment development planning process. The five-year equipment development plan for the continued re-equipment was developed on a civil-military basis and was published in 2020.

In this context, the principal aim over the period of the White Paper is to replace and upgrade as required existing capabilities to retain a flexible response for a wide range of operational requirements at home and overseas. Budget 2021 provides a capped allocation of €131 million for investment in defence equipment and barracks and will enable continued investment in major equipment platforms. The increased capital funding for 2021 builds on increased levels of capital expenditure totalling €292 million over the years 2018 to 2020.

With regard to airbase capability, the immediate identified aircraft equipment priorities have been the acquisition of three Pilatus PC-12 aircraft for an intelligence surveillance target acquisition and reconnaissance, ISTAR, role and for two Airbus C295 for maritime patrol replacing the Cessnas. An additional PC-12 was acquired in response to the Covid-19 situation.

**Deputy Cathal Berry:** I thank the Tánaiste for the response. I welcome the acquisition of two new CASA 295 maritime patrol aircraft in 2023. What I would say is that they are to be for maritime patrol and should be used exclusively for that purpose, especially given the fact we have two ghost ships in Cork because the Naval Service cannot put them to sea because of a crewing problem. We still very much need a utility transport aircraft for this purpose, particularly because the pandemic is still raging throughout the country and the world. We need to have this autonomous flexibility and capability. I would be grateful if the Tánaiste could raise this with the Minister for Defence and consider publishing the advice of the Chief of Staff for the benefit of the entire House.

**The Tánaiste:** I will definitely raise it with the Minister for Defence, Deputy Coveney. As I said earlier, my mind has not changed on this matter but I appreciate that funds are limited and there may be other higher priorities, such as, for example, maritime patrol, search and rescue and the modernisation and replacement of existing equipment. Having read the report, although it was a year ago, I do not see any reason it could not be published. I do not recall there being anything of national security sensitivity in it. Again, I would have to leave that to the discretion of the Minister, Deputy Coveney, as to whether it is appropriate to do so.

### **Topical Issue Matters: Motion**

**Deputy Brendan Griffin:** I move:

It is proposed, notwithstanding anything in Standing Orders, and until further notice in the 33rd Dáil, that topical issues submitted for Wednesdays shall reach the Clerk not later than 1 p.m. the day before, save where Wednesday is the first sitting day of the week, in which case the normal deadline of 10 a.m. that morning will apply.

Question put and agreed to.

### **Ceisteanna ar Reachtaíocht a Gealladh - Questions on Promised Legislation**

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** There is a list of 20 Deputies. I am not sure we will get through them all but I ask Deputies to comply with the time and we will do our best.

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**Deputy Mairéad Farrell:** The Tánaiste is aware of reports overnight that the British Government intends to grant an amnesty for its forces involved in illegal actions, including murder, during the conflict in the North. I welcome the comments of the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Deputy Coveney, indicating his opposition to this unilateral move. All families bereaved during the conflict deserve the truth and we support them in this. This is why we have supported the provisions contained in the Stormont House Agreement and in New Decade, New Approach. These agreements were the foundation upon which the political institutions were re-established, and we cannot see them undermined in this fashion. It is important the Irish Government and all of us in this Chamber send out a clear message to Boris Johnson that this plan is unacceptable and the British Government needs to return to the commitments made at Stormont House and in New Decade, New Approach. As co-guarantor of these agreements, I trust the Government will now engage with the British Government and the other parties to ensure this happens.

**The Tánaiste:** I thank the Deputy for raising this very important issue. I have to say the Government and I, personally, were deeply alarmed by reports we read about the possibility the British Government may consider providing an amnesty or putting in place a statute of limitations on offences that occurred during the Troubles in Northern Ireland. This would fly in the face of the Stormont House Agreement and of the New Decade, New Approach Agreement. Anything like this would have to have the agreement of the parties in Northern Ireland. It is something we would not support as a Government because we stand with the victims and the families who have been bereaved and damaged as a consequence of these actions. They have a right to know what happened and they have a right to justice. Whether the murderers were British soldiers or republicans or loyalists, they should be brought to justice.

**Deputy Alan Kelly:** Yesterday, my neighbour, Gary Toohey, tweeted a picture of himself outside the maternity hospital in Limerick, stating “Hours away from having our first child and there I am waving up at herself from outside the hospital on the street, where do you begin?”. His partner is Joyce and they are neighbours of mine. This is barbaric. The Taoiseach indicated to me last week this issue would be sorted. We were very much disappointed when it was not. Last week, I tabled a parliamentary question asking the HSE what maternity services were allowing in partners for critical moments during pregnancy. It could not answer me because it did not know. What is even worse is that officials did not go around and ask the maternity services themselves because they could not be bothered. This is barbaric. Once and for all, will the Government please ensure there is consistency in services to allow partners to be together in the delivery of maternity services at critical times?

**The Tánaiste:** I thank the Deputy for raising this issue again. I know it is of enormous interest to many people in the House. I will check up on this. My understanding was that partners could attend for the birth of their child and we were to revise the guidelines so that they could attend other appointments as well, such as the 20-week scan and some antenatal appointments.

**Deputy Alan Kelly:** It is not happening.

**The Tánaiste:** I have heard and understand there may be different policies being operated in different maternity hospitals, but I agree that a standard approach would be better and favourable. I will take it up with the Department of Health and with the National Public Health Emergency Team, NPHE, in the next couple of days.

**Deputy Jennifer Whitmore:** The US now supports the waiver on intellectual property rights for the Covid-19 vaccine and will negotiate at the upcoming WTO negotiations on that

basis. A global waiver on the Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights, TRIPS, is necessary if we are to fight Covid on a global basis and vaccinate the global community. Our President, Michael D. Higgins, has hailed the move by President Biden as “a moment of ... moral significance”. Will the Tánaiste commit to the Government now actively supporting the intellectual property waiver at an EU level and confirm the EU should now also follow the US?

**The Tánaiste:** As the Deputy will be aware, this matter is an EU competence. Ireland does not have a seat at the WTO. We are represented by the EU. There are no Covid vaccines made or developed in Ireland and, to my knowledge, the intellectual property is not held here. The statement by Ms Katherine Tai, the US Trade Representative, and the decision of the US Administration is very significant and should cause the EU and other developed countries to reassess their position.

The Covid pandemic is raging around the world. We are seeing record cases every day. To get it under control, we need to get it under control everywhere through vaccination, as we did with polio, smallpox and other viruses. If we do not, we risk reimportation into this country and variants. Our strong view is that Covid-19 vaccines global access, COVAX, is the best way to do this. It is an international partnership which we are part of. A TRIPS waiver is definitely an option but there are difficulties with it also. Few countries in the global south have the infrastructure and know-how or materials to make those vaccines and there is no point in giving somebody a recipe if he or she does not have the kitchen, the cooking skills or the ingredients. We want to take actions that do good, not just actions that look good or make us feel good, and we think the best way to do that-----

**Deputy Jennifer Whitmore:** Does the Tánaiste believe the US is doing this to look good?

**The Tánaiste:** -----is to involve the pharmaceutical companies, scientists and universities in a solution that will allow more vaccines to be made, and particularly in the global south.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** That was quite a slippery answer from the Tánaiste. I will attempt to get an answer again. People Before Profit has been campaigning for months for a people’s vaccine to stop the big pharmaceutical companies and their profit interest standing in the way of people getting access to vaccines and to seek to avoid the horror scenes we are seeing in India. The Government had a position, which was to oppose a people’s vaccine. They dismissed the people’s vaccine in the Dáil and they went along with the EU in using its votes at the WTO to block the India-South Africa proposal. Now the Biden Administration, under pressure from below, has changed its position. It seems to recognise that COVAX is no solution whatsoever. They are saying they will support a suspension. There is a question for Ireland. I saw the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Deputy Coveney, welcoming the announcement from the US but, if that is the case, will the Government be pressurising the EU to use its vote to support the India-South Africa proposal to suspend TRIPS?

**The Tánaiste:** The President of the Commission made a statement on this this morning and made it clear that the European Union is open to discussions on this matter. We want a practical solution that actually means that more vaccines will be produced in the global south and that needs to go beyond a TRIPS waiver. The EU position is we are committed and open to trying to reach an agreement with all members of the WTO on how to achieve the shared goal of providing timely and secure access to safe and affordable vaccines and medicines for all. This was reiterated by the European Union at the meeting of the WTO general council yesterday. There

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are existing flexibilities in the TRIPS agreement which allow compulsory licensing without negotiation with the patent holder in the context of a national emergency such as this and that a compulsory licence can cover exports to all countries that lack a manufacturing capability.

The EU has also welcomed the announcement of the new WTO director general to explore a third way to broaden access to Covid vaccines, therapeutics and diagnostics.

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

**The Tánaiste:** This would be achieved not only by waiving patent rights but also by facilitating technology transfer within the framework of multilateral rules.

**Deputy Michael Lowry:** Town centres across Tipperary and the country were struggling before Covid. The lure of commercial centres was only surpassed by the convenience of online shopping. Government-funded urban regeneration schemes were a welcome and significant step forward but the pandemic has undermined their objective. A drive through town centres across the country is a dismal experience. Every year more retail premises are left vacant. As the number of vacant shops grows, these towns become less attractive to new retail ventures. Business generates business. People are attracted to towns where their shopping and service requirements are to be met. It is vital we support the businesses that have survived. A new and innovative scheme to encourage small retail outlets, such as cafés, hairdressers and boutiques, to occupy these units would invigorate our towns. Renovation and fit-out supports, rent subsidy for a defined period and rate concessions would encourage new retailers. Such a scheme would help to rejuvenate our town centres and generate revenue.

**The Tánaiste:** I thank the Deputy. Traditional main streets and traditional shopping streets are really under pressure around Ireland. Whether it is in small towns and rural towns around the country or whether it is in places such as Henry Street here in Dublin, we now see a growing issue of vacancy on main streets and on traditional shopping streets. That is really for two reasons. One is the move online. Many more people are shopping online and that will not change. It is also because of the development of large shopping centres, which are not going to go away.

I agree we need to do something that helps to reinvigorate our main streets, bring them back to life, put more people living in them, and adapt buildings and renovate them. We need to make sure it is something that is sustainable. We will not be able to go back to the way it was. Online shopping and shopping centres are a reality but perhaps there are things we can do to bring those buildings and those old shops back into use and thus make our town centres and our main streets attractive places again.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** The situation with pass-through charges or, indeed, standing charges continuing to be charged to business customers by energy suppliers right throughout the pandemic is simply disgraceful. Some hospitality customers in my constituency have been charged up to €26,000 in pass-through charges alone by the energy suppliers. This is shocking money. They appreciate the support they got from Government but 40% of the support is going to pay these charges. Will the Tánaiste talk to the Minister, Deputy Ryan, who seems to be asleep at the wheel here on this, telling people he has no role in it? The Government must have a role in it. The Government is supporting businesses but 40% or 50% of the money is going back in standing charges. The Government closed the businesses by order. The Government is supporting them the best it can but the energy companies are laughing all the way to the bank. The only option for customers is stop their direct debits or cut off the supply themselves where

they would incur massive charges to reconnect.

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

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** It is simply not good enough. It is 13 or 14 months going on now and it has to be dealt with.

**The Tánaiste:** I will certainly look into it. If the Deputy wants to send me on some more information or some examples, I will take it up with the Minister, Deputy Ryan, and the regulator. I think I know what the response will be. The response will be that standing charges are there to pay for the infrastructure. They are there to pay for the pipes, the pylons and the wires.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** I accept that, but this is different.

**The Tánaiste:** Even when they are not being used, they have to be paid for. I would be happy to look into it further.

**Deputy Thomas Pringle:** On 16 February, the Tánaiste's colleague, the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Deputy O'Brien, brought a memorandum to Cabinet announcing the establishment of the independent working group to examine defective housing. To date, there has been no publication of either the membership of this working group or its terms of reference. This is despite the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, promising that the group would be up and running in quarter one of this year and the programme for Government promising it would report by July.

In Donegal, I am inundated with calls, letters and email from mica-affected constituents who are at the end of their tether with the scheme that was brought in by the former Minister, Mr. Eoghan Murphy, and the Minister for Finance, Deputy Donohoe. It is not working for them. They are hoping that this group's work will be able to offer them solutions to the problems they are encountering. They are not complaining and looking for a handout. They are suggesting innovative solutions and ideas that will help them if the group engages with and listens to them, but first it needs to be operational. When will the terms of reference of the working group be brought before the House and when will we see action, not more broken promises?

**The Tánaiste:** I thank the Deputy. I am familiar with the issue of mica in Donegal and in Mayo and I have been in houses in Donegal that have been affected. Unfortunately, I am not up to date on where we are in terms of the scheme and the working group. I will be talking to the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, either today or tomorrow. I will let him know that the Deputy raised it here and ask him to respond directly.

**Deputy Michael Creed:** Fortunately, with a lot of progress being made in reducing Covid-19 transmission rates and case numbers, as well as with the roll-out of vaccination programmes, the European Commission has proposed a digital Covid certificate. However, there is a lot of information missing with regard to whether we intend to use that here and if so, when we will begin to use it and how. It is also unclear how the certificate, which is a facilitation of international travel, might interact with our own restrictions on travel. Is it countenanced that we could be hosting international visitors while our own citizens would be unable to fly? How does it fit with the requirement that travel be for essential purposes only? There is also the question as to whether the State is considering vaccination as a key to easing restrictions on movement. Bearing in mind that the mantra to date has been that we are all in this together, it is worth remembering that there is a cohort of people who, through no fault of their own, whether

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for medical reasons or because of their age, are not vaccinated. Will the Tánaiste agree to having a debate in Government time on all of these issues?

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I remind Members that if they go over their time, their colleagues will not get in. The Tánaiste has one minute to respond.

**The Tánaiste:** I would be happy to have a debate on this issue in Government time. Deputy Griffin will talk to Deputy Creed about organising that. It is already the case that being fully vaccinated exempts people from mandatory hotel quarantine. That makes sense and the vast majority of people agree with that. It is the intention of the Government to opt in to the digital certificate being prepared by the European Union but we do not know exactly what that is yet. It has to be bottomed out and clarified. As the Deputy knows, we are not in the Schengen zone and it might be the case that member states have a lot of discretion as to how they use it. It may be a common tool but it may not be used or applied uniformly across member states. We need to know exactly what it is before we decide to use it and how to do so. It is still being developed.

**Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan:** We are in the middle of a global health crisis. We are living in extraordinary times which call for extraordinary measures. I note that last night President Biden released a statement announcing his Administration's support for the waiving of intellectual property rights for Covid-19 vaccines. It is quite obvious that not vaccinating the globe in its entirety as expeditiously as possible increases the likelihood of the development of further variants that are resistant to existing vaccines, ultimately prolonging the pandemic. I am sorry to repeat what others have raised but in light of last night's announcement, this issue needs to be discussed at greater length. I note the Tánaiste's comments on the inability of certain countries in the global south to manufacture vaccines but there are large nations in that region that would have the capacity to do so. This is an issue that the Government must examine again.

**The Tánaiste:** As I mentioned earlier, the announcement from the US yesterday is very significant and has caused the EU and other developed countries to reassess their position on this matter. This pandemic is raging across the world. Records are being broken every day in terms of the number of new cases. If we are going to get the virus under control, we need to get it under control everywhere. That means vaccinating everyone in the world and doing to Covid-19 what we did to polio and small pox. If we do not do that, the virus could be re-imported into the West and variants will develop that could be resistant to vaccines. However, as I mentioned earlier, just giving somebody the recipe is not enough. If they do not have a kitchen, kitchen skills or the ingredients, it will not make a practical difference in terms of the production of vaccines. That is why it makes sense to have a comprehensive agreement, ideally with the companies and the manufacturers of the materials on board because they are the ones with the know-how. That is the approach that is going to be taken in the WTO.

**Deputy Imelda Munster:** Last month I raised the issue of the lack of a vaccination centre in Drogheda. The HSE had originally identified Drogheda and Dundalk for vaccination centres. The centre in Dundalk is up and running, which is good news, but there is no excuse for the delay in the delivery of a vaccination centre for Drogheda. I contacted the HSE again recently but there is still no update. I am sure the Tánaiste will agree that the efficient, fast and effective roll-out of the vaccination programme is of the utmost importance but there seems to be no urgency in the HSE to deliver same. Will the Tánaiste instruct the HSE to expedite the delivery of the vaccination centre in Drogheda? It is the largest town in Ireland and people should not be forced to travel to be vaccinated.

**The Tánaiste:** I appreciate that the Deputy raised this matter with me previously. Deputy O'Dowd also raised it with me. Drogheda is a town of more than 40,000 people and I can see that there is a very strong case for having a vaccination centre there as well as in Dundalk. I will raise it with the HSE. As the Deputy knows, I do not have the authority to instruct the HSE on matters like this but I will certainly raise it. I would point out that there are many other parts of the country where there is no vaccination centre and people have to travel to be vaccinated. I represent the Blanchardstown area, which is home to 120,000 people and the nearest vaccination centres are in DCU and City West, to which people have to travel. Those centres are working very well.

Like I said, I will raise the matter with the HSE.

**Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh:** I wish to ask whether the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications, on foot of his and the Cabinet's illogical decision last week to adopt the least beneficial options from a Grant Thornton review, will be introducing legislation to scrap the Liberties' Digital Hub Development Agency, a highly successful and sustainable hub for digital companies, and the associated jobs, in an area of Dublin which is in need of regeneration. Will he, in the same legislation, hand over lands earmarked for local jobs, to the Land Development Agency, LDA, rather than to Dublin City Council, as promised for the last ten years? Has the Minister met the workers he is sacking or the community he is depriving of a very positive player in promoting regeneration in that area?

**The Tánaiste:** I understand there is nothing on the legislative programme as yet on this matter. It is the responsibility of the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications, Deputy Eamon Ryan, and I understand he is of the view that those lands in Dublin 8 would be best used for regeneration with a mixed development, including housing, business and other uses. The best thing for me to do is ask the Minister to contact Deputy Ó Snodaigh directly to discuss it further. I imagine he will want to meet all local of the Deputies on this matter.

**Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor:** What is being done to tackle the massive backlog of driver theory tests? It is my understanding that online testing was piloted for tractor drivers and the plan was to begin online testing for car drivers. What is the update on that? Are we increasing the number of testers to cope with the demand? I have had many emails and phone calls from people who want to know why they are being offered tests in different counties and having tests in their own counties cancelled? That has been raised with staff in my constituency office several times. Next Monday is 10 May and we are all delighted to see that we are starting to reopen. There is great excitement out there but this is such an important issue. I have had emails from students and from people who need a car to get to work. We need a plan and we need to improve the communication on this.

**The Tánaiste:** I understand that this is a burning issue. People need to get on the road, particularly younger people in rural Ireland but also in urban Ireland, to go to college and take up employment opportunities. We need to get on top of the backlog that was created by the pandemic. I am not 100% across the announcement yesterday but I understand that some services will reopen and an additional 40 staff will be taken on to help get through the backlog. Work is being done on an online driver theory test which will help with the situation as well. I am not 100% across it but that is the plan of action. I agree that we need to get through the backlog quickly so that people can get to college and to work.

**Deputy Johnny Guirke:** I want to raise the new model of SNA allocations in my constitu-

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ency of Meath West, at St. Mary's National School, Collinstown, County Westmeath. Twin boys with additional needs will start school in September but at the moment the parents of the boys and the principal of the school do not know if they will have access to SNA support. The principal has spoken to the special educational needs organiser, SENO, as I have.

He cannot make any commitment until the allocation model is realised. One can imagine the stress this is having on the parents who do not know if their boys will have SNA support come September. This is not good enough. It should be a given that these boys would have access to a special needs assistant, SNA, in the same school their older sibling goes to. The happiness and well-being of two young boys are at stake. Will the Tánaiste ask the Minister, Deputy Foley, to release this information immediately to the schools and parents rather than having them waiting in limbo, not knowing what is happening come September?

**The Tánaiste:** As the Deputy will be aware, we have more special needs assistants working in our schools than ever before. That is a reflection of the level of need but, also, the level of commitment by Government to making sure children who have additional educational needs get the best chance in life. This matter falls under the responsibility of the Minister of State, Deputy Madigan. I will take it up with her and press on her the need to make sure parents know what the situation will be as soon as possible.

*1 o'clock*

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** I want to bring to the Tánaiste's attention that there are almost 3,000 learner drivers waiting for a driver test in County Kerry. Since lorries and buses can do the theory test online, why can the theory test not be set up online for all vehicles? The Government is supposedly working with the Road Safety Authority, RSA, to get the theory test online for more than one year. Why is it taking more than one year to get this off the ground?

Traditionally, farmers' sons and daughters could do their theory test when they reached 16 years of age, get their provisional licence and drive a tractor to help out on the farm or get a job locally for the summer. This is not possible now. Young drivers cannot do the theory test, get their provisional licence or get on the road. It is essential for everybody to have a licence in rural Ireland. I am asking the Tánaiste to ask the testers to work on Saturdays and Sundays to deal with the backlog and to ensure the theory test can be applied for online for all learner drivers to get on the road.

**The Tánaiste:** As I mentioned earlier, I appreciate this is a big problem and a burning issue. Young people, in particular, need to be able to get on the road in rural Ireland and in urban Ireland too, so they can access job opportunities, get to college or do whatever they need to do. Yesterday, an announcement was made by the Minister for Transport that an additional 40 staff would be taken on to try to get through the backlog that built up over the course of the pandemic. Some theory tests are being done online. I do not see why more cannot be done online. I think that is the suggestion Deputy Healy-Rae is making. That is the intention.

**Deputy Mark Ward:** On a point of order, I am aware there are changes to Questions on Promised Legislation. The instruction coming from the Ceann Comhairle's office is that Deputies would only be able to speak once. Deputy Higgins spoke yesterday, so it is only fair that-----

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** It is not a point of-----

**Deputy Mark Ward:** I have already contacted the Ceann Comhairle's office and he said he would rectify this, so in the interest of fairness the Deputy should cede and sit down.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** It is not a point of order. Deputy Ward is attempting to clarify something. We will have to come back to it. In the meantime, Deputy Higgins is on the list, so I am calling her.

**Deputy Emer Higgins:** Everyday, I am being contacted by constituents in their 30s and 40s in cohorts 4 and 7 who are coming up against roadblocks in the roll-out of the vaccination plan. They are attending GPs who are not administering vaccines, or who are not administering the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines. This is proving hugely difficult for people, in particular people who are not under the care of a hospital team. These GPs need to be able to refer their vulnerable patients to a vaccination centre, just as they did for their over 70s.

I stood in this spot two weeks ago and asked the Minister for Health to intervene on this issue and to make sure that we could resolve issues in which GPs were not administering vaccines. We need to do that and that is why I am escalating this to the Tánaiste today.

**The Tánaiste:** I thank Deputy Higgins for raising that and I know the Deputy raised it with me last night as well. I have not had a chance to follow up on it but I will. It is an important issue to which we need a solution because we need to make sure we do not miss any of those patients in groups 4 and 7, because they are the ones at highest medical need. The Deputy can be sure I will follow up on that later today.

I am a bit disappointed with Deputy Ward's remarks. I do not see why he is so keen to silence Deputy Higgins.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** We are dealing with Questions on Promised Legislation.

**The Tánaiste:** Certainly, the approach in my constituency is always to facilitate each other and allow each other to speak.

**Deputy Mark Ward:** I am not silencing anybody.

**Deputy Paul Donnelly:** We are all waiting.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I had intended to use some flexibility but I will not. I will stop on the dot in a little while. There is a procedure. We wanted to avoid this and make sure that everybody got in. I have one minute and 33 seconds left and I am sticking rigidly to the time.

**Deputy Willie O'Dea:** In his reply to earlier questions, I heard the Tánaiste say there could be unintended consequences if there was a complete ban on cuckoo funds acting, about which we have all been talking in recent days. An obvious unintended consequence is the way they are acting at the moment, because they were established to increase supply and to provide capital and extra housing, instead of swooping in and purchasing housing already completed.

A number of cases have been brought to my attention in which further swoops are imminent. How long will it take the Government to come up with a solution to this problem? The activities we are talking about are not in the public interest.

Is there anything the Government can do, as an interim measure, to prevent more houses being swallowed up before it comes to a conclusion on what it will do?

**The Tánaiste:** Deputy O'Dea is quite right. This was an unintended consequence. An

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unintended consequence we want to avoid is a reduction in supply by banning forms of private investment but I am sure we can find a solution that gets the balance right. I cannot give the Deputy a timeline on it at present but I know the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Deputy O'Brien, and the Minister for Finance, Deputy Donohoe, are treating this with urgency and we hope to have proposals soon.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** That completes Questions on Promised Legislation. If Deputies complied, everybody would get in. Unfortunately, a number of Deputies have not got in. Deputies should take it up in the relevant forum.

### **An Bille um an Naóú Leasú is Tríocha ar an mBunreacht (Ceart Vótála ag Aois 16), 2021: An Chéad Chéim**

#### **Thirty-ninth Amendment of the Constitution (Right to Vote at 16) Bill 2021: First Stage**

**Deputy Thomas Pringle:** Tairgim:

Go gceadófar go dtabharfar isteach Bille dá ngairtear Acht chun an Bunreacht a leasú.

I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to amend the Constitution.

I am delighted to introduce my Private Members' Bill on the constitutional amendment on the right to vote at 16. I am introducing this Bill today to coincide with the Scottish and Welsh elections, in which 16 and 17-year-olds are voting.

I note the great work already done by Senators Fintan Warfield and Lynn Ruane on trying to bring forward a Bill which would allow 16 and 17-year-olds to vote in local and European elections. The Senators' Bill would not require a referendum but would limit the types of elections in which young people could vote. In March 2013, the first report of the Convention on the Constitution examined this issue and the majority recommended that the age be reduced to 16 and that the franchise be extended for all elections.

My Bill is a simple constitutional amendment Bill, which would put the question to the people of Ireland on whether they agree to amend Article 16 of the Constitution, reducing the age of eligibility to vote in Dáil elections from 18 years of age to 16 years of age. This change, if accepted by the people, would mean that people could register to vote from the age of 16 years and be allowed to vote in all elections, including referendums. Estimated figures suggest that upwards of 126,000 young people would be eligible to vote, with perhaps up to 5,000 of those in Donegal.

The local and European elections will be taking place in three years, a general election is probably not too far off and there are commitments in the programme for Government to various referendums. It is expected there will be a referendum on the right to housing and also on Article 41(2), on a woman's place in the home. Why not add this issue to the priority list?

Last Friday, 30 April, my colleague, Jessica Bray, and I attended the student council meeting in St. Catherine's Vocational School, Killybegs. The conversation was lively, insightful, and informed.

Interestingly, some students raised concerns around the idea that young people might not understand politics or the PR-STV system. We discussed the fact that young people are smarter than they are given credit for, but that they have just not been given the tools and information to understand our system yet. If teenagers can be taught to understand maths theorems, surely they can be taught to understand PR-STV. Indeed, there are many people, politicians included, who do not fully understand it yet, so I would not worry too much about that either.

Seeing as my Private Members' Bill is about giving young people a voice, I wanted to share some of the matters that came up during our discussion. We discussed the idea that young people are more involved in everyday life than we think, with many 16 to 18-year-olds having part-time jobs. We explored the idea that politics is in everything we do and affects young people more than they might initially think, from the facilities they use to the student grants to which they are entitled. I will read out some of their comments. One said:

You let us have certain responsibilities, like having a job or paying taxes, but don't give us the responsibility of having a say on worker's rights or where these taxes should go. If we are contributing to society, we deserve to be represented!

Another stated:

People tell us that young people aren't interested in politics but of course we aren't interested in something that we have no say over or input in. If we were given a vote, young people would be interested and empowered!"

Young people have suffered greatly during this unprecedented pandemic. They missed schooling, social development, sport and recreational activities. I know that all of society has suffered greatly and I acknowledge that. However, there has been additional anxiety for those preparing for their leaving certificate and further education and training opportunities. Over the past year, we have heard from articulate and determined young voices who wanted to be heard in the decisions being made about their future and safety. Young people spoke up and the media wanted young voices. The mantra of listening to those most affected is a welcome change in our media landscape and it should be the same in our political practices.

Even before the pandemic, we had seen the mass mobilisation of students around the world calling for action on climate change. The school strikes for climate and Fridays for Future campaigns have been led by young people around the world. Global inaction on climate change and their fear for the future of the planet and their own futures has mobilised young voices. It is inspiring to see. Reducing the voting age to 16 would enable schools to play a part in registering students. This should be done in tandem with political education and should take place in all secondary schools, linking with local youth groups for those who may have left school at 16.

I thank Luke Casserly and his colleagues from the Irish Second-Level Students' Union, James Doorley and his team from the National Youth Council of Ireland, and the teachers and students in St. Catherine's Vocational School in Killybegs for their time, ideas and collaboration on this important Bill. I would also like to give a special mention to a member of my team, Jessica Bray, for her enthusiastic and excellent work on this project. We look forward to it progressing through the Houses. I commend this Bill to the House.

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**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Is the Bill opposed?

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):**  
No.

Cuireadh agus aontaíodh an cheist.

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 Thomas Pringle:** Tairgim: "Go dtógfar an Bille in am Comhaltaí Príobháideacha."

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

Cuireadh agus aontaíodh an cheist.

Question put and agreed to.

### **Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Bill 2021: Second Stage (Resumed)**

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

**Deputy Jim O'Callaghan:** I wanted to speak on this Bill because it is very significant legislation that this Dáil and the Houses of the Oireachtas are going to enact. Not only is it very important legislation for this Dáil but when we look back on the legislation enacted in the early part of this century, it will be recognised as transformative and very effective. That is because climate change is one of the greatest challenges faced by modern societies, not just in Ireland and Europe but throughout the world. It is in how we respond to that challenge that we will be judged by future generations. The world and governments have had to deal with very many extraordinary challenges in the first 21 years of this century. When it comes time to look at how we responded to the extraordinary pandemic that came across the world, in general it will be recognised that the world responded competently and professionally. The story of the pandemic will be how quickly and astonishingly this world was able to respond through the production of a vaccine.

Just as the pandemic was an extraordinary challenge for the world, so is climate change and carbon emissions. The difference, however, is that in the former we were able to graphically see the immediate damage done by the pandemic to people who had died or were in hospital, as well as the significant damage done to society as a result of our response to it. The pandemic had a very immediate and dramatic impact not just on society but on governments, and there was a need for governments to respond to it dramatically. We did that well. Climate change is slightly different because it is difficult to convince people of the immediacy of it. However, in the past 20 years people have become aware that this is the greatest single challenge we face in the world today and it poses an existential challenge to humanity on the planet unless we respond to it appropriately and accurately.

Ireland is a small country when it comes to climate change and carbon emissions. We are responsible for around 0.1% of global carbon dioxide emissions. Notwithstanding that, we have a responsibility to ensure we get our response to climate change correct and set an example that other countries will seek to follow. More important, we must send people a message through legislation that we have to change our behaviour in order to challenge the threat posed by climate change.

Legislation is an extraordinarily powerful tool. I was listening to Deputy O’Dea talking earlier about what the Government is going to do to stop the bulk purchase by institutional funds of newly completed housing estates. That is an issue with which the Government and this Oireachtas need to deal. The way we will deal with it is not by talking about it but by bringing legislation before this House of the Oireachtas, and then the Seanad, and getting it put into our law. The one great thing laws can do is change human behaviour and we will see that presently when I discuss what is in this Bill. If we are trying to stop the bulk purchase of newly completed housing estates by institutions, we have to change our laws so that it is prohibited. That is permitted when it is done for the common good and when thinking of what public and Government policy is and should be.

This Bill sets out a pathway as to how we are going to reduce carbon emissions between now and 2050. We want to be a carbon-neutral economy and society when we get to 2050. I commend the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications on the changes made to the Bill since it was initially published. The Joint Committee on Climate Action did an excellent job in strengthening the Bill. It is in the interests of everyone in this House to ensure the legislation we enact is vigorous and strenuous and will achieve the objectives we want it to achieve. Let us be clear about what that objective is. We want to ensure that as a country, Ireland is able to achieve a reduction in our carbon emissions and greenhouse gases, in order to play our part in the world and protect it from ongoing climate change. If we do not do that, 30 or 50 years from now we will not be able to reverse the damage done to humanity as a result of climate change. We were able to respond to the pandemic through ingenuity and scientific knowledge and develop a vaccine. However, if we permit climate change to continue unchallenged we could find ourselves in a position in this century where the challenges are so great that humankind will not be able to overcome them.

One of the great advantages of Ireland having a vigorous climate action Bill, and laws which delegate how we are going to deal with the climate challenge, is that we can then speak authoritatively and competently to other countries about how they should seek to challenge this threat posed to humanity. Let us be clear about this: the threat posed to humanity by climate change cannot be dealt with by any one country, let alone Ireland. It is an international and global problem and it requires a global solution. Looking at the amount of carbon emissions emanating from other countries, it is clear that we will not be in a position to stop this unless there is international co-operation. I welcome that America now has a President who recognises the threat posed by climate change and has committed to rejoining the Paris Agreement. Unless other large industrialised countries start to face up to their responsibilities in respect of climate change, it will be extremely difficult to get an appropriate response to it. Ireland sits on the UN Security Council. We have a strong voice in the world. When Ireland speaks, people listen to us. When we listen to the vigorous debates in this Chamber, it may sometimes give the impression that we are not taken seriously as a country. We are taken extremely seriously by the rest of the world and other governments when we speak. Part of that is recognising that we were elected onto the UN Security Council. Therefore, I urge the Minister for Environment,

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Climate and Communications, Deputy Eamon Ryan, whom I know will do this, as well as other members of the Government, to speak out regarding issues pertaining to climate action and the challenges faced by the world. We are in a position to do so once we enact this legislation because the world will then see that we speak with authority, and that we act as well as speak on the issue of climate change.

One of the international issues I would like tackled by our Government and raised at the UN Security Council is the outrageous behaviour going on in Brazil, which is controlled by the Bolsonaro regime. We are all aware of the vital role played by the Amazon rainforest in protecting the ecosystem of the world. It absorbs damaging carbon dioxide and plays an extraordinary role in ensuring that carbon dioxide is taken in from the atmosphere. Unfortunately, last year, some five million acres of the Amazon rainforest were deliberately burned in Brazil. In years prior to that, these burnings were also occurring. We must respond to that situation. Ireland should speak out against it. We have a seat on the UN Security Council to do so, and we should do so. How do we respond as a country and as a world when another country poses a threat to us? We have seen such a question applied in respect of Iran and North Korea, and we impose economic sanctions on those countries. We do that because we want to send out a global message to those countries that their behaviour is unacceptable. Similarly, I urge the Minister, Deputy Ryan, to bring up what is happening in the Amazon with his colleagues in Europe. The EU should take note of the damage being done to the global ecosystem by the fires in the Amazon.

I welcome that yesterday it was reported by the BBC that several UK food companies have decided to impose their own economic sanctions on Brazil. They are no longer going to accept certain food imports from Brazil because of the damage being done to the ecosystem and the rainforest by the policies currently being implemented by the Bolsonaro regime, and which are threatened further by more legislative proposals from that regime. If we do not do that, we are going to find ourselves in a situation where the regime will continue with the destruction of the rainforest. We have a bizarre situation now where farmers in Brazil are being facilitated to knock down and burn parts of the rainforest so they can turn those areas into pasture and then put cattle on that land. Those cattle will subsequently be exported to the EU. You could not make up the inappropriateness of what is being done.

Let us be clear that under the Mercosur deal, that is the plan. Brazilian beef will be exported to the EU. The purpose of that will be to ensure that Brazilian meat producers are given greater markets throughout the world. That will be achieved in Brazil by reducing the size of the rainforest and turning the land into pasture for cattle. We must really look again at the logic of cutting down parts of the rainforest so that cattle can be put out to pasture and subsequently be shipped over to and sold in European markets. It simply does not make sense, if we are trying to cut down on carbon emissions and ensure that the ecosystem of the world is protected. We must recall that the rainforest in the Amazon is not just a natural resource of Brazil or South America, but that it is, as President Macron stated previously, “the lungs of the world”. We must protect the Amazon and preserve it. It belongs to all of us in respect of the impact it has on the ecosystem. If we do not do that, we are going to find ourselves perpetrating irreparable damage to the ecosystem which operates here.

We must also be innovative in how we respond to the challenges raised by the climate crisis and the proposals within this Bill. Understandably, many people in the agricultural sector are concerned about the impact this Bill may have on Irish agriculture. It is important in that regard to say that one thing the pandemic has taught us is that it is essential that Ireland preserves and maintains its own food supply. We had got into a state of mind in the world prior to the

pandemic where we assumed that none of those challenges that impacted the world in previous centuries, such as plagues, wars or other natural disasters, were going to affect us any longer. We were in the second half of the 20th century and the first half of the 21st century, and because of that we assumed that we had some kind of guaranteed gilded existence. We do not, and we must recognise that we are going to face challenges again in future.

One of the most important things we must ensure is that this country, an island, always retains its own food supply. In that regard, beef farming is obviously an essential ingredient. I ask the Minister to consider recent conclusive research from the University of California, which showed that the methane emanating from cattle can be reduced by up to 82% if those cattle eat seaweed. I will send that report to the Minister. We must examine and investigate that prospect. If it proves to be the case that methane emissions can be reduced by that extent, then we should again use Irish innovation to ensure we start to actively grow seaweed to be provided to beef farmers. Many people listening to this debate may wonder and fear that the taste of the beef may be extremely damaged as a result of cattle eating seaweed. Apparently, it is not. The research in California showed that the taste of the beef is no different and nor, indeed, is the taste of milk when dairy cattle were fed seaweed. These are factors we must consider, and we should approach them with innovation and excitement.

The Bill sets out several significant legal obligations on the State. The Minister and others concerned about climate action did not want to see legislation that was vague and would not impose obligations on the State. This Bill is not vague. It imposes many mandatory obligations on the State to ensure those obligations are met. I will make some proposals and suggestions for the Minister to consider on Committee Stage. When it comes to the definition of “climate justice” in the Bill, the Minister may have to be more precise regarding how he defines “the most vulnerable persons”. One of the definitions of “climate justice” is that it means the requirement that decisions and actions taken to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and to adapt to the effects of climate change shall, insofar as it is practicable to do so, “safeguard the rights of the most vulnerable persons and endeavour to share the burdens and benefits arising from climate change”. It is hard for me sometimes not to look at legislation with a lawyer’s eye, but if this text comes before a court, that court will look at the phrase and wonder what is meant by “the most vulnerable persons”. It is a definition or term used quite broadly in Ireland, and it would be helpful for the sake of the Bill if some further precision were given in that regard.

The national climate objective set out in section 5 is very clear and it sets out the country’s objective when it comes to global warming. It states that we must “pursue and achieve, by no later than the end of the year 2050, the transition to a climate resilient, biodiversity rich, environmentally sustainable and climate neutral economy”.

I am not going to go through the Bill in any more detail. I commend the Minister on bringing it to the House, and I believe it will have the wide support of Members. Some Members are fearful of the Bill, and others want to generate fear about it, but we have nothing to be fearful of when it comes to responding with innovation to challenges. We have seen how we have done that in respect of the pandemic. In Ireland, we have always reacted to challenges with innovation and we will be able to do it again. I would like people to give this Bill the opportunity to progress through the House so we can set ourselves a national objective.

I ask the Minister not to forget that Ireland is a small country, our carbon dioxide emissions are approximately 0.1% of the world’s emissions, but we have a much higher percentage when it comes to our influence on the world. Let us use that influence, because when we speak,

people listen to us.

**Deputy John Lahart:** I welcome the Minister to the House. One of the first things I want to do is to acknowledge that Ireland and the world owes the green movement a huge debt of thanks. I must acknowledge the Green Party was ahead of the posse here, notwithstanding the efforts of the odd individual, conservationist or ecologist who might have international status and be very well known to people publicly. The Green Party led the way, was persistent and experienced the slings and arrows of success and failure electorally and never gave up. It is fair to say that over recent years the whole green climate action agenda has become a climate action agenda that is embraced by all mainstream parties and, indeed, my own party.

In Government, way back in 1990 or so, we banned the use of smoky coal in Dublin. There is still a residual issue around the use of smoky coal. However, the ban on the use of smoky coal was very far-seeing at the time. My Fianna Fáil colleague, former Deputy Noel Dempsey, introduced the plastic bag levy when he was Minister for the Environment and Local Government. Indeed, perhaps the Minister, Deputy Ryan, might revisit that issue. There is a bit of abuse of that system going on. I have noticed that if you go into a shop and buy a bag, it can cost 70 cent to 1 euro. I think they are creeping back in, even if they are compostable. It might be something that the Minister could look into.

The climate action agenda has gone mainstream and is very much embraced by parties like Fianna Fáil. The most significant thing to say is that climate action and climate action legislation has been an objective, an ideal and an aspiration for the past decade. This Government has actually put it on the agenda and is dealing with it for the first time. It may not be perfect and there may be amendments and tweaks that need to be made, but it must be acknowledged that it is coming to our Statute Book, is aggressive in the manner in which it attempts to set climate action targets for us, does not baulk at facing up to the unique challenges that face Ireland, and calls on everybody to make their contribution.

One of the things on which I want to focus before making a few comments on the Bill is the fact the Green Party does the helicopter view of climate action really well. However, for the ordinary Joe and Joan Soap to make a really meaningful contribution to it, we must bring in more initiatives and ideas they can buy into, enabling them in a meaningful way to know they are contributing in a significant way to reducing not just their own carbon footprint but that of their community. The Minister will remember the green box into which we used to put our recyclables. It was the size of a shopping basket 20 years ago. Then we discovered that almost all of its contents ended up in landfill, even though everybody had been doing their best to recycle their recyclable products at home. We have improved a lot on that. People are recycling to a huge degree, they embrace it, want to do more of it and want to make their contribution in a meaningful way.

One of the areas in which I have been interested is waste management. It is an area that is managed on a retail basis here by Rehab. We have seen some really innovative gestures by large multiples. Perhaps they are not the mainstream ones we associate with our supermarkets and supermarket shopping but others. Aldi and Lidl have led the way in this. When you are finished your shopping, you can discard the recyclable parts of the packaging or packaging you simply do not want. These stores are doing this on a voluntary basis. I have a Bill in preparation that would oblige large retailers of a particular size, and even the local retailers like Spar, SuperValu and Centra, to provide their shoppers with the opportunity to discard the waste packaging they do not want. It would send a major and significant message back through the supply

chain to the point of source, manufacture or production to tell those involved the consumer does not need all this packaging, that product A results in a significant amount of returns compared with product B.

I know the print newspaper industry is going through a transformation and this Government has had positive ideas in that respect. Every Sunday when I buy the newspapers, there are a number of supplements I do not want, but they end up in my green bin. I would like to be in a position to be able to hand them back to the retailer and say I only want the main section or the sport, lifestyle or culture section, whatever it may be. I would like to be able to set out which sections of the newspaper I want to buy and the associated bits that I do not. A retailer will get the message very quickly and pass it back to the point of production that it is sent certain products every week, which are then stacked on the shelves and supplied to the consumer, who does not like the amount of packaging. It will pass on the message, which will be sent loud and clear. That should be legislated for.

There is an interesting story, which I might tell on another occasion, about an entrepreneur in my own constituency who was thwarted in the end by a well-known coffee retailer. Many people go to buy coffee in the morning and I have seen increasing numbers of people bring their own cup for this purpose. Let us consider the amount of waste generated in those small retail spaces. When we buy coffee, the coffee grounds go to landfill, yet coffee grounds are incredibly nutrient-rich and make really good fertiliser. There are outlets, like a major burger chain, that offer bags of coffee grounds to customers free of charge. The customers do not tend to take up this offer. Perhaps it is because they do not know that coffee grounds make really good compost for their plants. We should legislate that every retailer or outlet that sells coffee is obliged to recycle it, so that it does not end up in a black plastic sack in landfill. What about the little wooden stick that we use to stir a sachet of sugar into our coffee? It is made of wood, is only used once, goes into the black refuse sack and ends up in landfill. It could easily be recycled.

We need to be much more aggressive and vigorous on retailers and points of production. I spoke to someone who works with a major burger outlet that is one of the best known chains. They told me that when they replaced the plastic straws with paper straws, customers gave out because they did not like the paper straws, but they have got used to them. We need to be really vigorous. One of the reasons I raise this issue is that it gives the consumer, at a very basic level, a real sense of empowerment that he or she is doing something useful, is not adding to waste and is playing a small role in the supply chain.

The Minister and I share a passion for micromobility. If we keep going in the positive way we are going in relation to the vaccine roll-out and the Covid figures, we may not be back to peak traffic but we will be moving towards heavy traffic again. We can see it. The city is still particularly quiet but the suburbs are buzzing. The time has come for electric scooters. We should have gone about introducing them, as it was done in the UK, under the cover of Covid to give people time to get used to them. I have a Bill providing for a scheme like the Dublin city bike scheme that would get people used to scooters and show they can be rolled out safely and are capable of playing a significant part in smart transport in the city. However, the Covid window has passed. As people begin to return over time from remote working, the city will start to get busier. The Minister knows my enthusiasm for these types of initiatives. He is a cyclist, as am I. It would help legislators to make laws in this area if they had experience of things like e-scooters and e-bikes. I wonder how many members of the Cabinet have ridden either. It is not until you do, as the Minister has, that you see their exciting potential as a component of micromobility and smart travel.

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The next point I want to make is one I have raised with colleagues before. I am saying it to the Minister in the context of the next budget. Electric bikes have become hugely popular but they are an expensive piece of kit. A good one costs approximately €3,000. People can get some of that money back through the bike to work scheme but they have to spend the €3,000 before they get it back. I do not care whether it is a Fianna Fáil Minister or a Green Party Minister who brings forward initiatives in this regard. Dublin hosted the Velo-City cycling conference two years ago, which the Minister attended, and it was a fantastic and fascinating experience. Belgium is the leader in encouraging the use of electric bikes. It has a scheme under which any employer who invests in any electric bike initiative, whether by way of purchasing bikes for employees, constructing e-bike parking facilities and lockers or installing shower facilities in the workplace, can write off 125% of that investment against tax. In this country, all we have done is extend the bike to work scheme to an e-bike to work scheme. If the Minister were to give employers in Dublin city an incentive whereby every cent they spend on e-bike infrastructure for their employees could be written off against tax, that would make a substantial difference to mobility and commuting in Dublin and would not cost the Exchequer a huge amount.

I believe in trying to empower people to understand they can make a real difference on climate action in their own lives. I am a supporter of climate budgeting, which the Minister knows all about. I would like to see attention being given to the notion of county-by-county climate budgeting. I will explain what that would involve for anyone who might be watching and does not know. Just as a local authority produces an account of how much it spends, what it spends it on and how much it raises every year, climate budgeting would involve an audit of where the carbon footprint comes from in a particular area. In the case of my local authority, South Dublin County Council, agriculture does not account for a huge amount of the footprint, even though two thirds of the area is rural. Most of it is probably coming from data centres and transport. On still days in May, June and July, you can see a huge plume of brown smoke hanging over the M50 as it weaves its way through the area. If you are up in the Dublin Mountains, you can see that brown plume of smoke below. In the case of South Dublin County Council, a climate budget might involve setting the carbon footprint at 100 every year. The audit would include keeping track of the number of e-cars or hybrid cars and auditing their carbon footprint. Each time someone living in the local authority area changed a diesel or petrol car for a hybrid, he or she would be able to see that the carbon footprint of the area was reduced as a direct impact of that change.

When I proposed something along those lines before, when I was on the Fianna Fáil Front Bench, colleagues said it would punish particular counties that have a heavy reliance on agriculture. My argument is that my part of south County Dublin has a heavy reliance on data centres and transport, with the M50 running right through it. It is incumbent on all of us to set specific targets to reduce the carbon footprint in our own areas. That does not necessarily mean having to cut the cattle herd in some counties, although that may be part of it, but it involves looking at a range of suitable methods. The big headline figure in this country is emissions from cattle. The question is how to counterbalance that with other initiatives. In south County Dublin, for example, we could look to offset the carbon footprint of data centres by encouraging more people to cycle. That would require rolling out more cycle lanes and greenways and promoting the use of e-bikes, e-scooters and hybrid cars. It could involve telling the people of south County Dublin that they can make a real difference by reducing the amount of waste they produce. Initiatives like that could set up quite a competitive environment that is conducive to effective change.

Although data centres get a lot of flak, it is important to note there are other factors to consider. People forget that companies like Amazon, AWS, Microsoft and Facebook have set themselves incredibly ambitious targets in regard to the carbon footprint they create. The bosses in Ireland have demanding objectives to reach, overseen by the executives in headquarters. In my constituency, the AWS facility in Tallaght produces a lot of heat. However, AWS is doing significant work in terms of providing district heating from what comes out of that plant. We should look at more of those types of initiatives because the spin-off in terms of jobs is significant. In the old days, we may have thought we were getting the poor relation of technology in securing data centres rather than the creative enterprises. We now know that data are king. It is an incredibly valuable thing to have the data centres of many global companies housed in Ireland.

We waste one third of our food in this country, which is truly appalling. One of my family members has inspired me to take action in this regard. There used to be a bit of social cachet among the middle classes in having a full fridge. A really well-stocked fridge looks great. During Covid, my family member decided to try to exhaust the contents of the fridge before going shopping again. I have tried to do the same. Having empty shelves in the fridge and using up all the contents before going out to shop has become the goal. Shopping more often for fewer items may be helpful in this regard rather than doing one big shop, but this could be impractical for large families. It is something we should encourage people to consider. As I said, we waste 30% of the food we produce and buy. That is an appalling statistic.

My local authority, South Dublin County Council, is doing an enormous amount of work, backed up by the Minister's Department and other Departments, on the provision of greenways and cycle tracks. Constituents are looking for maps of where those tracks are because they want to use them. They want to know whether they can get from Knocklyon to Tallaght by bike and, if there is more than one route, which one is the best. There is also a lot of work being done on areas of ecological sensitivity. The old days of having every open space in an estate looking like a more well-manicured version of Augusta are gone. People realise that wild flowers, open spaces and rivers are types of sanctuaries.

The planet took a big deep breath over the past year, as we have discussed before in the House. We heard birdsong and experienced new smells. I encountered natural smells I had not smelled since I was a boy. The M50, which I live beside, was like a country road at the height of the Covid restrictions. You could hear individual cars pass by. The planet got to breathe but, at the same time, we witnessed things like what my colleague, Deputy O'Callaghan, referred to in terms of President Bolsonaro's actions regarding the rainforest in Brazil. That was a crime against nature. Before the Second World War, the concept of a crime against humanity did not exist. The concept of a crime against nature is something a body like the United Nations should look at with a view to setting particular standards in that regard and imposing punitive sanctions on countries that break those standards. I cannot make these comments without reflecting on the fact that we, in the western world, who exploited most of the riches that much of the rest of the world had over the centuries, are setting the global targets for those countries that are trying to develop and do their best. Ireland was not part of that exploitation and that is something of which we can be proud. Some of those countries that are trying to do their best to develop their economies and the potential of their people, countries, economies, natural resources, spaces and areas were exploited by colonists and imperialists over centuries. People in India and parts of Africa must think it is a bit rich to hear targets set by the West and countries that pillaged all their riches over centuries. We should not forget that.

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I wish the Minister well in his work. He has my absolute support for the Bill and any assistance I can offer. I would ask him to focus on some micro-initiatives, whether budgets or other things, which people on the street can buy into and know that in taking action and following such initiatives, they are making their own little contributions to the big but achievable targets the Minister has set at a macro and a global level.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** I am pleased to be able to speak today on Second Stage of the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Bill 2021. I am glad the Minister is here. Táim an-chairdiúil leis an bhfear sin.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Is the Deputy sharing his time?

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** I am not. I look forward to a robust debate with the Minister. We understand each other and have no hard feelings, and the same goes for all the members of the Rural Independent Group. Deputy O'Donoghue asked me to ask the Minister when, like "Living with Lucy", the Minister will visit Limerick with him.

This is perhaps the most far-reaching legislation to come before the Chamber in the current Dáil. As someone who has grown up, worked and lived in rural Ireland all my life, I am acutely aware of the fondness and respect that rural people have for the land, hedgerows, biodiversity and environmental sustainability. Their meitheal spirit is still alive and well when the chips are down and things are difficult as we saw during the recent lockdowns. Above all else, rural people have a deep sense of pride in passing on our traditions, heritage and way of life to the next generation. We value that greatly.

It is within this context that I want to clearly outline my full commitment, and the commitment of my colleagues in the Rural Independent Group, to improving the environment and reducing greenhouse gas emissions. However, I believe that pursuing these noble objectives should not have the impact of making people poorer by introducing harsh measures on ordinary people who only want to live happily and peacefully. There is a better way. There must be a fairer way, a path that must be socially just and grounded in economic equality which also achieves the required reductions in global greenhouse gas emissions. Social justice must be the central belief of this Bill. We cannot have a situation of legally binding emissions targets passed into law for a four-decade time window without consideration of some key elements. This Bill aims to bring about the reduction targets, five-yearly carbon budgets, sectoral emissions ceilings, an annually updated climate action plan and a long-term climate action strategy, with little or no actual democratic accountability to an Teach seo. We are privileged to be elected for the time being.

The expansion of the Climate Change Advisory Council under this Bill was welcomed yesterday by the Leas-Cheann Comhairle. She and I differ on things like this but I admire all her contributions for their honesty and integrity. The expansion of the council will result in that 13-member committee having much more input than ordinary citizens and even democratically-elected Teachtaí Dála. The council will be given a key assessing and advisory role for Ireland's transition to a zero-carbon economy by 2050. That is a diminution of our democracy.

We believe that this Bill is being rushed through the Dáil while the country is in a pandemic and without any consideration for the impact it will have on ordinary people, farmers or rural Ireland. This Bill treats rural Ireland as a victim and its population as rogues. That should not be. We cannot have a demonising of rural people. We need more of the honey and less of the

vinegar. At the very minimum, such legislative proposals should be accompanied by rigorous independent analysis of their social, societal and economic impact and how they will impact each sector. The number of quangos has mushroomed. I want to see farmers, farmer bodies and rural dwellers represented on the Climate Change Advisory Council. We must include the input of people who understand rural Ireland and will be impacted by the decisions that are made. If we had proper scrutiny, it would at least allow Deputies the opportunity to make informed decisions and provide for transparency around the costs and the benefits associated with the far-reaching impacts of this Bill. In fact, this legislation did not even contain a straightforward regulatory impact assessment of the Bill. We are promised that it will be published on Committee Stage. That serves to highlight again the rushed nature of this Bill. Make hay slowly, I say. I know people believe we are in a climate crisis. We are not climate change deniers but we want fairness.

This legislation has one common denominator, that is, the legislative impact will make every single Irish citizen poorer or much less well off. The Bill is much more draconian than the draft Bill published in October 2020. The main provisions include an objective of climate neutrality by 2050 and an interim target of a 51% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2030, relative to a baseline of 2018.

Some Members of this House and several members of the Green Party were highly critical of the members of the Rural Independent Group for not attending the Oireachtas committee which considered the draft Bill. The Leas-Cheann Comhairle knows that we only have six members. We did not get a lot of choice on committees because the Government took all the cake and left us some cake in the shape of a number of committee memberships. We did not get a membership of the relevant committee. We are all busy people who have other committee meetings to attend. If we decide to go to a meeting of a committee of which we are not members, we would have to wait, perhaps for hours, to get in to speak. That argument does not hold water and the people making those allegations should know better because they know the way the committee system works. Such criticisms are grossly disingenuous and are nothing more than a distraction, for several reasons. The members of the Rural Independent Group have their own committees, as I said.

This Bill is before us because the programme for Government was carved up between Fine Gael, Fianna Fáil and the Green Party, supported by a number of regional Independents, many of whom I noticed did come in to speak on the Bill. I was alarmed that country Deputies did not speak and were not interested in the Bill.

The Bill is being fuelled to keep the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, and the Green Party happy. It is a means for Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael to hold onto power, irrespective of the costs or impact to ordinary people and key sectors such as agriculture and many others. We believe that this Bill will do absolutely nothing to reduce global greenhouse gas emissions. In fact, the only thing that this legislation will do is hammer Ireland's economy, cost thousands of jobs both directly and indirectly, and include harsh impositions on our people. Above all else, the Bill is anti-rural, attacks the poor and will do absolutely nothing whatsoever to reduce global greenhouse gas emissions. We say that not only because we think it. We have seen independent research by different universities to back that up.

This Bill is riddled with hypocrisy, like all the Government's actions and messages on climate change. We hear Government Deputies and Ministers claiming that this Bill will make Ireland the world leader on tackling climate change. Do we want to be a leader on tackling

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climate change? It is a nice aspiration and lovely ambition but we must respect our people's right to exist under the Constitution. Ireland, through this Bill, even though we produce 0.11% or one tenth of 1% of global greenhouse gas emissions, is introducing potentially the most severe and utterly unachievable emission targets anywhere on the planet. Where is the research, backup and common sense? Such nonsense fools no one. If we were serious about reducing the world's greenhouse gas emissions, we would be focusing our efforts abroad and on a global scale.

Instead, the inward focus of the Bill will target Irish people and do nothing to reduce global emissions. Deep down, this cynical Government knows that is the case. Its only objective is to stay in power. It is willing to throw every single citizen under the bus, if the bus is still travelling and not out of gas, that is.

Greenhouse gas emissions are a global issue. The Government approach is tokenism and amounts to penalties on Irish people while turning a blind eye to what happens on a global stage. That is blatantly obvious. For example, a report published in 2018 by Greenpeace - I hope and know the Minister will not rubbish that organisation - stated that one small power plant in China produces far in excess of all the greenhouse gas emissions produced in Ireland in aon bhliain amháin. That is a stark fact. In fact, the report states that the top three firms in

*2 o'clock* China emitted more greenhouse gases than the whole of Ireland in the past decade. Why are we not looking at that? My colleagues and I are often accused of not looking at the broader picture but that is a very broad question. China is one of the world's fastest-growing economies and, with that growth, its emissions are increasing rapidly. China plans to build more power plants. Each plant that is built, even the small ones, will produce at least the same amount of greenhouse gases that Ireland produces in any year. We have to be serious about this. This serves to underline the fact that this issue must be dealt with on a global scale. We support that being done. The Government's flawed approach aims to hammer the Irish public with a raft of carbon-related taxation measures and net reduction targets while also doing business with China. That is farcical and turns a blind eye to China's emissions problems. We must be proud people. We were always recognised and respected as a neutral country. We must have our voice respected again.

While claiming to be the best in class and banning the cutting of turf under the Bill, the Government continues to support electricity generation at the Moneypoint power plant in County Clare via the importation of coal from an open-cast mine in Colombia. This is utterly bizarre nonsense and not a word is said about it. I was recently out on the bog in Moanyarha in Contae Phort Láirge, not too far from my parish, and saw men and women engaged in the old practice and pastime of cutting turf to give them a bit of heat during the winter. That should not be discontinued. I will fight for their right to keep cutting turf. It is easy for middle-class green activists in Dublin to propose the end of farming as we know it or to campaign against economic growth when the devastating consequences of both will be felt by others. That is what is happening.

The Government hypocrisy on climate change is also exposed when it comes to the transport sector, where a lack of strategic planning has resulted in emissions that spiralled by between 14% and 16% in 2020. This is mainly due to a lack of investment in public transportation across the country. I thank the Minister for coming to Tipperary and listening to the people. I know he has good aims and objectives and wants to get more trains, buses, rail corridors and whatever but is not in favour of big motorways. I am not in favour of them either. We need small bypasses of towns. We need to let the towns live and not cut them off completely. I am

thankful that the Minister is considering the M20 and the M24 and the associated impacts and costs, including the impacts on biodiversity. If the Government was serious about reducing emissions, it would begin by putting public transport in place across the country in order to provide people with an alternative mode of transport. We just do not have it. Bus services to Cashel and Tipperary are being cut. I heard Deputy Cathal Crowe remark earlier that he only has a few miles to cycle to the station in County Clare. That is great, but I could not cycle to my local station, which is 40 miles from my house. There are stations in Cahir and Clonmel but the train would not get me to Dublin until 3 o'clock in the afternoon. I have no doubt some Deputies would be delighted with that because they would not have to listen to me. The lack of public transport is not fair to people.

The Government hypocrisy is underlined by the fact that the Government could not even meet the lower 2020 EU emissions reduction targets, but it now wants to be the best in the world by 2030.

I wish to focus on several destructive measures in the Bill which will destroy rural communities. First, the Bill is anti-agriculture. On a global level, agriculture accounts for 16% of all greenhouse gas emissions. According to the Environmental Protection Agency, EPA, agriculture accounts for 34% of greenhouse gas emissions in this country. The Bill provides no special derogation for any parts of agriculture. Members are aware of the issue last week relating to heather. There is heather in my area. The purple heather on the Knockmealdowns is beautiful. The cuckoos have been there for the past two weeks and it is wonderful. Such land is farmed and has been farmed for generations but is now going to be ruled out in terms of receiving any kind of payments. That is pathetic nonsense. The heather is rich and untouched and has been there for generations and centuries but now the Government wants to cut the payment for land that has heather on it. Farmers are going to clear it and plough the land. One hand does not know what the other hand is doing.

Under the Bill, those involved in agriculture in Ireland will be forced to pay a disproportionate cost, much higher than that which will be paid by farmers in other countries. The fact that the Bill makes no special provision for the agricultural sector is utterly outrageous. We depend on farmers. That has never been more clear than during the recent lockdown. Under the Bill, the Climate Change Advisory Council and the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications will set the targets, which means the cuts proposed for the agriculture sector will be profound.

Before the most recent general election, many Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil Deputies came into the House and promised to bring in a special exemption for the agrifood sector. Where are those promises now? They are gone, like snow off a ditch or a cat through a skylight. Those Deputies are saying locally that agriculture will be okay. They are using the nod and a wink politics of the past. That is not good enough. They come in here and criticise me and my colleagues for scaremongering. We are not scaremongering; we are reporting from very reputable sources. Those Deputies are going to vote in favour of the Bill and its impactful measures. Well, I have a message for them. They cannot dine *à la carte* on this issue. Either they stand with farmers, local communities and ordinary people by voting against the Bill or they are for the Bill. However, they should know that if they vote in favour of the Bill, they are crucifying - I am sorry for using that word - every person living in rural Ireland.

That is what was done last Friday night when there was an increase in the carbon tax on fuel. The fuel subsidy is gone and people are perishing in their houses in this cold weather,

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with temperatures of minus 3°C forecast for tonight again. People did not realise the tax had increased until they were hit with the higher price of oil on Monday morning. The Deputies I am talking about are voting to put people out of work. They are voting to cull large numbers of cattle. That is not scaremongering; it is a fact. They are voting for higher food prices and higher electricity prices.

I raised earlier the issue of utility companies and the way they are fleecing companies even though the business premises are closed and not being used. The Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment, Deputy Varadkar, denied having any responsibility for that issue. He told them to do a deal with the utility companies. What is the purpose of the Commission for Regulation of Utilities? What is the point in having a regulator if it is not going to step in?

The Deputies voting for the Bill are voting to end the possibility of young local people obtaining planning permission on family-owned lands in rural areas. This is a very important issue. Young people want to be able to have a house in which to live in rural Ireland. They respect the community. The planners are flooded with work at the moment. I have to encourage anyone who wishes to build in rural Ireland to apply immediately, before the new plans come into force in 18 months time, because after that it will be a no-go area. That is putting significant pressure on the planners but it is a fact. They have told me that themselves.

A vote for the Bill is a vote to end the cutting of turf, which is a traditional solid fuel source for ordinary people. These Deputies are either with rural Ireland or they are about keeping their party in government. They cannot have it both ways. The game is up.

The provisions in the Bill aimed at meeting the emissions reductions will destroy agriculture as we know it. That has been well-documented by research, research that has been conveniently ignored by the Government. For example, analysis published on 27 March in the *Irish Farmers' Journal*, a very reputable publication that is treated as gospel in the farming community, suggests that half the cattle and cow herd would need to be culled by 2030. That is what the analysis stated. The Deputies I am talking about come in here and tell us that is not true. They love to quote from newspapers when it suits them. It would mean a cull of approximately 3.4 million cattle and cows. It would mean that a farmer with 100 cows would basically have to cull the herd down to 50 cows. It is shocking. It is a fact. That analysis published in the *Irish Farmers' Journal* has not been contested. The Bill would mean even deeper culls in 2030. It certainly means an end to growing herd sizes and is completely in contrast with the objectives outlined by the Minister, Deputy Coveney, and others who told people only a year or two ago to double their herds.

The Bill represents a blunt and callous approach and risks off-shoring our food production to countries that do not have emissions targets and can cut down their rainforests. It would bring thousands of tonnes of beef from Brazil into Europe. It is total pathetic nonsense.

The Bill fails to recognise that Irish farmers are the most carbon-efficient food producers in the world owing to our grass-based model of food production. It is important that this sustainable production is not restricted as it would lead to increased international climate emissions being created. The Mercosur trade deal, for example, will allow the import of 99,000 tonnes of beef into the EU at a time beef prices are on the floor and the cartels in the beef industry are doing nothing about it.

Recently published research from the University of Oxford shows that food miles, namely, the transportation of food between countries, contributes a greater impact on greenhouse gases. That is a fact. The Minister knows that, as well as I do. The production of briquettes in the midlands has been banned on the basis of a so-called just transition. This is the most unjust thing to do to the families in that region. Deputy Carol Nolan is doing her best to fight it. We saw the impact recently on a businessman who had been operating for 30 years developing the bike industry. Allegations have been made that the person who got the tender is related to the Minister, but I do not pay any respect to that because the tendering process is a tendering process and it has to be respected. However, the Minister might want to clarify if there is any connection to him, because it is not fair if it is not true. It is callous and wrong. That man has no chance now. We are supposed to be encouraging businesspeople and entrepreneurs. We must lead our people out of this and give them hope. We need to be honest and transparent with them instead of closing down the peat factories and banning turf cutting. The same was done with the gas and oil and we are now importing them. It makes no sense. A child in kindergarten could understand that never mind us here in this Parliament.

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate on this Bill. Over the past number of months, I have heard the Minister, Deputy Ryan, talk about the number of houses that will be retrofitted over the next decade and what we can do, especially for older people. Today is Thursday. Earlier this week, I saw two letters issued by Roscommon County Council to elderly people regarding grant aid for older people for the installation of new windows or doors or upgrade work to roofs and so on to make houses more energy efficient. My understanding is that the council budgets commence in March. It is now only May and Roscommon County Council has issued letters to people telling them that all of the funding has been allocated. This comes at a time we are hearing daily from the Minister about the proposed retrofitting and refurbishment of houses.

In the previous Dáil, I sat beside the Minister in the Chamber, where we had many a good chat. I am surprised at how undemocratic this Bill is. It provides for a five-year carbon budget, but regardless of how it is going, the Minister can overrule it. That should not be provided for in any Bill. That power should lie with the Parliament, but under this Bill that will not happen. There is another issue which has surprised me. I have seen this previously with regard to people appointed to boards. In this instance, I am speaking about the Climate Change Advisory Council. There is a person sitting on that council who has publicly stated, more than once, that half the national herd should be got rid of. I do not think that is a prudent thing to do. People who have made rash statements like that, who have been appointed to the council, should rethink where they stand on this issue. Appointees need to have an open mind and cannot be saying this, that or the other in the media. The Minister needs to look at this because he appointed the chairperson. It is a worrying development that before we start off, there are people who are totally opposed to the type of farming that is carried out in the agricultural sector. This is the first issue that should be looked at.

In talking about the climate Bill, let us go down the road of electricity. We hear nothing anymore other than that there will be wind turbines. We hear that there will be 1 million electric vehicles on the road and that there will be 500,000 houses reliant on electricity for heat. A week or ten days ago, I watched an RTE programme filmed at Moneypoint, during which I heard references to hydrogen commencing in Moneypoint and to wind turbines being out on the sea almost straight away. We need to be honest with people and tell them that a project involving wind turbines out on the sea from its infancy can take between ten and 14 years. It has to

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go through the planning process. Anybody who knows Moneypoint and the surrounding area knows there is a dolphin sanctuary there and that it is an area where it would be pretty tough to get planning permission. The impression was given - this is the spin that is going on - that we are almost ready to turn Moneypoint on to hydrogen, that the turbines will be on sea and there will be heaps of jobs. That is rubbish, because that is not going to happen. During that programme, businesspeople were interviewed who thought they were coming on stream in the next couple of months. That does not happen overnight. We need to be clear with people on that.

We have shut down the power stations in Shannonbridge and Lanesborough, but we have oil tankers going into data centres in this city where the ESB will not guarantee power. That is some contradiction. Approximately seven or eight oil tankers per day are coming into this country and all the while we are talking about plans for a clean environment. I will make a prediction on the record. On the basis of everything I have learned from talking to people and the experts, in 2027 we will be in real danger of not having power. We are jumping from one thing to the other. It needs to be borne in mind that the Corrib gas field will be gone in 2027. Some people are opposed to a gas terminal being located at Moneypoint along the Kerry-Clare border. If people continue with the “we cannot have this, this or this” we will be like a car with three wheels and we will not be able to go anywhere.

On transport, we have had several reports on the western rail corridor. In Galway, the home of the Leas-Cheann Comhairle, they talk about light rail. This is all hypothetical stuff at the moment because no funding is being put together to make sure that some of these projects are delivered. Since I was knee high, I have been hearing about the western rail corridor and what would be done, including that it would bring in people from Tuam and Claremorris and could be extended to Knock. In Dublin city, a quick solution could have been found. It is probably one of the only cities in Europe that does not have a rail line from its main airport. That is phenomenal.

We talk about the number of electric cars that we will buy or have on the road, but do we consider people's incomes or the cars' cost? Most people in rural areas buy second-hand cars for between €5,000 and €10,000. You would not get an electric car's battery for that.

Under this climate Bill, it seems like we in this country will nearly become sales people because we will tick a box saying that we will be classed as the clean, green economy. That will not work, though, because it will not create enough jobs. Under the current plan, the Government is happier to see briquettes coming in from Germany, Estonia and elsewhere than it is to tell Bord na Móna's workers in Offaly to keep making briquettes until 2030. They are 15% moisture and meet all the various criteria. The Government is happier to bring milled peat into Ireland in order to keep the mushroom industry going than it is for us to mill our own peat. We seem to be happier to bring in biomass from Brazil - I would like to see proof that it is not part of the rainforest - and South Africa than to have it made in our own country.

The problem is that, under the Minister's Climate Action Plan, we are to plant 8,000 ha of forestry per year, but we have not even hit a quarter of that amount since 2016. We have a Minister of State from the Minister's party who has been told this time and again but keeps talking about new ideas, we have a Department that is dysfunctional and the Government is in denial about it all. Still we write up on the chart that we will plant 8,000 ha every year. At the Joint Committee on Agriculture and the Marine, we pull out our dashboard and look at it weekly. If we are talking about planting 8,000 ha, we must give licences for 10,000 ha or 12,000 ha because a certain amount of applicants will never plant. If someone is waiting three years, he or

she will certainly never plant.

The Government talks about how organic farming will be the new way forward. In 2016, 1,663 farms were involved in organic farming. In 2017, there were 1,558. In 2018, there were 1,800. That was 137 more, but fewer for a number of years. A few months ago, the Government announced the new organic farming scheme with great fanfare and claimed that 400 to 500 farms would be brought into it. Today's figures tell the Government what the farmers of this country think of that scheme and the way the Government has gone about it. Only 317 of the country's farmers have applied for it. Does that send a message to the Government that something is being done wrong?

The Government talks about the new results-based environment agri-pilot programme, REAP, scheme. I remember speaking to the Minister about carbon budgets and so on. The carbon tax will move to between €80 and €100 per tonne. We were told that a great deal of money would go to the agricultural sector in a new environmental scheme. The new REAP scheme provides €4,700 plus €2,200 more if a farm has designated or double designated land, which is like trying to climb to the moon. The old green low-carbon agri-environment scheme, GLAS, was €300 more at €5,000. We have gone backwards.

I cannot understand something. If someone applies under the new REAP scheme, one can only include the land he or she included previously. If someone wanted to include a bit of wetland, bogland or whatever, it could not be included because it had not been included previously. What is the mentality of the people who draw up some of these schemes? Did they ever stand on a farm? Do they understand agriculture? They have read about it as an leabhar, but they do not understand it in reality.

Under GAEC 2, or the good agricultural and environmental conditions, farmers in the west and north west especially will face a situation where there will be two different systems under a derogation - we call it an amendment in this country but, funnily enough, the EU calls it a derogation - and they will be put at risk of their land not being classed as eligible. Speaking about climate, this is some of the best land in the world. If they are put out of that, what is the future for that rural family? What is the future for the next generation? What is the future for the community in that area?

We see the usual suspects in the media talking about agriculture and its emissions. They say that Ireland's figures have increased or whatever. We have not included our hedgerows, although in fairness to the Minister, he is trying to do that now. Have we carried out proper research on grass being grown and eaten? Have we carried out research on barley, wheat and other crops? What is the plan or vision for rural Ireland?

A cut to the national herd will not be tolerated. I can tell the Government that straight up. Covid will go and there will be a revolt by the people of rural Ireland for a simple reason, that being, farmers are trying to make a living. They are the custodians of the land. We come from a managed landscape. They are the solution to much of this, but they will not be price payers at the same time. I will give an example that relates to the Government's fancy new carbon tax. Consider a contractor cutting silage with the self-propelled forage harvesters, BiG Ms, loaders and tractors that are needed for the job. With increases in the price of diesel and the carbon tax, that contractor will pay €450 more per day. From where will that money come? The farmer will get hit once again.

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We need to ensure that we use the carrot, not the stick. People in rural areas are sick and tired. I have heard about rural transport. A Bus Éireann route that had been servicing Cloonfad for the past 30 years has been cut, yet the Minister talks about there being more buses. We cannot talk out of both sides of our mouths. While the Minister gets the support of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael Deputies in the House because they want to stay in government for another while, they will face the electorate yet. I can tell the Minister one thing about rural areas - if those Deputies tell farmers X, Y and Z about what the latter have to do with the land they own, there will be a different story at the next election. Supporting this for the sake of staying in power will not work. As was pointed out earlier, people are sick and tired of what companies in places like China and America are doing. These people in agriculture are guardians. They can look after the environment and they have done so. They will not be talked down to. Let me be clear once again. I even heard this mentioned last night when many of us Deputies were attending meetings. Those people made it very clear that the Government can hide for so long behind Covid-19. The minute Covid has cleared and we are at a different level, politicians in Dublin will get a horrid shock because rural people are sick and tired of what is going on.

I heard domestic turf cutting spoken about earlier. Domestic turf cutters fought a battle before and we will fight it again. We stood up and made very clear the idea of enough turf for one's own house and fire. In fairness to the Minister, I heard him speak about domestic turf cutters a few weeks ago on RTÉ. Whether it is the Minister or somebody else, however, let them not think that they are going to walk on top of the rural people. We bring in these things almost to try to put them out of business.

I mention the higher price of diesel, for example. At one time, kids were brought to school. Now, the buses going to schools have been cut. The bus routes are being cut and yet here we are in this fantasy of a place in Dublin talking about having more public transport and more of this or that and it will all be great and rosy.

The Minister spoke about the number of houses that will be retrofitted. Think of the two people, one of whom is 69 years old and the other 67, who got letters this week informing them there is no money to help them with their house. Think of that when the Minister is talking about 500,000 houses. I mentioned this when the budgets came in two months ago. They generally come in March. Think about what councils are seeing. It is not their fault because they are getting it from central government.

**Deputy Marian Harkin:** I am pleased to have the opportunity to say a few words on the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Bill 2021. I was a member of the European Parliament when the Kyoto Protocol entered into force in 2005. Its objective was to stabilise greenhouse gas emissions from 2008 to 2012. Then, of course, its successor, the Doha Amendment, was in operation up to 2020.

As a member of the European Parliament, I supported the agreed proposal from the Parliament and all member states that the EU would commit to a binding target of at least 40% reduction in greenhouse gases by 2030 compared to 1990 levels. The big one, of course, was COP21 and the Paris Agreement, where we had a global agreement on limiting the increase in global temperatures to below 2°C, and preferably to below 1.5°C, compared to pre-industrial levels. We saw the US pull out of that agreement but with the new Biden administration, thankfully, we have seen a recommitment to the objectives and targets of COP21.

In a nutshell, that was my experience as a member of the European Parliament, where time

and again I voted for these reductions in emissions. If we look to what has been happening here, we see that Ireland, of course, has signed up to these agreements. Over the last number of months and in the next few months, we will be finalising this framework legislation which will give effect to our contribution to fighting climate change and living up to the commitments to which we have already signed up. Of course, we had our setbacks and it took a Supreme Court decision last year, which stated that our national mitigation plan was unlawful. Of course, Ireland is not the only country where that has happened. It also happened in the Netherlands in 2019.

This brings us to where we are now. As I said earlier, this Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Bill 2021 provides a framework for action. We are finally taking responsibility for our own patch and drafting legislation to help ensure we keep our commitments and play our role in helping to fight climate change. We are gingerly tiptoeing our way out of Covid-19, fingers crossed, and we have seen that it takes a global effort to fight a global pandemic. Climate change is also a global issue and no country, large or small, can duck its responsibilities.

We are all very proud of Dr. Mike Ryan and the common sense and realistic approach he brought to the fight against Covid-19. At a recent Trócaire meeting, however, he did not mince his words when he told us that we are pushing nature, population and communities to their limits and creating conditions in which pandemics flourish. We are, therefore, at a tipping point. Indeed, some would say we may have passed that point. All we can do is what we do today and what we promise to do tomorrow, however. As legislators and representatives of the Irish people, we have a responsibility to enact laws that will help protect our environment and our planet; the place we call home.

That is all big picture stuff and it is important. Like any legislation, however, we must get down to the nitty-gritty and see how this affects people and their lives. I understand that many sectors, in particular, the agricultural sector, have significant concerns around this Bill. It is really important that terms like “climate justice” and “just transition” not only have concrete meaning but also that they must be central to how we pursue language policies.

One of the concerns that has been raised time and again is around the possibility of a decrease in the national herd. This legislation does not specifically deal with the national herd but it commits every sector, including the agrifood sector, to cutting emissions. I have a few thoughts on that. Our beef herd has been reducing for the last number of years. Most people do not seem to realise this. It is not so with our dairy herd. We need to be specific as to what our plan is on this issue. That is my first point.

Second, I spoke of climate change as a global issue, which it is. It is no wonder that Irish farmers are incandescent with rage when they look to Brazil and see the burning of the rainforest to produce Brazilian beef, and a Mercosur proposal to increase the importation of beef into the EU. This policy is nonsense but was strongly supported by previous trade Commissioners - I am not sure about the current Commissioner - who were gung-ho about it. Ireland must object in the strongest possible terms to any such proposals. We are on solid ground if we make these objections because our rationale is the protection of the climate. This is not a trade issue but a climate one. If the Minister wants Irish farmers to buy into his proposals, he cannot tell them that we ignore the bigger picture.

Beef production, whether in Brazil or Ireland, is a climate issue. That is why we in this

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country need to take a number of initiatives. We need further research at national and European level into agricultural methane and its impact over its life cycle. This is a crucial piece of research, vital for the beef and dairy industry here. There are good grounds to look at how we count agricultural emissions. I am not saying agriculture should get a free pass. It should not. However, we need to use the most up-to-date evidence when it comes to calculating these emissions. We and the EU have not done so. We need to investigate further the possibility of different types of feed. I already heard other Members refer to that today. We know this can make a significant difference. This research needs to be speeded up to ensure that, again, farmers can play their part in reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

The most important point, however, is that our primary producers get a decent price for the food they produce. Too many farmers are running to stand still. They are price takers with their margins squeezed. Despite some milk-and-water efforts to bring transparency to the food chain, we still have not regulated it in such a way that each link in that chain gets a fair return. The majority of farmers want to be part of the solution. They do not want to be seen as the problem. That is why issues such as the importation of Brazilian beef, using the most accurate scientific, up-to-date way to count emissions, using the most efficient feedstuffs and ensuring a reasonable return to the primary producer will allow farmers to engage as partners. These are crucial.

The new CAP must drive the policy change needed and reward farmers for this work. The results-based environment-agri pilot project, REAP, has been a huge disappointment. Will the Minister assure me that this is not a precursor to the kind of environmental programme we can expect to see in the new CAP? I must emphasise agriculture is the backbone of the rural economy. Those in agriculture want to play their part. They have families, children and grandchildren. They produce some of the best food in the world and they do so in a sustainable way. Will the Minister please commit to working with farmers? That will do far more to deliver on climate change and sustainable agriculture. We have not seen the evidence yet that this is going to happen. I am still waiting to see it.

We have heard about just transition, a fine and lofty term which sounds great. The nitty-gritty of getting from A to B is what determines whether the transition is just. Many speakers have spoken about the horticultural sector and milled peat. What is happening? We are going backwards. We need to learn lessons from that. It is not enough to ban production or to stop a certain action. One must look at the impact of that. Where does one end up? What happens in the meantime? How does one get there? Sometimes one needs to start from the end point and work backwards, as well as starting from the beginning, in order that policy has coherence and the outcomes are not unintended or unexpected. Policy coherence has been missing in many of the actions we have taken so far. That drives people bananas because they see us saying one thing but doing another. Will the Minister look at the consequences of actions and what happens along the way?

Not only does the Minister need to engage with, work with and support farmers, he must do the same with communities, particularly around the issue of renewable energy production. We heard much about wind energy and how offshore is best. Where it is onshore, we have no proper set-back distances. There has been much debate in this Parliament around that issue. However, infrasound and flicker must not impact on local communities. If we increase our set-back distances, it will decrease the areas where wind turbines can be erected. People are entitled to live in their homes, however, and not to be completely overshadowed by huge wind turbines.

Again, that is where we lose people who support progressive climate policy but see wind turbines imposed within 600 m of their homes. We need to work with communities. In the constituency that I represent, people get rightly angry when they cannot get planning permission for a house for a family member but massive wind turbines are allowed or proposed quite close to those family homes. They also see the march of the Sitka spruce across the landscape. We come back to policy coherence and bringing people along. People want to do the right thing and play their part in tackling climate change. The proposals we put in place, however, must allow them to do that and support them in doing so.

There has been a commitment from the Government and from the Minister's party on the issue of the importation of fracked gas. We have no formal policy, however, banning its importation. It makes no sense to have this climate Bill if the Minister does not move immediately to make good on his commitment to ban the importation of fracked gas. In his response today, will he give that commitment or, at the very least, give a timeframe? I will support this Bill on Second Stage. I will not vote differently in this Parliament from how I did in another parliament. I cannot expect policy coherence from the Minister if I do not deliver on it myself. I look forward to engaging with him on amendments during the next Stage and I am especially looking forward to hearing from him and his Government colleagues about how they intend to put flesh on the bones of these proposals. The Government's concrete proposal must, as I said, be to bring people and communities with it.

**Deputy John McGuinness:** Maybe I will take up from where Deputy Harkin left off in the context of policy coherence and the value of this Bill. The Bill itself is timely. It is a Bill that has gone through committee scrutiny successfully. In the course of that it has invited various other recommendations and no doubt in the course of the Committee Stage, more ideas and inputs will be brought forward and made, which is to be welcomed.

I want to examine the impact of the Bill on various sectors. Agriculture comes to mind first. We have a lot of farmers, indeed a lot of people, involved in all sorts of agricultural activity who are willing to participate fully in achieving the best possible goals for the environment in doing the right thing by the next generation. I have a great deal of respect for the farming community and what it has achieved to date. It has looked after the countryside. As is often said in this House, the farming community have been the custodians of rural Ireland. Farmers need to be recognised for that in a very positive way. Over the past ten years, the Government has set about encouraging farmers and family farms to go in a particular direction, namely, to develop their herd numbers and dairy units and all of this resulted in a significant cost to them. Some of them have invested up to €500,000 because this is what the policy of Government has been up to now. If we are to change that then it cannot be a dramatic change or an immediate change, and it must be supported by a serious level of funding that will comfortably move the farming community in a different direction. I have no doubt but that the community will co-operate fully, as I have seen that right across rural Ireland within farming communities. However, I have seen a lack of support and understanding from the Government in the context of the support, financial and otherwise, and assistance the community needs to continue to have viable family farm units from which a decent living can be made. That relates not just to their activities, be they dairy or otherwise; it relates to the types of vehicle and machinery they are using, the cost of that machinery and the cost to change that machinery to a more acceptable fuel that will do the job at the same time as being kind to the environment and supportive of the farmer. That is going to cost a huge amount.

Regarding credit for the maintenance of hedgerows and the biodiversity in them, I do not

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think enough is being said about that. These are the small things that have made a huge difference to rural Ireland and the environment and have been the result of a substantial contribution by the farming community. Not enough is being said about that from Europe, which is more interested in the bureaucracy of the schemes it puts in place, which are beneficial to the farming community but also very heavy in terms of the bureaucracy and red tape they require people to engage in. That is regrettable because all of that costs significant money, which could be better spent going directly into the farming businesses the families are engaged in. As such, first and foremost in this Bill we have to protect rural Ireland and to protect the direction those who live in rural Ireland want to go in, while at the same time being sympathetic to the cause of having a better and greener environment, and one that is sustainable and understanding.

My own background is in transport. The transport industry has done a lot to try to comply with the various upgrades of engine and type of engine, including the use of AdBlue and the other bigger engines that are available, to ensure that they are doing their bit to save the environment. However, at what cost? Like those in farming, they are not making sufficient profits to be able to casually invest in the newer type of machinery they will want to assist the Government in meeting those targets and, therefore, they will need assistance. As trucks leave Ireland and go to the Continent, they have that long journey to go on and if we are going to ask them to have the type of engines that are required to meet the targets, they will need support for that.

Transport and agriculture are two areas that are hugely labour-intensive. A transport operator is not just someone who sits in a truck; it is hugely labour-intensive, even down to the on-time delivery of the parcels everyone is now buying online. At present, electric vehicles and their technology do not necessarily suit the operator to change to. This is, first, because they cannot cover the distances and, second, because of cost. Again, it comes down to money.

I am not arguing against the Bill but we must have tangible supports that are real and meaningful to the sectors we are going to directly affect. The Government must consider the individual, particularly those who currently cannot afford fuel and who are having real, serious difficulty heating their old homes. Will grants be more easily accessible? Will they be greater than what is there at present? Will they do the job without bringing poverty and hardship to people who really want to do something for the planet but who in their own lives do not have the resources necessary to give them a place in what will be a new society and a new economy through greening the country? Those individuals will, therefore, need supports to properly insulate their homes, to properly change the fuel that they use and to do so in a sensible and pragmatic way. I refer in particular to any changes that will bring about the type of poverty that older people are currently experiencing. All of us have encountered cases our constituencies of individuals and elderly couples who have been unable to heat their homes and who are worried about the future and their homes. The heroes here are talking in grand terms about the climate change Bill and other matters and the people I mention are not part of that conversation because they believe they cannot afford to be part of it. If we are to be inclusive and to have policies that are properly connected in the context of their deliverables, then those people must be included too.

Costs are huge and they must be considered.

Communities were mentioned and the cornerstone of Ireland and its development has always been around the strength of its community. It is about how strong a community is in terms of advocacy, infrastructure for families or development. They must be supported. I listened carefully to an individual on the Joe Duffy radio show yesterday making the case for a friend of

his who rents bicycles. We were talking about the just transition but I heard what happened to that man's business when Bord na Móna put the service to tender after 11 years. He constructed the business and actively engaged with the community on a tangible level. He brought the community with him in his business of hiring bicycles so people could see the park and enjoy the basic activities we are now enjoying. That business was taken from him; that is not a just transition - it is anything but. We must address that.

I will turn to what would be happening now if we had no climate change Bill or discussion in the House about it. Local authorities are continuing to pollute the waters of this country by allowing raw sewage and other contaminants to go into rivers. They are not doing a great deal about this because they are looking for funding to deal with the problem. Until we address the matters causing problems, we will have difficulty in addressing what we want to in order to achieve the ambitious targets being set out by the Minister. I caution him against enshrining matters in law today that may have to be changed very quickly after the enactment of the Bill.

*3 o'clock*

I will speak again to what is wrong with today's economy. We can see how busy are the quarries and there are legitimate quarries doing legitimate business under a legitimate planning application. I have no difficulty with the businesses meeting those conditions. There are illegal quarries in Kilkenny and Laois in particular that do not have planning permission. They have escaped the law and the county council bringing them back to being a lawful and registered quarry. I have raised this question in the House with the Taoiseach and I am raising it directly with the Minister now. I ask him in the interests of the countryside to look at those quarries that are breaking the law now and causing untold destruction to nature. They are operating without any licence or proper planning permission. Will the Minister investigate these cases in Laois and Kilkenny and find out what is happening with those quarries that are breaking the law? What is happening with the citizens making the complaints about the law being broken? What can we do about the banks and vulture funds that currently own some of those quarries and which are turning a blind eye to the asset being stripped, taking no action to support the local communities?

These are real issues for today and yet we in the Dáil tend to ignore them. If I raise them with the Minister by way of parliamentary question, I am told it is a matter for the county council. That may be the case but it is a matter for this House when the law breaks down and the council is not being given the full support and resources of the State to battle some of these individuals breaking the law. I am not painting everybody with the one brush but there is a small number of people causing devastation in local communities to the environment we are trying to protect with this Bill. It is scandalous.

The law is there and I hope we are not passing another law that will be ignored. I wish the Minister well with the Bill but when a matter is raised like this in the House, as I have done on two or three occasions, the Minister who is listening should at least have the interest to check it out and follow up. I have followed up some of these particular queries on quarries and I am shocked that it takes so long to stop the individual from breaking the law. There is considerable damage done in that short period to the environment.

When the community we are trying to represent sees there is little impact from the complaints they make, people lose faith in politicians and the system. Authority may then break down and people might think if certain others can take a short cut because they have money, they can take a short cut too. People living in rural Ireland do not want to do this. The Minister

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has heard me asking and I plead with him to respond on this. Maybe it will not be today but he can do it in writing. I ask him to tell me what can be done to support the councils dealing with such matters.

Planning has been mentioned with regard to local government. In order to support rural Ireland and rebuild the villages and towns devastated by the financial crash, Covid-19 and closures of bank branches, post offices and so on, local government representatives should be included in this just transition. From what I hear, the just transition in the midlands has not been what they expected. They expected much more and got far less than promised. That does not bode well for this Bill or the actions we require from this Bill. Those actions will require substantial funding.

The only real way to make anything happen in this country is to go back to the community and “be small”. We should go back to empowering a local community or village to rebuild itself by giving people the tools to do so. That could be a law relating to financial support or planning permission. We must allow people to come back to their place of birth or where they were reared. We should give them the opportunity to do it and have a thread running from the Government to local government to policy on planning or climate change. I welcome the inclusion of councils in this. In rebuilding communities and villages, we must think small.

Our housing policy is falling asunder because we are trying to act in a grand way but why not take the process back to the local authorities? Let them build the houses. They know the profile of the local authority housing list. We do not need a grand plan and this was done in the 1950s and 1960s when really good houses were built. We could do the same if we build “small”, going back to the communities and the county councils. We should empower them to do it without the bureaucracy and red tape.

There are many people throughout the country essential to what the Minister is trying to achieve. They want to assist him in changing the way people live in order to pass the country to the next generation in much better shape.

Please support their willingness by putting money and initiatives into the model of the local community and parish that this country was built on.

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):**

I thank all the Deputies who have contributed to this debate and for the approach they took in doing so. I did not hear anyone who was fundamentally opposed to the Bill or to what we are looking to do. What I heard reflects what is out there among the people of Ireland, namely a desire for us all to contribute and to be helped in doing so without anyone pointing the finger. Deputy Harkin put it well when she said we need to bring people with us and show how we can all collectively do this. Throughout this debate a number of Deputies mentioned people from rural Ireland, including small farmers who previously might have been blamed for climate change. They are not to blame and they will be the solution. They are the people who are on the front line in making this change.

A number of Deputies asked that we would set out, whatever about the intention of the Bill, what exactly it means in practice and what will come about in the real actions. I want to try to answer those questions and set out what some of those changes will be. There are various sectors that we will have to design and set targets and plans for, and energy is the key one. Critically, we must stop the use of fossil fuels. It is relatively clear that burning those fossil fuels and

the release of CO<sub>2</sub>, methane and other greenhouse gases into the environment are the source of the problem. Therefore, we tackle the problem at its source. We stop the use of those fuels and provide better alternatives. It has to be a better alternative. We have to design this in a way that enriches our people and does not impoverish them. The reason that is achievable in our country is that we happen to be in a part of the world that probably has among the richest resources in renewable energy, which will be the centre stone of the switch away from fossil fuels. We live in a windy part of the world. The Gulf Stream and the trade winds that come up from the south west across our country give us the ability to convert that into the new power systems that will dominate this 21st century and give us an advantage, not just in the energy system but also in the industrial system, which will use that power in turn.

What does zero carbon by 2050 mean? It means we will go renewable and do all the clever engineering and power management systems work to make sure that is a better, more secure, more competitive, cleaner, healthier and more local energy economy. That is compared with an economy that is depending on us importing fossil fuels from distant parts of the world to burn here and to see that pollution threaten our future. The alternative is a better future and it will be switching to renewable energy. We will not be alone in that. Something significant has happened since this Bill was introduced by Government, namely we have seen the United Nations commit to a similar level of change and target to what we have done. It is showing a similar level of ambition in the development of renewable energy. We have seen the European Union committing in law to a similar level of change and transition. We have seen our neighbour, the UK, similarly committing to do that. We know the Chinese, the Japanese and other Asian economies will do the same. All are going to make this switch to this non-fossil fuel powered future.

That gives me real confidence that the economies of scale, technological development and research and innovation everywhere in the world will be in this direction. We happen to be based in one of the areas in the world with the greatest resource in that base power supply. We have real expertise and capability in the engineering and deployment of that. I heard the chief executive of EirGrid say today that it has just gone beyond what anyone expected. It is now the case that 73% of instantaneous immediate renewable power can be used at any one time in our system. That is world-beating. It is ahead of what anyone expected we would be able to do and we will push that to the limit. In doing that, we will have real economic expertise which we can share with the rest of the world.

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** What happens the power system when there is no wind?

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** That is a good question. There is a second key characteristic to this. That is that we will see connection with our neighbours. It is part of a wider international system. The scale of change that is coming is that there will be a connection to solar power from the south, nuclear power in France and hydroelectric power in Scandinavia and the Alps. The new technology and the innovations that have taken place-----

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** That is ten years away.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** It is not.

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** It is.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** EirGrid is a company I have mentioned which is a leading operator in this. It is applying for a 700 MW interconnection with France, which is largely funded by the European Union. We are similarly going to add an interconnection with the UK and that is

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only the start of it. It is only in the next few years that those interconnectors will start to come on board. This is new cable technology. The reason it is a better economy is that a cable of that size could take up to 2 GW of power and ship power over long distances with little to no losses. That is the revolution that is taking place. This is a new industrial revolution and we are at the equivalent to where places like Birmingham or Manchester were at the start of the last industrial revolution. We have every reason to be at the centre of this.

It will involve other work to get that balancing capability and we will still require fuels. Those will not be gas fuels and they will not be imported liquefied natural gas, LNG, or fracked gas in particular because we have to stop using fossil fuels. This Government will issue the policy statement we have committed to in our programme for Government to say that is not what we support and that is not how we see the future of the Irish energy system.

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** What will it be?

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** Instead, every energy Minister I talk to, including those in Germany, Britain, America, France and China, believes that the future fuels that will be used are the likes of hydrogen and ammonia, which can be converted through renewable power-----

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** That is ten years away.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** -----using electrolysis into alternative things like that-----

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** For fuck's sake we are in a world of our own.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** -----which can provide the backup power we will need. I mention that historic announcement by ESB, equivalent in my mind to the announcement on the building of Ardnacrusha, to convert Moneypoint to be a collection point for that offshore wind and to be a transition point where we convert that comparative advantage we have in offshore wind into hydrogen power. We could use that power in Ardnacrusha, Irish Cement or the Moneypoint power stations. That gives us the stability, better economy and security for our future. ESB says we can do that by 2028. That is a real challenge but ESB and Equinor, a Norwegian company, are probably world leading in their ability to deliver it and we can deliver it if we get our political, regulatory and planning systems right and that is what this Bill does.

Anyone who talks about this energy revolution recognises that even if we have abundant supplies of offshore wind in our system, which we do, it is a matter of efficiency first. If one is filling a bath one puts the plug in before one does anything else. I am confident we can do this because it is agreed by all the parties that took part, not just in the recent Joint Committee on Climate Action hearings on the Bill but in the previous Oireachtas, the Joint Committee on Communications, Climate Action and the Environment that did a huge amount of good work to look at what we should plan. All of us collectively said that we should aim to do 500,000 houses per year. Deputy Fitzmaurice is right about those two families in Roscommon. I can understand how that is crushing for them when they want to improve their houses and they get letters telling them it is not possible.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** In Tipperary as well.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** There are also examples of that in Tipperary and elsewhere.

**Deputy Michael Collins:** In west Cork they are two years waiting.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** It is not because of a shortage of ambition in the political system. We set aside €250 million in the budget for meeting these targets.

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** It was gone by May.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** We will continue to adapt, and we will have to do it in a variety of ways, to make sure we do get to every house. The advantage of this first and foremost is in health. It will be a fundamental change and improvement in air quality and the living conditions of our people. At the end of this process, when we end up with a housing stock that uses electrical heat pumps with no emissions-----

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** In 50 years' time.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** -----and no fumes, and when we combine this with well-insulated houses, there will be dramatic improvements.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Alan Farrell):** I apologise for interrupting the Minister. We have been engaging in this debate for five days and at the last moment Deputies are constantly interrupting. Can I please ask for a little bit of respect for the Minister in his summation?

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** As Deputy Fitzmaurice said earlier, we have sat beside each other over the years and we have got into the habit of engaging in such banter. I apologise to the Acting Chair because I am encouraging it but it is good banter. This is the engagement we will need to make sure we do get to every house. Every place matters and every person matters in this. There will be no looking down, pointing fingers or holier than thou. This transition is critical and the way it will work is what I have heard here today from every Deputy, that their constituents want to do it. We have to help them do it and ask for their help rather than telling them what to do. The engagement will continue. When I finish my speech we will engage in other fora.

In the next decade in transport we will have to go from 12 million tonnes of emissions to 6 million tonnes. This is an incredible challenge because transport changes slowly. The cars we have today will still be on the road in 2030. The buses and trains will only be at the start of their lives even if we buy them today. It will take time. The pattern we have allowed to develop in our country, which is for ever longer journeys, will take time to change but change we have to and it will be better. First and foremost, vehicles will use electricity rather than fossil fuels. Everyone in the car business knows it is a certainty we will make the change because they are better cars with a fraction of the fuel costs, a fraction of the maintenance costs, a better driving experience, much simpler, cleaner and quicker-----

**Deputy Richard O'Donoghue:** More expensive.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** They are at the moment but they are coming down in price because every car company will switch to them. If they do not they will be gone, they will be history, they will be toast, they will be finished, good night and goodbye. They are all going to switch to them so the prices will come down and the lifetime costs will be lower. It will be cheaper. The only way it will work is if it is cheaper and better, and I am absolutely convinced this will be the case.

This is not enough. We also need to switch modes and get out of our cars because there are other costs such as accidents and congestion. Our towns, villages and cities are clogged up

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with cars rather than being beautiful living places. We do have to make the switch. It will be towards active travel first and foremost and making it safe to walk and cycle, particularly for children. Let us start with making it safe to walk for the children in our 4,000 primary schools and 700 secondary schools. This one change alone would transform our country and our children for the better. For health outcomes it would be the best public health action we could take.

We need to reduce the demand and bring back strong communities with town centres first. We need to bring back living on the main street and living within walking distance of the pub, the shop or the church. This would be all for the better. It creates communities.

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** Rural schools.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** It is not saying “No” to someone in rural Ireland about what should be in rural Ireland. Those in rural Ireland will probably be the first to lead on the benefit of change because they will be the custodians of the land. They will be the best suited for electric vehicles because they will be able to charge their cars much more easily than someone in a terraced house on a street or in an apartment. The real industrial revolution is how we manage the distribution grid as well as the transmission grid. To my mind, stopping the sprawl and bringing back the community with buildings close together is absolutely what we need to do.

Agriculture accounts for 35% of our emissions and it will be one of the hardest to change because it takes time. There is every gain to be made from this. The other day I was reading Tom Arnold’s food strategy paper and I was thinking the very simple thought, and riddle me this, that since 2008 our exports of agricultural produce went from €8 billion to €14 billion in 2018, which is huge and it is projected to keep going, but our farm incomes for cattle and sheep farmers stayed exactly the same. There was not a blip upwards in the price. Dairy got a slight increase but none of that increase in value went to the farmer. We are allies and we will work together with the farming community to try to change this in every way we can, starting by paying for the protection and restoration of nature. Farmers themselves have their minds and hearts absolutely focused. They have the highest regard for their animals, their land, their farms and their parishes. If we can get the right incentives and mechanisms to pay them for storing carbon, restoring biodiversity and improving water quality-----

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** You are not doing it. It is not in the Bill.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** No, the Bill does not go into these details. What the Bill says is we will all sit down and work out a mechanism to deliver it. The Oireachtas will be critically involved. The mechanism in the Bill is-----

**Deputy Michael Collins:** Is that the plan?

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** -----that we come back at each stage. When the five-year budgets are put in place and when we are doing the sectoral plan and action plan, we will check to see whether there is another way. We do have to do it. The reason it makes sense for us to do this is not just because we are compelled to do so because every country is doing it under the UN Paris Agreement. In agriculture more than anything else, if we do what we can do, we will have a form of agriculture that is the best for animal welfare, the best for restoring the 500 pristine river systems, of which we have lost all but 20, and the best for restoring bird life, insect life and microbial life in the soil that is not just good for the environment but good for the future of the farm and the fertility of the soil.

We will go out and trade and be successful as a country by being Origin Green, but we have to be radically Origin Green. We cannot go out just with the wrapping. It has to be the full thing and the full real deal. I am absolutely convinced we can do this and we will have a stronger country that is ready for the climate change that is coming. Again, it has been a cold, dry April. Many farmers are hoping we will not have what we had in 2018 when there was no grass growth and we had to import fodder. Switching to mixed swards, putting in clover, all sorts of clever agroforestry and other systems and revenue streams will be good climate adaptation as well as mitigation, which is what we need to do.

We need data centres. We have a country with real skills in digital services, financial services and modern technology. Central to these are data centres. We cannot turn around and say we want all the jobs in these high-tech industries but we do not want the data centres. We will have data centres. They will be powered 100% renewable. They cannot be powered by fossil fuels. They have to contribute to the balancing solution. They have to provide heat, so it is not just about insulation in our houses but using waste heat in a really clever way. This is a secure future for our country.

It has to be a just transition. To all who ask why there is not more detail in the Bill, it is because we would have to write a 10,000 word manual about how this has to support rural Ireland in a just transition. It has to provide unionised, well-paid jobs for our young people. This is the best way to eradicate fuel poverty. There is no better way than reducing the need to spend money burning fossil fuels. This is the secret to addressing fuel poverty in a just transition.

It has to have a role for the public. We are on a tight timeline. We want to include this year in the first of the five-year plans. This means we are really tight. The Oireachtas joint committee has used the time well for its work but we need to get our five-year budgets in place now and we need to put our action plan in place. We need to do this because we have to go to Glasgow in November with our heads held high. The country has been a laggard. Like the prodigal son who went off on the tear for the while, we have come back to look after our home. We must have that all in place by November when the Glasgow conference takes place. It is not only Glasgow. We will go on to the one after that and the one after that. This will take decades.

This morning I read Wendell Berry, the philosopher, in relation to forestry. It is one example of the changes. Mr. Berry wrote something in *Crann* magazine in 1997. One can apply this to every different section. Mr. Berry talked about a good forest economy, like any other good land-based economy-----

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** One cannot cut the trees. One cannot get the licences.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** One can. One can do it in a slow way so that over time, one gets a steady stream of products and really high value. One converts that into really high-value material that one puts into one's building stock so that one will not be stuck with what one will see now, that is, the massive price inflation of building materials, because it will come from our resources. It would be a strong, local economy.

Mr. Berry said that what we would aim for would be a strong local human community, a local natural community or ecosystem, as conservingly and as healthfully as possible. He said that, "A good forest economy would therefore be a local economy, and the forest economy of a state or region would therefore be a decentralized [strong] economy." Mr. Berry went on to talk about how central it is to education and to providing education so that our children start to

understand our local ecology, local history and local land and from that we will be strong as a people.

Question put.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Alan Farrell):** The vote will be deferred until our next voting block.

### **Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters**

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Alan Farrell):** 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 Marian Harkin and Michael Fitzmaurice - compensation and remediation for farmers and landowners following the Shass Mountain landslide, County Leitrim; (2) Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan - an update on plans for St. Gabriel's School in Bishopstown; (3) Deputy Jennifer Whitmore - funding for Arklow as Wicklow's first decarbonisation zone; (4) Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh - the Government decision on Tuesday, 27 April, to wind-up the Digital Hub Development Agency in the Liberties; (5) Deputy Neasa Hourigan - steps to curb the amount of planning allocated to build-to-rent developments; (6) Deputy Michael Creed - site acquisitions for primary and secondary schools in Ballincollig, Cork; (7) Deputy Pauline Tully - updating SI 225 of 1993 boarding out regulations in relation to older people; (8) Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor - when the review of income thresholds to qualify for a place on a local authority housing list will be completed; (9) Deputy James O'Connor - the need for a return to North American international travel and for a roadmap for international travel; (10) Deputy Ciarán Cannon - a dedicated portal for submission of video evidence of close passing and dangerous manoeuvres by motorists; (11) Deputy Chris Andrews - plans for the regeneration of social housing flat complexes in inner city Dublin; (12) Deputy Paul McAuliffe - the rise in anti-social behaviour in Dublin; (13) Deputy Dessie Ellis - the disparity in class size-to-teacher ratios at junior and senior primary schools; (14) Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan - the requirement for Irish fishing fleets to weigh their catch on piers; (15) Deputy Réada Cronin - Saplings Special School in North Kildare and employment conditions of behavioural analysts doing critical work for children; (16) Deputies Mattie McGrath, Michael Collins, Carol Nolan, Richard O'Donoghue, Danny Healy-Rae and Michael Healy Rae - the need to resume theory tests, driving lessons and driver tests to clear the backlog; (17) Deputy Darren O'Rourke - the urgent need for a survival and recovery plan for the taxi industry; (18) Deputy Bernard J. Durkan - the increasing incidents of worldwide human rights abuses while the global community is preoccupied with Covid-19; (19) Deputy Matt Carthy - the role of investment funds in the housing market; (20) Deputies Violet-Anne Wynne and Martin Browne - the current system where recipients of Bedrocan must pay upfront before being reimbursed by the State; (21) Deputy Kathleen Funchion - stable and adequate broadband connectivity through the NBI for Carlow and Kilkenny rural businesses; (22) Deputy Kieran O'Donnell - progress on the planned new 96-bed ward block at University Hospital Limerick; (23) Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin - concern about a shortage of places and long waiting lists in second level schools in north Dublin for September; (24) Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú - real estate investment trusts and the wholesale buying of family homes, such as in Mullen Park, Maynooth; and (25) Deputy Louise O'Reilly - the risk of poor water quality in Balbriggan, County Dublin, partly caused by scavenging birds.

The matters raised by Deputies Harkin and Fitzmaurice, Tully, McAuliffe and Mattie Mc-

Grath, Michael Collins, Nolan, O'Donoghue, Danny Healy-Rae and Michael Healy Rae have been selected for discussion.

### **Private Security Services (Amendment) Bill 2021: Second Stage**

**Minister of State at the Department of Justice (Deputy James Browne):** I move: "That the Bill be now read a Second Time."

I am pleased to introduce the Private Security Services (Amendment) Bill 2021 in this House, and I look forward to our discussion of its provisions here today. The principal objective of this Bill is to include a new category of "enforcement guard" in the list of private security services licensed by the Private Security Authority under the 2004 Act.

Many of us will recall the removal of persons from a private property on North Frederick Street in September 2018 on foot of a High Court order. The persons were removed by a private security firm. The personnel who attended at the property on behalf of the private security firm are not currently subject to regulation or licensing by the Private Security Authority under the Private Security Services Act 2004, as amended. This is because the activity does not fall within the definition of what constitutes a security service under the Act.

Such occurrences by unregulated persons who are not required to wear identification, ID, or be licensed is unacceptable. It inevitably leads to flash points and many real concerns. Court orders obviously have to be upheld but they need to be upheld, if necessary, by persons who are properly regulated, who are identifiable and who have been trained.

In light of the widespread dissatisfaction with events at the property on North Frederick Street and the inherent risk associated with unregulated persons carrying out such functions, the then Minister for Justice and Equality, Deputy Charlie Flanagan, made a commitment to the Dáil in September 2018 that the law governing the area of persons involved in the execution of court orders that are not licensable by the Private Security Authority would be examined. The Minister established an interdepartmental working group chaired by the Department of Justice, comprising officials from the Courts Service, An Garda Síochána, the County Registrars Association, Revenue Commissioners, Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage and the Private Security Authority itself.

The remit of the working group was to examine the steps necessary to bring the regulation and licensing of security personnel assisting those enforcing court orders for eviction or repossession within the remit of the Private Security Authority. Bringing such personnel within the licensing remit of the Private Security Authority was the key recommendation of the interdepartmental working group report. On 22 October 2019, the Government approved the drafting of the Private Security Services (Amendment) Bill. The majority of the provisions in the Bill arise from the working group report but the opportunity was also taken to make two further amendments to the 2004 Act which were specifically requested by the Private Security Authority.

Before proceeding further, I would like to acknowledge Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire's Private Members' Bill, Regulation of Private Security Firms Bill 2019, which contained similar objectives to the Private Security Services (Amendment) Bill. On Second Stage, in November last, I shared Deputy Ó Laoghaire's concerns that the law in this area should be comprehensive

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and the Government did not oppose the Deputy's Private Members' Bill on Second Stage. I indicated that progressing this Government legislation was of high importance to the Government and I am pleased to be here today to present this Bill. There was encouraging support for this legislative change to progress when it was discussed then and I hope to see that support replicated today and in the next Stages of the Bill.

I am sure that everyone in this House will agree with me that the security industry in Ireland is one which has come far. It is an industry where society demands more than light-touch regulation and in which public confidence must be maintained. The Bill before us is proof of the Government's commitment to promote and ensure best practice in the industry.

I strongly believe that it is in the public interest that everyone involved in the private security industry operates to the highest possible standards. Bringing this new category of security service within the remit of the Private Security Authority will mean that enforcement guards will require a licence to operate in this area. It will ensure that they are subject to the training standards and licensing regime operated by the Private Security Authority.

I turn now to the main provisions of the Bill. Section 1 is a standard provision which includes the definition of the term "Principal Act". Section 2 is the key section of the Bill and inserts an additional category and a definition of "enforcement guard" in the list of security services covered by the Private Security Services Act 2004. The section also inserts definitions of a "county registrar", "court messenger", and "sheriff". The definition of an "enforcement guard" means a person other than a sheriff, county registrar or court messenger who for remuneration, as part of his or her duties, is authorised to perform any of the following functions: removing one or more persons from any premises or any other place in order to take possession of the premises or place; controlling, supervising or restricting entry by one or more persons to any premises or any other place in order to take possession of the premises or place; or seizing goods or other property in lieu of an outstanding debt, which said authorisation is conferred by or under an enactment, pursuant to a court order, in accordance with an agreement or a consent, pursuant to a contract, or otherwise in accordance with the law.

The insertion of this category and definition will ensure that an enforcement guard must hold a licence. It will be an offence to operate as an enforcement guard without a Private Security Authority licence. Such individuals will also be subject to the training standards and licensing regime operated by the authority. It will also be an offence to represent oneself as an enforcement guard by advertisement or displaying any object purporting to indicate that the holder is a licensed enforcement guard. For both offences, a person may be liable for a class A fine or imprisonment for up to 12 months or both on summary conviction. A conviction on indictment can lead to imprisonment of up to five years or imposition of a fine.

Section 3 inserts a further exemption from licensing by the Private Security Authority for those engaged in the enforced collection of Revenue liabilities by a sheriff or county registrar. Where, in exceptional circumstances, there might be a need to engage security personnel, existing protocols have been updated in Revenue to include a requirement that such personnel are licensed by the Private Security Authority. Section 4 extends the provisions of section 26 of the Private Security Services Act 2004 allowing the Private Security Authority to refuse to renew a licence, or suspend or revoke a licence of a body corporate for the actions of its members. This will include the actions of directors, shareholders, managers, secretaries or other similar officers of the body corporate or any person purporting to act in that capacity and will ensure that the PSA has the ability to appropriately regulate its licences.

Section 5 provides for the amendment of section 33(3) of the Private Security Services Act 2004 to make the register of licensed persons available for inspection free of charge by members of the public both at its principal office and online. Currently the register of licensed persons is only available for inspection at the principal office of the PSA during office hours. This amendment will make inspection of the register more convenient for members of the public.

Section 6 provides for the amendment of section 48(1) of the Private Security Services Act 2004 to include an offence of “impersonating an inspector” in the list of offences detailed in the subsection. The amendment will make it an offence for a person to falsely represent himself or herself as an inspector. A person found guilty of this offence will be liable to a fine not exceeding €3,000 or imprisonment for a term not exceeding 12 months or both. Section 7 repeals a number of provisions, including section 4(4) of the Enforcement of Court Orders Act 1926. Under this section, court offices are obliged to display court messengers’ names and places of residence. This has posed a risk to the safety of county registrars and court messengers carrying out their duties and is, therefore, being repealed. As I said earlier, section 5 provides for the amendment of section 33(3) of the Private Security Services Act 2004 to make the register of licensed persons available for inspection free of charge by members of the public both at its principal office and online. As a result of this provision, section 33(6) of the principal Act, which provides that the register be printed and published annually, and section 33(7) of the principal Act, which requires that once the register is published, a copy is to be furnished to every Garda station, are no longer required. Section 8 contains standard provisions relating to the Short Title, commencement and collective citation.

I wish to underline again the importance of this short Bill. Private security has a key contribution to make to safeguarding all of our citizens. Its role is varied and impacts on citizens in all aspects of Irish life from work to social activity. Private security personnel occupy a position of trust, engaging in regular interactions with members of the public and should operate to the highest of standards. I am pleased that with the introduction of these amendments, the PSA can continue to play an important role *vis-à-vis* the private security industry and the important contribution it makes to the protection of our community. Confidence in the industry has improved greatly due to the manner in which the PSA carries out its functions, providing clients of private security service providers with assurance that the industry is working to the highest standards possible. I wish to place on the record of the House my appreciation of the work of the authority and its staff. I also want to thank security personnel who have been working tirelessly throughout the pandemic, despite the challenges. I also wish to acknowledge those who have been unable to work throughout the pandemic. It is my hope that they will be back serving their communities in the near future. I commend the Bill to the House.

**Deputy Martin Kenny:** Sinn Féin will support this legislation, which addresses an issue that arose in many incidents across the country in recent years. The incident in North Frederick Street was the straw that broke the camel’s back for many people. We have seen the actions of unregulated private security firms whose personnel were uncontrolled and untrained, unknown and often masked. There were incidents of security personnel coming into areas, sometimes from other jurisdictions, in a Wild West-type scenario, which is something that we could not allow to stand. In that context, this legislation is very important and I agree with the Minister of State that it should progress through the Houses as speedily as possible. Adequate training and regulation of those engaged in private security activities must be put in place.

This Bill is similar to legislation introduced by Deputy Ó Laoghaire in 2019, which the Government allowed to progress to Second Stage. The Government has now replaced that leg-

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islation with its own Bill, which is often what Governments do. Deputy Ó Laoghaire, myself and others were contacted by our constituents about this issue. We recognised that this was an urgent situation that needed to be dealt with and that legislation was required. We brought that legislation forward in good faith. I hope to see support in the House for bringing this Bill forward to Committee Stage, when we can amend or tweak it and get into more detail on it.

The broad principle of what we are trying to do here is for the benefit of everyone, including those engaged in property-related private security activities. We do not want to see too much of such activity in our society. These situations should be dealt with in other ways apart from seizing property. Unfortunately, this was something that many people have had to face because of economic decline. People all over the country have had their property seized and have been in conflict with various banks and lending institutions, including the vulture funds that came in here, bought up loans and rode roughshod over them. There is a suggestion that this is something that only happened in the past and that it is not happening now but that is not the case. A number of weeks ago, I dealt with a farmer who had a piece of land that was provided as security for a loan that he secured during the boom. He was a very hard worker and he did everything he could to pay his debts. He signed over all of this farm payments, including his area aid payments, to cover his debt and the interest. However, his loan was bought by another company, Pepper, which refused to accept the arrangement put in place by the previous lender. It insisted on moving the loan to a liquidator and putting the property up for sale. Fortunately, the issue was finally resolved by a personal insolvency practitioner, PIP but it is deplorable that companies can act in this way and try to ride roughshod over people. When I met the couple, they were hugely distraught and upset. They felt a sense of shame that this had happened to them, even more so given that they were actually paying the loan. They were meeting their debt and yet they were faced with their land being sold. The Government must find a way to be tougher on such companies to make sure that they cannot do that to people. Today we are dealing with the regulation of the security firms that are carrying out court orders but there is also a need to ensure that situations do not reach the stage of courts issuing orders and that resolutions are found prior to that. That is one of the lessons that we should have learned from the incidents that took place in recent years. It must be said, however, that there are some people who just will not pay their debts and who will default on loans. Naturally enough, action must be taken against them. I am not avoiding that issue but clearly some companies, including so-called vulture funds, swoop on loan books and go for the quick buck. They are determined to sell if the value of the asset is larger than the loan outstanding, regardless of whether payments are being made and that is wrong. We need to find a way to deal with that but unfortunately we have not found one yet, despite having talked about it for more than ten years.

To go back to the legislation before us, the issues here are licensing by the PSA and ensuring that those who have a licence have the appropriate skill set and training to carry out the unfortunate work they have to carry out. The Minister of State said that corporate bodies would obtain licences and that individuals would also be licensed. Must each individual have a licence or can the corporate body hold one on his or her behalf? I ask him to clarify that. I also ask him to outline the situation with regard to the cost of the licences. What does it cost to apply for and obtain a licence? I am aware that for many security personnel, including bouncers in nightclubs, their work is part time in nature and not very highly paid. I am concerned that the licence fee would act as a penalty for individuals, particularly if the fee is large. Some of the licences that are distributed by the PSA are quite expensive, which must be addressed in the longer-term. In general, we welcome this legislation and the move by Government to deal with this situation. It is long past time that it was dealt with and that the people who carry out these

kinds of operations where they seize properties under court orders are held to account, because there is certainly a feeling among the general public that they are not held to account. That needs to be reversed as quickly as possible.

This legislation will go to Committee Stage at which point we will dissect it and look at it in detail. The general thrust of it should find favour with the vast majority of Members of these Houses. I have seen commentary online stating that Government is somehow trying to make it okay for people to have their property seized. The truth is that people's property is seized on a regular basis because of the way the law stands at the moment. What we are trying to do here is ensure that we do not have people coming from outside the jurisdiction, who are often masked and unknown and with no sense of responsibility towards the laws of this State, carrying out these kinds of actions and acting in a very aggressive way and using bully-boy tactics, as we have seen in some cases. The gardaí in these instances, because a court order is being executed, simply have to stand back and watch it. I have spoken to gardaí who told me they were quite frustrated that they were unable to intervene because a court order was waved in their faces and they were told that these people were doing their job. We need to understand that there should be at the least an element of respect for people who are in unfortunate circumstances where they are losing their property or, in some case, perhaps their home, and that is the most tragic part of all.

This legislation will hopefully deal with that aspect of it. I assure the Minister of State of our support in trying to get it through the various Stages in the Houses over the coming weeks and months.

**Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire:** Many of us would have seen the scenes at the evictions on North Frederick Street, Dublin, in particular, but also in Strokestown, County Roscommon. In many instances, the personnel involved did not conduct themselves in anything like an acceptable way. The behaviour was heavy handed in some instances. It was violent and, in many ways, it was, quite frankly, scandalous. At the time, there was a great deal of disquiet, in particular that the gardaí seemed to have very little ability to intervene or that there was almost a *carte blanche* afforded to the private security personnel involved.

Following these evictions, in particular those on North Frederick Street, I contacted the Private Security Authority to make a complaint because I was upset and angered. I was horrified to learn that personnel involved in the enforcement of evictions did not fall under the remit of the Private Security Authority. The enforcers at North Frederick Street and Strokestown, who hid their faces behind masks and acted in the most aggressive manner, were not accountable to anyone or to any body. There is no licensing, no training, no means of making a complaint or no redress for those who may have been wronged by them. These are just the instances that were recorded or came to media attention. Doubtless, this is an issue which has arisen in dozens of cases, or perhaps more, throughout the State. In every county in Ireland, banks, financial institutions and powerful organisations hire anyone they want to enforce evictions and court orders and who can do anything they want with no accountability or recourse for complaints.

I brought the legislative loophole to the attention of the then Minister for Justice in 2018 and he pledged to address this. While there was talk of an interdepartmental group, there was not much sign of progress, quite frankly. It was on this basis that Deputy Kenny and I brought forward a Bill in 2019, which was debated last year. I welcome the fact the Minister of State, Deputy Browne, and the Minister, Deputy McEntee, did not oppose that legislation. The Bill was supported across the Dáil when it was debated in November. It is long past time that we

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dealt with this issue, due to the severity of the situation and the need to step up and protect those facing evictions.

It is incredible when one thinks that this is the most emotive and the most potentially fractious and violent area that could involve private security and yet this light touch-regulation exists. People who provide security in bars, restaurants and shops are subject to much more oversight and regulation. It is right that they are subject to oversight and regulation, but they are subject to far more oversight and regulation than those involved in enforcing evictions and other forms of court orders. At this point in time the person working at the door of Penneys is subject to more regulation than the person who has the authority to force a family out of its home, and that is completely wrong.

The least people expect is that the Government would demand the same level of accountability and transparency from security personnel enforcing eviction orders as we expect from those who work security at the door of a pub or in a shop.

In many of the violent evictions that have been widely publicised, the personnel involved displayed no visible identification. They wore masks and there was no way to determine who they represented or what right they had to enforce an order or the conditions of same. It is totally unacceptable that masked men would be given free reign for so long to turf people out of their homes without even the basic constraints of transparency. The least we should expect is that those who seek to act violently and those who have such power are subject to legislative standards, oversight and licensing, and subject to complaint and investigation mechanisms.

I welcome that the Government has acted and brought forward this Bill, but we cannot simply deal with the issue of regulation. Our focus must not only be on this area but on stopping wrongful evictions. The events on North Frederick Street and Strokestown struck a cord with people the length and breadth of Ireland - the callous behaviour was evident. It hit a raw nerve and it was a reminder of history and heritage and the fact that hundreds and thousands of evictions took place right across this island, in every parish, over the centuries. There is a concern that wrongful and forceful evictions may increase if this housing crisis escalates.

Evictions hit a raw nerve for people in this country. The events of the Famine and the Land War are seared into our collective memory. It is a very emotive image, to think of families being forced out of their home unjustly, because they cannot afford their rent or mortgage payments. The reality of it is that evictions could happen because there are many people across the State, particularly during the Covid crisis, who are out of work and at the pin of their collar as bills and debts mount up.

The absolute worst thing the Government could have done was to lift the ban on evictions, which was keeping families in their homes. Removing the ban would leave tenants vulnerable once again. I urge the Government to reconsider this and to extend the ban until at least the end of 2021.

Regulation may stop people with no vetting and background checks participating in the enforcement of court orders, including evictions, and that is a good thing. However, it will not prevent evictions in the first place or wrongful evictions. The Government has so far refused to bring forward workable solutions to the housing crisis and is continually, including this week, voting against measures brought forward by the Opposition. Indeed, the Government has been responsible for allowing a loophole, or legislative situation, that allows investment trusts to

pounce and grab dozens of homes in housing estates, which occurred in Maynooth recently and in other places, and denying people the chance of owning their own home. There is a whole generation that wonders whether it will ever have the possibility of having a permanent home, whether that is due to the local authority housing waiting lists or because the affordable housing scheme the Government has spoken about is not practical for a start and the costs being talked about are beyond the reach of many.

Until we deal with all those situations, there will still be pressure on people with mortgages that are overextended and who are under very severe pressure. The Government must implement the Focus Ireland amendment to prevent evictions into homelessness. We need radical change in tenancy law to ensure tenants can have contracts of indefinite duration. If the Government is serious about protecting tenants, then this Bill must be just the first step in legislative changes to protect tenants from unfair evictions in the first place.

Having said all of that, I welcome that the Government supported our Bill in the past and we will, accordingly, support its Bill, which achieves the same objectives. I hope it can pass into law at an early juncture.

**Deputy Brendan Howlin:** I am happy to support the Bill. I welcome it, notwithstanding it is a slightly belated response to a situation which caused real disquiet in communities across the country.

The specifics of what happened in North Frederick Street in 2018, which were replicated in other places across the country, caused many of our constituents to reach out to us with a real sense of concern. One of the issues in the North Frederick Street incident was that members of An Garda Síochána were present but almost as bystanders, doing nothing, as individuals carried out a court order in what most people considered a very heavy-handed way. Most people regarded what happened as unacceptable and there was a rightful clamour for legislative change, after years of debate on the issue.

I recall the debate on the regulation of the private security industry very well. There was much talk about the fact that it was unregulated. While there were very professional, well-trained and disciplined individuals involved in providing private security, unfortunately there was an element of thuggery involved that needed to be regulated. We thought in 2004 that the legislation was comprehensive and did that job. The push for a proper response to that legislation has taken some time. The Bill introduced here last November by Deputy Ó  
*4 o'clock* Laoghaire was a perfectly acceptable and appropriate response, which put a solution in place and addressed the lacunae in the law. I said as much in the House during the debate on Second Stage. That Bill could easily have formed the basis for any additional amendments the Government wanted to make to the 2004 Act.

I want to make a general point before going into the detail of this Bill. During the previous Dáil, mainly because of the pressure of numbers, we changed the way the Dáil itself functions. We set up supports for Opposition Oireachtas Members to draft legislation to a high standard and the Houses of the Oireachtas also negotiated with the Government a memorandum of understanding on the acceptance and vetting of Private Members' Bills. What used to be the almost exclusive prerogative of the Government to have legislation enacted was fundamentally changed. There has been some significant progress in that regard and I am very pleased that my own Harassment, Harmful Communications and Related Offences Bill 2017 became law last year, with the co-operation of the Minister for Justice and the Minister of State, Deputy

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James Browne, who is present. That should be the norm as opposed to the exception. It struck me as odd that the framework proposed by Deputy Ó Laoghaire was not simply travelled with and amended, as appropriate, in committee. These provisions could have become law much quicker. All of us should be able to be initiators of legislation, rather than merely responders to proposals for legislation coming from Government, as was the case for so many years.

The list of covered security services set out in the 2004 Act were door supervisor, supplier or installer of security equipment, private investigator, security consultant, security guard, provider of protected forms of transport, locksmith and supplier or installer of safes. One would expect that to be a comprehensive list of all those involved in the private security business but it then transpired that private contractors involved in enforcing court orders were not covered by the Act. Hence the need to include that category of worker in the legislation before us. As the Minister of State indicated, a working group was established and, having consulted with the industry and those directly involved, it came up with some additional amendments with which I want to deal, as well as those including private contractors involved in the enforcement of court orders. There is, however, an exception to that in sections 2 and 3 of the Bill. Section 2 proposes the insertion of an additional category and a definition-----

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Alan Farrell):** I regret that I have to interrupt the Deputy as we must adjourn the debate.

Debate adjourned.

*Sitting suspended at 4.05 p.m. and resumed at 4.25 p.m.*

### **Covid-19 Vaccination Programme: Statements**

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I thank the Leas-Cheann Comhairle for the opportunity to update the House on the Government's response to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic and the roll-out of the national vaccine programme.

Considerable progress has been made in reducing infection levels since the start of the year. The main reason for this is widespread adherence to the public health measures. I and my colleagues are very aware of the enormous imposition these measures have had on people, on mental health, on isolation, on loneliness, on wellness, on livelihoods, and on so much more. Despite this, and in spite of how difficult it has been for everybody, Ireland has achieved and sustained one of the lowest rates of infections in Europe, and that is something for which everyone in this House is immensely proud of our nation for having achieved. I sincerely thank everyone around the country for their collective efforts and support of the public health measures over the past months. We are now beginning to see the benefits of this collective national effort to limit the spread of the virus and its impact on our communities. Last week, the Government agreed to move ahead with the next stage of our plan, Recovery and Resilience: The Path Ahead. The only reason we could do this was because of the national effort put in to suppress the virus, protect against the importation of variants and roll out the vaccines.

Ireland is one of only a handful of countries in Europe that has fully reopened schools.

Over the past few weeks, our young people have been back playing sports. From Monday next, personal services, museums, galleries and libraries will reopen. More people can meet up outdoors, and this will include in gardens, which has been warmly welcomed. Our churches are recommencing in-person religious services and the numbers attending weddings and funerals will be increasing. Intercountry travel will resume, and this means families all over Ireland will be able to meet up with their loved ones and friends for the first time in many months. From 17 May, all remaining retail will open.

The effect of easing the restrictions on ongoing public health measures is, of course, being watched closely so we understand the impact of these changes in respect of the spread of Covid-19. If the situation remains stable, the Government intends proceeding with the next phase of easing restrictions in early June. While we are all keen to hear good news, we must be balanced, of course, in our assessment. The reality is that there is much that remains uncertain. It is important we convey to people just how important it is that we all stick with the existing measures while we are opening. As of 4 May, the 14-day incidence rate per 100,000 of the population was 134. That is one of the lowest rates in the EU, but it is still significantly higher here now than it was just two weeks ago. That figure has been rising.

Despite the progress, we know this is a virus, and particularly the B.1.1.7 variant, which accounts for the majority of cases here, that quickly gains a foothold when given the slightest opportunity. The Seychelles, which is the most vaccinated nation in the world, is experiencing a big surge in Covid cases. It is not alone. By the end of March 2021, more than one in three Chileans had reportedly received a full course of vaccination, yet Covid cases are surging in Chile and authorities have had to look at lockdown measures again. Several reasons have been put forward for this unexpected jump, including the spread of more virulent strains from neighbouring Brazil and reduced adherence to social distancing during the vaccination programme, which some are suggesting, due to a false sense of security before a sufficient number of people were vaccinated.

We need to remain vigilant and continue to reduce the transmission of this virus in our communities. In particular, we need to stick to the new guidance on numbers of households and individuals meeting up outdoors and minimise the risks of transmission during close contact. As we all know, it is something which, as a nation, we know how to do and are good at doing, which is how we have had such a big reduction in case numbers since January.

The Government's approach to tackling Covid-19 is comprehensive and includes measures to deal with the risk posed to our population by the variants of concern. We have the strongest measures in place anywhere in Europe, by a long way, in terms of minimising the importation of the variants of concern. The measures we have in place are working, and working well.

Mandatory hotel quarantine is one part of this, and plays an important role in combatting Covid and, in particular, variants of concern. As of 3 May 2021, 2,511 people have entered mandatory hotel quarantine, with 1,567 people having completed their stay. Some 75 cases have been detected among those residents, with nine of these cases being variants of concern. More may be discovered as we do the genome sequencing on the latest cases. Mandatory hotel quarantine is mitigating the risk of the spread of Covid-19 and, more importantly, the variants of Covid-19. It is, for now, a necessary component of our public health response to protect the public, our health system and our vaccination programme. One of the biggest benefits of the hotel quarantining system is not even in the figures I have read out. The biggest benefit is the deterrent effect it has on reducing the number of inbound travellers from the countries that our

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public health experts have identified as those of most concern to us because of the presence of the variants of concern.

The roll-out of the national vaccination programme continues apace and I welcome the opportunity to provide colleagues with an update. As of 4 May 2021, a total of 1,655,866 vaccine doses-----

*(Interruptions).*

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Is a copy of the Minister's speech available?

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** -----were administered.

**Deputy Alan Kelly:** It has happened again

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** I will ask. There have been copies every time we have come in here.

**Deputy Alan Kelly:** This is the third time I have come to the House and there is no copy of the Minister's speech.

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** The Deputy keeps asking and I keep telling him the copies are available outside. I will make sure he gets a copy.

*(Interruptions).*

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Deputy, please.

**Deputy Alan Kelly:** They were not available outside.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Deputy, please. We will not point fingers.

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** A Leas-Cheann Comhairle, can I continue with my speech?

**Deputy Alan Kelly:** The copies are not there.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Deputy, please.

**Deputy Alan Kelly:** They are not there. The Minister should not tell me that something is there when it is not. I have checked.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Can we stop the clock for a moment? It is important for Deputies to have a copy of the speech. I know the Minister has given such copies to Deputies on previous occasions. There is a delay for some reason; I am not sure what it is. We will get copies of the speech. I ask the Minister to continue.

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** Thank you, a Leas-Cheann Comhairle. I want to say to the Deputy that previously copies of my speech were available. On this occasion, I have them. I was running late, but as soon as I finish I will furnish the Deputy with a copy, if that is okay.

I was talking about the vaccination programme. A total of 1,655,866-----

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Sorry, Minister. Did not one Deputy get a copy? Will there be copies available soon for everybody in the audience, or in the room?

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** Yes. I have them all here, a Leas-Cheann Comhairle.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Lovely. Go raibh míle maith agat.

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** Thank you, a Leas-Cheann Comhairle.

I was talking about the vaccination programme. A total of 1,655,866 vaccine doses were administered as of 4 May 2021. Some 1,201,373 people have received their first vaccine dose and 454,493 people are fully vaccinated. As of this morning, 430,758 people have registered to be vaccinated on the public online registration system. This means that 77% of those aged between 60 and 69 have made use of it. It is important to note that the percentage of 65 to 69-year-olds registering is a lot higher than 77%. The latest information I have is that the percentage is in the high 80s. The HSE is running the analysis on that. What this suggests, importantly, is that the total registration rates will continue to increase in the coming days and weeks. The total of those aged 57 to 59 who have registered is now 104,000. The majority of these applications have been made through the public portal, while HSELive registrations are currently running at about 13% of overall registrations. We are now inviting people in their mid to late 50s to register to be vaccinated. From this coming Sunday, the registration system will be opened for the 50 to 54-year-old cohort.

As vaccine supplies increase, a lot of work continues around the country to scale up the vaccination programme. The estimated vaccinator workforce needed in the vaccination centres is 350 for April and 450 for May. Through hospital groups and community health organisations, 860 people are trained and available as vaccinators. Currently, 30 of the 38 vaccination centres are in operation, with the remainder planned to come into operation this month. This week a further 220,000 to 240,000 vaccine doses are scheduled to be administered with a view to building on the progress already made in relation to the target groups.

Our progress in relation to the vaccination programme compares well with those of the 30 EU-EEA countries referenced in the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control's Covid-19 vaccine tracker. Our strategy is to distribute all vaccines that we receive as quickly as is operationally possible, and we are doing this.

Our priority now is maintaining control over the disease and preventing a further wave of infection until vaccination can offer widespread population-level protection. Significant progress has been made in managing the spread of the disease and this, coupled with the impact of the vaccination programme, is what is making it possible to open up our society and community again. It is critical that our approach to reopening continues to be cautious and gradual to enable a safe and sustainable reopening and to ensure we protect the gains of recent months and vital public services.

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan):** I would like to thank Leas-Cheann Comhairle for the opportunity to update the House on the Government's response to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. The focus of my statement is on socially excluded groups and, specifically, how the Government and the HSE have sought to protect them from the threat posed by Covid-19 and our plans for administering the Covid-19 vaccine to these groups.

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Not everyone faces the same risk from Covid-19. From the outset of the pandemic, NPHE and the Department of Health identified socially excluded groups living in congregated settings as having a heightened risk due to underlying health and social factors. A range of protective and mitigating public health measures are in place to minimise the impact of Covid-19 on these groups.

I want to acknowledge the collective efforts of public health officials, the HSE social inclusion services, Departments and agencies, the many voluntary service providers and representative groups, in minimising the impact of Covid-19 on socially excluded groups.

It is concerning, however, that the incidence of Covid-19 remains high among the Traveller community. Outbreaks in this community account for 62% of all outbreaks and 80% of all associated cases. The high rate of Covid-19 among the Traveller community highlights the poor conditions in which Travellers live, the social determinants of health, and the behavioural issues associated with family events.

The long-term strategy for protecting socially excluded groups is through vaccination and better access to health services. At the end of March, the Government approved an update to the Covid-19 vaccination allocation strategy, informed by advice from NIAC. This strategy sets out the population prioritisation to best achieve the vaccination programme's objectives of preventing serious illness and death. The updated strategy prioritises members of the Traveller and Roma communities and people who are homeless as specific groups at significantly increased risk of hospitalisation or death compared with the general population. These groups will be vaccinated in parallel with the age-based approach for the general population. The strategy also recommends that a single-dose vaccine, namely, Janssen, may be preferable for these groups, who may find it difficult to return for a second vaccine dose.

The HSE has established a national operational working group to develop and implement a vaccination pathway for the prioritised groups using bespoke and targeted vaccination clinics. This pathway will ensure accessibility, suitability, optimal engagement and participation for the administration of Covid-19 vaccines to the target population. I am happy to inform the House that the first phase of the vaccination programme for prioritised groups commenced yesterday for medically vulnerable people living in homeless services in Dublin. This group includes persons with specific underlying health conditions that mean they would be at significant risk of severe disease or death should they be infected with Covid-19. Over the next two weeks, 700 medically vulnerable people in homeless services will receive the single-shot Janssen vaccine, with approximately 350 due to receive the vaccine this week alone.

Earlier this morning, I had the opportunity to visit the temporary vaccination clinic set up by the HSE in Dublin city centre to deliver the programme, where I met both the staff and clients attending the centre. This dedicated clinic is a landmark event in the Covid-19 vaccination programme. The vaccination of medically vulnerable people in homeless services demonstrates the value the Government places on equality and inclusion in the public health service. I pay tribute to the front-line healthcare workers who have protected medically vulnerable people in homeless services during the Covid-19 crisis. Through the Dublin Covid-19 homeless response team, the HSE, the Dublin Region Homeless Executive, DRHE, and voluntary service providers have greatly minimised the potentially devastating impact of Covid-19 on this group. They are now seeing the reward for their efforts with the vaccination of their clients. I thank the staff administering the vaccine and the Salvation Army for hosting the clinic. I congratulate the individuals attending the clinic, who have had to endure personal sacrifices to remain safe dur-

ing the Covid-19 pandemic. Today, they are being liberated to return to social activities. Their return to society will be a positive one due to the health supports they have received during the Covid-19 crisis.

A side benefit of the pandemic is that we found new ways to provide health services for people who are homeless. We are reinforcing those new ways through an additional investment of €11 million in health services for people who are homeless during the Covid-19 pandemic under the HSE's national service plan for 2021. The vaccination programme for people who are medically vulnerable in homeless services is being delivered in bespoke ways. It is using the one-shot Janssen vaccine, which is new to Ireland, and the HSE is providing transport to and from the vaccination clinic. There is an active communications plan to encourage and support people to take the vaccine.

The roll-out of the vaccination programme to all the prioritised groups will ultimately benefit more than 40,000 individuals. Its delivery takes into account the unique circumstances affecting these groups, including the difficulties they may have in accessing health services and their low levels of health literacy. Other at-risk groups, such as residents in direct provision and people attending drug treatment services, will benefit from this targeted approach in due course. Listening to, and engaging with, vulnerable groups is critical to building confidence in the Covid-19 vaccination programme. Continuing the collaborative approach between statutory and voluntary service providers is essential. To support this, the HSE has convened a series of webinars for service providers.

While the lifting of restrictions is to be welcomed, the reopening of society should not be taken as a signal the pandemic is over. We must all play our part in continuing to protect vulnerable groups, including those in congregated settings. The Covid-19 vaccination programme is well advanced, with more than 30% of the eligible population having received at least one dose. It is a key enabler of the reopening of society and the economy and protecting socially excluded groups at increased risk from Covid-19. I look forward to hearing the contributions of Deputies on these matters.

**Deputy David Cullinane:** I am sharing time with a number of colleagues. Is the Government going to support the TRIPS Agreement waiver appeal that has been submitted by India and South Africa to the World Trade Organization? As the Minister knows, this would involve a temporary waiving of certain intellectual property rights. If it is implemented, it will bolster supply of Covid vaccines, which we all want to see, and send a huge message of solidarity to developing countries, especially those, like India, that are really struggling with Covid infections and need to see a real urgency in regard to the vaccine roll-out. A waiver would mean a much greater supply of vaccines in this State and right around the world.

The appeal is supported by Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and Oxfam. It is gaining widespread popular support because there is a logic to it. It is part of the European citizens' initiatives, No Profit on Pandemic and Right to Cure, that were commenced by a whole range of political parties and organisations in the European Union. I commend the former Sinn Féin Deputy, Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin, who has played a major role in representing the State in that campaign at European level. The Biden Administration in the United States is now supporting the waiver. What is the official position of the Government in this regard and does it intend to take a strong position in terms of the EU's approach?

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** I thank the Deputy for his question. I want to say at the outset

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that the objective, which we all share, is global distribution of the vaccine. That is important for two reasons, as we have discussed here previously. One is that it is ethical and absolutely the right thing to do and, second, it is in our interests. There is no point in Ireland or, indeed, the western world being vaccinated if much of the rest of the world takes several years. The only question is what is the best way to do it. Ireland is continuing our conversations on this as part of the EU. There are a few points worth making. The EU's current position is that the WTO's TRIPS Agreement already has significant flexibility in it. It allows compulsory licensing, which, as the Deputy will be aware, is when a government permits someone else to produce a patented product or process without the consent of the patent owner. The EU's position is that this is catered for within the TRIPS Agreement.

There is an additional point to make, which is the question of what is stopping a very significant increase in manufacturing. Manufacturing capacity, access to raw materials and distribution networks, particularly around some of the vaccines that have to be stored at very low temperatures, are big issues. There are a lot of different options available, including possibly licensing agreements. We are continuing our discussions on this with the EU.

**Deputy David Cullinane:** I appreciate the response the Minister has given but my time is very limited. The question I asked is whether we are going to support, at a European level, what the Biden Administration is now supporting, which is a waiver under the TRIPS Agreement. When the matter comes up with the World Trade Organization, the European bloc will obviously have its position. Is the Irish Government going to be a leader in this regard? Will it be a voice within the European Union to ensure this is something the Union will support?

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** We will most definitely continue to be a voice within the European Union stating that there must be global justice and an acceleration of vaccine production and distribution right across the world. The only question for us is what is the right way to do that. There are differing views as to whether a simple waiver achieves those aims. It does not identify many of the other bottlenecks. I am sure the Deputy knows that the EU has set up a task force to look specifically at what the bottlenecks are so we can accelerate global production and distribution.

**Deputy David Cullinane:** I must say I am not comforted by that response. It was a heavily caveated response, which I was not expecting, but that is a matter for the Minister and the Government. It would be much better if we had a strong position on this but it is a matter for the Government.

I will move to the vaccine roll-out and a question about registration. I am getting a lot of calls from people who are aged between 65 and 69, who have registered online and are yet to receive a call for vaccination. I presume they will get a call. What is the average time period between a person registering and getting a call? If a couple of weeks goes by, people are obviously concerned that they have missed something. Can the Minister give us an indication as to the length of the time lag between a person registering and when he or she can expect a call?

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** I will get the Deputy a detailed breakdown. My understanding is that it might be slightly different in the 65 to 69 age category than it is for those in their 50s. There are also some regional differences. I will ask the Department to supply the Deputy with a detailed response.

**Deputy David Cullinane:** It is important. I have checked with some of my colleagues,

including those in government, who have been receiving similar queries. We want to be able to give the people the assurance that they are registered and will get a call. It would be good if we had some sense of the timeframe involved.

I also wish to put to the Minister the issue of pregnant women and permission for their partners to accompany them for scans. I have raised the matter with the Minister previously. In fact, I raised it many months ago with the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, and we had a constructive engagement in the Dáil Chamber. That shows how long it is since I first raised the issue. What I was looking for then and am looking for now is a uniform approach across all maternity hospitals. I understand the position is that in the majority of hospitals, the partner of the pregnant woman is allowed to accompany her for the 20-week scan and the birth. Given that we are easing restrictions, we could and should look at that area and consider extending that permission to other scans, especially during a complex pregnancy. We should be more flexible in better supporting the expectant mother and her partner. Will the Minister outline his position on the matter? What movement might we see in that area in due course?

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** This is one of the good news stories of the vaccine programme and the considerable reduction in cases of Covid-19 in healthcare settings, including maternity hospitals. The maternity hospitals are making local calls themselves. As the Deputy is aware, there are different rates of disease around the country and hospitals are faced with different local epidemiological situations. I will, of course, support the local infection prevention and control decisions that are made by the hospitals but I want to see, as we all do, as open access as possible but, critically, within the confines of what the local hospitals believe is safe.

The Deputy asked me about the Government's position on the waiver and I have given him that. My position, for what it may be worth, is that the waiver is a good idea and I would like to see it. The Deputy asked me specifically about the Government's position. The waiver is not a panacea or silver bullet but we must find a way to get vaccines around the world as quickly as possible. My personal view is that I would like to see the waiver supported.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** There was a recent scare of Covid-positive cases in Dealgan House Nursing Home. All necessary protocols kicked in and the worries were allayed. I commend everyone involved. However, I want to again bring up the issue of Dealgan nursing home and the tragic outbreak last year that resulted in the loss of the lives of 22 residents. The Minister and the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, met some of the affected families. The Minister has accepted that the families require a mechanism by which they can be delivered answers. The families are, obviously, looking for a public inquiry and I believe that is the best method for learnings and for providing answers. The nursing home, HIQA and the HSE all have questions to answer and a right to their narrative. Will the Minister give me an update? A number of these families have corresponded with him. There is also an issue about information they require and have looked for from the HSE. I will deal with that later.

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** I am very aware that listening to families can bring great learnings to many situations. While we are still dealing with daily case numbers, we are continuing to look at options that may be available to the State whereby it can listen to the voices of those who have lost a loved one.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** I accept that. I have a couple of questions for the Minister and the Minister of State about information that is required from the HSE. I accept that, in the near future, they will have to go back to the families on the issue of the mechanism that will provide

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the affected families with the answers that are required.

**Deputy Matt Carthy:** I am still getting calls, as I am sure other Deputies are, from constituents who are housebound and awaiting vaccination. These are people within older age categories. The questions they ask relate to who contacts them in the first place, when they will be contacted and the process that will be involved. I understand the ambulance service provides the vaccinations.

I would like if the Minister could give us a sense as to where testing and tracing will go over the next number of weeks and months. We are all agreed that the one thing we do not want to see is a repeat of what happened during previous periods of restriction easing. To ensure that, one of the key weapons we have is contact tracing. Is the Minister satisfied that enough staff are employed to deal with contact tracing? What levels does he see for the coming weeks and months? Does he anticipate an increase? Is anybody using the Covid tracker application anymore? Does it have a role to play? I do not see it being promoted through the HSE to the same level it once was.

Is the Minister satisfied about the issue around passengers arriving into this State from destinations that do not fall under the mandatory quarantine regime? I understand that out of nearly 250 flights, there was at least one case. There has been a consistent issue around the contact tracing of other passengers on those flights. Is the Minister satisfied with the system in place? Will the Minister also outline, if he has time, the situation as it now pertains to testing and tracing within the meat industry? Is he satisfied it is now at a level that can provide assurances?

Deputy Cullinane made a point about the patent waivers and the need for an international eye to all of this. There is a European citizens' initiative campaign under way across the EU. I commend my predecessor, former Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin, and Sinn Féin MEP Chris MacManus on the role they have played in that regard. It would be very useful if the Irish Government endorsed that course of action at a European Commission level.

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** Do I have the Deputy's remaining time to respond?

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Yes.

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** I will ask the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, to answer the question about people who are housebound.

I fully agree with the Deputy on testing and tracing. It has been, and remains, an essential part of our response to Covid and it has increased in the past number of days and weeks. In the seven days to 3 May, 124,000 tests were done. Some 4.5 million tests have been completed to date. The positivity rate at the moment is 2.7%. Some 94% of referrals are getting a test appointment in less than 24 hours, which is positive. Testing has restarted in schools, special education facilities and childcare settings. There are now 788 swabbers and 960 contact tracers hired and retained. The Deputy will be aware that serial testing is ongoing in nursing homes, mental health facilities, food production facilities and now in mandatory quarantine sites.

The Deputy will also be aware that we have launched the walk-in PCR testing centres, which have had a really strong response. No appointment is necessary. They are free and very fast, and people get their results back very quickly. Essentially, they are for people who are asymptomatic. If a person is symptomatic, he or she is still meant to go to via his or her GP.

Areas included are Letterkenny, Castlerea, Nenagh, Dunmanway, Tralee, Youghal, Waterford, Newbridge, Edenderry, Mullingar, Tullamore, Blanchardstown, Ballymun, Galway Airport and Castlebar. Three new centres opened this week in Milford, County Donegal, Cavan and Ballina. We announced another two centres for Donegal earlier. The locations are changing but it has been going down very well.

Genome sequencing is playing a bigger part. It was initially used to try to track down source identification for major outbreaks. We are using it now, obviously, for variants of concern. We were doing approximately 1% of all positive tests. We are now doing 20% of all positive tests, including the cases coming into the country. It has, therefore, been really useful. As the Deputy will be aware, we have also had a big push on rapid testing. On 1 April, a report was launched, and I am now working with colleagues across Government to roll out projects in the different sectors. It has, therefore, played a big part. We are doing new things such as rapid testing, much more genome sequencing and the walk-in centres, and it will continue to play an important role.

*5 o'clock*

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Unfortunately, the Minister has left 20 seconds for the Minister of State.

**Deputy Mary Butler:** I am sure I will be answering that question later. As we all know, the roll-out to the housebound is extremely important. More than 3,500 referrals have been received from GPs for housebound patients to date. The GP determines and refers the person on to the National Ambulance Service.

As of 2 May, a total of 2,045 dose 1 and 739 dose 2 vaccinations have been administered, so that is just under 2,800 vaccinations. Currently, fewer than 500 people are waiting for their first dose and they will be done by the end of next week.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** We must leave time for the Minister. Deputies must stay within the time as I am under time constraints.

**Deputy Alan Kelly:** I have two blocks of two questions; I only have four questions. I want to ask something I had not intended but it is based on the Minister's response to a previous questioner. On the maternity services, there seems to be a direct contradiction between what the Minister said and what Mr. Paul Reid said an hour and a half ago. Mr. Reid said: "We believe the conditions are right that restrictions should be lifted" [in maternity units nationwide]. That seems pretty black and white.

I raised the issue earlier of Gary Toohey and his partner, Joyce Tooher, who are neighbours of mine. At this moment, he is actually outside the maternity hospital in Limerick. I know the maternity hospital. I have been there many times myself, luckily enough. Mr. Toohey is on social media at the moment thinking what Paul Reid said means the restrictions have been lifted. This is heartbreaking. It is so emotional. I know these two young people and their families. Let us forget about the politics and all the rubbish we do here. We have to give these couples some consistency and compassion, please.

Last week, Dr. Colm Henry said something and it was not followed through. I thought the Taoiseach said something and it was not followed through. Paul Reid has said it now. I do not want to go back to these couples and say again that it is not going to happen. Joyce is literally in labour at the moment and there are hundreds of other people like her this week. Whatever we do collectively, can we please show some compassion and sort this out?

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I have two sets of questions. I am not trying to catch the Minister out with them. When will he make a decision on the HSE's recent application for whatever it is, the 27th or 28th version, on the Johnson & Johnson vaccine for under-50s? I have no problem with the fact that happens. I genuinely have no problem because it is doing its best. I believe the HSE is doing a good job. When will the Minister going actually give a decision as regards the use of the Johnson & Johnson vaccine for under-50s, however? I believe it is a critical decision. I know the HSE is waiting on this. The domino effect has an impact all the way down the line so we need a quick decision. When will the Minister do that?

Second, I received the Minister's figure of 77% regarding the 60 to 69-year-olds. I understand that leaves more than 100,000 people who have not been vaccinated. The concern used to be vaccine hesitancy. The issue I am now genuinely hearing from people is that because they are getting the AstraZeneca vaccine, which has a 16-week wait until the second dose, they are afraid they will not be able to qualify for the green travel certificate. Can the Minister give them some comfort on that?

I have two more questions. First, however, when will the Minister make the decision? Second, can we give genuine comfort to the 60 to 69-year-olds who are getting the AstraZeneca vaccine that they will be able to travel like everyone else?

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** I thank the Deputy for his questions. I absolutely share his view on the maternity services. I heard Paul Reid's comments earlier. Mr. Reid was signalling that the conditions are right to do this. As the Deputy and as that couple will be aware, however, that has not happened yet, which is why the dad is currently outside the hospital. We wish them the very best at this hopefully incredibly joyous time.

As I am sure we will agree, to date it has been a decision on a local level. It is not decision for me. It is not a political decision, as I believe the Deputy will agree. It is a clinical decision. We are engaging with the HSE on this and we would like to see it move forward. The point I was trying to make earlier, though, is that we have to follow the clinical advice on this rather than trying to impose a political view. I fully share the Deputy's view that we want to get this open as quickly as possible, however.

I will tell him exactly where we are regarding the latest plan. The Department received a proposal from the HSE late on Monday night, which I looked at on Tuesday morning. The CMO, Department, public health team and I are in discussions with NIAC. We need to leave that a little bit of time. I cannot give the Deputy an exact date, although I would very much like to be able to do so. It will be soon enough, however. I cannot say it will be today or tomorrow but we are looking at it, as is NIAC. The good news is that we do not need a decision imminently. We have plenty of vaccines and plenty of people in the cohorts that are open to keep going at full tilt for now. The Deputy is, however, absolutely correct that in time, it will become an issue.

Finally, there is some good news on the 60 to 69-year-olds. First, for many people who are given the AstraZeneca vaccine, the waiting time is 12 weeks. I have the detailed NIAC advice, which is different for different groups. I can read it out or give it to the Deputy afterwards if he prefers. The important bit, however, is that people will be deemed to be fully vaccinated at an equivalent time. From memory, it would be AstraZeneca dose 1 plus four weeks.

**Deputy Alan Kelly:** Will that be accepted as a digital certificate? That is the issue.

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** It is certainly our proposal for Ireland, for example, for anyone coming into country who would like to say he or she is vaccinated. That is all still being negotiated and worked through with the EU. The understanding, and the basis on which we are proceeding, is that member states will be given a fair amount of leniency in terms of what they do locally.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** There are 50 seconds left.

**Deputy Alan Kelly:** I understand. When are we going to include the pharmacists? I will skip the final question to give the Minister time to answer. Pharmacists have a major role to play. I know the Minister spoke about 24-hour testing centres. If he wants to go down that route, I will support him 100%. Honestly, pharmacists have a huge reach into the communities. What is the plan? What is the timeline for including pharmacists?

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** The Minister has 30 seconds to conclude.

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** I agree. Pharmacists have an important role to play. I would like to see them playing more of a role. A pilot scheme with 15 community-based pharmacists will start shortly. I spoke to the HSE this week about when the pharmacists are going to be in place. I have expressed my desire to see them playing a more prominent role than they have been. The position to date has been that the capacity they provide has not been required yet based on the volumes we have seen. The GPs, vaccination teams and vaccination centres have been enough for the volume that has come in.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** To be fair to everybody, I have to move on. We move now to the Government slot. Deputy Murnane O'Connor has four minutes.

**Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor:** It is great to see the vaccination roll-out. Today, all 57-year-olds can register for their vaccine. What happens to those who do not register on the day their age comes up? What if they miss it or do not know about it? Can they register later? Will they be accommodated? If, for example, 220,000 60 to 69-year-olds did not register, can they do so now or must they wait until all ages are complete?

What is the plan for vaccine apathy, that is, those people who may not get around to a vaccination right now? According to recent National University of Ireland, NUI, Galway data, one in five women under the age of 30 is worried about taking a vaccine. As we approach the younger age groups, what are we doing to allow people to register for vaccines later if they wish to do so? We are seeing a rise in vaccine myths with lockdowns and more people accessing the Internet. We see claims which make some younger people hesitant about taking a vaccine. They may not be against the vaccine but they are worried and are asking if they will be penalised for waiting.

Last week, the Cabinet approved the national immunisation advisory committee, NIAC, recommendation to offer women between 14 weeks and 36 weeks pregnant the mRNA vaccines, which include Pfizer and Moderna. This is most welcome and I understand expectant mothers were asked to speak to their GPs about this. I received calls this week from pregnant women, however, who asked their GPs about this but who said they did not know anything about it. Will the Minister clarify this as there is a bit of confusion around the matter?

On maternity hospitals, the HSE has told maternity hospitals to allow a partner to be present at the 20-week scan and during labour, while a parent should be allowed access to the neonatal

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intensive care unit. A pregnant woman in Carlow or Wexford can face a different rule depending on which maternity hospital she attends, however. It is important we get clarity on this issue and get the proper information out. All maternity hospitals throughout the country must apply the same rules.

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** What I want and what the HSE has asked for is that there is maximum flexibility in compassion when it comes to maternity hospitals. We all understand why that is. At the same time, the HSE continues to allow local hospitals apply discretion, which indeed they must. Some hospitals are dealing with much higher rates of Covid in the community than others. As I said earlier, we would love as consistent and open a national approach as possible. That is what Paul Reid was speaking to earlier on. However, it is not being applied uniformly because some maternity hospitals have made a call that they do not believe it is safe for them. I support that and their local right to make those decisions. Obviously, we would like to see things move more quickly.

In terms of registrations, the answer is “Yes”. Once you are in an age cohort which can register online, you can do so any time you want. If you are 69 years of age, you will be able to register the whole time.

How do we deal with vaccine hesitancy? We listen to people. We respect them and we supply them with the best possible information in order that they can make informed choices.

**Deputy Colm Burke:** I thank the Minister for the information he has given us this evening and the work he is doing.

I have had many pregnant women on to me asking who they should contact about the vaccine. I have letters from both GPs and maternity hospitals stating they have got no information on this. People are anxious as there are more than 40,000 women at any one time who are pregnant. Clarification needs to be given on this. Will the Minister give some clarification on this issue this evening?

A study in UK shows that the condition of those with long Covid improved dramatically once they got the vaccine. Could we look at prioritising these patients? Many of them are out sick for between three to five months. It is important they are looked after. One way of doing so is by making the vaccine available to them, regardless of age.

I had to email Dr. Ronan Glynn today because a constituent whose wife got the vaccine had an adverse reaction to it for the past 12 days. The advice they were getting seemed to have been incorrect to such an extent that Dr. Ronan Glynn rang me and asked that the constituent would immediately go to hospital to get medical care. Will further information be given out to GPs about how they deal with those on whom the vaccine has an adverse effect?

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** With regard to pregnant women, I need to be very careful not to be stepping in and providing clinical advice which I am not qualified to give. The context is as follows. NIAC recommended that pregnant women should be offered an mRNA vaccine between 14 and 36 weeks following an individual benefit-risk discussion with their obstetric caregiver. While there are currently no data published from clinical trials specifically evaluating the EMA-approved Covid-19 vaccines in pregnant and breastfeeding women, there are ongoing clinical trials. There have been no specific safety concerns identified with pregnancy with the use of mRNA vaccines. The HSE is working hard on this issue to put the protocols in place as quickly as possible.

With regard to vaccinating people who previously had Covid, that is happening. There is not a situation whereby you will not get a vaccine if you have had Covid. You can be deemed to be equivalently vaccinated or protected for up to six months after a lab-confirmed test of Covid, but it does not preclude you from being vaccinated.

With regard to the GP advice, I will raise that. I understand there is comprehensive advice and materials have been provided to GPs. I will discuss that with Dr. Glynn and the HSE.

**Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan:** I thank the Minister, health professionals and front-line staff for the progress made over recent months in the vaccination roll-out. It is heartening to see us rolling through the different age cohorts, with people getting those much-needed jabs. That needs to be acknowledged. I thank the Minister, his Department and all those on the front line.

On the 24-hour vaccination centres, will the Minister expand on their anticipated roll-out, where they might be and how quickly we might see them? What is the Minister's position on supporting the waiving of intellectual property rights in terms of the Covid vaccine?

On maternity services, last April, my wife and I were lucky enough to have a baby girl. As we had a child during Covid, we think back on the difficulties we had at that time. I was lucky enough to be able to be there for the birth of my child. I can empathise with much of what has been said here by other Deputies. We are expecting a third child in September. It would be great to get some clarification on a more streamlined approach with maternity services. What role potentially might a digital green cert play in the availing of such services? Would it permit people to attend such services in the future?

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** I start by offering the Deputy my congratulations on the birth of his daughter some time ago and on the future birth this year. My wife and I had our first two children very close together. While I congratulate the Deputy, we might have a conversation later about coping mechanisms for the very long tunnel that he is about to enter.

In terms of the 24-hour vaccination centres, this came from the minutes of a NPHET meeting where it was discussing the issue and may have contacted the HSE about it. We may or may not need 24-hour centres. There is significant capacity in place between the GPs, the vaccination centres, many of which are running seven days a week and very long hours, and the pharmacy network, which is yet to be brought online. If it is needed to run the vaccine centres 24-hours a day, we will absolutely do that. At present, we do not need to as there is a lot of capacity in place.

In terms of the waiver for intellectual property rights, personally I am in favour of it. I do not think it is a silver bullet, however. I do not think that if we do it, we will suddenly have manufacturing of these very complex compounds all over the place. The EU is setting up a task force to look at all the bottlenecks. There are issues around manufacturing sites, the supply of raw materials and distribution, particularly as some of the vaccines must be stored at very low temperatures. The Government is working with the EU on it. The EU's view is that within the existing TRIPS agreement there is latitude for governments to proceed but, to be honest, a whole-system solution is required. What I and the Government want to see is a global programme that gets everybody vaccinated.

**Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne:** We know many complex circumstances and situations are coming to light with regard to the roll-out of the Covid-19 vaccine. Many people are falling between the cracks of the very rudimentary categories established by the current administra-

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tive systems for the roll-out. The co-ordination between the HSE, NAS, GPs and administrative teams working through the portal is exposing the patchy lines of communication that pass extremely important and sensitive information between essential stakeholders. I raise this as I find I am hearing about this every day. The information needs to be clear and concise for people and they need to know where they stand when it comes to the vaccine roll-out. Many concerned constituents have been flooding my communications channels with almost inconceivable personal circumstances concerning the roll-out and the distinct lack of clarity and compassion they are receiving when they are trying to confirm when they will be getting vaccinated.

I will detail the circumstances of some constituents who have reached out to my office. One example concerns a GP in west County Clare who unfortunately has been out sick for a number of weeks. I take this opportunity to wish him well in his recovery. Undoubtedly, though, this has caused significant interruption of the lines of communication about patients being referred to NAS. What is plan B in these circumstances? This has caused undue distress for lots of vulnerable people and their families in the west. I am aware of one woman who has multiple sclerosis and is completely bedridden. She will not be able to access a vaccination outside her home and although all six of her carers have been vaccinated, she has been repeatedly forgotten. This woman's family members reached out and after I communicated on her behalf, her family were then contacted but were unfortunately told she would need to register. This woman is not required to go through that process and it has caused undue distress to everyone involved. I am aware of another man who was unable to attend his appointment as he was quarantining on the date originally designated for his appointment. He went to great lengths to notify the HSE of this fact and outlined all the relevant details around his quarantine timeline. He was given numerous appointments within that timeline and we both made numerous phone calls just to get that information across. Now that his quarantine is over he has not actually received an appointment.

I raise also the case of prison officers. All establishments across the prison estate are operating quarantine areas to deal with potential or confirmed cases of Covid-19. It is known that outbreaks of Covid-19 have occurred in virtually all prisons and were managed by prison officers and nursing staff. We also know prison officers have worked on Covid wards at various hospitals with both compliant and non-compliant prisoners. Outside of a healthcare setting, prison officers and prison nurses are the only group who have no option but to work with people with confirmed cases of Covid. Prison officers clearly work in a congregated setting where social distancing cannot be maintained but they have not received the vaccine. Meetings between the HSE and the Minister for Justice have taken place but no clarification has been provided on the vaccination of prison officers. Furthermore, on the evening of Monday, 12 April it emerged that more than 500 gardaí from the Dublin area were vaccinated, arising from concerns that they may be called to deal with issues which may arise with hotel quarantine. Prison staff have now been working with quarantined prisoners for more than 12 months. All establishments across the prison estate are operating quarantine areas to deal with potential or confirmed cases of Covid-19. Approximately 6,000 prisoners have been quarantined since the pandemic began. Is there any indication of prison officers getting appointment dates?

**Deputy Mary Butler:** The roll-out of vaccinations to the housebound is an extremely important part of the programme and 3,500 people have been referred by their GP. No politician or layperson can register somebody for a housebound vaccine. Only a GP, medical clinician or consultant can because it is very important that politics does not intervene here. As I said, 3,500 people have been referred by their GP and between 23 and 26 April the HSE contacted

800 individuals who were outstanding. Thus medics and HSE staff have worked very hard and I congratulate them on the work done to date because there are many complex cases. The Minister moved very quickly two weeks ago and increased the number of ambulance jeeps on call so we can get to as many people as possible. There are 500 people outstanding but contact has been made with them.

**Deputy Róisín Shortall:** I want to return to the issue of pregnant women and the Minister confirming they will be offered an mRNA vaccine between 14 and 36 weeks. They have been left not knowing what the plans are and what the situation is. It is particularly worrying for people who are past 30 weeks of pregnancy. They do not know whether they are going to get it in time for that 36-week cut-off point. What, therefore, is the situation? Has that process begun? Who is going to be responsible, or who is responsible, for registering pregnant women? Where will those vaccines be administered and by whom?

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** The advice came in from NIAC and the HSE is currently working through it. I will read from the latest presentation from the vaccine task force as of this week. On the NIAC recommendations in regard to the vaccination of pregnant women, it states: “This will be implemented and a working group is being established, led by the women and infants programme, to develop the referral pathway and an operational plan as soon as possible”. That is the latest report direct from the task force. Both the Deputy and I want to see it in place very quickly. We just need to be aware that there is a lot of complexity being managed within the vaccine programme. The NIAC recommendation for pregnant women came in as one of a series of recommendations and changes and while we all want to see this implemented almost immediately, it takes a little time to get the referral pathways in place.

**Deputy Róisín Shortall:** I accept the complexity involved but this particular cohort is time-limited, unlike many others. It is not really fair to leave them in that kind of limbo, where they do not know what the plan is. What does “as soon as possible” mean? That is not good enough. I ask the Minister to get some kind of concrete timescale so women know where they stand and when they are likely to receive it. On those other practical issues relating to registering, who will give the vaccine and all of that, the Minister has announced it without giving any of the detail and that is not very satisfactory. I ask that he provide that detail as soon as possible, and certainly within the next week.

I also wish to ask about the role of pharmacists. The Minister mentioned the pharmacy network. He knows those involved are ready and willing to do that. Can he now give a timescale for when pharmacists are likely to be brought onboard to start providing that service? In that respect, I highlight also that there is a very significant dip in the administration of vaccines every weekend. It happens on Saturdays and Sundays and this week it happened on Monday as well. The number dropped down to about 12,000, which is just not really acceptable at this stage when it should be rolled out as quickly as possible. Pharmacists obviously have a key role as well. What is the timescale for the pharmacists being involved?

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** It will be in the coming weeks. I have discussed this at length with the HSE. I want to see pharmacists playing a more prominent role in this. I know they are ready to go and we have had an agreement in place with them for a very long time. The IT systems and portals for the pharmacists are being piloted with a number of community pharmacists right now. As I said earlier, the view from those in the vaccine programme is that the capacity they bring has not been required yet. However, the volumes are increasing very significantly and I want to see them brought in very quickly. At this point the answer is that it will be in the

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coming weeks. I fully take the Deputy's point about the HSE still working out the detail of administration of the vaccine to pregnant women. By definition, this is a time-limited group of people. I will take that back to the HSE. The Deputy said this was announced without detail, but to be fair to the HSE, while we announced the NIAC recommendation, we need to leave a bit of time for the HSE to work it through.

**Deputy Róisín Shortall:** It is seen as one and the same so we need that detail. I ask the Minister about the cohort of people that received the AstraZeneca vaccine before the recent advice on it being administered to those under 60 and under 50. As of today, approximately 7,500 healthcare workers would have been due to get the second dose as the 12 weeks is up. What is the position of that group? The suggestion is that they wait until 16 weeks but is that for all that cohort or just those under 50? What is happening with the people over 50?

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** I will read the exact advice on this from NIAC. It is the AstraZeneca recommendation for dose 2 interval. The HSE points out that much complexity is involved. Dose 2 for the over-50s and for those who are very high risk or a high risk will be given at 12 weeks. That is from mid to late May, in line with supply. For the under-50s who do not have a high-risk or very high-risk underlying condition, it will be administered on a 16-week basis. The majority of people the Deputy speaks about will be under 50. Some may have a high-risk or very high-risk condition but the majority would not. For that group it is 16 weeks.

**Deputy Róisín Shortall:** How are they being distinguished with respect to being under or over 50? Will people be notified automatically or do they have to register again?

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** They should be notified. The two distinctions are people aged 50 and older and then under 50. The people aged 50 and older will have an interval of 12 weeks. Those under 50 with a high-risk or very high-risk condition will also have an interval of 12 weeks. For those under 50 without a high-risk or very high-risk condition, the interval is 16 weeks.

**Deputy Róisín Shortall:** Are people in their 60s only receiving AstraZeneca or are any of the other vaccines being provided to those people?

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** The broad intention is that they would receive AstraZeneca. There may be cases where, if there is availability of an mRNA or Janssen vaccine, it can be used. We have received very little Janssen vaccine so far. The Deputy is aware we have started rolling that out now to homeless people, which is really positive to see. It is possible, at the margins, that some people in the group will receive an mRNA or Janssen vaccine based on availability of supply. The numbers are low. The broad thrust is that they will receive the AstraZeneca vaccine.

**Deputy Joe Carey:** I thank the Minister and Minister of State for their response and action in increasing resources to improve speed of delivery of vaccines to housebound people. They will recall that I raised the matter some weeks ago. One of the affected individuals, Mr. Joe Kenneally from Kilshanny in County Clare, has received his first dose of the vaccine. His family members are very thankful and they want to convey their thanks to the Minister and the National Ambulance Service for the care, courtesy and attention they showed to Joe when the vaccine was delivered.

I raise the question of fully vaccinated persons being permitted to travel into Ireland without having to quarantine in hotels. There is much demand, particularly from markets like the

US, and fully vaccinated people want to travel to Ireland. There is also the specific matter of the large cohort of Irish people who live in Dubai and who want to come home to Ireland for the summer. They are fully vaccinated with a different vaccine, Sinopharm. Will the Minister update the House on the position of people who have received that vaccine? When will it be approved by the European Medicines Agency and in Ireland?

The first cohort of people vaccinated comprised front-line workers, including nurses and doctors. That was right. Nurses have led the charge in the fight against Covid-19 for the past 14 or 15 months. I request that the Minister and the Government look at trying to give some due recognition to nurses. I propose that the Government look at the registration fee for nurses. They currently pay an annual registration fee and I ask the Government to consider introducing a reform so a registration fee would be paid just once on qualification. I ask the Government also to examine seriously the unwinding of the additional hours from the Haddington Road agreement in recognition of the work that nurses have done throughout the pandemic.

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** How long do I have?

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Not very long. Be as quick as you can as there are two other Deputies looking to contribute in the slot.

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** Okay. The Deputy asked when the European Medicines Agency, EMA, will approve certain additional vaccines and that is a question that only the EMA can answer. I know it has a rolling review in place for vaccines. I will ask for a note to be sent to the Deputy on the position of various vaccines within the rolling reviews.

The Deputy should remember the registration fee paid by nurses is not to the Government but to the nursing professional body, which has been a really important part of the ongoing progress and development of the nursing profession. The Deputy asked about recognising the efforts of these personnel but I will stay away from the question of Haddington Road agreement hours or anything like it because that is a matter for national pay agreements.

My view is there should be recognition for nurses and everyone else who has worked across the healthcare system, including nurses, doctors, cleaners, healthcare assistants, nursing home staff, chefs, hospital porters and others. They went into work day after day and stepped up. They were at risk and this is a sector that saw significant additional infection rates. They deserve enormous credit and I want to see meaningful recognition for all healthcare workers for the extraordinary time they have put in this year and last year on behalf of our nation.

**Deputy Jackie Cahill:** It is right to acknowledge that the vaccination programme is certainly picking up pace. Since our vaccine supplies increased, we have seen a remarkable improvement in the numbers being vaccinated daily and weekly. There is no denying the early days of the vaccine roll-out were tough but the supply of vaccines was out of our hands and the control of the HSE.

I acknowledge the exceptional work by front-line staff, vaccinators and testers in fighting this disease. Every week we see the vast majority of vaccines received in the country being distributed in a matter of days, with exceptional efforts by hard-working individuals involved in the process.

Vaccinations to people who are at home were mentioned earlier and there are still a number of people in my constituency who are bedridden or housebound who still have not received

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their vaccine. I acknowledge the great work being done by the National Ambulance Service but could we have a timeframe for these people's vaccinations?

Deputy Carey raised the question of people in other countries, including Abu Dhabi in the United Arab Emirates, who are fully vaccinated but where the vaccine is not recognised here. Could this be rectified? Some of these people are coming to the end of contracts and they want to come home. They are fully vaccinated so could their process be streamlined?

I am thankful there is now a steady supply of vaccines and the time has come to operate 24-hour vaccination services. People getting the vaccine would not mind what hour of the day or night they are asked to come. People are extremely anxious to get this vaccine and get their life back to normal. We have a decent supply of vaccines so could consideration be given to 24-hour vaccination centres?

We want to keep the virus under control and we definitely do not want another wave. There should be testing, especially in higher population densities or where people are in workplaces. We have a number of walk-in test centres in my constituency and all around the country. Can the number of those centres be increased and can they be set up in all towns? Can they even be set up where there are major employers? We have seen instances with major employers having clusters of the virus. More of these walk-in centres will be essential to make sure we continue with the progress we have made.

The rapid antigen testing also has a place. For major employers in places where there are many people congregating, it is worth considering that rapid antigen testing would become the norm in these workplaces.

**Deputy Mary Butler:** I will respond to the question on those who are housebound. As of 6 May, there are fewer than 500 individuals awaiting first dose vaccination and it is expected to have all first dose vaccinations completed by next week, the week commencing 10 May. To date, the National Ambulance Service has provided 2,784 vaccines. We will get to everyone by the end of next week. To be fair to the Deputy since he has raised it many times, the main message is that nobody will be left behind.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The other questions could be responded to in writing because Deputy O'Connor is here and we have to move on to him.

**Deputy James O'Connor:** I thank the Minister and the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, sincerely for their close co-operation and help in recent days regarding the serious outbreak in east Cork and west Waterford, based around Youghal, in particular. It was an enormous challenge for our local healthcare services, schools and sports clubs to deal with that issue. I pay tribute to and compliment the HSE, the National Ambulance Service, our local GPs, the Minister and the Ministers of State. We are lucky to have the Minister of State, Deputy Feighan, the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, and the Minister of State, Deputy Butler supporting the Minister and I am grateful for the work they are all doing.

We are moving into a positive phase in the vaccination roll-out. As we speak, 30% of adults over the age of 16, representing 1.1 million citizens, have received their first dose of the Covid-19 vaccination. This is a positive moment. We are hopefully reaching a tipping point where the vaccine roll-out will start to have a more meaningful impact on the level of Covid cases in the country, allowing us to further reopen society. I agree with what many Deputies said on the continued use of technology to ensure we are allowed to reopen our society. The digital green

certificate for people who may wish to travel internationally is of critical importance and I hope the Department is being proactive in preparing for the implementation of such systems.

On the vaccination roll-out, I am getting positive feedback from people who have been to their local vaccination centres, whether they are attending the one in Mallow, Páirc Uí Chaoimh or the other ones around the Cork area. They are well-run and I want to pay tribute to the staff who are working in them. In fairness, there seems to be few problems. I want to concur with points made by other Deputies in the Chamber on people who are housebound. We get quite a few calls from people who are querying their status. I know the healthcare professionals in the National Ambulance Service are doing important work in that regard. I again ask the Minister, the Department and the HSE would give every support necessary to allow people to get vaccinated.

I will allow the Minister to utilise my remaining time if he wishes to answer.

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** I thank the Deputy for the questions and his kind comments. There is definitely a good political team in the Department of Health and there is a good working relationship with the HSE. It was good to see movement happen on Youghal that quickly. The Deputy raised points on the ongoing response and there was a comprehensive, rapid and flexible response to exactly the points he made. I can assure him that we will continue to work with the Department and the HSE so that the services he is advocating for and the people he represents get what they need and deserve. We will keep working to that end.

**Deputy Thomas Gould:** I have a number of questions. I will take three minutes and give the Minister the remaining time to answer if he could.

I was contacted by a lady whose mother is 69 and is housebound. She had received a vaccine appointment for a clinic but she had not received an appointment from the National Ambulance Service to come out to her house. When I contacted the HSE about this, it was confirmed to me that there is no system in place for under-70s who are housebound to receive their vaccines at home. To me the Minister has dropped the ball on this issue. Will the Minister instruct his officials in the Department to sort this out? Was the Minister aware of this situation?

Expectant mothers in Cork are still waiting to receive their vaccines. A lady contacted me whose GP is still waiting on instructions from the HSE. Cork University Maternity Hospital has told this lady that it will be back in touch in a few weeks' time. This lady is 25 weeks pregnant. She does not have weeks to wait for someone to come back to her. There are plenty more women in Cork, and right across the country from listening to other Deputies, who cannot wait and who need to be vaccinated. These are vulnerable women. I am not trying to be alarmist but the Minister made comments about the link between Covid-19 and stillbirths. Vulnerable women are worried by these comments. On 27 April the Minister said the vaccine would be rolled out for them. Why are these pregnant women waiting?

There is no vaccine clinic on the north side of Cork city. I have raised this issue before. People could be stuck travelling for an hour on public transport to get vaccinated. Why are we putting barriers in place when half of Cork does not have a vaccine centre? I mention facilities such as Upper Glanmire community centre. A local area representative, Mandy O'Leary-Hegarty, said the community is available to put that up. Neptune Stadium has been used in the past for similar purposes. Many other community centres, GAA clubs and sporting organisations are willing to offer their facilities for the vaccine roll-out on the north side. Will the Min-

ister commit to a vaccine clinic being opened on the north side of Cork city?

SouthDoc in Blackpool was closed in March 2020 because of the Covid-19 crisis. I do not believe that was true; rather I believe SouthDoc used the crisis as a way to close down its services in Blackpool and Listowel. Will the Minister commit to making sure that SouthDoc reopens those facilities with a full service? The people of Cork North-Central need it.

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** I thank the Deputy for all those questions. On the housebound, the National Ambulance Service is doing a huge amount of work. As the Deputy will be aware, we worked with the HSE to increase the capacity available. The ambulance fleet that is directly allocated to this has been doubled and additional personnel were put in place to support the administration of the programme as well. The Deputy specifically asked about a constituent of his who is under 70. The Deputy's constituent needs to work with her local GP. The GP then needs to refer her and state that the patient is housebound. There are cases where the National Ambulance Service can provide the service. If the Deputy wants to provide me or the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, with the details of that person, we will look into that for him.

On pregnant women, I share the Deputy's sense of urgency and I know there are pregnant women all over the country who are saying that NIAC has made this recommendation and are asking when they will see it implemented. The HSE is working through this. I know the Deputy will appreciate that many additional recommendations came through from NIAC. We are working through them, as is the HSE. We want to see the referral pathways and protocols put in place as soon as possible and the HSE is working through that.

The third question was on vaccine centres. There are 30 centres operational and there will be 38 in operation in total. There are several vaccine centres in the Cork area. For anyone over 70, they can access a vaccine through their GPs. Pharmacists will also play a role. For people who are mobile, they can take a trip across a city to a vaccination centre to avail of these incredibly effective vaccines, which are free to everybody to use, to vaccinate themselves against a global pandemic. Anyone I have been talking to has said that if they need to travel for half an hour, 45 minutes, an hour or a bit longer because they have been told that they get to go to a vaccine centre and be protected from this global pandemic with some of the most effective vaccines that have ever been created provided for free, particularly in the context of a lockdown, they are saying they will get in the car and go. However, it is worth reiterating that for those aged over 70s the GP network has been available. For people who cannot leave their homes the National Ambulance Service will be involved.

**Deputy Thomas Gould:** There are three centres in Cork but not one is on the northside. Half of Cork has no vaccination centre.

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** The pharmacy network will also be involved.

**Deputy Gino Kenny:** Today was significant in the fight against this pandemic. Today, the Biden Administration made an announcement, and other Deputies have mentioned this, with regard to waving intellectual property rights. This is significant for the people's vaccine. The EU has made soundings that it will review its position. Given that an astronomical amount of public money has been given to some of these companies it is the least that humanity could expect from them. The announcement by the Biden Administration has not gone down well with some of the companies, such as Pfizer and Moderna. Their share prices have decreased. It is quite incredible that these huge companies can almost blackmail humanity in the war with this

virus. This is very important.

The Irish Pharmaceutical Healthcare Association made an extraordinary statement today and I had to read it a couple of times. It is urging the Government to oppose the waiver at the WTO in June. This is incredible. Humanity is at a precipice with regard to people getting the vaccine rather than monetising and monopolising it. What is the position of the Minister for Health? What is the position of the Government? Today, the Tánaiste was quite confused about whether the Irish Government will support the EU waving intellectual property rights on the people's vaccine. That is what we deserve.

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** I thank the Deputy. I want to see a global solution to this. We cannot have a situation where poorer countries are locked out of vaccinating their populations because they cannot afford it. It is ethically unacceptable and it would also be really stupid on behalf of the western world because the virus will continue to circulate. We need to do it for ethical reasons and for reasons of self-interest also.

The Deputy and I might have different views on the economic system and the pharmaceutical companies' right to make a margin on the work they do but clearly something in the global pharmaceutical system is working really well. We have a variety of incredibly effective safe vaccines quicker than they have ever been produced before. Last year, I spoke to leading experts who told me that based on previous pandemics and diseases it could be five, ten or 15 years before we saw this. Clearly something has worked really well. What we now need to do is channel this energy. I would like to see the waiver gone but it is important to say there is no silver bullet. If we got rid of that waiver tomorrow we would not suddenly see mass production. We have to look at manufacturing, distribution and other matters. As the Deputy is aware, the EU position is that there is already significant latitude within TRIPS that could be activated at this time.

**Deputy Mick Barry:** The Minister did not answer the question. Is the Government going to instruct its representatives at the World Trade Organization to vote in favour of waving intellectual property rights on the vaccines? That is the issue and the Minister has not answered the question. The Government has a choice to make. The Biden Administration has done a U-turn. It has changed its position under pressure from below. One option is to back the same position. The other option is to back the position argued by the pharmaceutical industry in this country, which this afternoon called on the Government to vote against it. The Minister needs to make his position clear. Which side is he on? Please answer the question. Will the Government instruct its representatives at the WTO to vote in favour of waiving the intellectual property rights on the vaccines? I would like a straight answer to a straight question please.

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** I thank the Deputy. The Government is working with the EU on this. I have told the Deputy what my view is. The Government is working through this very closely with our colleagues in the EU. The EU's position is that the WTO TRIPS Agreement already allows countries a lot of flexibility that is not being used. For example, it allows compulsory licensing, which is when a Government permits someone else to produce a patented product, which essentially is what Deputies Barry and Gino Kenny are advocating for. This is already contained within the TRIPS Agreement.

I restate that regardless of which way we do this, and whether nation states activate the clause within the existing WTO TRIPS Agreement or intellectual property rights were to be waived, there are significant additional obstacles that have to be dealt with. The EU is setting

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up a task force to look at this to see how we deal with increasing manufacturing. These are not simple compounds to make. How do we deal with distribution? How do we, for example, distribute vaccines that have to be stored at  $-20^{\circ}$  in warm countries with limited infrastructure? All of this has to be solved at the same time to reach a necessary goal, which is as rapid a global vaccination as possible.

**Deputy Joe Flaherty:** It is very good to see that we now have momentum on the vaccine. I am especially pleased that our vaccine centre is open in County Longford. I thank the Minister for his commitment to opening the centre. From the very outset he was committed to a centre in Longford and it is good to see that it is now open. I thank the staff at the centre, in particular the centre manager, Carmel Breaden, and I wish them the best of luck in their endeavours. They have worked tirelessly to have the centre up and ready and open for vaccinations. I must also acknowledge the local GAA club, Clanguish, and Longford County Council, which have worked very closely with the HSE in this regard.

The public has reacted very favourably to our reopening plan. As a nation and a people we want to return to normality. There are some inconsistencies in the plan, which could be addressed in the interests of public goodwill and as a gesture of solidarity with small businesses and communities. Many small gyms will not be in a position to reopen outdoor activity on 10 May while peer facilities will. Gyms are scheduled to reopen on 7 June but it is not inconceivable that these facilities should be able to resume their indoor activities in line with non-essential retail on 17 May. They have proven themselves very adept at managing their facilities and adhering to all public health guidelines. Any analysis of case figures will validate this.

Stage and dance schools and local theatres have been challenged on all sides by Covid. In most cases, they were unable to access any State support. They now find themselves struggling to adapt to outdoor activities owing to inclement weather. It is the only outlet at this time for many young people and it is critical that we see them return as people are missing out on a crucial developmental year. On reopening last year, the sector proved itself more than willing and capable in terms of complying with public health guidelines.

I would ask that they could also reopen on 17 May in line with non-essential retail.

In particular, I welcome the Minister's commitment this week to trial outdoor events with spectators for the month of June. An obvious one must surely be the park runs which take place the length and breadth of Ireland. The park run movement will return for adults in the UK on 5 June and there is a compelling case that we should be able to follow soon after here in Ireland. Even before Covid, this was one of the best policed and managed public events in the country with all participants tagged for the purpose of timing, and full contact details already ready to hand to aid track and tracing. I would ask the Irish park run movement to engage with the Department of the Taoiseach and the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media, Deputy Martin, in the hope that this could be one of the flagship events for the month of June.

I welcome the Minister of State, Deputy Feighan's overview of the Covid challenges in the Traveller community. There were 16 new Covid outbreaks and 65 new cases of the disease in the Traveller community notified to the HSE in the past week. These new cases bring to more than 3,600 the number of confirmed cases of the disease in the 35,000 strong Traveller community reported in this third wave of the disease which began just before Christmas. According to the statistics, 155 members of the Travelling community have been hospitalised with the

disease since the third wave, 22 have required critical care and, sadly, eight have died.

We had a very public event in Longford town yesterday and, understandably, it has given cause for much concern locally. It was an event that ran contrary to the compliance and significant community commitment which has helped us as a community and as a county come to terms with the public health challenge in recent weeks. Some weeks ago, the Traveller health movement and the HSE convened a very successful pop-up test centre in Longford town. At the time, our statistics were among the worst in the country. Yesterday, for the first time in almost two months our national average over 14 days was back below the national average. However, there are concerns we may see a spike again in Longford over the coming days. With this in mind, I ask the Minister to request the HSE to convene a mobile pop-up test centre for Longford town for the next couple of weeks and until such time as we are sure that any risk arising from this week's events has abated.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Do we want to hear Deputy O'Donnell or go for a response?

**Deputy Kieran O'Donnell:** I will be using my time over and back.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Then we will go to the Minister for a response to Deputy Flatherty.

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** I will take back to the HSE this evening what the Deputy suggested and ask if that can be done. I thank Deputy Flatherty.

**Deputy Kieran O'Donnell:** I would like to ask questions and use my time over and back. First, the vaccination centre for Limerick is the Radisson Blu Hotel on the Ennis Road, technically in County Clare but obviously servicing Limerick and that region. While we have had a successful roll-out with more than 50,000 people vaccinated, issues have arisen for people who do not have access to private cars and who must use the bus service there. The current bus service, which is the 343 Limerick-to-Shannon bus route, goes every half hour during the day, every hour in the evenings and on Saturdays, and every hour and a half on Sundays. It stops at the other side of the N18, which is a motorway. For many people, it is very difficult. I note the local HSE, in fairness, has stated it is now reviewing the operation of the Radisson Blu because there will be a significant ramping up of the service. Will the Minister take up with the HSE the possibility of having an additional pop-up mobile centre in Limerick city itself or having a shuttle service specifically to serve the existing centre? The Minister might respond to that and then I have a further question.

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** I thank the Deputy. I would be happy to and I will revert to the Deputy on that. It is essential for people who do not have access to cars - many people simply do not have access to cars - that there is sufficient public transport to get to the vaccination centres. Sometimes that is required seven days a week. I would be happy to take the Deputy's point back to the HSE.

**Deputy Kieran O'Donnell:** I thank the Minister. A shuttle service or a location in the city as well would make a huge difference. You cannot have people crossing a motorway or dual carriageway. It is unsafe. In this modern age, we cannot have it. Vaccination is going well but we want it to be an absolute success.

I want to refer to another issue. We had Professor Mark Ferguson in before the Joint Committee on Transport and Communications Networks yesterday. Professor Ferguson was appointed by the Government to set up and chair a Covid expert group to look at rapid testing. We

in the committee are very much looking at the aviation sector. With the vaccination programme going at pace, Professor Ferguson, whose expert group's report has been adopted by Government, is of the view that rapid antigen testing has a key role to play in the full restoration of air travel. Professor Ferguson is looking for the roll-out of a pilot programme of rapid antigen testing, and the expert group has made this recommendation in its report. That should be done.

The committee has written to the Minister for Transport and the Minister for Health seeking the establishment with immediate effect of a pilot programme for rapid antigen testing. Take a route from Ireland to the UK. The UK has started doing a pilot programme of its own. We can tap into the expertise they have to date. Furthermore, we have the digital green certificate coming on stream at the end of June. It would make a huge impact if we could be ready to look at the possibility of rolling out rapid antigen testing as one of the elements in terms of Covid safety to ensure people may not have to quarantine when they come to Ireland. Will the Minister take on board the recommendation of Professor Ferguson and his expert group and of the Joint Committee on Transport and Communications Networks to establish a pilot scheme of rapid antigen testing for air travel on a route from Ireland to the UK? It would probably take four weeks because we need to have that ICT structure in place prior to the digital green certificate coming in place at the end of June.

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** I thank the Deputy. It is certainly something I can discuss with the Minister for Transport, Deputy Ryan. The expert group reported in to me on 1 April and its report contained recommendations across a number of sectors. The way we are approaching it in government is that line Ministers are exploring what can be done in their sectors. The Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine, Deputy McConalogue, and I, for example, are working on rapid testing, much of it in meat processing, while the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, Deputy Harris, and I have been discussing rapid testing in higher education, etc. This one would fall within the remit of the Minister, Deputy Ryan, obviously, with public health advice.

I would urge caution on aviation before we are ready to go with the digital green certificate. We have very strong measures in place in terms of international travel at present. We have the strongest measures in place in Europe by quite a bit. In fact, the UK would be the closest to ours with its own mandatory hotel quarantine. I would be happy to discuss it with the Minister, Deputy Ryan, to see if it is something he wanted to pick up with the aviation industry, with that caveat that we have very strong protections in place for very good reasons. On the Deputy's point, however, my hope is we will fully engage with the digital green certificate and we might see an opening of travel from July.

**Deputy Darren O'Rourke:** Following up on that point, I second Deputy O'Donnell's proposal. I sit on the Joint Committee on Transport and Communications Networks. There is an interesting and important window of opportunity to carry out that pilot study. We have this hybrid model, which I have argued against because I believe it should be stronger, of mandatory hotel quarantine for a specific cohort and a pre-departure PCR test for other people travelling, for instance, from London to Dublin, as well as recommendations and other obligations, but only advice regarding a post-arrival PCR test. What has been proposed here is to add to that serial antigen testing. It would be an interesting study to run over the period of a month. It would provide useful information for the Government in terms of opportunities for the future and could be of benefit in the time ahead. The Joint Oireachtas Committee on Transport and Communication Networks issued a letter on this and held very interesting hearings yesterday with Professor Ferguson. This is a real opportunity and I ask the Minister to respond on it.

The other issue I want to raise is the TRIPS waiver. While I do not want to repeat the questions asked by others on Government commitments, I do want to hear and see such commitments. I am firmly of the position that there is a real opportunity with the TRIPS waiver to increase the supply and reduce the cost of vaccines. The Minister referenced the success of the vaccine roll-out which may be the case from a European or North American perspective but from a global perspective, there are vast swathes of the planet that have not seen any vaccines. Indeed, some countries have not seen a single vaccine dose yet. There is enormous scope for improvement and the TRIPS waiver is part of that. What is the timeframe and at what level are discussions taking place? What is the role of the Irish Government in this? Does the Minister for Health have a role or is this a matter for the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Deputy Coveney, the Tánaiste or the Taoiseach? At what level are those discussions taking place and what is the expected timeframe for a decision?

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** I thank Deputy O'Rourke for his questions. In respect of a pilot for rapid testing, I commissioned a report on it and I support its findings. The Deputy will be aware that there are strongly-held views among highly reputable, well-informed people on both sides. Some people like Professor Ferguson believe there is a very substantial role for rapid testing to play while others believe there is significant risk because it can give people a false sense that they have had the equivalent of a negative PCR. They may then adjust their behaviour in ways that are risky for them and for the people around them. I believe rapid testing has a strong role to play and that, as Professor Ferguson argued in his report, as this year goes on the technology is going to get better and the tests will become more accurate and easier to use. There will be some really interesting developments during the year.

It is the Minister for Transport, Deputy Ryan, who would lead the work on an aviation pilot scheme, with support from the Department of Health and public health. What the Deputy has proposed is very interesting in that it would be in addition to the existing preflight PCR test. While I do not want to pre-empt anything, I imagine some people will say that if we are already doing PCR tests, there is no marginal benefit to rapid tests. It would be interesting to see if rapid testing could provide an additional source of protection in the context of the requirement for a PCR test being removed over time as we move to using a digital green certificate, whereby people who are deemed fully vaccinated can potentially travel without the need for a preflight PCR test. Perhaps the rapid test could provide an additional piece of protection and I am very happy to take that up with the Minister for Transport.

Regarding the waiver, I will revert to the Deputy directly. A lot of the issues he raised have been already discussed during this debate. What I want to see and what we need for ethical reasons as well as reasons of self-interest, is a fast global vaccination programme. That is going to require the Western world stepping up-----

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I am sorry to interrupt but we are running out of time. Deputy Canney is next.

**Deputy Seán Canney:** I was lucky enough to get a call to get my vaccination last Monday in the racecourse in Galway and I must say the operation that was being run there was absolutely phenomenal. There were no queues and everybody was vaccinated and out again within 30 minutes. I want to put on the record my appreciation for the work that is being done across the country in all of the vaccination centres. The buzz and confidence that people had going in was marvellous. The biggest joke we had was about our age. I met some of my classmates whom I had not seen in a long time.

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We are moving on with the vaccination programme and a lot of people who use day services are now vaccinated. Organisations are now trying to get back to the provision of normal day services but transport will be a problem. There is still a requirement to maintain social distancing but the type of vehicles available to these organisations is a problem. Is there anything the Department of Health can do to make sure additional transport is put in place so that these services can continue? The Department must also work with those providers who were running day services in hotels, many of which are still closed. Will the Department and the HSE work with providers to make sure services are restored so people can meet again and have some sort of normality and socialisation in their lives after the long trawl they have had for last year and a half.

I also wish to raise the issue of primary medical certificates. The suspension of the scheme last June and its reintroduction in January was disastrous and with the perfect storm of Covid, there is very little happening in terms of assessments except by phone. Reviews are only carried out in Dublin except for once a year, when they are carried out in Cork. An appeals clinic was due to be held in Roscommon in October of last year but that was postponed. I was told the other day that it will probably be rearranged for 2022. Large numbers of people are waiting to get vehicles for people with disabilities. They have ordered vehicles but they cannot get an assessment or a review. This matter was raised by the Oireachtas Committee on Disability Matters with the Minister for Finance on a number of occasions. I implore the Minister to make sure that interim arrangements are put in place, such as providing temporary certificates to those who need them, until things are sorted out.

**Minister of State at the Department of Health(Deputy Anne Rabbitte):** I will take those questions if I may. I thank Deputy Canney for raising these matters. I will take his last question first. He is quite right in what he has said about primary medical certificates. There was very little movement on them up to last December and into January. I met the primary medical certificate team myself two months ago. In the past two months, 471 assessments have taken place. The Deputy is correct in saying there have not been face-to-face assessments. In my own CHO area in Galway, more than 300 assessments have taken place and the plan is to get back to doing face-to-face assessments in the coming months. The team has already determined who needs face-to-face assessments. I must compliment the team for the work being done on this.

As the Deputy knows, most day services did not close during the most recent lockdown but services were reduced. I am assured by the Department and the HSE that there will be a resumption of services on a three-days per week basis. Transport is being reviewed at the moment by the Minister for Health, the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, myself and the HSE.

**Deputy Verona Murphy:** I have three questions for the Minister today. The first relates to persons in category four. We need a clearer outline of how people in this category are to be notified about their vaccination. I am hearing about a lot of complicated scenarios, whereby consultants have told patients it is the responsibility of their GP but the GP has no knowledge and people are getting confused. We do our best and the staff we deal with in the HSE are excellent but I am keen to avert and avoid confusion. Unfortunately, according to Twitter today, there are doctors on social media saying that because of the abuse they are getting from those who are expecting to be vaccinated by their GPs and the lack of clarity, they are going to quit the vaccine programme. I ask the Minister to make sure that is addressed and the problem does not fester.

The second issue is that there appears to be no way to cancel a registration on the IT portal.

People have come to me who have spent hours trying to cancel over the phone because they have been contacted by their doctor and have actually received the vaccine. My concern, as well as theirs, is a no-show would mean a vaccine going to waste. I am not sure how it can be addressed but it is important.

Many people have been asking me for the daily vaccination figures on a local electoral area basis. I appreciate there is plenty to be done but people endured the daily death figures for the past 12 months and that had a significant impact on people's lives and morale and what we have been through. It would be a significant morale boost if people knew the vaccination figures, even on a county basis, so that if 150,000 people were to be vaccinated in County Wexford, we might get to a stage at which we can see we are nearly at 70%. It would have a significant effect on people's morale.

A cohort of people are living, married and have families in Ireland but are working abroad. Many of them have contacted me because they are in receipt of the Sinopharm vaccine which is not one of the recognised vaccines. It means they would have to enter into quarantine, fully vaccinated, but not with a recognised HSE vaccine. They would end up having to quarantine and pay for it, have little or no time to see their families and then, possibly, return to quarantine when they return to work. I ask that somebody might consider how that would be catered for.

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** I thank Deputy Murphy for all of those points. On her last point, I am aware, as we all are, many people are resident in Ireland or want to come or return to Ireland. Twelve vaccines are being used for Covid-19 around the world and the European Medicines Agency, EMA, has authorised four of them. The exemption from hotel quarantine is only for those four vaccines. That is the public health advice we have at present but I will take the Deputy's point back.

Much progress has been made on cohort 4 but I know, as all of us do, that some people are finding it difficult to get the answer they want quickly. In terms of the progress made, to date, more than 200,000 vaccines have been administered to cohort 4 and this is a big week. This week, 40,000 to 50,000 vaccines are targeted for cohort 4. A huge number of people in cohort 4 have been vaccinated and are being vaccinated this week. It is a big week.

In the first instance, people should be able to get an answer, either from their GP or treating hospital. The approach is that if a person has an underlying condition and is in treatment with a hospital group, that hospital group should be able to vaccinate him or her and should be contacting that person to tell him or her to come in to be vaccinated. In the majority of cases, that is exactly what is happening. Some people have the same underlying conditions but are not in active treatment with one of these hospitals, and in those cases the GPs can make the decision to vaccinate them.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Thank you, Minister. We have to move on. I am not being awkward but I suggest you correspond with Deputy Murphy to respond to her outstanding questions. Deputy Devlin is sharing with colleagues.

**Deputy Cormac Devlin:** It is just me. Tonight's figures remind us of the need for vigilance, with 393 new cases and, sadly, eight further deaths. I acknowledge the great efforts by everybody involved in this national effort, especially our front-line healthcare workers.

The vaccination programme is certainly picking up pace. It is encouraging to see 1.7 million vaccinations have been administered, with almost 1.2 million people or 30% of adults over

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the age of 16, having received their first dose. I also express my appreciation to the Ministers present for their availability and assistance in matters in the constituency in Dún Laoghaire. News that people who have had their first AstraZeneca jab can be considered vaccinated after four weeks is particularly welcome and good. I ask that the Minister for Health considers getting that message out there as much as possible, because it would reassure many people who have been cocooning. Many of them believe they have to wait for the 12-week period and they do not want to stop restricting their movements or cocooning. It is important that message gets out there.

On the mandatory hotel quarantining, the Minister will be aware of several recent cases in which people needed to travel abroad for medical treatment. I ask that a streamlined process be put in place for those vulnerable individuals. I know the Minister is working on issues, and perhaps he might update us in his response.

I have some questions, especially on the Janssen vaccine. It is particularly useful for administration by pharmacists. When will the first significant shipment of Janssen vaccine arrive and when will the pharmacists begin vaccinating? In terms of vaccinations, will other organisations such as the Tropical Medical Bureau be involved or considered in the roll-out?

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** I thank Deputy Devlin for his kind words. With regard to when people are deemed to be fully vaccinated, we will redouble our efforts on that. It is important the message gets out that, for example, people who are being vaccinated with AstraZeneca do not need to wait the 12 or 16 weeks and then plus two after their second dose, rather a number of weeks after the first dose and it is different for the different vaccines. We will redouble our efforts to make sure people know that.

With regard to exemptions from hotel quarantine for people who are returning to Ireland because they have left for medical treatment abroad, the Deputy and I have discussed this and individual cases. We are dealing with a number of individual cases to make sure people are met appropriately, dealt with compassionately and get what they need. However, we need to go further than that. We are putting an exemption in place, which I hope to sign soon and share the details of. It will cover people who need to travel abroad for urgent, time-sensitive, material medical treatment abroad and provide them with an exemption.

In terms of Janssen, the latest I have, which is subject to change almost daily, is that during the week of 10 May, approximately 75,000 doses of the Janssen vaccine will arrive here.

**Deputy Cormac Devlin:** The Minister for Health might come back to me on whether the pharmacists will begin from next week in their vaccination programme and whether other agencies such as the Tropical Medical Bureau will be involved or considered.

A number of special needs assistants, SNAs, teachers and carers have been in contact with me. They accept the new age-based vaccination roll-out but wonder if arrangements could be put in place to allow people to register online for last-minute vaccinations. If there are excess vaccines in a local vaccination centre or through a GP, could they be considered?

The Minister of State, Deputy Butler, is probably aware I am involved in a day care centre in Glasthule. Throughout Dún Laoghaire and the country, there is real eagerness for that cohort to go back to the day care centre setting of enjoyment, fun and interaction with others. Does the Minister of State have any update on when we might see them return? Obviously, that age cohort has been vaccinated, by and large, as have the staff who work in those day care centres.

**Deputy Mary Butler:** I thank Deputy Devlin for his important question. As we know, day care centres and services have been closed since March 2020. It is a key priority for me, working with the HSE and the Department, to ensure services for older people can open as soon as it is safe to do so. As Deputy Devlin has quite rightly said, the vaccination programme has been rolled out to persons over 70 years of age and as a result, further guidance has been sought from public health on the provision of day care services and how they can be operated safely.

Day care services have been asked to assess what can currently be delivered and requirements to reopen. A subgroup has been established to develop an individualised risk assessment that can be carried out in respect of clients returning to the services. This will focus on safe transport to the service, identification of clients who are safe to return, protection of carers who have not been vaccinated and the impact of this. Finally, we also need to support clients who will not be in a position to return to day care services.

I am hopeful we can move on this soon. Day care centres are a huge lifeline for the people who attend them. They are important to their well-being and they are looking forward to going back. I am hoping to open centres on a staged basis. If a day care centre previously operated for five days a week, we could open it initially two or three days a week and move from there. We are working very hard on this issue at the moment. I thank the Deputy for his question and the work he does with his own day care centre.

**Deputy Frankie Feighan:** I am happy to inform the Deputy that the Janssen single-shot vaccine was administered today to prioritised groups of medically vulnerable people living in homelessness services in Dublin. This group includes people with specific underlying conditions. There are more than 700 medically vulnerable people in homelessness services, and approximately 350 of them are due to receive the vaccine this week alone. The Janssen vaccine is very appropriate because it is a one-shot vaccine. It was incredible to see all the stakeholders and very vulnerable people who cocooned and made huge sacrifices over the past year. It was wonderful to see that single-shot Janssen being administered. That will be a huge game changer in the coming weeks and months.

**Deputy Cormac Devlin:** I thank the Ministers of State for those updates. The news about the day care centres is particularly welcome. Many people and staff do not know when they will be reopening so it will be great to get that information as soon as that subcommittee reports.

I thank the Minister of State, Deputy Feighan, for that update. No doubt it is very welcome that cohort is being vaccinated. There was a slight delay in starting that programme for the most vulnerable and it is important it continues.

I ask the Minister to come back to me on the question of pharmacists. I just want to get clarity on this matter. I know the vaccines are coming in next week, but when will the vaccinations in pharmacies start? Many pharmacists have completed the documentation that was required and sent it back to the HSE. Not all pharmacies are suitable as vaccination centres due to their size, but if we could get a bit more information I would be very grateful.

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** A pilot scheme is being rolled out for the ICT system and portal for pharmacists. I have taken this up with the HSE on numerous occasions, including this week. I believe there is a role for pharmacists to play in the vaccination roll-out. That is why we put a deal in place with the Irish Pharmacy Union, IPU, at the start of this process. To date, the people running the programme have said that the capacity has not yet been needed. Between

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the GPs, the vaccine centres and the HSE vaccination teams, there has been sufficient capacity. We know this is correct because we have been getting the vaccines out, with the vast majority of them - around 95% - being administered within seven days of arriving into the country. However, volumes are going to increase substantially and, as the Deputy rightly says, the Janssen vaccine in particular would be very suitable for pharmacists to give out. That is something we will continue to pursue.

Regarding SNAs and teachers, the same question could be asked by many very worthy groups, which we would dearly love to see vaccinated as quickly as possible. At the moment, there are excess waiting lists in order that vaccine doses are not wasted if people do not turn up. However, that protocol is carried out according to the NIAC recommendation on the cohorts and that is how we are proceeding. It should be noted this issue will diminish very quickly in the coming weeks because, as the volumes increase significantly, which is beginning to happen, more and more SNAs, teachers and our phenomenal front-line workers, whom we want to vaccinate as quickly as possible, will be getting vaccinated anyway through the cohort system.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** I would like written answers from the Minister. Why are the HSE and the Department of Health not collating figures on the numbers of people with delayed diagnoses of cancer or misdiagnoses? There are 38,000 people waiting for colonoscopies alone and many of their diagnoses have been delayed.

Student nurses were forced to take the AstraZeneca vaccine. The Taoiseach told the Dáil they had to take it or they would forfeit their careers. Now we know it is not suitable for under-60s. What redress is there for those student nurses and young people? It is shocking.

There is a cohort of teachers from Ireland working in the United Arab Emirates, UAE, who have been vaccinated. The summer holidays are coming up and they dearly want to come home. Many of them have children who want to see their grandparents. However, their vaccinations are not EU approved. Will they be forced to quarantine or can we get some forbearance for those people who have been vaccinated?

I return to the issue of St. Brigid's Hospital in Carrick-on-Suir. I want to know why it was closed in the middle of a pandemic. Why did the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, the Minister for Health and the Taoiseach refuse to meet with Councillors Kieran Bourke and David Dunne and the action committee of doctors and nurses? They point-blank refused to meet them. Why? How was the hospital deemed suitable for treating Covid patients when it is now deemed unsuitable for treating patients who are convalescing? Why is that? It was deemed suitable for Covid patients last March. Why did HIQA deem it suitable for step-down patients during the Covid pandemic and then decide it was no longer suitable in November? We need answers to those questions. I represent the people and am entitled to answers. I have not got one answer in writing from the Minister since he took up office. I expect to get them. I do not think paper is that scarce that he cannot give me a written answer. It is outrageous that the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, turned her back on her own community and her own colleagues, including Councillors Burke and Dunne and others. To turn her back on her own community as regards that hospital is shocking.

**Deputy Michael Collins:** I have been asking these questions for the past three weeks and I have not got any answers. The Minister promised me two weeks ago he would furnish me with answers. People over 65 who have a family history of clotting are worried about taking the AstraZeneca vaccine. Some tell me they are so worried they cannot even sleep. They are wor-

ried because the Tánaiste said that anyone who refused the vaccine would be put at the bottom of the pile. These are people who have genuine concerns.

I also mentioned Parkinson's disease sufferers last week. They have been in contact with me and I presume they have been in contact with the Minister as well. They are worried they have been dropped down the list due to the age categories and they are very worried about their own health issues. Does the Minister have a timeline as to when Parkinson's sufferers will be vaccinated?

The Minister of State, Deputy Butler, might be able to answer my third question, which relates to Clonakilty Community Hospital. It is not up to HIQA standards. I had a meeting with the HSE the other day and my impression was that it is not on the list to be upgraded at all. It is a hospital of excellence and the staff have worked so hard on it but it is not up to standard, and if it is not up to standard, there is an issue. Why is it not on the list to be brought up to standard? Clonakilty hospital serves a huge, vast area. I ask the Minister of State to come back to me on that.

I always go outside the line with these questions. I will probably run out of time so I may as well leave it to the Minister to reply to me in writing. The Minister said he would have a follow-up meeting with Vera Twomey. I respect that this does not relate to Covid but it is a Covid year and this is a very urgent issue. Much of the issue has been resolved - credit where credit is due - but there is a part that is not resolved. I would appreciate if we could have a follow-up meeting with the Minister as soon as possible.

**Deputy Richard O'Donoghue:** I am still baffled that there is no Limerick venue for the roll-out of the vaccine. We heard today about the Radisson hotel and how dangerous it is for people who do not have transport to cross that motorway to get to it. I highlighted this concern months ago. There are people travelling from Limerick to Clonmel, Mallow, Cork, Clare and Kerry for vaccines. We offered the Government Limerick Racecourse, the University of Limerick, UL, and other venues these people could have gone to and now they are travelling to different counties to get vaccinated. A couple on "Morning Ireland" last week talked about how difficult it was for them to get to a vaccination centre. I highlighted this months ago. I was on Live 95 FM with Deputy Kieran O'Donnell and Councillor Liam Galvin, and they were happy enough with the venue at the time. Now, it has been proven it is not a good venue. I ask the Minister to please give us a venue in Limerick so our people can get their vaccines in their own county.

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** I thank the Deputy for the question, and we were discussing that vaccination centre earlier. The issues raised regarding access to public transport are ones I have committed to taking back to the HSE. It is imperative that everyone can access these vaccine centres. Not everybody has access to a car, of course, so people must be able to access these centres using public transport. I will take this issue back to the HSE. One suggestion made earlier was that a shuttle bus service might help a lot with the situation. We must ensure everyone has appropriate and as easy as possible access to all these centres.

**Deputy Catherine Connolly:** I am going back to the issue of day care centres and respite care, and this matter is for the Minister of State, Deputy Butler. I welcome that progress is being made on this issue, but I cannot understand how quicker progress cannot be made a year and two months after a pandemic was declared. The Minister of State knows the facts and figures on the ground. The vaccination programme has been rolled out. Can we have more specifics

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regarding day centres and particularly regarding respite care? I reiterate that I do not think it is my role to go to a Minister about a specific case but I will have to, even though I do not want to, because everyone should be treated the same. People are going under in caring roles with no respite. Briefly, when is it envisaged that we will have respite care and day centres restored?

**Deputy Mary Butler:** Regarding respite, and the Deputy raised this issue with me last week, I have sought a comprehensive report on this issue in the Galway area. Respite is happening in other areas and I will furnish that information to the Deputy as soon as I get it. I have answered the question regarding the day care centres. Work is under way and the task force is in place, but it must be safe to do so. There were 393 cases of Covid-19 today, so we are trying to take a cautious approach in this regard. We want to open these day care centres and not to close them again.

**Deputy Catherine Connolly:** I understand that, and I understand that the Minister of State is doing her best. We are, however, talking here about minimum prices for alcohol and other things that are irrelevant now. Government effort should be going into identifying vulnerable groups and essential services and restoring them as a matter of priority. That is what I am asking the Minister of State. I welcome the fact she followed up on it, but before I came in here I checked at 5 p.m. and Merlin Park Hospital has stopped respite care. Day care centres are not functioning in Galway, so we need clarification on this issue. I thank the Minister of State for that.

Turning to the roll-out of the vaccination programme, I believe the Minister has been put in a position where information is being segmented. I am not happy with that, and I do not blame the Minister for it. He is doing his best in this limited role. I think we need an overall discussion on this aspect. I was called disingenuous by the Taoiseach when I said this was not happening. I am repeating it is not happening. There are so many elements we cannot even get to discuss here. Vaccination is only part of it. Trust is an essential element, and I think that trust has been broken. I pay tribute to the people who nevertheless persist in believing in a system as best they can.

Regarding the age group from 60 years old to 69 years old, I have heard no apology from anybody. This issue has been raised by other Deputies today. For people to be told they are going to the bottom of the list is simply appalling and unacceptable. I use those words again and I hope I am using them with sufficient force so that the Minister might look at them. Regarding this age group, Professor Kingston Mills, at the end of April, pointed out, among many other things, that, “The Medical Council guidelines make it clear that recipients of medicines (including vaccines) have a right to make an informed choice and should be provided with all the information necessary for decision-making, including details on possible adverse reactions, efficacy and alternatives.”

I am in a position as a Deputy where I am making representations to the HSE regarding a people having contacted me and wanting to be vaccinated but not wanting to have the AstraZeneca vaccine for very good reasons. Those people have nobody to discuss this issue with. I will not say they are at the mercy of their general practitioner. Some GPs are very good, but other GPs do a sales pitch for AstraZeneca and say there is no choice. That is unacceptable and it is no way to build confidence in the roll-out of the vaccination programme.

I have two other points to raise. One concerns temporary accommodation for healthcare workers. An issue has again arisen in Galway. It arose before, and RTÉ has raised the issue as

well as Deputies. I refer to healthcare workers coming from direct provision centres, who are in temporary accommodation, and now they have been told they have to get out of that temporary accommodation. In fact, in Galway, in two cases, letters were received telling the people involved to get out by the end of July. They have not got out because they have no place to go. On the one hand, therefore, we are saying temporary accommodation is there for the duration of Covid-19 as long we have it and yet this aspect is being interpreted in a manner that is completely inconsistent and unfair when we really need healthcare workers.

The final matter I raise concerns the waiver of intellectual property rights in respect of vaccines. The Biden Administration has, finally, shown the way and that is very welcome. Our own President Michael D. Higgins has said that, "This decision marks a moment of immense moral significance in international policy, putting global need ahead of any narrow considerations." The Minister has said he is looking at this issue, and I welcome that. However, we are now a year and three months into the pandemic and this was something we should have looked at in the very beginning. Ireland should have been leading in this regard because, given our background, we knew we were all in this together. That is what we were told. Now, however, we have very upsetting scenes from India, which is producing and exporting vaccines while people are dying in the manner we are witnessing. My colleague, Deputy Joan Collins, raised this issue, I raised it and other colleagues have also raised it. We were laughed at regarding waiving intellectual property rights.

The point of the TRIPS Agreement waiver was to fill a gap in the market and encourage innovation. It is not possible to encourage innovation where there is too much risk and no demand. However, all those risks have been taken away. Why? It was because indemnity has been provided to all the pharmaceutical companies. We have taken away the risk factor and there is absolute demand. We are in a situation now where we are bolstering those companies' profits at the expense of human beings dying on the street. That is totally unacceptable. We should be leading the way. Our voice from this small country should be leading the way to say we should look at this issue. It is not good enough to tell us today it is not a panacea. I do not want a panacea. I do not want perfection. I want a country that is leading with a voice of humanity and not for profit. If we are putting all our eggs in the one basket, which I disagree with because I think we need a multifaceted approach, then at the very least remove the profit element.

In my last six seconds, we had a very interesting Zoom meeting with representatives of the Cuban Government recently, which is in the process of producing five vaccines. This is my third time raising this issue with the Government. There is an embargo on Cuba. Can we imagine that, under an embargo and in a non-profit situation, five vaccines are being worked on in Cuba and one has come to fruition. There is a very low death rate in Cuba, and while any death is unacceptable, those deaths only happened when the country opened, foolishly and prematurely, as has been admitted.

**Planning and Development (Amendment) (Repeal of Part V Leasing) Bill 2021: Second Stage [Private Members]**

**Deputy Cian O'Callaghan:** I move: "That the Bill be now read a Second Time."

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**Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan):** Deputies Cian O’Callaghan, Catherine Murphy and Cairns are sharing 20 minutes. I call Deputy Cian O’Callaghan.

**Deputy Cian O’Callaghan:** I thank the Acting Chair, but I am sharing time with Deputies Gannon and Cairns.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan):** That is fine. Proceed.

**Deputy Cian O’Callaghan:** This day two weeks ago, I raised with the Tánaiste the sale of 435 apartments in Ashtown, Dublin 15, which were sold off to a foreign investment company that is based in Germany. I suggested this practice should be banned, and the Tánaiste stated I was being ideological. When my colleague, Deputy Shortall, raised the issue of international investment funds with the Tánaiste, he again accused us of being ideological, stating that he favours a practical approach to housing.

Let us be very clear. There is absolutely nothing practical about some of the highest rents in Europe being in our country. There is nothing at all practical about favouring build-to-rent schemes which are cheaper to build, more expensive to rent and impossible to buy. There is nothing practical about young people and, indeed, those who are not so young, being caught in a rental trap, unable to buy their own home as investment funds buy up more and more new housing. There is absolutely nothing practical about more than 120,000 households on housing waiting lists or in insecure HAP tenancies. There is nothing practical about more than 8,000 people and 2,000 children living in emergency accommodation. There is absolutely nothing practical about a child eating her dinner at the side of the street. There is nothing practical or inevitable about any of this. What would be practical would be the implementation of housing policies to ensure that people have access to the housing and shelter they and their families need, to rents that are affordable, to secure tenancies and to homes that are affordable to purchase and within reach. That would be practical.

Yet again, we have a situation where Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael are acting surprised at the outcomes of their own policies. Are we really to believe that they had no clue at all when they introduced tax avoidance measures for investment funds where they pay no corporation tax and no capital gains tax, and where they pursued policies where rents have run out of control, that they simply did not realise that this would lead to entire housing estates being bought out by these funds? Is the Government really just asleep at the wheel, completely unaware of the consequences of its own decisions and policies?

Comments from the Taoiseach and the Tánaiste over the last 24 hours have made it clear that while they have problem with suburban housing estates being bought up by international investment funds, they fully support global funds buying up apartments *en masse*. The Government still does not have any issue with that. According to the Construction Industry Federation, 95% of apartments in 2019 were bought out by institutional investors, leaving just 5% of apartments for everybody else. The Government has made it clear that it continues to actively support the buy-out of entire apartment developments by global funds. If this is not ideology, I do not know what it is. Are individuals and families who live in apartments to be excluded from the aspiration of homeownership and to be caught in a rental trap? What about our young people who live in cities? Should they not be able to buy a home?

There is a pattern here that we have seen before when it comes to housing policy. Developers lobby Government, making all sorts of promises, then when the inevitable outcomes of

these policies materialise and the promises of the developers evaporate, we see Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael left scratching their heads, wondering where it all went wrong. We saw it with co-living. Developers promised a niche market, not unlike that of boutique hotels. Instead, what we got was 21st century bedsits where people are crammed into living spaces smaller than a parking space. We saw it with apartment standards. Developers promised that if apartment standards were reduced, apartments would be built that were affordable and within reach for people who could afford a home. Instead, we got some of the most expensive prices for new-build apartments in the world. We saw it with institutional investment funds. Developers promised that with tax avoidance measures for real estate investment trusts, we would see investment in a supply of housing that people could afford come on stream. Instead, what we got was entire housing schemes and estates and apartments being bought up by international investment funds with a view to keeping people trapped in a rental market while pushing up rent and house prices.

We now see it with the Government's plans for the shared equity scheme. Developers are promising more homes that are affordable. Instead, what we are going to get, and what we have gotten already, is price caps of €0.5 million for apartments in Dublin. We know from the UK experience that we will get inflated house prices and increased profits for developers.

Will Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael ever learn to stop letting developers write their housing policies? The Government is turning housing into an investment opportunity for vulture funds, driving up rents and housing prices for everyone. As part of this, the Government is turning social homes into an investment opportunity and commodity. Long-term leases, where the State pays off the full cost of building a home over a 25-year period and the developer retains ownership of the home at the end, are exceptionally poor value for money. Long-term leasing is a sweetheart deal for developers. The Bill that the Social Democrats are putting forward will help end this practice.

Shockingly, we see this Government pursue policies which seek to turn housing and social housing into profit-making opportunities for its developer and investor friends. Increasingly, we see the State signing up to these long-term leases with developers. There was a report last week of a social housing portfolio of properties in Finglas, Tallaght and Blanchardstown guiding at €21 million, a price guide informed by an annual gross rental income of just less than €1 million per year. *The Irish Times* reported that the prospect of immediate rental income, copper-fastened by the security of a 25-year Government lease, is expected to see strong interest from investors. Analysis by Killian Woods in *The Business Post* showed that of 11 Part 5 lease deals examined, there were deals involving long-term leasing on 384 homes, where the State is signing up to these leases instead of acquisitions. As part of these deals, an average rent of more than €20,000 will be paid out for each home each year. This will equate to €181.6 million over the course of the leases. The State is in line to pay an average of more than €490,000 to rent each home - a price significantly above the sale market value of each home.

Long-term leases are exceptionally bad value for money, but the Deputies should not take my word for it. A report from the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform has already advised that leasing property on a long-term basis in the current rental market represents bad value for money. The CSO estimates that a 25-year lease over which the investor will recover the full cost of delivering the home from payments from the State, covers only 31% of the economic lifecycle of a home, which it estimates to be about 80 years. Dermot Desmond has estimated that the outlay spent on long-term leases could provide about four times the amount of social homes if it was used to build homes rather than lease them. At the same time, we know that

long-term leases will create a potential cliff edge of evictions when they expire in 20 or 25 years' time. Someone who is 40 now and is housed under long-term leasing, could potentially be evicted and uprooted from his or her community when he or she is 65 years of age.

This is a sweetheart deal for developers and investors. If the Deputies want evidence of this, they need look no further than the documents released to me under a freedom of information request, which show that the State has signed up to long-term leases with developers that are multimillion euro contracts, in some instances without carrying out any independent valuations and simply relying on the valuations provided by the developer. How could this be allowed to happen? I must ask whether the Government is asleep at the wheel on this issue. Why does it take the use of freedom of information legislation by an Opposition Deputy to discover this?

Long-term leasing artificially inflates rents. There is considerable evidence that some developers and investors of newly-built homes will leave them empty instead of dropping the price of rents to fill them. What happens when they cannot fill these empty homes? They look for a long-term lease from the State. This ensures that the drop in rents that should happen, does not happen. This increases rents for individuals and also increases the rents that the State is paying out. Analysis by *The Business Post* has shown substantial evidence of this rent-fixing taking place. Given that there are millions of euro at stake in terms of long-term leasing, it is something that the Government should be actively investigating and challenging.

If the Government continues on this path, our housing stock will be largely in the hands of international investment funds, long-term security of tenure and homeownership will be for the privileged few and the many will be stuck in insecure accommodation with too much of their hard-earned income paying out high rents.

**Deputy Gary Gannon:** I want to begin by thanking my colleague, Deputy Cian O'Callaghan, for bringing forward this Bill and for the leadership he has shown on this issue throughout his time in Dáil Éireann and beforehand.

The inability to access housing and a home is destroying lives in this country, and has done for more than a decade. This debate happens regularly in this Chamber, as it should as a point of conversation in national debate. Too often, that debate is defined by arrogance. That arrogance was encapsulated perfectly over the past couple of weeks in the forcing through of what has been referred to as the Affordable Housing Bill 2021, with a Minister who was unwilling simply to listen.

He was unwilling to listen to the experts who are telling him the Bill would increase the cost of housing and make it more unattainable for those who are already suffering. It is arrogance not to listen to experts, including those in the Central Bank and the ESRI who advise the Government, and academics such as Ms Orla Hegarty, Dr. Lorcan Surr and Dr. Rory Hearne, who have dedicated their lives to advancing a more humane approach to housing in this country. We see the arrogance of the Government in its treating of the Opposition with disdain and its refusal to listen to members of the parties in government, including councillors who see the outcomes of these failed policies every single day in their communities.

There is arrogance in the bullish repeating of the same old mistakes of the past and in keeping going in the apparent knowledge that, weirdly, there is legitimacy beyond outcome. There is arrogance in redefining cost-rental schemes, as was done this week when the Minister,

Deputy Darragh O'Brien, said the concept would be expanded to ensure it is not overly reliant on public funding. If it is not reliant on public funding, it will resort to being reliant on private gain and private ownership, which has not served us well. The Government had the arrogance to redefine the very concept of what it means to be affordable. An affordable home is not one that costs €500,000 in Dublin or €400,000 in Galway, as has been presented this week. To continue in that belief and with that system is arrogant. It is the same arrogance that once led Fianna Fáil in government to tell us we had all partied and, in a previous generation, allowed a Fianna Fáil Taoiseach to say the country needed collectively to tighten its belt. That arrogance has defined Fianna Fáil throughout its time in politics and made us all lesser for it.

The conversation around housing has been defined by arrogance and hypocrisy on the part of the Government. Two weeks ago, and again today in the Dáil, the Tánaiste responded to legitimate questions from Deputy Cian O'Callaghan and our party leader, Deputy Shortall, on REITs. They asked whether a method can be applied to stop REITs purchasing blocks of apartments *en masse* and if evidence-based approaches such as those that are working in Germany could be employed. The Social Democrats were told we are being too ideological. There is great hypocrisy in being told we are too ideological by a Fine Gael Tánaiste who adheres to the market at all costs. There is great hypocrisy in his not being able to see that it is this very adherence to market forces and *laissez-faire* economics that led to a housing crisis that has been detrimental to the very dignity of the people who are being locked out of being able to own or rent a home. There is arrogance and hypocrisy in all of this.

The housing crisis in this country is a consequence of the failed ideology of Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil. It is the result of Fine Gael's total faith in the market and deference to international investors. There is a massive hypocrisy in that approach. Next week, legislation will be brought before the Dáil that seeks to prevent the sale of concert tickets by touts. I am almost amused at how quickly that legislation is being forced through. It is welcome legislation that will deal with a situation where large multinational companies were buying concert tickets *en masse* and charging ordinary concert-goers a higher price for them. Why has the same logic not been applied to our housing market? When the exact same principles are being applied in the housing market, the Government has simply closed its eyes and turned away because it does not want to see it. However, in the case of concert tickets, the Government is willing to rush legislation through because it seems like a popular move. It is hypocrisy on the highest scale.

It is hypocrisy to say, even now that we all see the detrimental effect REITs are having on the housing market, that those REITs do not perhaps belong in suburbia but they might belong in our city centres. There is arrogance in walking out of this building, seeing the former communities where there are apartments everywhere and still refusing to acknowledge that people cannot aspire to live, own a house or apartment and raise families in our cities. Two separate sets of logic and understanding are being applied. There is hypocrisy, arrogance and false indignation when the issue of REITs is raised. When the problems are brought to the attention of Ministers, they clutch their pearls. The Taoiseach says somebody should do something about the problem. Of course somebody should do something about it. That is what we are elected to this House to do.

None of these issues is a new phenomenon. The idea of REITs is not new. In fact, they have been with us for more than a decade. The rising cost of housing, exorbitant rents, increasing homelessness and vulture funds are not new concepts. The Government has simply chosen not to do anything about them. The Taoiseach, the Tánaiste and the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage have done nothing to address them. Now we are hearing that various

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Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael Deputies are clutching their pearls about these issues at parliamentary party meetings. It is this false indignation, arrogance and hypocrisy that has brought us to this position. We are no longer willing to stand for it.

Fine Gael Members had their chance to stop international private funds and say “Enough” when their party was adamant about privatising social housing and creating private rental markets that had investors drooling and rubbing their hands with glee. They chose to do nothing. Deputy Cian O’Callaghan and the Social Democrats have brought forward a Bill that has the simple purpose of taking back ownership of long-term leases. When Part V properties are rented from a local authority, the State will own those assets. The Government has said it will not oppose the Bill. We have an expectation much greater than that, that Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael Ministers will work with us to enforce these provisions in law and will no longer sit on their hands, as their parties have done for decades. It is a minimal request and we intend to hold the Government’s feet to the fire to ensure it happens.

**Deputy Holly Cairns:** I commend my colleague, Deputy Cian O’Callaghan, and his team on all their work on this Bill and their constant determination to ensure greater access to affordable and social housing. Housing is one of the main issues raised by constituents. It is raised by families waiting on social housing lists for years and families trapped in a long-term renting system that was designed only for short-term letting. There is a whole generation of hard-working people who know they will never be able to own a home. This situation did not just happen. It is not an accident but, rather, a direct result of Government policy since the 1990s.

The block-purchase of 135 family homes in County Kildare brought some of these issues to the fore this week. They are issues Deputy Cian O’Callaghan has been raising since being elected to this House. The news was greeted with shock and objections from members of the parties in government. I heard on the radio this morning that at last night’s parliamentary party meetings, members of both Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael were blaming the current housing crisis on the policies of the other party. I reassure Deputies from both parties that they are equally to blame. Tax breaks and easy lending in the 2000s increased house prices. The real estate investor tax breaks introduced in 2012 facilitated vulture and cuckoo funds, not ordinary people. The housing assistance payment, HAP, scheme replaces the real solution of building social housing with a stopgap rental model that is directing hundreds of millions of euro in public money into investment funds.

Dr. Rory Hearne of Maynooth University, who has written a book on these issues, explained yesterday that the Government has created an unaffordable system that is focused not on delivering homes but delivering housing as an investment asset. Our Bill is a direct and specific response to this appalling situation. Social homes should not be an investment opportunity for vulture funds. It is crucial that we stop the completely unsustainable rise in rent and house prices. There has been a 62% increase in rent prices in Ireland over the past ten years. Meanwhile, there was a corresponding 15% increase in the rest of Europe. I have many friends and family members who would love to move home to Ireland but simply cannot. When will this end?

Instead of seeing any kind of end in sight, we are seeing an increase in social housing obligations being met through leasing. Instead of buying properties, councils are entering into long leasing deals whereby the State is paying mortgages for investment funds while people are living in properties they will never be able to own. The repeal of Part V of the Planning and Development Act will prevent this. It will directly help to provide more affordable and social housing. Ultimately, as we all know, tackling the housing crisis requires the State to build and

deliver affordable social homes. However, we learned this week that under the new Government housing Bill, a cost of €400,000 for a home in Cork is considered affordable. People are outraged by the absolute ignorance of reality on the part of the Government. Our Bill is a proactive response to the reality of the situation people are facing. It is a focused measure to ensure more families can have homes, be part of a community and feel safe and secure. This is the type of public policy we need.

**Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke):** I thank Deputy Cian O’Callaghan for bringing forward this Bill. I can confirm that the Government has agreed not to oppose it. As we all know, due to Covid-19, the past 12 months have been very challenging for the housing sector, with delivery impacted by restrictions introduced to protect public health. However, despite the challenges brought about by the onset of Covid in 2020, construction proved resilient and the year finished with the completion of just over 20,000 new dwellings. A total of 7,827 new homes, including 5,000 new builds, were delivered in 2020, representing more than 70% of the target for the year.

Covid-19 will, unfortunately, have a much bigger impact on the housing supply in 2021, with most residential construction having been stopped for more than three months at the beginning of the year. There is no question but that in many local authorities, units that were expected to be ready for tenancing in 2021 are now, unfortunately, likely to be delayed until 2022. Every home not delivered in 2021 represents a household that does not come off the waiting list this year. It is essential, therefore, that we take every opportunity to maximise delivery so as to provide as many homes as we can. With that in mind, we must ensure that any changes to current housing policy are carefully considered in the context of their impact on the overall housing delivery.

The Part V housing supply provisions in the Planning and Development Act came into effect in November 2000 and contained a radical new approach to the supply of social and affordable housing in Ireland. While, originally, Part V required developers to ensure that 20% of land zoned for residential and other uses was reserved for social and affordable housing, in practice many developers availed of an option of making a cash payment in lieu to the local authority instead of building social and affordable housing. Part V was amended in 2015, following a review by the Housing Agency and public consultation. The overall requirement was reduced to up to 10% of units and the option of a cash payment was abolished. The Affordable Housing Bill 2021, which was approved for publication on Tuesday, provides for an extension of Part V to set those requirements at 20% in every local authority area, with a minimum 10% requirement for social homes and up to a further 10% requirement for affordable homes, where required. Where not required, the additional percentage may be used towards social housing.

Part V leasing has been an option for Part V delivery since 2015. The option allows for circumstances where a local authority does not have the capital available to purchase the housing units. This option has been used on a very limited basis and only 16 units were leased in 2020 under this mechanism. It is also important to note that there is no obligation on housing authorities to deliver Part V obligations through leasing. In fact, the advice, through circulars and ministerial guidelines, clearly states that the preference for housing authorities is to acquire units on-site in order to comply with the relevant Part V conditions. The decision on how Part V obligations are satisfied is one for the local authority, to be made in line with its own housing strategies.

The Part V lease option gives housing authorities flexibility in certain circumstances to

lease a dwelling on a long-term basis, rather than to acquire it. There may be instances where it is more practical to enter into a leasing arrangement for Part V units, or where the overall objectives of a local authority housing strategy would be better served by doing so. This is particularly true where the transfer of other units within the functional area is not available as an alternative option. For instance, in the case of build-to-rent apartment developments, Part V options for the acquisition or transfer of completed units may not be practical, given the long-term rental nature of such developments. In other instances, the local authority may be in a position to secure the long-term lease of more units than the baseline Part V requirement, which could be significantly more than 10% of the units. In such circumstances, this will result in more units being available to the local authority for the purposes of social housing and the subject lands could, therefore, better satisfy the objectives of the overall housing strategy. Each individual local authority needs to assess this on a case-by-case basis, having regard to offers from a number of proposers, individual housing needs and provisions of the planning Acts. Most important, the Government is clearly shifting away from leasing towards direct build and has provided the financial framework to achieve it.

The effect of the Bill will be to repeal the amendments made to Part V in 2015 so that housing authorities and developers will no longer be permitted to enter into lease agreements to satisfy Part V obligations. I understand the motivation behind this Bill where the local authority or approved housing body does not own the house at the end of the Part V lease term. Acquisition of Part V units can involve significant capital expenditure and there is an opportunity cost associated with this expenditure. However, it remains the case that leasing should not be the priority option for housing authorities in securing Part V units and that, in most cases, the priority would be the acquisition of Part V units by either housing authorities or approved housing bodies.

The Government has committed to increasing the social housing stock by 50,000 social homes, with a strong emphasis on new-build units. In 2021, the total funding being made available for the delivery of housing programmes is €3.3 billion, the single largest housing budget ever with the most ambitious housing targets on record. This includes funding to deliver 12,750 social homes through build, acquisition and leasing. Subject to the impacts of the Covid shutdown of construction, a major component of this investment is a delivery of new build, with the overall target of 9,500 new social homes.

In respect of the market generally, the measures accommodated under the Affordable Housing Bill will, in the near term, improve market access for first-time buyers, stimulate and increase the number of new homes being developed and provide State-supported rental housing at a more affordable price. This includes the cost rental equity loan which provides funding to approved housing bodies to deliver homes for rent in 2021 at a minimum of 25% below market rent. The Bill also includes provision for an affordable purchase shared equity scheme, which will help alleviate housing affordability challenges for certain groups in the short term and stimulate supply by providing confidence in the viability of future private housing developments. These new policies, particularly as they relate to affordability, will reshape delivery of housing in Ireland and deliver on the Government's commitment that everybody should have access to good quality housing to purchase or rent at an affordable price, built to a high standard and offering a high quality of life.

Work by the Economic and Social Research Institute, ESRI, recently commissioned by the Department, estimated that we will need approximately 33,000 houses a year, across all tenures, to keep up with population growth and demand for housing. This summer, we will publish a new housing strategy, Housing for All, to set out our ambitions on how we can achieve these

targets. The delivery of more affordable and social homes will be a key focus of the plan. It will also set out measures to address homelessness, both through the delivery of new homes and also the provision of supports that many homeless people need, particularly in the areas of mental health and addiction. Supporting our most vulnerable citizens will be a key objective of the plan and the main focus will be to deliver new build homes to reduce reliance on the private market and put local authorities back at the heart of our housing delivery.

I acknowledged earlier that there are some valid concerns about Part V leasing and I appreciate the spirit in which the Bill has been introduced. However, it is also my belief that it is essential that any change in current policy is carefully considered in terms of its implication for social housing delivery in the short to medium term. On that basis, the Government is not opposing the Bill at this stage, but will commit to examining the current policy in the context of the Government's Housing for All strategy, due to be published in July.

I thank all Members for their comments. I note some of the inaccuracies that have been put forward. One Deputy compared one of the biggest crises in our State to the ticket touting Bill, introduced by my colleague, former Deputy Noel Rock, in 2017. I do not know how that is considered to be rushed legislation in 2021. There was also reference to the historical fact of different taoisigh tightening their belts. The Deputy needs to look at the record in connection with that. We need to work together to solve this crisis by responding as a team into which everybody has an input. Using emotive language and calling people "arrogant" every day in this House will serve no purpose and not provide a solution to the housing crisis.

**Deputy Catherine Murphy:** I thank my colleague, Deputy Cian O'Callaghan, and his team for drafting this legislation. The Minister of State indicated the Government is not opposing the Bill at this time. That is disingenuous if it is intended not to assist with passing this legislation.

The Minister of State spoke about inaccuracies. I wonder who wrote his speech with regard to the 16 social housing leases last year. Even the reply to a parliamentary question I received last night said it was 1,440. I believe that is very much understating it.

Let us talk about what is really happening. We are at a pivotal stage in terms of a point of no return when it comes to leases. This includes a shift in policy from the State acquiring homes under Part V by way of lease as opposed to purchase at cost price. It is not happening by accident. It has all the hallmarks of a favoured policy that is being pushed by the Minister of State and the Custom House. It is hard to imagine a more expensive way of providing social housing. It will absorb huge amounts of the housing budget with little left for the more cost-efficient direct builds.

It was the same with the housing assistance payment, HAP, which was introduced in 2014. In common with others, I predicted that unless it was accompanied by a significant social housing build, it would absorb a huge amount of the social housing budget. That prediction has proved to be absolutely right. What was supposed to be a short-term policy has become a dominant housing support. At the time, it was all about pretending that the housing list was being addressed.

We are at another crossroads. Long-term leasing, usually for 25 years, is now becoming a more typical, if not dominant, means of the provision of social housing. It is a golden ticket; it is the winning lottery number and it is Government policy. We are told that it is part of the social housing mix. I believe the number of housing units being acquired in this way is seri-

ously understated, however.

In my constituency, several housing estates, which were under construction by private developers, were snapped up by the council or an approved housing body, AHB, under long-term leasing. I will refer to three of them by way of example. In Johnstown in Naas last year, 49 houses were snapped up by the council. There was a good deal of local interest to purchase them and the expectation was that it would be possible, once that estate was complete and offered for sale. The expectation was that 10% of this estate would be acquired for social housing.

Exactly the same thing happened in Naas with the development of 125 houses. This was also long-leased. A large housing development was built in Leixlip, where 10% was to be acquired for social housing under the terms of Part V of the Planning and Development Act 2000. Sixty-one houses will not now be purchased. Instead, they will be long-leased for 25 years. Typically, the houses are leased for just below market rents with a four-year rental review. After 25 years, they are refurbished before being handed back. Despite the outlay, there is no asset at the end. It is effectively the same as paying the mortgage of the developer or the lessee for 25 years and then handing the property back in pristine condition. It begs the question of what happens to the tenant at the end.

There has been a promise of direct builds by local authorities and AHBs. The perception is that these are separate to the housing output by the private sector. I can see very few direct builds happening in my constituency. Essentially, I am seeing turnkey housing and long leases. There is also a complete lack of transparency on what is occurring. One file I checked last week had a blank Part V form. We have no idea, therefore, how the 10% social housing obligation is to be satisfied on that development. Replies to parliamentary questions on the numbers of long leases completely understate what I can see is occurring but we only will know when the transaction is complete.

I refer to an excellent article in *The Currency* on 27 April, which details three different types of institutional investor. It is well worth a read. I want to quote from part of this article:

Right now, the leasing of social housing is still a relatively small part of the overall residential property market. But it's growing quickly. And industry players agree, a wave of money is on the way. ... One senior lawyer is expecting "an explosion of deals later this year". [A property lender stated] "We get probably 20 social housing projects in a week, and we probably get one private housing development in a week". ... "Things have changed" said Dublin City Council's deputy chief executive Brendan Kenny. ... [He] has seen the long-term leasing market change and grow in recent years. Where before it was smaller players coming to them with portfolios of older homes, now it's institutional money buying newly-built stuff. "We prefer dealing with the big funds, even though they might be greedier and more expensive. They just want to collect the money." ... [He went on to say] "Since Covid we have 800 units at various negotiation phases with developers."

The international funds are, therefore, offering already-built housing units to Dublin City Council under the nose of the Minister of Finance in his own constituency. He seems to think that their only involvement is building them. The headline of *The Irish Times* article of 28 April mentioned by Deputy Cian O'Callaghan reads, "Dublin social housing portfolio guiding at €21m". The piece goes on to state:

the vendors have not provided a precise breakdown of the portfolio's composition, it

is understood the properties comprise an equal mix of houses and apartments distributed across residential schemes located in the main in Finglas, Tallaght and Blanchardstown.

It further states, “The vendors, Allied Irish Property, specialise in investment in the residential sector throughout Ireland and in the provision of social housing to local authorities.” The article shows very clearly that social housing has now become a tradeable financial product.

I raised this issue with the Taoiseach several weeks ago and quoted an article from the website of Hobbs Financial Practice, which I will quote again. The article, with the headline, “The new property market”, states:

There is no requirement to deal with tenants, as local councils (or housing agencies) are your lessees. This is a hands-off situation with no risk of vacancies or the usual tasks associated with managing property lets. The cash comes directly from local government into your bank account, there is no intermediary.

Build a portfolio of approved social housing units, houses, and apartments that will be rubber stamped by local councils and housing agencies for long-term leases. Sleep peacefully without worrying about stock markets! Your obligations stop at buildings insurance [and] ... property tax.

It goes on to outline the key benefits, such as the average yield of 5% *per annum*, which is significantly above the Government bond, no vacancy risk, no advertising, no calls from tenants and that monthly rent payments will arrive into one’s bank account like clockwork. That is the reality and the Minister of State needs to brush up on it.

I believe the remit of the Land Development Agency, LDA, urgently needs to change. Currently, the remit includes using public land for private development, which unless stopped could produce more long leasing. Incredibly, it is using State assets at a time when all the evidence is that direct building is much more cost effective. The LDA needs to be changed to a project management remit where the land is used to build mixed communities with mixed tenure types including for sale, cost rental and social housing. We set that out in a policy position in 2016 and brought it to the attention of the then Minister with responsibility for housing, the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Deputy Coveney.

Affordable housing to buy or rent is key to people’s affordable lives. We need to look at the available State resources that are going to be deployed on these long leases. We need to ask the question of whether we are using up all our ability to build houses with the HAP and now long leases. That is a really bad return. The Minister of State really has to look at this speech he gave and ask the person who wrote it where he or she got that information. It is so wide of the mark that the Minister of State is making a fool of himself by repeating it.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** I commend Deputy Cian O’Callaghan on introducing this valuable legislation today. I thank his Social Democrats colleagues for making way for the Bill in Private Members’ time.

The Minister of State, Deputy Peter Burke, urged us not to use emotive language. He said it was unhelpful. I will use some straight language. Long-term leasing of social housing in Part V developments is the stupidest way to deliver social housing that I have ever come across. There are so many reasons this should never have been on the Statute Book and should be removed as a matter of urgency.

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There are three reasons this is a bad policy. First, it does not guarantee social housing tenants lifetime security of tenure. The great value of social housing is that the family gets real lifetime security of tenure and can embed roots in the community. Even better, if they pass the property on to their children, we get intergenerational security of tenure which produces sustainable communities. Long-term leasing of Part V social housing units prevents all of that.

Second, it defeats the purpose of Part V legislation in the first place. Part V was designed not only to provide social housing but to ensure no housing development could be 100% private. Yet, we have a situation where a developer can lease out the units for 25 years then revert them back to private, resulting in the whole purpose of Part V being actively undermined.

Every time I hear a Minister talk about social housing ghettos, the patronising tone sends shivers down my spine. Apparently, it is okay to have rich ghettos of 100% private housing as facilitated by this legislation.

The third reason this is the stupidest way to deliver social housing in the history of the State is because it is so damn expensive. For example, the average cost of the Part V leases approved to date this year is €18,000 per unit per annum. Per unit of accommodation, that is a total cost of €451,000. The most expensive long-term Part V lease was approved by Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council in 2019. It came to an astonishing €28,000 per unit. In total, €700,000 of taxpayers' money was used not to own the social house for life but to lease it for 25 years. In some senses, this is the children's hospital of social housing. It is hardly surprising that it happened under Fine Gael's watch. So bad is this mechanism, it is even more expensive than standard long-term leasing. The standard long-term lease average price this year is €15,000. It is actually €76,000 more expensive to long-term lease a Part V unit.

This Bill is timely because, while Part V long-term leases have been a tiny portion of overall leases for a number of years in double digits, so far this year over 100 have been approved. Deputy Cian O'Callaghan and his colleagues have informed the House that private investors and developers are now actively seeking this out as a way of increasing their yields.

Sinn Féin wants this Bill to proceed to Committee Stage as a matter of urgency. We want the Government to change the law and ensure that no more long-term leases of Part V developments proceed. I was concerned by what the Minister of State told the House. The Government has no intention of proceeding with this legislation or honouring the democratic will of this Chamber when we approve it later on. It just wants to make it seem that it supports the principle. Then, of course, because it has a majority on Committee Stage, this Bill will never see the light of day, like so many other good Opposition Bills over recent times.

Not only do we need to scrap long-term leasing of Part V, but also long-term leasing itself is a bad way to deliver social housing. It does not provide security of tenure or good value for money for the taxpayer. It should be stopped. The sooner we get to large-scale delivery of public housing on public land led by local authorities and other not-for-profit agents, the better.

It is unfortunate that the Minister of State is not here. Earlier, he said the Government is now going to prioritise the direct delivery of local authority homes. Last year, long-term leasing produced more homes than those directly delivered by local authorities. There were 1,500 long-term leases but only 800 directly delivered by local authorities. The Government really needs to get its act in order if it is going to meet that commitment. I suspect, however, like so many other aspects of its housing policy, it is a promise soon to be broken. The Government

hopes people will forget. The Opposition, however, will be united to ensure that its broken promises and failed housing policies will not be forgotten. The public will be reminded of them at every opportunity.

**Deputy Réada Cronin:** I welcome the opportunity to speak on this Private Members' Bill from the Social Democrats. I commend Deputy Cian O'Callaghan on his timely debate to repeal Part V leasing.

It needs to go because when it comes to housing our people, a 25-year lease is about as prudent as taking truckloads of public cash and setting fire to them on a public green. With so many houses being snapped up by long-term leasing, it looks like public money will be piled high and set ablaze, like in Mullen Park in Maynooth in my constituency in north Kildare. What will be at the end of these bonfires? There will be piles of public ash but no public assets.

Leasing is not about public housing and its good and proper place in society. It is not about looking after families and individuals, giving them a chance to build a life and a future in a community in a forever home. It is a shallow political fix for a deep societal problem caused by too much Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, along with their co-dependents, the market hawks, vultures, cuckoos and developers. It is a shallow political fix with deep financial and social consequences. A house is no longer home. It is a commodity. When people cannot afford to buy, they face mutant markets. Their hard work, salaries, savings and mortgages are useless against the war chest of London and New York. My hard-working constituents in north Kildare saw this in Mullen Park in Maynooth.

Public housing is seen as easy spending with the transfer of public cash to private investors. We see housing, especially public housing, as being about the public good and about investment in our people. As it stands today, the public pays the lease for the term, be it 20 years or 25 years. The public also pays for the refurb at the end of this lease, yet the same public, in the form of the local council, walks away from this transaction with nothing to show for it. It is a case of one arm as long as the other. There is nothing to show for hundreds of millions of euro of citizens' hard-earned cash, with no houses or assets.

When it comes to public housing, leasing is not just the developers' cash cow. It is the entire financial herd. Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael expect the public to put up the hard cash to cover the risk for these financiers. The State is basically allowing these global investors take no risk whatsoever. The Government cannot treat the public as cash cows for global financiers. It cannot serve two masters. Do Ministers have any idea how frustrating it is for the public to hear them saying that this is unacceptable when they created the problem? They were warned about the problem but continued to accept it. It is absolutely disgraceful.

**Deputy Paul Donnelly:** I thank Deputy Cian O'Callaghan for bringing forward this Bill.

Fingal County Council plans to lease 159 units in Hansfield SDZ, strategic development zone, under the Part V lease scheme which will cost between €60 million and €74 million. We do not know the real figure because it is shrouded in secrecy and it is impossible to get it revealed. The council is preparing to sign a contract with a private developer for these 159 units at a cost of over €384,000 for a one-bedroom unit over 25 years and €438,000 for a two-bedroom unit. Fingal County Council only recently announced its own affordable housing scheme, however, where a one-bed unit costs only €166,000.

It seems Fingal County Council is willing to sign this deal that will see a leased unit cost 2.5

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times that of an affordable housing unit. This is an incredible waste of money. It is essential that an immediate stop is put to any attempt to sign this deal. It is a bad deal for taxpayers and for tenants.

It is astonishing the council can support spending of upwards of €74 million for this deal yet we have Churchfields in Mulhuddart, a development that was announced in 2017, on which only a handful of houses have been built so far. On Part V, and this is really important:

As units leased may revert to the developer at the end of the lease period, and hence be removed from the local authority's social housing stock, the aims of Part V, and of the Government's social housing policy, will be better achieved by the acquisition of houses, rather than leasing. Accordingly it is recommended that where capital funding is available, including through AHBs, the local authority should seek the acquisition of houses on the development site.

I ask the Government to support the motion to end this absolute waste of money and call on the Minister to act in his own constituency by calling the chief executive of Fingal County Council and ending this absolute waste of money.

**Deputy Chris Andrews:** I thank Deputy Cian O'Callaghan for bringing forward this important private members' Bill to repeal Part V leasing. We are in the depths of a housing crisis and have been for many years. I see the reality of this crisis every day across the communities in Dublin Bay South. There is a chronic shortage of affordable housing for first-time buyers. Public housing such as Glovers Court, Bishop Street, Cuffe Street and Mercer House are all within 500 m of Leinster House and have all been condemned as substandard by the European Committee of Social Rights. I do not know of a single flat complex across the constituency that could be deemed good, liveable and safe accommodation. There is public housing with extreme mould and dampness. Raw sewage flooded over a public area in Canon Mooney Gardens in Ringsend over the weekend. Rat invasions are an everyday issue for tenants living in flats. There are dangerous electrics and regular flooding within the flat complexes themselves. The list is endless and it is not acceptable to expect families to live in these conditions.

We have vulture funds swooping in and buying up new houses in bulk that should be homes for first-time buyers. We facilitate these vulture funds and let them enjoy generous tax breaks and avoid paying corporation tax or capital gains tax and the full rate of stamp duty. Where is the break for ordinary working families, like the generous tax breaks these vulture funds have got? When will enough be enough? Do working families not deserve a break too?

Unlike other crises we have faced and are still facing as a society, few see an end to this housing crisis through the policies being developed by this Government, given its record. Leasing for Part V arrangements is yet another example of policies to suit developers and investors at the expense of the State. The cost of renting in this State has increased by in excess of 60% over the past ten years, more than four times the average increase across the eurozone. By allowing leasing for Part V arrangements we are effectively locking local authorities into long-term leasing arrangements at a time when rents nationwide have hit a peak even greater than that experienced during the Celtic tiger era. It is beyond me how anyone could view this as a wise strategy for local authorities to use when tackling this housing crisis. It is plain to see that this is another example of developer-led housing policy to suit investors at the expense of the State. This Government should put in place supports for local authorities to build their own housing on their own sites, thereby providing public housing to an appropriate standard because

the standard and quality are not acceptable.

**Deputy Patricia Ryan:** I too thank Teachta Cian O’Callaghan for bringing forward this Bill. It addresses one of the many imbalances in legislation that tilts housing provision in favour of developers and away from the interests of working families. Part V provision should not be leased. Leasing is bad value for money and families should not be left to the mercy of the market to fulfil their housing need. We have a housing crisis and particularly a rental crisis. This Government is currently asleep at the wheel. A lady contacted me last week wondering what she will tell her children when the “For Sale” sign goes up outside their home. The landlord is selling the house and she has just been given four months to leave. The only property in Monasterevin listed on daft.ie as available today is a three-bedroom house in Ferns Bridge costing €1,700 per month. There are five in her family and they will be homeless just as the children are due to return to school. Her children will have to be uprooted from their schools and their friends. As the Minister of State knows, councils assist families who are homeless and not those at imminent risk of homelessness. This needs to change. We need urgent action and I do not think we will see this action until we see an election.

Sinn Féin in government will implement an emergency three-year ban on rent increases and legislate for tenancies of indefinite duration. We will also introduce a refundable tax credit for tenants in the private rented sector to put a month’s rent back into every renter’s pocket. We will ensure all rental properties are compliant with minimum standards by introducing a national car test, NCT-style certification system. I was contacted by a man last week who is renting a converted shed that is so cold inside he can see his breath. His clothes are mouldy because of the dampness and he hears vermin in the cavities of the walls at night. He keeps the radio on so he is not woken by the scratching. His doctor tells him he will be hospitalised if he continues to live there. The only property in his town to rent costs €1,000 per month, twice what he is paying to live in the shed in somebody’s garden. He is on illness benefit and his income is €800 per month. Would anybody live in such a place?

The system is broken and it is time for this Government to stand aside and let people who are serious about fixing it do so. I heard the Minister, Deputy Darragh O’Brien, this morning on “Ireland AM” and he kindly decided to tell the people who were watching that programme that he inherited the housing problem and he could not fix it as he had inherited it, but he would do his best. He is in government now and it is his best he needs to do.

**Deputy Thomas Gould:** I support the Bill and thank Deputy Cian O’Callaghan and everyone involved in bringing it forward. Part V long-term leasing is a cosy deal for developers, which leads to social housing being turned into a commodity under the watch of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. Part V long-leasing, combined with investment funds buying entire estates, as we have seen this week, will not solve the housing crisis but will in actual fact make it much worse. The Government is continuing to rely on passing the buck onto the private sector and developers to tackle the housing crisis. It has never worked, it will never work and it will only make developers and speculators rich.

In Cork, more than 8,000 families and individuals are on the social housing waiting lists, while there are 400 families and individuals in emergency accommodation. Cork City Council should be able to purchase these properties under Part V and not have to long-lease them. The council should not have to rent them for 25 years at exorbitant amounts from unscrupulous developers who are holding both Cork and our country to ransom. There is no surprise and no sense of irony by the Minister, Deputy Darragh O’Brien, who brought forward a proposal to

Cabinet this week that would see affordable homes up to the value of €400,000 in Cork. What planet is that man on that he thinks housing at €400,000 is affordable to anyone? Housing prices have risen by 11% in Cork. How can the Minister of State and this Government stand over policies and these prices? The Government promised affordable homes, it built up expectations and it created hope in people's hearts and minds but it has stolen that hope away again.

The pockets of developers and speculators will be lined while the people of Cork and this State will continue to be locked out of home ownership. The dream of ordinary people to own their own home is slowly vanishing under this Government and developers and investments funds are laughing all the way to the bank. Today it has taken an Opposition Deputy to bring forward this Bill to try to fix a problem caused by Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. Yesterday, the Government refused to support Deputy Ó Broin's Bill to support renters and the day before it decimated people's hopes, including young families and individuals, of an affordable house. For the sake of everyone, I hope the Minister takes tomorrow off because people cannot live with these types of policies.

**Deputy Duncan Smith:** We are supporting the Bill. I thank Deputy Cian O'Callaghan and his team for their work on this matter.

The provision of social housing stock by way of Part V acquisition should never have been allowed to become another cushy deal for developers but, unfortunately, it has. Local authorities and the Government must ensure social housing is provided in the most sustainable, efficient and effective manner possible. Ultimately, the point of social housing is for people to have homes and be safe and secure. The point of social housing is not to drastically increase the profit margins of developers while failing to ensure that they have the stock capability to provide housing for anybody who needs it in one year or in 20, 30 or 50 years. Disproportionate reliance on leasing for social housing stock means the State is open to stock dwindling again once these leases come to an end in 30 or so years. To whatever extent Part V leasing could have been justified, extensive reliance on it is not sustainable, and neither is it sustainable in the short, medium or long term. Our successors will end up back here dealing with these same matters forever if more local authorities fail to establish and maintain social housing stock.

I understand documents released to Deputy Cian O'Callaghan under freedom of information legislation indicate that Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council signed a multimillion euro lease for 25 years with a developer but failed to engage an independent valuer on rental costs before agreeing to monthly rents per unit of €2,300. This speaks to an issue that goes far beyond the simple availability of leasing as not suitable for Part V acquisition.

The Government or local authorities may seek to justify recent surges in the use of leasing for Part V acquisitions on the basis that it provides housing more quickly. Nevertheless, Mr. Killian Woods, writing in *The Business Post* last month, indicated that seven apartments in Dundrum being leased by the local authority have been left vacant for more than 17 months. There are thousands of people on the housing list from all over Dublin, so not only was the council paying €2,000 every month to lease each apartment, it was not even housing people in them. There are no circumstances in which that is acceptable. It is utterly disgraceful.

The Planning and Development Act 2000 provides that local authorities must carry out an examination of several factors before entering into agreements for Part V housing. One factor is whether the agreement will constitute the best use of resources available to a local authority. Surely the examples to which I refer prove that this in no way meets that criterion. Local

authorities are already under a statutory obligation to consider each and all of the criteria when entering Part V agreements. Why have they not been doing so? The information provided to Deputy Cian O’Callaghan through his freedom of information request suggests that local authorities are entering what are clearly financially unwise deals, meaning that there is a bigger problem on top of the leasing under Part V arrangements.

Local authorities are obliged to ensure that Part V agreements are efficient and effective in realising the overall objectives of the housing strategy. If they are not doing this, we could be left with a multitude of costly leasing agreements on which the State will have to either spend even more in a few decades to keep the leases or lose the properties to which they relate from the social housing stock altogether. If these agreements are not the best method of providing social housing under Part V in all these circumstances, that speaks to a systemic problem regarding the way in which local authorities are dealing with Part V properties.

We call on the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage to address this matter with local authorities and for representatives of those authorities to come before the housing committee to set out exactly how they have been complying with their obligations under the 2000 Act. It seems that they have not been doing so. They should explain how these leasing agreements constitute the best use of resources under the Act to ensure an adequate supply of social housing.

We do not just need an adequate supply of social housing for the lifetime of this Government or the next, we need it for the next 30 or 50 years. We must learn from the mistakes of the past and at every level of politics we must ensure the provision of social housing is not treated as an afterthought or a money-making racket for developers. We will only have adequate social housing stock when there is nobody in Ireland without a roof over his or her head.

Labour supports this Bill. I ask the Government to seriously consider supporting it too. Not opposing the Bill on Second Stage is not the equivalent of supporting it. We can all see through that tactic now. Part V leasing arrangements have been neither an effective nor an efficient use of local authority resources and, worst of all, they are not providing people with any homes at all. We ask the Government to support the Bill.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** As we do not have Members present from Solidarity, the Regional Group, the Rural Independent Group or the Independent Group, I must return to the Minister of State and ask him to respond on behalf of the Government.

**Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Malcolm Noonan):** I take this opportunity to reflect on a number of the matters touched on during the debate on the Bill. I reiterate that local authorities are not obliged to enter into agreements to deliver Part V obligations through leasing. A clear preference for housing authorities is to acquire units on site in order to comply with relevant Part V conditions. Leasing to satisfy Part V elements should only be used in limited circumstances as set out in ministerial guidelines and circulars. It is clear that, to date, this has been the case. Part V leasing delivery represents a very small proportion of total Part V output. Of the 742 Part V homes delivered in 2020, just 16 were subject to a Part V lease and total delivery between 2018 and 2020 was 39 dwellings.

The Government’s objective and priority is to focus strongly on new builds and, in particular, local authority-led new-build activity. The major focus of the €3.3 billion in funding being made available for the delivery of housing programmes this year will be local authority and

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approved housing body build activity, with an overall target of 9,500 homes for this year.

The general leasing programme is separate to Part V leasing but utilises the same kind of agreement. A total of 1,440 leased properties were delivered in 2020, including the delivery under key programmes such as mortgage to rent and repair to lease. Mortgage to rent is a very important scheme that will allow families and households in mortgage distress to remain in their homes. The repair and lease scheme and the buy and renew scheme allow local authorities to return vacant homes in their area for use as social housing. Both mortgage to rent and repair and leasing schemes are key leasing delivery streams.

Leasing provides additional social housing on a long-term basis, allowing us to address a greater proportion of social housing need than can be addressed by means of construction and acquisition programmes alone. The build programmes are the main focus of delivering stock but leasing provides for additional delivery of homes on a waiting list. The priority for us all must be the delivery of homes for the households that need them. In many cases, leasing is assessed to be a viable option where local authorities do not have access to adequate land or build pipelines to cater for demand in the area. I understand the concerns arising from the fact that under a Part V lease agreement, a property is not owned by the local authority at the end of the lease term. The issue of asset transfer at the end of lease is tied up with the balance sheet status of the contract. If the house was to transfer to the State at the end of the contract, the lease payments would be on a general balance sheet, leaving less capacity for other State investments. Funding housing in this way gives the Government much more flexibility in its spending and allows us to deliver more social housing than we could under the capital programmes alone.

Concerns have also been raised regarding the value for money of Part V leasing and leasing in general. Relative cost-efficiency is always an important consideration in the mix of delivery but it is not the only consideration and this must be viewed in the context of policy objectives and wider concerns. The cost of leasing is kept under constant review but it is not the sole determinant of value.

I am also aware of recent commentary relating to a loophole in the private rental market whereby landlords are registering higher rents than they are charging in reality with the Residential Tenancies Board, RTB, in order to keep market rates high. The Minister, the Department, the Housing Agency and the RTB keep the operation of the rental market under review and any necessary legislative change will be made. If there is any evidence of this taking place and affecting the rents paid for leasing, it is of concern. I ask that any Deputy with any evidence of the practice to make it available to my Department as a matter of urgency so appropriate steps can be taken.

It is clear from this debate that all speakers agree on a fundamental point, which is that we need more homes. We need more homes for the rental sector, more social homes and more affordable homes. We also need more homes for first-time buyers. We need to increase supply. Earlier in the evening there was mention of the figure from the Economic and Social Research Institute of 33,000 homes being required annually. There is no single approach to deliver this number and we should have a multifaceted strategy drawing on the capacity of all sectors, including the private sector. We need to increase local authority builds and ensure we have a fit-for-purpose and affordable private housing market. We need an attractive and secure private rental market. We must ensure we can use every possible mechanism to bring vacant housing back to use. That is why, in formulating the Government's new housing plan, Housing for All, we are looking at avenues to increase delivery across all areas.

The Programme for Government: Our Shared Future commits the Government to the mission of housing for all.

8 o'clock The document articulates core beliefs that everybody should have access to good quality housing for purchase or rent at an affordable price and that the State has a fundamental role in enabling the delivery of new homes. It recognises not only that the provision of more affordable housing has a profound benefit socially and economically but that affordable housing contributes to a high quality of life for citizens.

The publication of the affordable housing Bill on Tuesday was a key step in that process. The Bill will be the first comprehensive and stand-alone legislation dedicated to the provision of affordable housing in the history of the State and will provide for the first scheme of direct State build affordable homes in over a decade. It will provide the first ever national scheme for the delivery of long-promised cost rental housing and will introduce a new affordable housing purchase equity scheme for homes in private developments. This will be landmark legislation and a game changer for affordable housing in this country. This Bill is delivering on the programme for Government commitment to put affordability at the heart of the housing system and to prioritise the increased supply of affordable homes.

The measures being introduced in this Bill will, in the near term, improve market access for first time buyers, stimulate an increase in the number of new homes being developed and provide State supported rental housing at more affordable prices. This Bill provides the statutory underpinning for affordable housing going forward. The detailed operations in the scheme, outlined in the Bill, are already under way and are being developed further, including terms of target setting and longer term funding provision in the context of the development of Housing for All and the Department's submission to the review of the national development plan.

I refer to homelessness. The publication of the Bill is just one of many steps the Government needs to take to deliver on its commitment in Housing for All. Our most recent homeless data for March 2021 shows that the total number of homeless individuals, including dependants, is 8,060. This represents an 18.6% decrease on February 2020 when there were 9,907 homeless individuals recorded. There were 913 families in emergency accommodation in March 2021, representing a 38.6% decrease on March 2020. This is the lowest number since March 2016. There is a declining use of hotels and bed and breakfast accommodation in Dublin and there has been an 80% reduction in the number of families accommodated in commercial hotels in the past year. While these decreases are welcome, the number of people experiencing homelessness is still a major cause for concern and the numbers are still far too high. We need to continue the work we have started and make sure numbers continue to come down.

The past year has seen extremely challenging conditions in social housing delivery for the construction sector as a whole. The unprecedented nature of the pandemic has led to major disruption of the sector and we still face considerable challenges in delivery. However, the Government's priority remains the acceleration of the social housing build programme. It is essential that any change in Part V leasing policy is carefully considered in terms of its implications for social housing delivery in the short to medium term. Therefore, the current policy will be reviewed in the context of the work being undertaken on the Government's forthcoming Housing for All plan.

I would like to mention the issue of institutional investment. The Minister is opposed to institutional investors purchasing inappropriate properties, such as housing estates, in bulk where

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there is no evidence of real additional supply. I know this has been referenced by Members. The Minister is considering taking additional measures to tackle this and already, on 4 May, he secured Cabinet agreement on increasing Part V from 10% to 20%, to include affordable purchase, which will ensure that every development has an affordable section. This, in itself, will prevent cuckoo funds from snapping up entire developments. Institutional investors occupy a relatively small share of the housing market; approximately 5% of tenancies. Investment that leads to additional supply is welcomed and needed. However, the move of some institutional investors into traditional estates, where demand and viability are not issues, is deeply concerning. The Minister for Finance sets out the regulatory basis for investment, in particular in ensuring that where an investment brings profit, a fair share of tax is paid, and that a whole-of-Government approach is required to address the issue. Our commitment in that regard will be dealt with as a matter of urgency.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I am conscious of the fact that there are four groups that were not in the Chamber but were in the House when their time came up. I am also conscious of the fact that it is difficult for groups to know when they are going to be called and when they are not going to be called. During my period as a Whip for the Opposition, the Opposition Whips co-ordinated and worked through one Whip to ensure that all the groups knew how the debate was progressing and when spokespeople might be required. That is not happening at present and I suggest to Opposition groupings that some level of co-ordination between themselves might avoid this sort of thing happening in the future. While I would always be anxious to facilitate people who would want to contribute to an important debate such as this - and it is of critical importance - the procedure is well established that once the Minister or Minister of State has started to reply to the debate it is not possible to return to Deputies.

I ask Deputies Shortall and Cian O'Callaghan to conclude.

**Deputy Róisín Shortall:** I commend my colleague, Deputy Cian O'Callaghan, for bringing forward this important Bill. It makes a contribution to an important aspect of the area of what we are now seeing, namely the increasing privatisation and commodification of housing.

After Fianna Fáil crashed the housing market in the late noughties - we all experienced the devastation of the associated banking crash - most people would have thought it should never be allowed near housing again. It was kept away from it for some time but it did not make an awful lot of difference to the approach taken by Government. What we saw from Fine Gael over the last ten or 12 years was a repeat of the mistakes of the past. We saw the commodification of housing, priority being given to the profit margins in housing and little regard paid to the need for housing to be provided as a basic service and a basic responsibility on the part of Government to ensure that housing was provided in adequate numbers and was affordable. Instead of that, thanks to former Deputy, Michael Noonan, over the last ten or so years Fine Gael introduced tax breaks to encourage vulture funds and REITs to come into the market in order to bring in international capital. We are paying a huge price for that. That was followed by the introduction of HAP, which sought to create demand at a time when demand was low. That was followed in 2015 by the then Minister, Deputy Kelly, reducing the standards of apartments, making them cheaper to build and increasing the profit for developers. That was followed by the lifting of height limits by the then Minister, Deputy Coveney. The former Minister Eoghan Murphy then further reduced standards and gave us the fast-track strategic development housing system, which squeezed the public out of the planning process. All of these policies were designed for profiteering within the housing market and happened at the direct expense of ordinary people trying to access homes. Little regard is paid to people on average incomes who

aspire to own their own homes. It seems that is no longer a realistic aspiration as long as we have Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil in charge of housing policy.

It was quite surprising yesterday when my colleague, Deputy Catherine Murphy, raised with the Taoiseach the matter of investment funds swooping in and buying up entire apartment blocks and, increasingly, housing estates and second-hand housing. It is a licence to print money for them and the Taoiseach seemed to be surprised that it was taking place at such a level. He was doubly surprised when Deputy Catherine Murphy pointed out the tendency for local authorities to engage in this practice of entering long leases with these investment funds. The Taoiseach expressed surprise and responded by saying that it is an unacceptable practice. Yes it is an unacceptable practice but it has been facilitated by his Government's housing policy, a policy that was inherited from Fine Gael and continued faithfully by Fianna Fáil in partnership with Fine Gael. I often wonder just what is the Green Party's position in all of this. We hear very little from it, other than tonight's attempt by the Minister of State, Deputy Noonan, to somehow justify the practice of long leasing.

It is a licence to print money as a return for 25 years is guaranteed. The investor cannot lose. The people who lose, of course, are the taxpayers who pick up the very substantial tab for this. The Taoiseach also said he would work with us on implementing the Bill and its provisions. It is quite clear from the responses of the two Ministers of State this evening that they have no intention of doing that. They are talking about considering it in the context of a review of housing policy. It is clear we are getting more of the same and that the Government cannot be trusted. The Minister and the Taoiseach, who made those points yesterday, simply cannot be trusted.

**Deputy Cian O'Callaghan:** I thank all of the Deputies who contributed to this debate. It is very clear from the statement by the Minister of State, Deputy Burke, that the Government is not opposing the Bill at this time. We know it has no intention of working with us to help progress the Bill. Both Ministers of State effectively defended the Government's position on long-term leasing in their comments, as did the Minister last night. That does not surprise me. What does surprise me is that the Minister of State, Deputy Noonan, repeated the recent Government line on institutional investors and basically said it should not be happening in suburban housing estates but for it to happen in apartments is okay. This was from a Green Party Minister of State who, of course, should be supporting sustainable compact development. I do not understand this comment.

To be clear on this, and we have been very clear on this all along, until recently, Part V long-term leasing was happening on a very small scale. That has changed dramatically in the past six months to a year. I have given concrete examples of this, as have Deputies Catherine Murphy, Paul Donnelly and Ó Broin. I am surprised the Ministers of State are referring to figures from previous years when we have been saying that what is happening now needs to be addressed.

Survey data by researchers at the Central Bank has found growing wealth inequality in Ireland. Looking at survey data from 1987, it found the share of wealth of the top 1% of households has increased from 10% to 15% while the share of wealth of the bottom 50% of households has declined from 12% to just 7%. The top 1% of households in Ireland now have more than double the amount of wealth of the bottom 50% of households. We know that housing completely dominates the composition of distribution of wealth in Ireland. Of the bottom 25% of households in Ireland, only one in 1,000 are home owners. Of those aged under 40 years of age who bought a home between 2013 and 2018, almost 50% did so through receiving inheritance. Younger people, renters and people on lower incomes are being caught in a trap of

paying high rents and are unable to afford to buy a home.

Long-term leasing does not make sense. It does not make sense for social housing tenants who do not get security of tenure and face eviction as they grow older. It does not make sense for building sustainable communities, it does not make sense for the State and society in terms of long-term value for money and it creates problems down the road. The only people for whom this makes sense are developers and investment funds. If the Government is serious about tackling this it should be serious about progressing the Bill. Long-term leasing is a sweetheart deal for developers. It is an incredibly reckless economic approach and it is not an efficient use of State funds. The Government is creating a perfect storm of lax oversight and developer-centric deals that are driving up housing costs and denying the State an opportunity to add to its permanent social housing stock. Before any more damage is done, it is time to end the State's reliance on long-term leasing as a means to provide social housing. To tackle this housing crisis we must take a new approach and prioritise the delivery by the State of long-term secure and affordable social homes.

Question put and agreed to.

## Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

### Agriculture Schemes

**Deputy Marian Harkin:** I thank the Ceann Comhairle for his explanation of what happened earlier.

The Minister is aware of the Shass Mountain landslide at Drumkeeran. Approximately 55 ha of land was affected, with approximately 170,000 tonnes of peat on the land. It was an extensive landslide. Subsequent to the landslide, which was ten and a half months ago, the Minister of State, Deputy Noonan, organised a meeting and the then Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine, Deputy Cowen, came to Drumkeeran and made a commitment that all farm payments on the land, including under the basic payment and areas of natural constraints schemes, would be paid last year and, indeed, they were. Subsequently, the Minister of State, Deputy Noonan, has held a number of meetings of the stakeholder group.

A lot of positive work has happened through the auspices of Leitrim County Council and the Department of Transport. However, the one Department that has not engaged with the people on the ground and with the farmers is the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine. The Minister of State is well aware that right now farmers are putting in their applications for the basic payment scheme. When they do this they tick various boxes. One of the commitments they make is that their land is in good agricultural and environmental condition. How are they supposed to do this when there are several feet of peat on the land? They cannot walk on it let alone put out an animal. They have not been given any advice. What will happen? Will these payments be made under *force majeure*? If they claim these payments and received them will there be penalties because they ticked boxes that the land was in a certain condition and it was not?

I have spoken to many farmers. They have to apply for their basic payment. What do they do? We raised this question a week and a half ago at the stakeholder meeting and we were not given any kind of response. In other words, the farmers were supposed to get on with it. Get on with what? Will the Minister of State give these farmers the same guarantee the former Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine gave them and state these payments will be paid under *force majeure* and that there will be no penalties for claiming these payments? Approximately 20 landowners are affected. We have not had the type of proactive engagement from the Department that we have had from other Departments. To some extent, farmers have been treated badly. I have spoken to many of them and they say that they have heard nothing from the Department. They want to hear from Deputy McConalogue, as Minister, this evening what they are supposed to do, what plans or proposals the Minister has in place for compensation for the damage that has occurred on this land and what is the long-term outlook for agriculture on this land. As I said, this happened ten and a half months ago. As the Minister will be aware, when landslides occurred in other parts of the country, they were dealt with much more quickly and efficiently than this one. Leitrim farmers have as much a right to be dealt with in a proper way as farmers elsewhere.

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** I thank Deputy Harkin for tabling this Topical Issue matter. As the Deputy will be aware, the landslide occurred on Shass Mountain on 28 June 2020 following heavy rain in the preceding days. A large area of upland bog, including some forestry, moved off the mountain and large quantities of liquified peat, vegetation and trees flowed down the mountain. This resulted in damage to road infrastructure and areas of land and forestry which were covered in peat. There has been ecological damage to the river with quantities of suspended sods carried down in floodwater. The damage to land, both farmed and forested, included an overlay of peat and associated loss of grazing meadows and forestry, blocked drains, damaged fencing and the removal of trees from afforested lands.

I am conscious of the massive challenges faced by farmers in the immediate aftermath of the landslide. Following the event, my predecessor immediately reassured the farmers that the farm payments in 2020 would not be affected as a result of the landslide.

A multi-agency group was established under the chairmanship of the Minister of State with responsibility for heritage at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Deputy Malcolm Noonan. This multi-agency group includes representatives of Leitrim County Council, local representatives, Oireachtas Members, farm bodies, the National Parks and Wildlife Service, NPWS, inland fisheries, the Department of Transport, my Department and academia.

The Department has assessed and mapped, using satellite and GPS, the ground of the land parcels apparently affected together with the land use. This exercise included an estimation of the area affected. This assessment and mapping exercise indicates that approximately 20 herd owners, the members of the basic payment scheme, BPS, and green low-carbon agri-environment scheme, GLAS, participants, and eight forestry owners were adversely impacted by the landslide. The estimated areas directly damaged by the landslide are approximately 24 ha of farmland and 12 ha of forestry.

With regard to BPS, GLAS and forestry participants in the 2020 scheme year, *force majeure* applied to all 2020 participants in accordance with the governing EU regulations and no scheduled scheme payments were adversely affected as a direct result of the landslide.

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Leitrim County Council engaged with the services of consultant engineers to carry out an initial study on the background to this event and to make recommendations on more remedial actions. This report, in October 2020, considered and reported on the key factors influencing the triggering of the landslide and included recommendations on works that could be undertaken in the short term, including practical remediation measures and procurement options. It also included recommendations on further studies and investigations.

Any *ex gratia* payment will require the sanction of the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform as the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine does not have a contingency fund to pay for land damage or land remediation in circumstances such as this.

The multi-agency group agreed at its meeting in November 2020 that they would work together and follow up with my Department and the matter is under consideration at present.

With regard to farm payments, as the Deputy will be aware, my Department administers the various schemes on behalf of the European Union and both the Department and scheme participants are bound by the governing rules in the relevant EU regulations. *Force majeure* is a recognised feature in the EU regulations and this matter will be dealt with in line with the regulations.

Deputy Harkin has raised this matter with me previously, as has Deputy Martin Kenny and, in particular, the Minister of State, Deputy Feighan. My party colleague, Deputy MacSharry, has been in close contact with me on this issue too.

I am glad to be able to say that officials of my Department are contacting affected landowners or their agents to advise that *force majeure* will apply in respect of the 2021 scheme year and to assist them in making their applications. Affected applicants should ensure that their applications for participation in the various farm schemes in 2021 are submitted as required before any applicable closing dates, most notably and most urgently the basic scheme application, which must be submitted by 17 May.

I thank Deputy Harkin for raising this matter in the Dáil this evening so that it can be discussed. I am glad to bring that clarity to the matter. The working group, which the Deputy is participating in, will continue to address the matter in the time ahead as well. It is good to bring clarity to the payments matter this evening.

**Deputy Marian Harkin:** It is always positive to get a good response from a Minister. I am pleased that officials are contacting affected landowners to advise that *force majeure* will apply in respect of the 2021 scheme. That is a positive outcome and many people will be happy to hear that this evening.

However, I have spoken to a number of affected landowners in recent times and they had heard nothing but the Minister's word is good enough for me. That deals with the immediate issue of the application for the basic payment scheme, BPS, and everything that is contingent on that. It was a real worry for many landowners, not only the payments themselves but the fear that there might be some kind of penalties attached if these forms were filled out incorrectly.

There are the medium and longer term issues. I spoke to landowners whose drains are blocked, for example. Huge drains that would normally perhaps be 6 ft deep and 8 ft or 9 ft wide are blocked. What are they supposed to do? Can they clear out those drains because that is having a negative impact on the rest of their land? We need much more positive proactive

engagement from the Department. People want to stay within the regulations and the law but they do not know what to do. I would appreciate that engagement.

Finally, on the issue of compensation, the Minister said it is up to the Department of Finance, and that is fine. The Minister will note that in his own area of Inishowen, when there was a landslide, compensation was paid to farmers for losses incurred. I am only asking that the Department, in conjunction with the Department of Finance, put a similar scheme in place for the farmers in Drumkeeran.

**Deputy Charlie McConalogue:** I thank Deputy Harkin again for raising this matter in the Dáil this evening. As I indicated, the multi-agency group is an important forum and structure for trying to make progress on this. I will continue to have further engagements with my officials as well on the issues raised tonight to assess how matters can be brought forward.

It was a significant event and there was significant damage to and impact on the land. It was significantly different in scale from the Inishowen flooding, which involved primarily repairs to flood damage, whereas this was a land movement issue and a really challenging one to deal with.

My own officials will continue to engage through the working group. It is a challenging issue to deal with but I would encourage everyone to continue to work together. We will ensure that there is strong co-operation to try to tease out those remaining issues.

### **Care of the Elderly**

**Deputy Pauline Tully:** I wish to raise the issue of boarding out regulations which comes under SI 225 of 1993. As the date suggests, these regulations first came into operation in 1993. They allow for individuals or families to take care of elderly people in their own home. This is suitable for an older person who is not able to live independently or with family members of their own, or does not want to live alone. Boarding out is not suitable for the care of people who need high levels of medical support but it can reduce social isolation. It makes use of family homes rather than expensive residential facilities. It saves the State money while also fostering independence and well-being. The regulations have not been updated since 1993. A review was conducted ten to 12 years ago but very little change was made to the scheme.

Providers are contracted by the HSE to provide care for up to six elderly people in their own home. The CHO decides on the amount to be paid to the provider each week. Each resident also pays an amount of money to the provider which is decided by the HSE. Providers are asking that the regulations, which have been in place for 28 years and which have not been updated in over 12 years, be reviewed; that the weekly contribution from the HSE be increased and standardised across CHO areas; that the amount paid by the older person be standardised; that the number of residents allowed per house be increased; and that income tax concessions be updated. This care model is much more economical than the nursing home model. Older residents can stay in the community and live much more independent lives. This supported housing option for the elderly is strongly supported by Alone, the charitable organisation for older people.

Currently, the amount paid by the HSE towards the care of residents varies from €110 in one CHO area to €165 in another. Residents are asked to pay a fee which can vary from €140

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in one CHO area to €180 in another. Problems arise when residents from different CHO areas are living in the same house and are paying different amounts from their pension. Providers are also receiving different amounts for each person in their care, again depending on which CHO area they come from. The amount the HSE pays for each resident and the amount residents pay towards their care should be standardised across all CHO areas in the interests of fairness. The amount contributed by the HSE must also be increased. It has not increased in more than 12 years and the cost of living has risen immensely in that time and in the last year in particular, the cost of food has risen considerably. I ask that the maximum number of residents permitted under the scheme be increased from six to nine. The taxation system needs to be amended to enable host families to avail of tax exemptions similar to those available under the rent a room scheme or the foster care legislation. Similar schemes exist in the UK. A submission could be made to the Revenue Commissioners to enable host families to avail of the tax exemptions currently available under the rent a room scheme.

I first contacted the Minister for Health, Deputy Donnelly, on this issue last September and he advised me to speak to the Minister of State with responsibility for older people, Deputy Butler, which I did. I emailed details to her and have pursued this issue regularly. I put the proposals I have just outlined to officials in the Department of Health for assessment but I have not heard back from them. If the officials need more information or want to talk to people involved in this, that can be arranged. I sincerely hope this statutory instrument can be examined and updated.

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan):** I thank Deputy Tully for raising the boarding out scheme, in which she is very interested. The Government is committed to supporting people to live in dignity and independence in their own homes and communities for as long as possible. Where this is not feasible, the health service supports access to quality, long-term residential care where this is appropriate. We will continue to develop and improve health services in all regions of the country to meet this objective and to ensure quality and patient safety.

The 1993 regulations provide a framework for the operation of a boarding out scheme. These regulations include specific conditions relating to maintenance, care and welfare of an older person in a private house. The intention of the scheme was to provide social and personal care to older people who did not want, or were unable, to live on their own but wanted to remain in their local community. Under the regulations, the HSE must be satisfied that the house is suitable and the householder is fit to look after the person accessing the scheme. The householder must provide suitable and sufficient care, nutritious and various food and adequately attend to the needs of the person. The householder must also respect the privacy of the individual. Not more than six people can be boarded out in one house.

The regulations also set out standards regarding the suitability of accommodation, cleanliness, safety and other related matters. The regulations provide that the HSE may pay to the householder an amount not exceeding half the weekly rate of the non-contributory State pension in respect of each person accessing the scheme. In addition, the person being boarded out must pay to the householder an amount which is agreed between the HSE, the householder and the individual boarder. It was not intended that the scheme would provide medical or nursing care beyond the levels normally provided in a person's own home. Those availing of the scheme require a level of social care which is delivered by people who are funded to provide this service through the scheme, together with contributions from the older person.

The boarding out scheme has diminished over time and is now only available in a limited number of areas across the country. According to the HSE, there are 17 boarding out facilities across three of the CHOs. In 2017, the HSE completed a review of the scheme which concluded that an expansion was warranted. The last year has been very challenging for the health service in terms of responding to the current pandemic. This has highlighted the continuing importance of supporting people, including our older population, to access the right care in the right place at the right time. The boarding out scheme facilitates older people to remain in their communities where they might otherwise be accommodated in residential care. It can also help to reduce social isolation. While the use of the boarding out scheme by the HSE has traditionally been small, there is value in exploring it further. I am pleased to advise the House that the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, has asked officials in the Department to consider this model of care and the relevant regulations in the context of our overall commitment to enhancing opportunities for older people to stay in their homes and communities for longer.

**Deputy Pauline Tully:** I welcome the fact that the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, has asked officials to give this model of care more consideration to determine if an expansion of the scheme is warranted. That is good news. However, the issues I have outlined need to be addressed for those who are currently providing care under the scheme. Providers of boarding out facilities are currently working for less than the minimum wage. They are doing an immensely important job in helping our older generation to continue living in the community and ensuring they have the independence to do the things they wish to do. Providers, as well as providing a bed and meals, often bring people for appointments, collect their prescriptions and some are even cutting hair at the moment.

The HSE does not promote this form of care. I looked at the HSE website under “Services for Older People” but it is not mentioned or if it is, it is well hidden. Nursing homes are on the website but I could not find any reference to boarding out facilities. Alone supports this model of care, as referenced in its report, *Housing Choices for Older People in Ireland - Time for Action*, published in 2018. Alone believes a demand for up to 750 places could be met if the provision of this service was replicated across all CHO areas. Obviously, regulation and monitoring would be required and tax exemptions would be needed for providers to make this scheme more attractive. At the time of the report’s publication, there were only 51 people boarded out but many people do not know this facility exists.

The average cost annually to the State for boarding out facilities ranges from €8,000 to €9,000 per person per year, while nursing home care costs approximately €50,000. These are approximate figures and there will be differences from region to region but the savings to the State could be in the region of €30,000 per person. I wonder why this option is not being promoted more. I appreciate that it will not suit everybody but there are many for whom it would be ideal. Many older people living at home without proper supports often end up in nursing homes because their health fails due to their inability to care for themselves. If this option was available, it would avoid that outcome. While boarding out will not suit everyone, it should be an option that more people can consider.

**Deputy Frankie Feighan:** Again, I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. Our overriding objective is to support older people to live in dignity and independence in their own homes and communities for as long as possible. The Government is committed to the continued enhancement of health and social care services delivery at both individual and community level. Under the Sláintecare model, we are looking at a significant shift in our model of care towards one that is focused on prevention and early intervention, a model in which care will predominantly

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be provided at the lowest level of complexity in our local communities. It is important that we look at the boarding out scheme in this context, ensuring that it aligns with broad reform, such as the development of a statutory scheme for the financing and regulation of home support services. In addition, a reformed model of service delivery will be introduced to ensure the provision of home support in a transparent, equitable manner based on standard assessment of care needs.

A review was carried out 28 years ago. This review, which was carried out three years ago, may need a further review. I thank Deputy Tully for her concern and consideration.

### **Anti-Social Behaviour**

**Deputy Paul McAuliffe:** As Covid forced many people in society to withdraw from our public spaces, unfortunately, levels of antisocial behaviour crept in. As we head into a period when, hopefully, things will begin to open again and we will make greater use of our outdoor spaces, I and many other Members of this House want to make sure that they are safe places to be. Unfortunately, over recent weeks and months, we have seen an increase in incidents and high-profile incidents, in particular, of antisocial behaviour. I want to be very careful in saying that while some of these incidents involved young people, they are in no way emblematic of young people in Ireland, or of society as a whole.

What is the Government doing to tackle this issue? It is critically important to support traders, communities and people who have been restricted for so long, so that when they come back into circulation, they can do so in a safe place. We have seen the incidents reported online. A young lady was pushed off the platform of a train station. There have been incidents in Malahide with cars being attacked by groups of people. There was a looting incident in my area, in a place one would never see such an incident.

What can be done to tackle this issue? The youth justice strategy, which the Department of Justice has brought forward, is an important step. The antisocial behaviour forum, which Minister of State, Deputy Browne, chairs, is an important forum. In fact, it has been quite successful in dealing with its first issue, namely, scrambler bikes, which Members will be tired of hearing me talking about. It has dealt comprehensively with that issue. I urge the forum to move on and look at how we can ensure we have safe public spaces.

That needs to be done in two ways. We need a significant increase in gardaí and in the number of on-foot gardaí. I realise that is an operational matter, but it is something we need to communicate to the Commissioner. We need high-profile policing and greater visibility of policing in our communities. Our community gardaí do fantastic work, but there are blockages in the system. My station in Finglas had a fantastic community sergeant, John O'Reilly, to whom our community paid great credit. Unfortunately, for us, he has been promoted and we await a replacement for him. We must ensure those vacancies are not left for a significant period.

The Minister of State knows about the campaigning work we have done in Ballymun and the Ballymun – A Brighter Future report, which suggested increasing the number of gardaí by a factor of approximately 50 because it has one of the lowest representations of gardaí. We must also invest in youth services, ensure cutbacks made almost a decade ago are addressed as a priority, ensure street work and outreach work helps those young people who are most in need and ensure we reach those communities and households where people are engaging in antisocial

behaviour. Will the Minister of State update the House on the work the Government is doing on this issue and do everything it can to tackle it?

**Deputy Frankie Feighan:** I thank Deputy McAuliffe for raising this important issue. An inevitable impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and the public health restrictions, which we put in place in order to control the transmission of the virus, has been a significantly decreased public presence on city centre streets during the last year. I fully appreciate this has resulted in some of those who need to be in the city centre at times feeling less safe due to this reduced footfall. The absence of activities, which would usually be available to young people outside of school hours, has in some locations led to increases in antisocial behaviour among these age groups. The Minister, Deputy Humphreys, is acutely aware of the impact this and, indeed, any antisocial behaviour has on local communities. An Garda Síochána has continued to roll out information-led policing operations in response to specific incidents of antisocial behaviour throughout the pandemic. It has also continued Operation Spire and Operation Pier, which specifically target antisocial behaviour, public order offences and street-level drug dealing in Dublin city centre. These operations are supplemented by the continually high-visibility patrols in support of the public health regulations, which can and do respond to antisocial behaviours.

Deputy McAuliffe may be interested to note that the Garda authorities have reported that statistics in April show a decrease of 11% in public order offences in the year to date. While clearly a significant element of this drop can be attributed to the public health restrictions, the Minister, Deputy Humphreys, is encouraged by the ongoing efforts to prevent antisocial behaviour. It is important we continue to do all we can to tackle such behaviour.

Both the programme for Government and the Justice Plan 2021 include a number of actions to tackle antisocial behaviour and to enhance community safety. The Minister of State, Deputy Browne, and the Minister, Deputy McEntee, recently launched the new Youth Justice Strategy 2021-2027, which provides a framework to prevent offending behaviour and divert children and young adults away from crime. The immediate priority within the strategy is to enhance engagement with children and young people who are most at risk of involvement in criminal activity, principally by strengthening the service available through the existing network of 105 Garda youth diversion projects across the State.

In line with a commitment in the programme for Government, the Minister of State, Deputy Browne, has also established the antisocial behaviour forum, providing an additional mechanism to focus on the factors that give rise to antisocial behaviour and to identify potential solutions. As Deputy McAuliffe is aware, the Department of Justice has recently committed to providing funding to communities to deliver projects in response to the antisocial use of scramblers and quad bikes, following consideration of this topic by a subgroup of the forum. The Minister, Deputy Humphreys, is committed to building on the existing momentum to deliver the various justice plan actions with a view to dealing with the antisocial behaviour in an effective and informed way.

I thank Deputy McAuliffe for our recent engagement with his Ballymun task force. There are many issues which we can work collaboratively on across Government. I also saw those issues regarding antisocial behaviour on social media. They were horrific and lives could have been lost at the rail station. It sends out the wrong message and it is something I hope we can address across the Department of Justice, An Garda Síochána and the various forums, as quickly as possible.

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**Deputy Paul McAuliffe:** I welcome the Minister of State's comprehensive response to the issue I raised. It is fair to say that while the numbers are lower, the visibility of those incidents is much greater. We must ask ourselves why they are more visible during Covid time. With less international and national news, the stories of these individuals are coming to the fore, but in many ways those stories were there during busier news cycles. Those incidents are being told in Covid times.

It is really important that as life gets busier, we do not forget the victims of antisocial behaviour because when people experience it, in particular older people when they go outdoors, it shakes their confidence in their community, in their neighbours and in the people around them. At a very low level it can be a gang of young people at a shop who intimidate them into going in. Often that is just about both groups understanding each other. That is not the antisocial behaviour I am talking about. I am talking about the kind of pernicious and destructive antisocial behaviour that can vary from open drug dealing to aggressive begging and all those other issues. We need to deal with the social problems behind these things but we also need to make sure the streets are safe. That is not a matter for this House. The matter for this House is the resourcing of the Garda. Ensuring our spaces are safe is an operational matter for the Garda. I know the Garda does everything it can but I urge it to pay particular attention to open spaces, our public realm and to ensuring people feel safe in what is a great city here in Dublin, as well as in other public spaces right across the country.

**Deputy Frankie Feighan:** The Deputy is justifiably concerned about antisocial behaviour in Dublin and its effects on local communities. Antisocial behaviour can radically change the complexion of where each of us calls home and can make us feel distressed and unhappy. It can pose a serious threat to community safety and weaken collective resilience. Strong community engagement and services are critical in reducing and preventing antisocial behaviour. This is central to the comprehensive community safety policy currently being developed by the Department of Justice, based on the recommendations of the Commission on the Future of Policing in Ireland. This policy will underpin the new policing, security and community safety Bill, the general scheme of which was published last week.

Community safety is not just the responsibility of An Garda Síochána and the challenges communities face are not limited to policing issues. Bringing the right services together and working with each other to tackle the underlying issues that impact on a community and people's sense of safety within the community is key. The new legislation will place an obligation on Departments, State agencies and local authorities to co-operate with An Garda Síochána in delivering community safety. A key element of this framework will be the establishment of local community safety partnerships nationwide to develop local safety plans tailored to the priorities and needs of individual communities. Three pilot schemes are currently being developed in Dublin's north inner city, Waterford and Longford and will run for the next two years, ahead of a nationwide roll-out to all local authority areas. These partnerships will provide a strong forum to identify and tackle the issues causing antisocial behaviour in local areas, both in Dublin and throughout the country.

### **Driver Test**

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** I thank the Ceann Comhairle and Jill Gray in his office for facilitating this Topical Issue debate. We have been raising this matter with the Tánaiste, the Tao-

iseach and everyone else. The dogs in the street are aghast about it. Why is there such inertia in the Road Safety Authority, RSA, and the Department of Transport in dealing with this issue? A lady in my constituency has had her driver theory test rescheduled seven times since last October. Just this morning she received an email from the RSA to say that her test scheduled for 14 May, when the country will be reopened at level 3, has been cancelled already. It spends more time cancelling tests now than focusing on getting people driving. Farmers, agricultural contractors and all businesses need these young drivers to be on the road to help them. Many people who want to go to work, such as trainee nurses going on work placement or work experience, cannot go anywhere without a car.

**Deputy Michael Collins:** There are people all over west Cork trying to get theory tests and driving tests. The whole system seems to be blocked up and flawed. One lady told me she had her 12 lessons done but the system would not allow her to register them, which meant she could not book her test. This is mainly about young people's lives. Priority must be given to getting a more efficient system going. We blame Covid for all the wrongs but this has been a problem well before Covid. The test booking system is a shambles. In one example, two people from the same household tried booking a test at the same time. One was offered several available options in a particular time period and the other was not offered anything in the same timeframe. There are situations where logged lessons do not show up on the logbook portal, which means people will not get a test as the system states they have not completed their training. West Cork has a lot of young people looking to get their driving tests. We have a great driving test centre in Skibbereen but maybe somewhere like Bantry, Bandon, Clonakilty or Kinsale could be considered as a second centre to ease the pressure.

**Deputy Richard O'Donoghue:** In my constituency of Limerick, theory tests could have continued the whole way through the pandemic because they are done on a portal system. It would have been very easy. Other businesses kept going. This was a very easy system that could have been kept going to get the theory test out of the way so people could get their licences. It is so important to get the theory test done so people can apply for a licence because that gets them on the system for the insurance companies down the line. That is the main thing. People who have no transport and who want to go to college and get part-time work have been held up for nine and ten months over theory tests being put off all the time. A theory test is done on a computer screen. People sit in front of it and answer questions. Other businesses were able to continue. Why were the theory tests not able to?

**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:** I thank the Ceann Comhairle for allowing this very important debate. Prior to the pandemic, we had an issue with the waiting times for driving tests and theory tests. It is an issue I have highlighted time and again, as have my colleagues. Now the waiting list and the backlog of people who are eligible to take the test and want to take it is out of control. The Department of Transport and the RSA have failed young people time and again. The previous Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, Shane Ross, and the hierarchy of the RSA were more interested in criminalising young people than educating them. In the past, proposals were put forward to the Department to overhaul the way we educate our young people on the rules of the road and assist them in obtaining a driving licence. Again, this was thrown to the side because commonsense suggestions get nowhere these days, unfortunately.

The current waiting list for driving tests is at a crisis point and needs to be tackled once and for all. Back in 2007 and 2008 SGS Ireland was brought in to reduce the waiting lists and this worked very well. Something like this will have to be done again in the immediate short term to ease the pressure on driving testers, of which we simply do not have enough. I could go on

and on. In the past, very sensible and constructive proposals were put forward to deal with the driving tests, to both the Department of Transport and the RSA, and each time they fell on deaf ears. I am sorry to say this but I have no doubt that history will repeat itself and it will fall on deaf ears again.

I want to say to the people who contacted me as late as in the last ten minutes on my mobile phone, that the Rural Independent Group, led by Deputy Mattie McGrath, are here today asking the Minister of State please to do something for them. One young girl has had her theory test put back six times. Would the Minister of State like to be dealing with that person? Another person who spoke to Deputy Mattie McGrath had their test put back ten times. It is outrageous.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** It is, and the Deputy has made the case very clearly.

**Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Osian Smyth):** I thank the Deputies for raising these important questions. All Deputies in this House will have been contacted by constituents asking when this vital service will be brought back online. I am answering questions on behalf of my colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy Hildegard Naughton. She sends her apologies.

Driving tests for essential workers will continue to be the priority for the driving test service. In line with the gradual reopening of services, driving tests for all those who are eligible to take the test and those who have been waiting longest will recommence in a limited fashion from late May. The further opening of the driver testing service will be the subject of discussions between Department of Transport officials and the Road Safety Authority in the coming weeks.

Due to the suspension of driver testing services in the initial pandemic response, along with the health protocols required since the resumption of services, a significant backlog has developed. RSA driver testers are undertaking driving tests in extraordinarily difficult conditions, in an enclosed space where physical distancing is not possible. Testers are also moving between vehicles provided by test candidates, which are not controllable work environments. The Department of Transport is liaising with the RSA on an ongoing basis to meet the growing demand for tests.

An additional 40 driver testers have been authorised, along with 36 who were approved for retention or rehire in 2020. Deputy Michael Collins asked whether additional test centres can be put on line, and they will be. The RSA is making good progress in recruiting these additional testers and they are expected to be conducting tests by the end of June 2021. The Department and the RSA will monitor what impact the new testers are having as they come on stream and the Covid-19 restriction level reduces. Further recruitment, if necessary, is being discussed. The health of the public and the testers must take priority, and, as a result, it is important to recognise that it will take time to get driver testing waiting times back to normal pre-Covid-19 levels.

Regarding driver theory tests, this is not an essential service and remains closed. In the meantime, the RSA is engaging with its service provider to examine ways of increasing the number of tests for when services resume. The aim is to increase capacity at all test centres to cater for additional appointments. Pre-pandemic capacity was approximately 15,000 tests per month. When the service is allowed to reopen, the aim is to provide approximately 50,000 tests per month. This would make substantial inroads into the backlog. A pilot online driver theory test is under way for trucks and buses. The roll-out of this option to theory tests for cars

is planned to begin during May 2021, with up to 3,000 online car theory tests being conducted per month. There will be a limit on the number of customers who can avail of the service during the initial roll-out phase, but work is ongoing to make online services more widely available towards the end of 2021.

As part of the broader easing of restrictions across Irish society, I am happy to confirm that the gradual reopening of the driver instruction industry will commence from 10 May. Initial basic training, IBT, the course of mandatory lessons that learner motorcyclists must complete with an approved driver instructor, ADI, will resume for all learners from that date, regardless of employment status. Essential driver training, EDI, for cars may also resume from 10 May, but this will only be in circumstances where the learner in question is a confirmed essential worker. This cohort will be required to download and complete a self-declaration from the RSA website, which they must then present to the instructor before starting lessons. The RSA will also reopen the online EDT portal on 10 May to allow instructors to upload completed modules for the learners in question. The RSA has issued a formal communication regarding these changes to ADIs across the country via the ADI stakeholder forum.

The gradual reopening of services will not immediately solve the backlogs in the driver theory test, driver test and driving lessons. Every possible measure is being put in place to ensure that the maximum number of customers can be served, while public health guidance is strictly adhered to.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** That is a pathetic reply. It is no wonder the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, or the Minister of State, Deputy Naughton, would not come into the House and read it out. Have the Government Ministers and the RSA board a brain among them? That board is arrogant and out of control. It cares nothing about young people, old people or anybody. It is outrageous that this is the answer we get. Why was it not possible to have some kind of imagination and make some effort to facilitate people? It is only wait, wait, wait and discrimination against workers, regarding whether they are essential or not. It is despicable that it is not possible to do a theory test online in this day and age. We are going backwards.

We have a board that is a quango. It is a cabal, and does not care. New members were appointed by the former Minister and Deputy, Shane Ross. They are all sitting there on a board. Would any of them have a bit of interest in young people or any driver? Appointments are being cancelled as often as 12 times. An appointment for 14 May was cancelled last Friday at 7 p.m., and an appointment for Monday morning was cancelled. It is totally disrespectful to the electorate. That is the way the Government is going on, and then the Minister of State comes in here with that toilet paper and reads it out.

**Deputy Michael Collins:** I have spoken to driving instructors in west Cork. They feel they were disowned in this crisis. The responses given by the RSA to instructors were either non-existent or were childish during this pandemic. The RSA takes a fee of €250 per instructor every two years for registration. It never answers regarding what that money is spent on. It is definitely not spent on correspondence fees. The RSA has what it describes as an ADI stakeholder forum. The representative is not even known to my local instructors.

The Minister of State said this is not an essential service. That is very unfair to so many people out there who need to go to work and to avail of essential services. I appreciate that the Minister of State said that additional test centres are being examined. In an area as huge as west Cork, however, Skibbereen test centre cannot be expected to take all the workload. Areas such

as Bandon, Clonakilty and Kinsale need test centres open, and this certainly must be deemed an essential service. I plead with the Minister of State, and with the Minister who should be here, to come before the people and put this right for once and for all. This situation should not be allowed to drag on for several more years.

**Deputy Richard O'Donoghue:** I am very disappointed with the Minister of State. He said a theory test is not essential. What about the harvest this year? What about the farmers whose sons and daughters want to help to bring in the harvest? That is essential. Those sons and daughters can get their theory tests when they are 16 years old and can then drive tractors on their own farms. The Minister of State thinks that is not essential, but that just proves the point I have been making since I was elected.

The Government is too city-based and does not understand rural Ireland or anything about farming. The Minister of State has just proven that by saying that he thinks a driver theory test is not essential. Why? It is because he does not understand about the harvest and he does not understand the people in our areas who do not have transport. They need to get to college, to the grocery shops and to their part-time jobs, but the Minister of State is saying the people of Ireland are not essential. That is exactly what he has just said, because he does not understand the situation.

**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:** I will sum this up in a couple of words. The Minister of State knows sweet damn all about cutting silage. If he did, he would not have made the statement he did here on the record to disgrace himself and the Government he is supposed to represent. It is easy for the RSA to criminalise, penalise, demonise and paint the young people of Ireland as a target for increased revenue for the State, when the reality is that only 6.6% of traffic accidents involved young drivers and they may not even have been the cause of the accidents. It is a real pity the RSA does not focus more on the way it educates young people before they sit behind the wheel. For me, that is the real issue.

Will the Minister of State please take back the nonsensical and silly statement he made about theory tests being non-essential and only being essential for certain categories? It is essential for every young person of an age when he or she wants to get behind the wheel, like every one of us did. They are young people; we adore them and we want them to get on the road. They are as safe and entitled to do that as anybody else. If the Minister of State did know about cutting silage, he would know that a tractor cannot drive itself. A young boy or girl must be at the wheel. That is how the silage is cut and how the animals are fed in the wintertime, but a lot the Minister of State cares about the animals or the people or the young people. He has shown that here tonight.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I thank the Deputy. I think he may have been a little harsh on the Minister of State. I doubt he realised that he was going to have to explore the challenges of cutting silage when he came in to take this Topical Issue matter. I am sure the Minister of State will convey the messages he has received to his colleagues. He also has a further response.

**Deputy Ossian Smyth:** The Ceann Comhairle was very kind to defend me, but I really am fine. I thank all the Deputies for their contributions, and particularly the constructive suggestion from Deputy O'Donoghue that we bring our driver theory tests online, as they should be. I am very happy that it is starting this month, and that there will be approximately 3,000 tests per month for cars and that it is also happening for other vehicle classes.

While the driver test service is limited at present, the RSA is making plans for when testing will be permitted to resume for all. This includes increasing the numbers of testing staff. The RSA is also examining whether the number of tests a driver tester can perform each day can be increased. Due to the additional hygiene and sanitation procedures now required, each testing slot takes much longer to complete, and consequently the number of tests a driver tester could conduct each day was reduced from eight to five when the service reopened. Following experience of managing tests under Covid-19 conditions, this increased to six in mid-September.

The RSA has set up a dedicated web forum so essential workers can request a driver test. Anyone seeking an urgent driver test appointment who falls into this category can apply to book a driver test this way. The Department of Transport welcomes the roll-out of the online theory testing service, albeit in a limited capacity initially, and the RSA is fully committed to extending the service to all categories of vehicles. However, the expansion of services will take time. Operational, technical and contractual issues must be addressed prior to further expansion. There will be a limit on the number of customers able to avail of the service during the initial roll-out phase, but work is ongoing to make online services more widely available towards the end of 2021. From the start, it has been clear that the first priority is public safety. We want to provide services, and we know people are seeking services, but we will provide them only to the limit possible while preserving public health.

### **Estimates for Public Services 2021: Message from Select Committee**

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The Select Committee on Agriculture, Food and the Marine has completed its consideration of the following Revised Estimates for public services for the year ending 31 December 2021: Vote 30.

### **Message from Business Committee**

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The standing Business Committee has completed its consideration, under Standing Order 30, of the request by the Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment to waive the requirement for pre-legislative scrutiny, under Standing Order 173, of the general scheme and draft heads of the Workplace Relations (Miscellaneous Amendments) Bill 2021, and has agreed thereto.

*Written Answers are published on the Oireachtas website.*

The Dáil adjourned at 9.10 p.m. until 2 p.m. on Tuesday, 11 May 2021.

6 May 2021