



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE  
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

**DÁIL ÉIREANN**

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

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# DÁIL ÉIREANN

*Dé Máirt, 25 Bealtaine 2021*

*Tuesday, 25 May 2021*

Chuaigh an Ceann Comhairle i gceannas ar 2 p.m.

***Paidir.***

***Prayer.***

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

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** The Green Party has long campaigned for affordable homes. It promised to invest in large-scale affordable housing developments and reuse vacant stock for affordable homes, thereby revitalising our urban centres and tackling climate change. The Green Party continually promotes compact growth and rightly advocates for the 15-minute city. Yet, the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, and his colleagues are part of a Government that is actively undermining these policies. That Government is allowing big institutional investors to snap up thousands of family homes and denying would-be buyers from realising their dream of owning homes. It is also allowing these institutional investors to charge sky-high rents, which is squeezing more and more working people out of our city centres.

The planning and tax measures announced last week will do nothing to solve these problems. In fact, the exclusion of apartments from either measure will make matters worse. Are apartments not homes? Do we not want people to rent and buy affordable apartments in our city centres? On Thursday last, the Minister told the Dáil: "The market is not working ... There has to be a radical change and we will help steer that change from within government." Only days later, however, we learned that not only is it allowing big institutional investors buy up family homes, the Government is actually funding them to do this. Home Building Finance Ireland was set up by Government to fund medium-sized builders to build and deliver mid-priced homes. The Minister for Finance, Deputy Donohoe, is the main shareholder and yet over the past 12 months - with the full knowledge of his Department - he has given €264 million of taxpayers' money to big developers to build almost 1,000 homes. Home Building Finance Ireland and the Department of Finance knew that all of these homes would be sold to big institutional investors which would charge extortionate rents. Last week, the Tánaiste told the Dáil there may have been only one case or a handful of cases where Home Building Finance Ireland invested in build-to-let investments. Now, of course, we know this is not true. In the past year, 30 Home Building Finance Ireland loans, totalling more than 56% of the homes it is financing to be built, have gone to big institutional investors. What in God's name would the Minister do to allow taxpayers' money to be used to fund wealthy developers build and sell homes that will then

be rented out? Why is this money not being used to build homes and apartments for working people to rent and buy at genuinely affordable prices, as the Minister promised in his election manifesto? Will the Minister give a commitment that the Government will immediately cease using taxpayers' money in this way and instead invest the money in the large-scale delivery of affordable homes for working people? The current level of investment by the Government in affordable purchase and affordable cost rental homes is derisory. This is not just the view of the Opposition, it is the view of every independent agency. When will the Government stop allowing taxpayers' money to be used to invest in homes for funds and when will it start to invest in homes for working people?

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

The housing crisis is at the top of the Government's agenda. We now have to apply the same cross-governmental approach we applied to Covid to housing because it is the real crisis of our time, particularly for young people. The Government is committed to doing everything we can to meet this crisis. It is a multifaceted problem. There is not one simple cure-all solution that will get us out of this. We will require a range of different initiatives. It will be in the delivery of social housing, the delivery of accommodation that people buy and the delivery of rental accommodation, particularly new solutions such as cost rental, that will meet the various needs of various people. More than anything else, we need to do this so our younger people have a chance to set up home in a viable way. An apartment home is absolutely just as important as a house, if not more important because we want, as the Deputy said, to bring back compact development close to the centre of cities and towns so people can live in a sustainable way that creates a good sense of community. Those apartments and flats are just as important as any other community.

How do we do this? In some instances, it will be through the €3.3 billion budget for direct spend by the public sector in social housing. This will give us a lever and control to be able to go flat out on this and build as many homes as we can as quickly as possible. We must also recognise, in truth, that one of the real constraints and problems is the availability of the construction sector to build houses and, at the same time, build the transport system and water, health and education infrastructure, carry out retrofitting and meet the other needs we have. We have huge demand and we will spend a lot of money on capital investment. Having workers with training and skills is one of the key issues.

We will also need agencies such as the Land Development Agency, and I understand the Land Development Agency Bill 2021 is on Committee Stage. This will mean the State will build not just social housing in the traditional model but new housing that is affordable for purchase and affordable cost rental housing. That will be key to the role of the Land Development Agency. The role of other Departments will be to provide State lands to allow the Land Development Agency to provide the cost rental solutions that give security of tenure at affordable rents and will build up the apartment as a home concept.

There is also a role for the private sector. The ESRI's housing needs demand study does not have set targets but makes an indicative case, similar to what the Central Bank has set out, that we need 33,000 houses a year, with one third social housing, one third rental and one third for purchase. The Government may have slightly different figures. We need solutions in these areas also.

The financing in this regard was put in place to help the building sector provide some of those houses for purchase and or rent. Another part of the problem we have, as well as the

shortage of building workers, is that we do not have a financing system that is fit for purpose. We are down to two main banks and the legacy of the housing crash is that our basic funding mechanisms for development and construction are not working. The market is not working. We need that type of intervention, among many other initiatives, to get the balanced range of solutions we need. If we present it as though there is one easy fit if only there was political will to do it, that would not be honest and neither would it be accurate in terms of what the problem is. The problem is multifaceted and needs a range of solutions, including the ability of various agencies to make sure that we have the development finance to ensure that a range of different properties are built.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** It is revealing that the Minister did not at any stage say that it is wrong for taxpayers' money to be given to large developers who do not need it to build houses and apartments that will be sold to large institutional investors who will charge working families rip-off rents. That is either right or wrong. I would like to hear the Minister's response in respect of it.

The Poolbeg strategic development zone is in the Minister's constituency. This is another example of the failed Government housing policy. Thousands of homes are going to be developed in this area for the high-end high-priced build-to-rent sector. We now have a situation where, because of the Government's failure last week to include apartments in the planning and tax changes, the 550 affordable homes guaranteed in that strategic development zone are in jeopardy. Can the Minister tell us whether he believes it is wrong for taxpayer's money to go to big developers to build developments that will be sold to institutional investors to be rented at sky-high rents? What is he going to do, particularly with respect to including apartments in the measures on planning and tax announced last week, to ensure that the 550 affordable homes that are supposed to be delivered for voters in his constituency will actually be delivered and will not go to large institutional investors, thereby ensuring that people will have to continue to pay rip-off rents?

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** In the Poolbeg development, I have no sense that those affordable housing units will not become available. I am not happy with the mechanism used in the context of the development of that project to date. I would have much preferred it if we had got direct State build and access to the land but that is not the legacy that we inherited. We will manage matters, however, and make sure that we provide we provide social and affordable housing units on that site and others.

This evening, our councillors will be working - Sinn Féin has been involved with a similar issue in Donabate - in the context of the sort of solutions that we are presenting within government to give power to local authorities in order that they will retain a certain percentage of homes and that homes cannot all be sold off to institutional funds. This is because we want a mix. To go back to my key argument, we need a mix of different solutions. This evening, our councillors will be taking that approach in order to deliver real solutions on the ground.

The provision of finance, be it by the Ireland Strategic Investment Fund or the other financing agencies, is not a cash injection from or a payment by the Exchequer. We are setting up financing mechanisms that allow us have a range of different solutions. We need financing. Our financing system is not working. We need a variety of different operators including, where there are gaps in the market, the State intervening to make sure that we have finance.

**Deputy Alan Kelly:** No sooner did we get some light at the end of the tunnel in respect

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of Covid than the B1617 variant appeared on our shores. My home is close to Limerick city. The number of Covid-19 cases in Limerick has increased, with 272 new cases diagnosed in the past week. We do not know how many of those cases involve this variant. Up to Friday last, 73 cases of the B1617.2, commonly known as the Indian variant, had been detected in Ireland. This is just a snapshot of the situation over the past number of weeks because it takes time to sequence the variant but there has been a huge spread of this variant in the UK. I want to question the Minister as regards what the Government is doing to deal with this in the context of our vaccine roll-out. The variant is obviously spreading.

The National Public Health Emergency Team, NPHE, has said that it is genuinely concerned about the number of cases involving the variant. People are worried about this variant. A concern has been raised with me by many people over the past week or two, in particular those who are due to get their second dose of the AstraZeneca vaccine, namely, those in the 60 to 70 age cohort. I am sure this has been raised with the Minister and has come up in government.

The latest UK research data for the variant shows that two doses of AstraZeneca provide just under 60% protection, and the figure for the Pfizer vaccine is 87.9%. What is really worrying is that the first dose of AstraZeneca only provides 30% protection according to a very credible UK study. Those who have received the AstraZeneca vaccine must wait at least 12 weeks to get their second dose.

I and my colleague, Deputy Brendan Howlin, have raised this issue with the Minister for Health several times. It is a cause of serious concern to an age group that could be the next most vulnerable, namely, those aged between 60 and 70. This means that of all the cohorts vaccinated, those in the 60 to 70-year-old bracket will have the lowest level of protection, the longest waiting time for a follow-up dose and will be at the greatest risk of ending up in hospital. In order to tackle this concern, across the sea the UK has dropped the time limit from 12 to eight weeks for the second dose of AstraZeneca. This issue is of genuine concern to those aged between 60 and 70 who are constantly raising this issue with all politicians.

Will the national immunisation advisory committee, NIAC, re-examine the vaccination strategy for people aged 60 and above? Will we follow what has happened in Britain and shorten the waiting time for the second dose? Will we do what has been suggested by some in the medical profession, that is, offer a second dose of the Pfizer vaccine for those aged between 60 and 70 in order to boost their protection against this variant, given that the evidence shows they will have greater protection much more quickly than what is currently proposed, which is a wait of between 12 and 16 weeks?

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** We have to be constantly vigilant and concerned about what is happening with Covid-19, including local incidence rates. Deputy Kelly cited Limerick as one example. We have to continue to monitor the situation. The reality is that the figures over the past two months have been relatively stable. We would like to see them lower but by any international comparison, we have one of the lowest levels of transmission.

There is a whole variety of variants. The B1617 variant is of particular concern. As of 24 May, there were 128 cases of the variant of concern confirmed in Ireland, 89 cases of B1617.2 and 39 cases of B1617.1. Critical to that is the ongoing high incidence of genomic testing to enable us to find out where there are clusters. One of the reasons the UK may have identified high incidence rates in certain areas is because, in fairness to it, it is doing a very high level of

genomic testing, at a rate much higher than most other countries.

We cannot assume that when there is not a higher level of testing that cases are not present in other countries. As we know, a variety of variants are continuing to evolve. Variance is an ongoing risk of the Covid pandemic. The Public Health England study gives some reassurance about protection, in particular, as the Deputy said, after two doses. In terms of percentages, I understand the key figure we need to consider is the level of hospitalisation, while not underestimating the fact that some who are not symptomatic do not have to go to hospital. That is the key measure we have to protect against.

I understand the Deputy's suggestion is that we again alter the vaccine roll-out programme for those aged in their 60s. We will have to defer to public health advice and the vaccine roll-out group in terms of how we do that. I will be honest and say that I would be slightly concerned that we minimise the level of change unless there is a very clear public health argument in favour of it. The vaccination programme is working. We are seeing an incredible show of strength by the HSE in the way it set up vaccination centres and in the GPs have rolled in on the process. That will widen out to pharmacists and others. One of the real difficulties they have had is constant changes in the roll-out programme. This makes it difficult for them, especially with regard to the AstraZeneca vaccine, because we know that has been the most variable in terms of delivery. Saying anything with certainty on AstraZeneca at the moment might give false hope, because we have not had a clear, absolutely certain delivery timetable for it at any stage over the past six months. I will present the argument to the relevant experts but cannot commit to taking up the Deputy's advice.

**Deputy Alan Kelly:** I am the most pro-vaccine person the Minister will ever meet. I have a track record to show that. The HSE has done an incredible job under very difficult circumstances, many of them outside its control. However, the real issue I am raising is based on the UK study and the sequencing that has been done. The UK has much more data than us, as the Minister rightly said. Those in that age bracket, based on the analysis that has come from our closest neighbour, will in a few months' time have the lowest level of protection, even though it is a quite vulnerable age group. Members of this group wait the longest for a follow-up dose and, according to the analysis, will have the greatest risk of ending up in hospital.

I am asking the Minister to put this forward to NIAC and ask that it be considered as something that we need to give confidence to, for that age cohort in particular. I have been extremely surprised by the number of people who have come to me to outline this argument, and it is growing. At least if the Minister puts it to NIAC, and it comes back and gives reassurance, that issue will be dealt with. I would appreciate it if the Minister would do so.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** I will happily put that to NIAC as the Deputy suggests. One cause of comfort, although maybe it is the wrong word, is to look at what is actually happening. My understanding on what has been reported in Limerick is that there has been a spike locally. The numbers are not huge and, while we still have to keep an eye on every such spike, it has not been in that older age category in Limerick. It has been in the younger age category, so we have to look and see.

Regarding the UK and potential importation, the advice remains the same for the immediate future on no non-essential travel. There is strong advice against it from any location at the present time. There will be statements later on the whole issue of international travel. Again, one issue we have to take account of in any projected timeline for the return of international

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travel, is it would likely be over three months since most of that age category would have been vaccinated. In that sort of time period, it is likely that the vast majority of the cohort concerned, because there is a concern with older age cohorts, will be in the category of getting 80% to 90%-plus coverage, which the public science seems to indicate. That gives us some protection, but we have to remain vigilant at all times.

**Deputy Mick Barry:** Today is the third anniversary of the historic vote to repeal the eighth amendment. That huge pro-woman, pro-civil rights vote was a vote for choice and an end to hypocritical Irish solutions to Irish problems. There are many outstanding issues with the subsequent legislation, including the fact that only one in ten GPs and only half the maternity hospitals are providing for abortion while at least one pregnant person a day is still being forced to travel.

However, the key outstanding issue is who will own the new national maternity hospital and whether it will provide full abortion services. Some €500 million of taxpayers' money is being spent on our new national maternity hospital. The hospital should be 100% State-owned and abortion services should be provided there in full. However, the 2020 annual general meeting, AGM, of the current National Maternity Hospital was informed by its legal team that something very different was on the table. What was being looked at was for the State to gift the hospital to the St. Vincent's Healthcare Group and then to lease it for 99 years, and, along with the National Maternity Hospital medical team, the St. Vincent's Healthcare Group medical team would be granted a licence to work at the hospital.

The St. Vincent's Healthcare Group is the late successor organisation of the nuns of the Religious Sisters of Charity. They are obliged to uphold the values and vision of the founder of the Sisters of Charity, Mary Aikenhead, in other words to uphold Roman Catholic doctrine. The former master of the National Maternity Hospital, Holles Street, Dr. Peter Boylan, put it very well in 2017. He said:

To believe that the new National Maternity Hospital will be the only hospital in the world owned by a Catholic congregation to permit sterilisation, IVF, abortion, gender re-assignment surgery, and any other procedures prohibited by the Church is naive and delusional ... That approximately €300 million of public money will be spent on such a project is a scandal.

His words require only two updates. The €300 million should now read €500 million, and the same points would apply to the lay successor organisation.

In 2012, Savita Halappanavar died a preventable death in a church-run hospital and in 2018 the people voted for decisive change. The fact that the Government of which the Minister is a part has not ruled out an arrangement for our new national maternity hospital that involves less than 100% State ownership, with medical procedures 100% decided by the State's representatives, is indeed a scandal. I have two questions for the Minister. First, will he take this opportunity to guarantee to the House that the new national maternity hospital will be 100% State-owned? Second, will he also guarantee that abortion services will be fully available to women at the new national maternity hospital?

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** The Deputy is right to frame this question in the context of the vote three years ago to repeal the eighth amendment. The people are sovereign in our constitutional Republic and what we have to do now, as set out in the legislation following that vote, is to con-

duct a three-year review of how the new services are working, to heed what the World Health Organization and the National Women's Council of Ireland are saying about gaps in the service that may become apparent, and to adjust accordingly. Included within that will absolutely be a guarantee that the new national maternity hospital will be 100% in public ownership. It will be operated by two separate voluntary hospitals, which will provide health services without religious, ethnic or other distinction or ethos, in accordance with its operating licence. That framework will also ensure that the new national maternity hospital will have clinical, operational, financial and budgetary independence in the provision of maternity, gynaecology and neonatal services. The answer to both the Deputy's questions is "Yes" because this issue goes back to the fundamental decision made by the Irish people in that repeal vote three years ago. The decision is also in line with the legislation and what has been committed to in the programme for Government.

It is important that we build this hospital, which was originally proposed back in 2013. We are not yet even at the planning or tendering stage and as we know, projects in this country - particularly building projects - take significant time. We also have a duty to the parents, the mothers and their partners, to have the very best services. We need to proceed but will only do so on the basis of the hospital not having any clinical, operational or other leads other than the State. That is reflective of what was set out in the Irish Constitution following the repeal vote, which is that such services will be available to all our women, including in our new national maternity hospital.

**Deputy Mick Barry:** What the Minister has just said is different from what has been said by representatives of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. To date, they have failed to give an absolute guarantee that this hospital will be 100% owned by the State and that abortion services will be fully and freely available to women there. The Minister is at odds with what his Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael colleagues are saying. I suspect foot-dragging here on the part of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. Both parties have a long, sorry and shameful tradition of failing to fight unhesitatingly for the civil rights of women on these issues and of pulling their punches when it comes to dealing with the Roman Catholic Church. Decisions are due on this project in the next few weeks. Will the Minister give a guarantee to the House that, if Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael come one iota short of full 100% State ownership of the hospital and full provision of abortion services to Irish women in it, the Green Party will make it an issue and would be prepared to break with the Government, if it does not do the right thing on this key church-State issue?

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** I do not have a sense that the Taoiseach, and the head of Fianna Fáil, takes such a different position. In fact, going back to the repeal vote, he took a position at that time that was probably difficult within his party. He and the Minister for Health, Deputy Stephen Donnelly, have taken similar positions in anything I have heard. It is similar with Fine Gael. I have never heard the previous Minister for Health, Deputy Harris, or the Tánaiste, Deputy Varadkar, say anything different regarding the approach on this issue, the status of the national maternity hospital or the absolute commitment across Government to ensuring that it is fully independent in all its operations. I do not expect there will be any difference on that. It does not divide this House and it does not divide Government. It is a matter of getting on and delivering the hospital, while giving absolute guarantees of its full independence, particularly in all clinical matters with which it has to deal and medical procedures it has to undertake. I see no divide or difference in the Government in that regard.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The fourth question comes from the Regional Group. I call Deputy Grealish.

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**Deputy Noel Grealish:** I was elected to Galway County Council in June 1999. One of the first items on the agenda at my first meeting was the proposed Galway city outer bypass. The initial plan for the bypass was published in October 1999, with a projected cost of £103.8 million or approximately €130 million. The intended route of the bypass would have entailed the demolition of eight houses. The following years saw major legal challenges in respect of the project. Despite An Bord Pleanála part-approving the project, the matter ended up going to the European Court of Justice. After that court's ruling in April 2013, it was officially abandoned. The projected cost when the project was finally abandoned was approximately €444 million, which was nearly three and a half times the original estimate.

In late 2013, the consultant firm Arup was appointed to design what is now called the N6 Galway city ring road. In 2015, the emerging preferred route was published. It consists of 12 km of dual carriageway, 6 km of single carriageway, a bridge over the River Corrib, a viaduct and two tunnels, one of which will run under part of Galway racecourse. The impact of this new proposed road on families, businesses and farmers will be significantly greater than would have been the case with the original route. It will involve the demolition of 44 family homes, with ten more to be acquired. Several industrial and commercial properties are also to be acquired or demolished. More than 320 non-agricultural properties will be subject to partial land acquisitions, including parts of gardens and driveways, but mostly roadside strips outside boundary walls. Overall, 219 hectares of farmland from 195 land parcels will be acquired.

The proposed cost of this project has increased to approximately €650 million. I firmly believe that the cost of this project, if it gets the go-ahead, will be in excess of €1 billion. More than €35 million has been spent on this project since 1999, €14.7 million on the initial Galway city outer bypass and approximately €20 million on the current project. As already stated, Arup was appointed in 2013. The current proposal emerged in 2015 and was submitted to An Bord Pleanála in October 2018, almost three years ago. The oral hearing in respect of this road project took place in 2020 and the decision on it was deferred from April to 25 June. However, this date is not written in stone. We are 22 years into this project, with millions spent and still no road. Is the Government 100% committed to providing the funding for this project if it gets the go-ahead from An Bord Pleanála?

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** Deputy Grealish has a good, clear understanding of the history of transport in Galway. I remember that an engineer looked at the city in the late 1990s and stated that there would be a real problem there unless we changed our ways, because the emphasis on building road networks and roundabouts was going to cause gridlock. That is what that person argued at the time, and it subsequently turned out to be true. Galway city's transport system is not working. I would argue that it is the city in this country which is the least functional in transport terms. It needs radical change and a range of different solutions.

The Deputy is also correct with regard to looking at the history of this situation and, returning to earlier discussions, how long it takes for us to build anything. The Galway road to which the Deputy referred is as good an example as any.

We must await the publication of the findings from the An Bord Pleanála hearing. My understanding is that the board may issue its decision towards the end of June. It could be later, in the order of these things. We will have to await that decision. Even then, as with any large transport project, there will be a series of further decision points before it actually gets the go-ahead. It is still necessary to go through the Government public procurement process for assessing projects. That includes a business case being presented and a tendering stage when the

actual cost is determined.

I agree with the Deputy that the actual final cost of the project is likely to be much higher than anything that has been speculated to date. Looking at the cost of other road projects that are being commissioned at this time, the costs tend to be significantly higher than what was originally estimated. Transport Infrastructure Ireland is trying to avoid that eventuality by setting pricing estimates that take into account all eventualities. However, we are still likely to see a higher cost in this area.

The issue of the householders on the proposed route is a critical one. The Deputy has spoken to me on several different occasions in respect of the difficult situation in which they find themselves. He is right. They are unable to sell their houses and do not know what is happening. I am afraid they will have to await the publication of the findings of the An Bord Pleanála hearing. An Bord Pleanála might set conditions that change the route or aspects of the project, which might change their circumstances. Those people have been caught up in this process for a long time. The decision cannot come quickly enough for them.

I have agreed with Government colleagues that we must look at a whole range of different transport projects in Galway and not just focus on one project, as if one project alone can solve the problems. Huge investment in active travel is needed immediately in Galway to address the problems that exist in the city. BusConnects for Galway needs to be built out. That work has started. The development of the routes through sensitive areas, such as across the Salmon Weir Bridge and Eyre Square, is now in progress. It is vital that these projects proceed. No matter what we do on the road, we are going to need that infrastructure. The rail line from Athenry to Ceannt Station will need to be upgraded. The Deputy will have heard me speak about the benefit that development will bring, not just for Athenry but for Oranmore, Ardrahan and new areas in the city which need to be developed. The road project can only be considered in that wider context. That is how it was included in the Galway metropolitan strategy. That is what I follow as our guide in terms of any future Government decisions that are made.

**Deputy Noel Grealish:** As I stated, 54 homeowners are about to lose their homes and many more landowners and farmers are directly affected by this project. The homeowners find themselves stuck in limbo, whereby they cannot sell their houses or downsize because nobody will buy them. They cannot build new houses because technically, they still have a home. They do not want to spend any significant money renovating or refurbishing because they do not know how much longer they will be living there. They could be stuck in this limbo for years, just as the eight homeowners on the original route were before the project was finally abandoned, 14 years after it was originally proposed.

These homeowners deserve certainty and clarity. Will the Government come up with a plan to buy these houses without delay if An Bord Pleanála gives the project the go-ahead and regardless of any legal or judicial challenges that might be taken, which could last several years? I ask the Minister to give some hope to these homeowners if An Bord Pleanála does grant permission for this project. I urge him not to leave these homeowners hanging for years as the process is ongoing.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** I understand that Galway County Council has already set up and advanced the negotiation strategy for the road project. All affected householders are invited to participate. Subject to the decision for approval, I encourage Galway County Council - and we will do everything we can in this regard - to assist those householders who have been affected.

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I wish to make one final point. Going back to my earlier statements, I do not wish to be critical of Galway. However, we must think about the special beauty of the city. I recall attending a conference in the National University of Ireland Galway in recent years, at which we looked at the planning and transport systems in Galway. Someone made the point that if only we could go back to that period in 1999, we could build more of Galway in Galway. In other words, the city has unique characteristics. It is located beside its own bay, with good urban features and streets that are attractive to walk on. We need to build more of those features in Galway. We need to develop features that make Galway a spectacular place to live. Galway could be a 15-minute city in which all services are within walking and cycling distance. Those 54 households deserve that, and they have to get out of their difficult circumstances. However, every household in Galway deserves us looking at how we can create a planning framework that makes Galway special and, included in that, solves the transport problems that beset the city.

### **Message from Seanad**

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Seanad Éireann has passed the Loan Guarantee Schemes Agreements (Strategic Banking Corporation of Ireland) Bill 2021 without amendment, and has passed the Planning and Development, Heritage and Broadcasting (Amendment) Bill 2021 without amendment.

### **Committee on Standing Orders and Dáil Reform: Change of Membership**

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I wish to announce for the information of the House that Deputy Cian O'Callaghan has been nominated to the Committee on Standing Orders and Dáil Reform in substitution for Deputy Holly Cairns.

### **An tOrd Gnó - Order of Business**

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The House has agreed that for the duration of the Covid emergency only, the rapporteur's report of the Business Committee shall be taken as read. Arising from it, therefore, there are three proposals to be considered today. Is the proposal for dealing with Tuesday's business agreed to?

**Deputy Mairéad Farrell:** Sinn Féin wrote to the Business Committee last week regarding the Government's submission to the EU recovery fund. Last week, it was announced that the Government was to make its submission to that fund this week, without it having been discussed in the Dáil at any point or at committee level. This involves €853 million, which is significant. We wrote to the Business Committee about this and the Government has agreed to have it discussed next week. Is the Government, therefore, postponing its submission to next week so it can be brought to the Dáil, Members can scrutinise it and proposals can be made? That is a key part of the democratic process.

**Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment(Deputy Eamon Ryan):** We have to assess a number of different key questions or big projects. First, we must prioritise housing in a new housing for all strategy, which we must deliver in the coming months. Second, there is a review of the national development plan, which must be done in tandem with

the climate action plan. All this is within a very tight timeframe. I believe we should aim to try to get that done before the end of this term. The recovery and resilience facility fits within that, but it is just one of the elements we will have to discuss, debate and sign off on. I welcome that we will have that debate next week. It will show, first, that we are going to make a very green investment, as is requested by the European Commission. It will help address some of the housing crisis issues by providing transport solutions that will be critical for it.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** We cannot go into the detail of it now.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** I look forward to that debate, but it is only one measure in a series of very important initiatives in the next few months.

**Deputy Michael Collins:** The Minister is well aware that tomorrow, the biggest crisis in the fishing industry will lead to protests throughout the country. It will probably be the biggest fishing industry protest for decades. We have had a disastrous term with regard to fishing and Brexit, in which the Minister and the Government have been caught asleep at the wheel.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** What has this got to do with today's Order of Business?

**Deputy Michael Collins:** Now we have been led into a catch weighing crisis that is out of all proportion, as the Sea-Fisheries Protection Authority, SFPA, and the Minister now accept. They knew about it in December and did not acknowledge it to the industry until April. I am asking for a debate on this issue today. It is a serious issue. The fishermen of Ireland will protest tomorrow in massive numbers. This can be averted. There should at least be a discussion in the House, or show them there is a future in the fishing industry of this country.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** I advise that the Deputy's representative on the Business Committee raise it in that committee, where it can be discussed and decided on for future Dáil business.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Is the proposal for today's business agreed to? Agreed. Is the proposal for Wednesday's business agreed to?

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** In circumstances in which all four legislative measures that make up the Health and Criminal Justice (Covid-19) (Amendment) Bill 2021 could have been extended individually, why has the Government lumped all these legislative measures into the issue to be debated in a new Bill commencing in the Dáil tomorrow? The Bill was passed by the Seanad yesterday. The Government is trying to create confusion, as far as I can see. A simple vote by Members of the House on whether to extend the restrictions to November or perhaps February is all that is required. The Government has now conflated the issue into four legislative measures. This is a type of four-card trick it is playing with the public. I want a debate on this. I want to know why this issue could not be dealt with in one piece of legislation.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** We will let the Minister answer.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** I understand there will be time for a debate on that subject. My understanding is that the vast majority of the House is supportive of the approach. If there is anyone with a contrary view, they will have every opportunity to articulate it tomorrow.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Is Wednesday's business agreed to? Agreed. Is the proposal for dealing with Thursday's business agreed to? Agreed.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** On Saturday, thousands of people joined demonstrations in Donegal

and Mayo. They called on the Government to deliver a 100% redress scheme for those whose homes have been, and are being, destroyed by defective blocks containing mica and pyrite. This issue, as the Minister knows, also affects homeowners in County Clare. Under the existing scheme, some homeowners are having to pay the cost of up to 50% of the remediation, sometimes hundreds of thousands of euro. This is money the families concerned simply do not have. They were not responsible for the defects in the first place. These families should have been treated exactly the same as the families who availed of the original pyrite redress scheme, who got 100% of the cost of remediation. Will the Minister commit to reviewing the scheme urgently? Will the Government provide equality for the people in Mayo, Donegal and Clare by providing 100% redress for defects they did not create?

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** A number of Deputies have mentioned this issue to me and I am well aware of it. It is a real concern. That is why the Government and the Department are looking at how the scheme is being applied in practice. There have been different characteristics in different parts of the country. I will certainly pass on the Deputy's desire for 100% coverage for the cost of remediation to the relevant Minister.

**Deputy Alan Kelly:** I raise the issue of the surface of the M7 motorway. Over the weekend, there were again a number of accidents on the M7 between Nenagh and Birdhill. I have raised this issue multiple times with the Minister. I have, in fact, raised the issue with multiple Ministers for Transport. I have raised the matter in this Chamber with a Minister for State with responsibility for transport and I have raised it with Transport Infrastructure Ireland, TII. There is something wrong around Annaholty, where sinkholes were discovered that meant the construction of the road was delayed for a number of years. There are continuously crashes on the road. TII has replied to me with a long statement saying it is putting up speed checks on the road, in conjunction with An Garda Síochána. That is not what is needed. Something is wrong with the surface any time there are hailstones or rain of a significant level. People around the area choose to use the old road because there are so many crashes and collisions on the M7. I am asking the Minister to use his power to ensure that TII does a study of the road and its surface.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** I agree that we need to prioritise safety when investing in our road network and, in many instances, that applies to issues such as the surface of the roads. I will sign off on a climate adaptation fund later this week which concerns the protection of road surfaces that have been affected by heavy rainfall and hail events, the sorts of things mentioned by the Deputy. Those are becoming significant issues as floodwaters wash away surfaces and create dangerous driving conditions. I will commit to that. I will ask TII to look specifically at the M7 close to Birdhill in that regard.

**Deputy Cian O'Callaghan:** There is a huge gap between what the Minister and the Government are saying about housing and what they are doing. The Minister earlier referenced the proposed sell-off of public land in north Dublin, enough to build 1,200 affordable and social homes, to a private developer. If that sale goes ahead, more than 240 apartments will be built on those lands and sold off to investment funds. None of them will be available for people to buy. Why is it, under this Government, that 100% of new-build apartments are being sold to investment funds and none is available for individual purchase to allow people to make that choice? Will the Green Party, while in government, push for choice and availability so that apartments will be available for people to buy as a part of sustainable development and not just for investment funds?

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** We will always push for that, particularly at the level of local gov-

ernment, which is where this must apply. My understanding is that, in 2018, our councillors pushed for 70% of the overall development to be available for cost rental. The Social Democrats had a motion at the time calling for a significant number to be available for cost rental but did not set a particular percentage. The Green Party will always try to get the highest proportion, particularly of new public housing solutions such as the development the Deputy mentioned. I understand the county council has to decide on the issue this evening. There is still the possibility that the council will be able to set the terms to protect affordable apartments from being sold en bloc. I hope that is successful and that the council comes to an agreement this evening.

**Deputy Bríd Smith:** Earlier the Minister spoke about the third anniversary of the vote to repeal the eighth amendment and the questions around the national maternity hospital. He said he has no evidence that there is any difference between his position and that of the Minister for Health, Deputy Donnelly, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, other than what we and all in government want. According to the Minister, Deputy Ryan, there is no disagreement on a full guarantee on an absolutely independent national maternity hospital.

We do not have evidence there is not a divide between them. A cross-party group has written to the Minister, Deputy Donnelly, asking him to meet us and give us clarity on the issue. He has not answered. I have written personally to him and he has not answered. I have tabled parliamentary questions that have not been answered. Will the Minister please now ask Stephen Donnelly to give the women of this country an answer?

By the way, I think it is worth noting that if men could get pregnant - look around you - we would have had clarity long ago. We are not getting clarity because we are being kicked around again on the question of full access to safe, legal abortion. Will the Minister please get the Minister for Health to give us clarity on the issue?

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** I expect Government will be able to give legal clarity very shortly. I will certainly pass that on to the Minister, Deputy Donnelly, and look forward to presenting the case.

**Deputy Michael Lowry:** News that Aer Lingus will permanently close its cabin crew base at Shannon Airport has come as a significant blow to the airport, the midwest region, including County Tipperary, and in particular, the 80 Shannon-based staff who now face redundancy and grave uncertainty.

Over the past week, I have heard very genuine personal stories reflecting great hardship and huge anxiety for the future. This announcement is a grave disservice to a loyal, dedicated staff. The staff of Aer Lingus are squeezed in the middle between Government-imposed restrictions and Aer Lingus strategy and policy.

Protecting the future of its core workforce must be a Government priority in discussions with Aer Lingus. Financial support for the company must be conditional on the retention of its base at Shannon. State aid must be directed in such a way to support and assist the workforce. The move by Aer Lingus to close its base at Shannon contradicts Government policy to encourage actively balanced regional development. Dublin Airport will continue to grow and flourish. Shannon and Cork airports are doomed to struggle for survival. Does the Minister have any proposals to assist Aer Lingus and the Shannon base?

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** I was glad to be able to talk to some of the pilots who were protesting outside the convention centre today and give them a similar commitment I will give to the

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Deputy, which is that we will do everything to see the aviation sector return and with it all the range of different benefits that accrue to our country.

To be clear, Shannon Airport will see flights returning. I expect Aer Lingus to be back flying from Shannon Airport in September and flights from the states equally returning. In a meeting I had with the airline and the airport last week, there was no indication or sense that this will not be the eventuality. Yes, must make it happen first and foremost. It is about managing Covid-19.

We will have statements on travel shortly in the Dáil. A Government decision is expected later this week, after which the roadmap will be set out. I hope that will be the key element in getting those jobs back.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** I believe in the old adage, Tús maith leath na hoibre. What is going on with the Road safety Authority, RSA? It is under the aegis of the Department of the Minister and the Minister of State, Deputy Naughton. Some 100,000 people are waiting for driving theory tests and cannot get started on the road.

The Minister of State came into the Chamber to reply to a Topical Issue matter, which the Ceann Comhairle kindly allowed us some weeks ago, and told us that driver theory tests were not an essential service. It is a most essential service that allows people to go to work and to get on the road for silage and contracting. It will be an issue across industry if we cannot get these people tested.

People are getting appointments now for August that were applied for last December. The RSA seems to be busy now cancelling the tests rather than making any effort to deal with the issue. It is a screen test that can surely be done online. It beggars belief. The ineptitude of the Department of Transport and the RSA is such that they cannot allow theory tests to go ahead on-screen. It has to be addressed because it will cripple our industry and economy.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** Every different section of our society has suffered in this Covid-19 pandemic and we must think of each of them. I would argue, however, that our younger people are the ones to whom we must be particularly attentive. They will be the last to be vaccinated.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** Give them the other test.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** They have suffered most in terms in their education and work. They have lost most jobs, and within that, they are the ones who particularly suffer from the lack of a theory test or the delay in getting a driving test. We will put all the resources of the State into reducing that waiting list, including the use of online theory tests.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** It is not happening.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** It will happen, and not just that.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** Christmas is coming.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** As we return in June and measures are relieved, critical within that, and almost my first priority, would be allowing people to come back to have theory tests.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Thank you very much, Minister.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** For younger people, in particular, in terms of accessing work, that is going to be critical and it will be our top priority.

**Deputy Thomas Pringle:** Seaview Respite House in Mountcharles in County Donegal is slowly reopening but the disabled people who get respite there, and their families, are in desperate need of a proper service. Will the Government put pressure on the rehabilitation services and the HSE to ensure the service reopens fully, on a seven-day-week basis, so that families can get this much-needed respite?

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** Such respite services are a huge relief to families. I will ask the relevant Minister to consider the case for the restoration of seven-day services in the Seaview centre in Mountcharles, as the Deputy requests.

**Deputy Francis Noel Duffy:** The Minister has campaigned extensively for MetroLink and for improved sustainable transport for more than 25 years. As he knows, I have been campaigning for metro south west and have passed transport motions at regional assembly level, including on the opening of the Navan rail corridor and, in particular, the metro extensions to Knocklyon and UCD. The south-west Dublin area is chronically congested and becoming densely populated with strategic housing development, SHD, schemes, among other planning applications. Dublin South-West is in need of improved public transport to give people better access to work, education and health. The impact of sustainable transport extends beyond the environmental benefits to include improvements to quality of life, productivity and opportunity. The programme for Government commits to prioritising plans for the delivery of MetroLink, Luas and other light rail expansion. When is it expected that the planning application for the airport-city metro will be lodged and when can we expect works to start?

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** The Deputy and I share a belief in public transport and the potential role of the metro in extending not just to Ranelagh but further south. Whether it goes south west to Terenure, Knocklyon, Firhouse and on to Tallaght, up the green line, which I think is less likely given the disruption it would cause, or runs to the south east, to Donnybrook, UCD, Stillorgan and Sandyford, is going to be the subject of a detailed review by the NTA, looking at all options. We have to look at the options with real seriousness because, as the Deputy says, that south-west corridor in particular, as I know from working there over the years, is probably the least well serviced in terms of bus corridors, the most difficult and there is a large amount of planning and development happening there at this time. We need public transport solutions for every quadrant of the city and that quadrant is particularly ill served. However, it has to be done on a good transport basis. We have to look and see what the optimal engineering solution is and that will take time. Unfortunately, as we discussed earlier, transport projects, particularly big projects like the metro, which has been more than 23 years in planning-----

**An Ceann Comhairle:** We cannot go into the detail.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** I expect it to go for planning approval this year but, even then, it will take many years to build, such is the project. By thinking long term, we can get the overall planning of the area right, including Terenure and Rathfarnham.

**Deputy Niamh Smyth:** I raise the backlog in the driver theory test and driving tests, which must be dealt with as a matter of urgency. I appreciate the Government has decided to take a very safe, gradual and phased approach to reopening some driver test centres through the RSA, which commenced on 10 May. That is welcome. However, learner drivers across counties Cavan and Monaghan are becoming increasingly frustrated by the lack of progress. As things stand, only essential workers can sit the driving test and the same applies to people wanting to take driving lessons. Many constituents of mine, and their parents, have contacted my office

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about this. Parents ultimately take the brunt of this in constituencies like Cavan-Monaghan where we do not have the same public transport infrastructure as elsewhere. If young people do not have that mode of transport to get to work, college or wherever they need to go, parents have to take them. I ask that particular resources be put into the Cavan and Monaghan area to address this.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** Most of the emails I get are probably on this issue. The Ceann Comhairle would be aware of this from his contact with the public. It is a huge issue, as I said earlier. The solution will be an early return to tests, but we have to take that in the context of public health advice. The job of public health, rightly, has been to minimise all social contact, particularly anything indoors. Being able to do the theory test, particularly online, will help to overcome that problem.

*3 o'clock*

I expect it to be one of the services that will return soonest in order to allow us to address the backlog, not just by means of the traditional 15,000 theory tests a month but by a multiple thereof. Doing that number of tests will facilitate young people in getting back to work.

It will be the same with driving tests. That will take slightly longer because, obviously, one cannot do a driving test online. By definition, a driving test takes place on the road. In the previous opening-up period, we appointed an additional 40 testers. We will double that again, as needs be, in order to get the queues down.

**Deputy Mairéad Farrell:** I raise the issue of the derelict site at the former Corrib Great Southern Hotel. In 2010, planning permission was granted to demolish the current structures. In 2015, the site was added to the derelict site register. Years later, however, we are still stuck with this eyesore in one of the most prominent locations in the east of the city. At a time when people cannot afford homes, we cannot afford to have sites like this lying idle in Galway. I am asking if the Government will commit to reviewing the vacant site levy to make it a more effective tool to stop the hoarding of derelict sites in the middle of a housing crisis.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** This goes back to the discussion I had with Deputy Ó Broin earlier. We need a multifaceted response and we must use the stick as well as the carrot. This must apply particularly to the use of underdeveloped lands and sites and further action must be taken. The vacant sites levy has not delivered the scale of urgency or action one would have wanted so yes, it must be part of a new, much more ambitious, much more progressive housing strategy.

**Deputy Catherine Connolly:** The programme for Government contains a commitment in respect of taking urgent action against domestic violence and, in particular, carrying out an audit in respect of the segmented services across all Departments for victims of sexual, gender and domestic violence. We were promised that at the end of March but March has come and gone. We were promised it at the end of April but April has come and gone. Can the Minister please tell me when the draft report that has been with the Department for some time will be published and action taken on it?

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** I commit to trying to find exactly when it will be published and will have that information transmitted to the Deputy. She is right about the whole issue of domestic and sexual violence not receiving the right level of attention. On a separate but related issue, following the recent cyberattack, the Deputy may have read in the newspapers that the information from some of the assault units was not digitally recorded but was still on paper. On the one

hand, that protected us in this instance but, on the other, it showed a lack of urgency or lack of attention and resources regarding domestic violence. I will ask and try to get the information to the Deputy about when the report will be forthcoming.

**Deputy Réada Cronin:** I want to raise the mystery of vanishing crèches in housing estates in north County Kildare. Developers get planning permission, advertise and sell on the basis of estates having crèches but when the families move in, there are no crèches. Those involved have been abandoned by developers, usually in favour of more homes or, perhaps, the developers state they are going to wait until all the phases are sold. Last year, north County Kildare was down hundreds of crèche places promised by Ardstone Homes and Cairn Homes. Those places were just not delivered. The same thing is happening with the Castle Farm development at Jigginstown, Naas, where many people bought homes when their children were newborn on the basis that there would be a crèche for them. Those children are now three years of age and are nearly ready for school. When will the Government legislate to ensure that these crèches are built? I suggest that crèches be built first in the future in order that people will not have to wait for all the different phases to be finished.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** I share the concern about the resources that are needed. We keep looking at the housing crisis, which, obviously, must be our primary focus, but we have housing without public transport, local shops and local schools. There is a real issue in County Kildare. In that context, I recall a Dáil debate on the number of school places in County Kildare. It is not just crèches, it is across the whole spectrum. There is a real problem. Half of the new houses being built at the moment are in the counties surrounding Dublin, namely, Kildare, Meath, Wicklow and Louth. Half of the budget is being spent there. We have unbalanced regional development, a continuation of the sprawl model. We need housing in County Kildare but it cannot be housing without the other services to which I refer. Building in counties Kildare or Meath will not solve the housing crisis. There is a need to put in place the right quality of housing, which means services must also be provided.

**Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan:** I was hoping my fellow Corkonian the Taoiseach might be present to answer my question. Given his remit in the area of transport, I am glad the Minister is here. A report was published yesterday from the All-Island Research Observatory in Maynooth demonstrating that Cork's road infrastructure is massively underfunded. It is not just a question of underfunding of roads, as it also involves the town and village renewal scheme and the CLÁR and LEADER programmes, funding for which is substantially below national averages. Engineers Ireland stipulates that roads should be strengthened every 20 years but in Cork that is not likely to happen for 52 years, given the backlog and our problems.

The national roads office in Cork estimates almost €750 million is required to bring local roads up to standard. Given that the programme for Government commits to ensuring sufficient investment in the local and regional road network to maintain roads to a proper standard, deal with road and safety challenges and improve regional accessibility, what will the Government do to address the issues in Cork arising from the report I mention?

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Is the Minister's chequebook out for Cork?

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** The key argument represented to my engineers and the Department is that investing in ongoing maintenance saves in the long run. If we let a road go and it goes below a certain standard, getting it back to standard is very expensive and difficult. There is a real case for what is called steady state investment, or investing in the steady state characteristic

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of our roads. Cork is the largest county by area and, I am sure, has the greatest length of road by miles, and it will be considered, like every county, in making our roads safe. That is what the investment provides for.

**Deputy Alan Dillon:** I met members of the north Mayo pyrite group at their socially distant demonstration last Saturday in Ballina and their story paints a grim picture, through no fault of their own. Pyrite has caused considerable distress, both financially and mentally, and this is compounded by the response of the quarries that supplied the blocks. Their demand is simple; there should be parity of treatment to terms available under the pyrite remediation scheme. In contrast, the defective concrete block grant scheme requires a financial overlay at a cost of 10%, along with payment for alternative accommodation and storage while continuing mortgage repayments. This is desperately unfair.

I acknowledge the Minister with responsibility for the matter, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, has undertaken to meet affected groups and Oireachtas Members in Mayo this week but we need a cross-departmental approach, particularly between the Departments of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Finance and Public Expenditure and Reform.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** I am sure the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, will benefit from meeting the various Deputies who have expressed an interest in this matter. We have schemes in place and the question is whether they are working effectively or what changes may be required. For anyone involved, it is clearly the worst disaster that can befall a person because the house is fundamentally damaged. We must help those people and I am absolutely certain the Minister will apprise the Deputies of how he intends to do it.

**Deputy Michael Collins:** I raise the same matter that was mentioned some moments ago. The Minister must be aware of the comprehensive report published yesterday by the All-Island Research Observatory at Maynooth University, which states that Cork County Council had the lowest levels of funding over the past number of decades, including the lowest CLÁR funding *per capita* despite having the highest population eligible for the programme. It had the fourth lowest level of LEADER funding, despite our population, and the lowest rate of funding for rural regeneration and town and village renewal schemes, local improvement schemes and greenway funding. The report indicates it will take 52 years to bring Cork County Council roads up to standard. I can certainly tell the Minister that our roads are not safe, as he said they were a while ago. Come down to west Cork and I will drive him around. I will shock him with the potholes and the scandalous level of repairs to the roads arising from a lack of funding.

This report vindicates my position since 2016 fighting for funding for west Cork. Every Taoiseach and Minister since has refused to give proper funding to Cork.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Thank you, Deputy.

**Deputy Michael Collins:** I am calling for a task force to deal with the matter. Will the Minister support me in requesting the establishment of a task force for Cork county and west Cork?

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** I know those roads well and they are absolutely a real priority, as they are in every other county. If the evidence in the report is that Cork is left behind, I would be surprised, to be honest. The engineers and managers in Cork County Council are not slow or shy about asking for funding or in their ability to spend.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Their public representatives are not too shy either.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** There is good work done at a local government level in Cork. I will look at the report and if there is any disparity, or if west Cork in particular is falling behind, I will be happy to try to address that.

**Deputy Brian Stanley:** I raise with the Minister the driving test backlog. There are 12-month waiting lists for driving tests. I understand there was a safety issue with physical driving tests at the height of Covid but as we emerge from the pandemic, the Minister needs to provide staff to catch up. Approximately 100,000 people are waiting for driving tests. The Road Safety Authority sought 80 extra driver testers and I understand 40 were provided. Perhaps the Minister will confirm that. This is holding people up. The suspension of the theory test does not make sense. The test could be done in cubicles or online. It should never have been suspended during Covid-19.

I also raise the issue of testing for motorcyclists, one of whom told me he cannot do the driving test because of Covid. I failed to figure out how someone could catch Covid on a motorbike. Driving tests for motorcyclists seem to be suspended also. Perhaps the Minister will clarify this. It is causing major problems in counties Laois and Offaly for those who need a licence and car for work, especially those who live in rural areas of the midlands who do not have public transport.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The Deputy has made his point.

**Deputy Brian Stanley:** When will we see action on these very difficult issues?

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Deputy Thomas Gould also has a question, which he can put before we conclude.

**Deputy Thomas Gould:** Gaelscoil Pheig Sayers was set up 35 years ago, in 1986. Since then, it has moved from Na Piarsaigh football and hurling club to the North Monastery and later to the North Point Business Park. The Department of Education is in negotiations with the Farranferris Foundation. Gaelscoil Pheig Sayers needs a new purpose-built school. Will the Minister commit to this? Twelve years ago, the school had 89 students. It now has more than 300. There is great enthusiasm for educating young children in Cork North-Central through Irish. It is time we delivered a school because 35 years is too long to wait for the Gaelscoil.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Will the Minister address those two questions?

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** I will pass on to the Minister for Education the case the Deputy made regarding the needs of the Gaelscoil in question.

On Deputy Stanley's question, motorcycle testing is returning. As the Deputy said, the physical reality for doing the test is now very different. We provided for an additional 42 driving testers. The direction I gave was that if further testers were needed, an additional 40 would be provided. The RSA must manage its resources to optimise that allocation. It indicated that the additional testers provided should suffice for the time being. If there is anything we can do to reduce the driver test backlog when testing is allowed to return, we will do it. Similarly, I expect the driver theory tests to recommence first and quickly, not only online but also in person as soon as the public health authorities say the centres can be reopened.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I thank the Deputies and the Minister for their co-operation. That concludes questions on promised legislation.

## **North-South Interconnector Review Group Bill 2021: First Stage**

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to establish a review group to examine the route of the electricity interconnection between the State and Northern Ireland of the project known as the North-South Interconnector, to define the review group's terms of reference and to require it to submit a report to the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications as regards the placement of high voltage power cables on the route of the North-South Interconnector in the State, and to provide for related matters.

The Government seeks to construct 409 pylons, each up to 51 m high and carrying 400,000 V, through counties Meath, Cavan, Monaghan, Armagh and Tyrone. These will be set just a minimum distance of approximately 13 m from people's homes. Opposition to this project of 140 km of pylons has raged since 2008. There are significant fears among the communities along the curtilage of the North-South interconnector about health, cancers and childhood leukaemia. There are also significant fears that the value of people's homes will be wiped out. Businesses, farms, tourism, agriculture and even the horse industry are extremely alarmed by the Government's proposal.

Technology has moved on significantly since this particular project was mooted back in 2008. The technology for this project is now out of date, having been superseded by technology that can do the same job underground. Now, around Europe we are seeing similar projects being built, such as that between Germany and Belgium. The Government said this could never be done here in Ireland, yet a project is commencing to build a similar underground line in County Kildare. At a recent meeting of an Oireachtas committee, the chief executive officer of EirGrid, Mr. Mark Foley, stated that 50 km was the maximum for the undergrounding of an AC line. In contrast, four years ago, the then CEO of EirGrid, speaking before An Bord Pleanála, said that 10 km was the maximum distance a line could go underground. I have not even mentioned DC technology, which is also developing fast.

The North East Pylon Pressure, NEPP, Monaghan campaign, and Safe Electricity Armagh and Tyrone, SEAT, campaign in the North have been incredibly well run. They have held dozens of public meetings, many of which attracted thousands of people. However, they have been cursed by members of political parties who have stood with them shoulder to shoulder at these public meetings voicing exactly the same concerns as the campaigns have voiced. They have also stood outside the Dáil gates having their photographs taken with these campaigners, but when they get elected to the Dáil they go underground and lose their voices of opposition to this project. When in opposition, the current Fianna Fáil Minister of State, Deputy Thomas Byrne, stated a party cannot say one thing in opposition and then do another thing in government. The Minister of State and many other Deputies in Cavan, Monaghan, Meath East and Meath West have become the thing they said they hated.

Fianna Fáil has promised a watery review in the last few weeks. It amounts to nothing more than a desktop exercise with regard to the existing information and the input from EirGrid. Interestingly, the Green Party leader and Minister for Transport, Deputy Eamon Ryan, has said he believes the controversial North-South electricity interconnector must go ahead as planned, despite the Taoiseach ordering a review to be held. I have been an elected representative for

ten years and one can get very cynical in this place for sure. Many times I have seen people hold investigations and reviews, knowing the results before any part of the review has been completed. We seem to be falling into exactly the same situation here.

What is left? We are running against the clock on this issue. There is a significant chance that the construction phase of this project could start towards the end of this year or start of next year. Right now, the only bulwark against this is the judicial review under way in the North of Ireland. I will add one point that the Government may not have taken into consideration. All the landowners along the curtilage of the North-South interconnector route have said they will not let EirGrid on to their land under any circumstances. I have no doubt the Government is now edging towards significant conflict with the people living in that area.

In the North of Ireland I do not believe enough is being done to stop this project. There are serious questions to be asked of Sinn Féin and the level of effort it has put into this issue in the North. I have no doubt that some of the party's Deputies in the South are fully against this project, but there seems to be a dual approach. There is no evidence that the energy needed to stop this has been expended in the North.

This is my second Bill on this issue and it seeks to do two things. First, it seeks to include the cost to the value of homes, farms, businesses and enterprises in the full cost of this project. Second, it aims to stop the Government manipulating the terms of reference. If the Bill is passed, the Government must carry out the review to its full extent. I have no doubt in my mind that if this Bill is passed, the project will be found uneconomical and wrong, and it will be stopped. I urge the political parties in the Dáil to support the Bill.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Is the Bill opposed?

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

Question put and agreed to.

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

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** I move: "That the Bill be taken in Private Members' time."

Question put and agreed to.

### **Regulation of Tenderers Bill 2021: First Stage**

**Deputy Mairéad Farrell:** I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to provide that abnormally low tender bids for construction works with a contract equal to or above the EU threshold for public works are regulated, and disqualified, if their low level is not adequately explained to the relevant authority, and that performance in prior public contracts be grounds for exclusion from participation in a procurement procedure.

Beidh mé ag roinnt mo chuid ama le mo chomhghleacaí, an Teachta Patricia Ryan. I am very pleased to introduce the Regulation of Tenderers Bill 2021 with my colleague, Deputy

Patricia Ryan.

The Bill will provide for greater regulation with regard to publicly procured capital works. Annual spending on public procurement here is massive, coming in at approximately €12 billion. This is approximately the same amount spent on some of the pandemic income and business supports. According to the Office of Government Procurement's most recent spending and tendering analysis for 2018, capital works are the largest component of public procurement spend, coming in at more than €5 billion.

We know that for years Ireland has lagged behind our European peers in terms of capital expenditure and this has left us with a major infrastructural deficit, which the International Monetary Fund, IMF, the Economic and Social Research Institute, ESRI, and the Irish Fiscal Advisory Council, IFAC, have called for us to close. This infrastructural deficit is most acute in regional and rural areas. The recent stability programme update outlines that capital expenditure is set to increase over the coming years and I welcome this although there is certainly room to go further. The national development plan has identified numerous capital projects set for commencement and it is important these are rolled out quickly. However, it is essential that taxpayers get value for money for these projects. We do not want to face more scandalous cost overruns, such as have been witnessed in the national broadband plan, the children's hospital and, closer to home, the renovations in Leinster House.

Our Bill is designed to tackle one potential contributor to cost overruns, namely, abnormally low bids. These abnormally low bids are sometimes referred to as lowball offers. The Regulation of Tenderers Bill 2021 would establish that abnormally low tender bids for construction works that have a contract equal or above the EU threshold for public works are regulated and would be disqualified if their low level is not adequately explained to the contracting authority. It would also ensure that performance in prior public contracts would be grounds for exclusion from participation in procurement procedure. In other words, if a tenderer makes an abnormally low bid for a contract, and if the tenderer is claiming it can complete the project at a significantly lower cost than its competitors, that tenderer must explain to the contracting authority how this is achievable. If the contracting authority does not receive a reasonable explanation for the abnormally low price submitted, the tender price should be rejected and the tenderer disqualified from the procurement process. The contracting authority should record the reason for rejection and submit it to the Office of Government Procurement.

**Deputy Patricia Ryan:** I will say a few words on how the process will work in practice. When four or more tender bids are submitted for a public works contract, a tender that is more than 15% below the adjusted average shall be considered an abnormally low tender. In the event of an abnormally low tender being submitted, the contracting authority must seek information on, and an explanation of, the economics of the construction method with a detailed cost breakdown, the apparent exceptionally favourable conditions available, technical solutions and compliance with the contractual and legislative requirements. Following this, if the contracting authority does not receive a reasonable explanation for the abnormally low price submitted, the tender price should be rejected and the tenderer disqualified from the procurement process. The contracting authority should record the reasons for rejection and submit them to the Office of Government Procurement.

In the event the explanation is deemed to be reasonable and acceptable, the contracting authority must notify the chief procurement officer at the Office of Government Procurement that it intends to award the contract to an abnormally low tender. The tenderer must confirm the

price to the chief procurement officer, and the contracting authority must recognise the potential requirement for enhanced contract management resources to be put in place for the duration of the contract. The contracting authority must provide regular reports to the chief procurement officer for the duration of the contract.

Moreover, contracting authorities will be empowered to exclude those suppliers that demonstrate significant or persistent deficiencies or both in the performance of prior public contracts. In the event of exclusion, the contracting authority should record the reasons for rejection and submit them to the Office of Government Procurement. We believe if the Bill is enacted it will ensure better value for taxpayers and reduce possible instances of litigation and the delays to completion that arise from this. It would also encourage good behaviour and better performance by suppliers.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Is the Bill opposed?

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

Question put and agreed to.

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

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

Question put and agreed to.

### **International Travel and Aviation: Statements**

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The Minister of State and I thank the House for allowing us this opportunity to address the matter of international travel and aviation. The impact of the Covid 19 pandemic, coupled with the emergence and spread of variants of concern, has resulted in one of the most sustained and deepest periods of suppression of international travel. Globally, aviation is experiencing its most challenging crisis in its history. In Europe there were 5 million flights in 2020 as against 11 million in the previous year. Scheduled carrier flights were down by almost 60% and at the end of the year half of the European aircraft fleet - more than 4,000 aircraft - was grounded. The impact on passenger traffic was greater than on the number of flights as, generally speaking, flights operated at lower load factors.

Restrictions on international travel this year have further suppressed passenger numbers, which are down as low as 3% of normal volumes in our State airports. It has led to the collapse in forward bookings. Throughout the aviation sector, passenger air travel revenues have fallen away to a fraction of 2019 levels. As a result, practically all aviation companies are facing unprecedented challenges. This has led to companies taking action to right size and rationalise their cost base, including redundancies and staff reduction measures, as well as taking steps to safeguard liquidity through borrowing and new shareholder capital.

Moreover, the general reduction in passenger numbers has severely impacted air connectivity, something which is vital for an island economy such as ours. This negative impact on aviation has significantly increased the cost of airfreight for the export sector, increasing the

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cost of doing business. There is a strong likelihood that without signalling the possibility of an easing of restrictions on travel, major employers will be forced to take further action to cut costs which could be avoided.

The greater risk by far is that the restoration of connectivity will be constrained further, with consequences for tourism, business generally and foreign direct investment. Analysis undertaken last week by Eurocontrol, the European Organisation for the Safety of Air Navigation, suggested that air traffic throughout Europe is not expected to return to 2019 levels before 2025. I can give assurances that through the review of the mandatory quarantine and the development of the digital green certificate, many of these matters are to be addressed by the Government when it meets this Friday. I am confident Ireland will, in due course, be in a position to join in the European approach for a digital green certificate system for international travel with Europe and with certain third countries where the risk is low.

The European approach on the digital green vaccine certificates would see the easing of restrictions on non-essential travel while addressing variants through a new EU-wide emergency brake mechanism. It remains open to EU member states to recognise vaccination certificates from other countries for the purpose of waiving public health requirements in a similar way. The EU regulation for digital green certificates will be formally adopted on 1 June and will enter into force on 1 July. Member states will then have six weeks to achieve compliance by mid-August at the latest. The digital green certificate will be available free of charge in digital or paper format. It will include a QR code to enable security and authenticity of the certificate. The Commission will build a gateway to ensure all certificates can be verified throughout the EU and to support member states in the technical implementation of certificates.

Our system is substantially developed to enable the facilitation of vaccination proof for an individual on request and is compliant with the appropriate EU standards. Already the principle is established in the mandatory quarantine exemption regulations that vaccinated people should not be subject to mandatory hotel quarantine. As the vaccination programme is rolled out and large portions of the population are fully vaccinated, I would like to see this principle applied more broadly in the context of the opening of international travel, whereby fully vaccinated people who do not present an intolerable public health risk for the spread of Covid-19 would not be subject to pre-arrival testing or quarantine requirements.

Given that the digital green certificate might not be in widespread use until at least mid-August, the timeframe permitted by the European regulations, it would not seem reasonable to expect fully vaccinated people to wait for the certificate before allowing freedom from current pre-arrival PCR and quarantine requirements. There is a need for pragmatism to allow for an early discontinuation of these public health requirements for fully vaccinated people to travel within the EU and between certain non-EU or non-EEA countries. However, the epidemiological conditions, including status of variants of concern, must also be favourable for international travel to return, and for the current advice against non-essential travel to be lifted within Europe and with third countries.

Each week we have seen countries being removed from the list of specified countries for variants of concern under the mandatory hotel quarantine regime. This is a positive sign. International connectivity will be critical to economic recovery by providing a key enabler of trade and business, including foreign direct investment and tourism. Getting international travel back up and running is vital for the continued economic well-being of this country and remains a priority for the Government; however, this can only be accomplished through consideration

of the progression of our Covid-19 national vaccination programme, developments at EU and international level, and public health advice.

In my capacity and responsibility for communications, I would like to briefly comment on the recent cyberattack on our health service. This is a particularly heinous crime at a time of great stress on our State health system. I commend the dedication of the public health service and its personnel and all the health providers, hospitals, nurses, doctors and the other healthcare professionals who are endeavouring to provide to the public through this challenging period. Similarly, I also commend the dedication of the officials of the Department of Health, which was also subject of a later cyberattack. Within the cross-departmental structures, the officials in our Department have worked tremendously closely on all matters relating to international travel and Covid-19 response over the past year, despite, as is the nature of public policy, often have competing priorities. Officials in my Department will continue to work collaboratively with their counterparts in the Department of Health as it leads on implementation of the digital green certificate and the managed relaxing of restrictions necessary for international travel to resume.

The Government will publish a national economic recovery plan shortly in which it will set out the priorities and objectives for Ireland's economic recovery, reflecting the enormity of the challenges faced by businesses and individuals and setting out the plan ahead for a resilient and sustainable economy. As the State and industry prepare for recovery of the sector from the Covid-19 crisis, the emphasis must be on building back better. For international travel and aviation this will mean greener more sustainable airports, more efficient aircraft and sustainable fuel alternatives, and the efficient management of air traffic. This is both a time for national recovery planning for the broader economy and seizing this moment of opportunity for long-term horizon planning and building back better, as I said, when aviation and international travel resumes.

The entire aviation sector - airports, airlines, catering firms, travel agents and tour operators, pilots, cabin crew, engineers and airport staff - has been affected by the impact of the pandemic. Many of the jobs across the aviation sector are well-paid, highly-skilled and of high value to the economy. The aviation sector directly supports almost 40,000 jobs. Firms range from large- and medium-scale employers, such as the international airlines, the airports, aircraft leasing companies and maintenance, repair and overhaul, MRO, facilities, down to SMEs nationwide, including 200 travel agencies in rural and regional towns as well as in the larger cities. The Minister of State, Deputy Hildegard Naughton, will address the steps we are taking to support the industry towards recovery and the engagement we have had over recent months and weeks in that regard.

What we have done in these recent months has been steady, slow progress on a step-by-step basis to return our country to a more normal existence, bringing us out of this pandemic. That is the right approach. This summer we will see further measures, including the return of international travel. It is most important that we make that safe and that it will not be not a stop-start exercise. The aviation industry has done good work already in making its part of this safe. We have to do the same at home to make sure the vaccination programme is rolled out and keep the numbers low. That will be the best guarantee for returning to international travel so that we can meet our family and friends and travel for work or for holidays as part of a normal existence. We look forward to that day coming soon.

**Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegard Naughton):** I join the Minister in thanking the House for allowing us to address the matter of international

travel and aviation.

I take this opportunity to acknowledge the announcement by Aer Lingus last week regarding its Shannon base. It is very regrettable that Aer Lingus has decided to close the Aer Lingus cabin crew base at Shannon Airport and to temporarily close its base at Cork Airport as well as embarking on a review of ground handling arrangements at those airports. However, it is also noted that many airlines across Europe are also implementing significant cost saving measures in light of the circumstances currently facing the industry. Reported job cuts in other European Airlines, for example KLM, Lufthansa and IAG is indicative of industry-wide restructuring across Europe. The unprecedented challenges being faced by Aer Lingus and their staff during this difficult time is also understood within this context and the cumulative impact of Covid-19 over the past 15 months. The Minister and I met with the CEO of Aer Lingus to discuss details of the announcement made by the company last week. We reiterated the Government's commitment to supporting the industry and acknowledged the importance of providing clarity on the extent and duration of the employment supports beyond the end of June. We reassured the airline that there would be no cliff edge in the horizontal State supports that have been available from the start of the pandemic.

The meeting with the CEO last week also focused on the future operations of the company in Ireland. The CEO outlined the company's hopes for a resumption of travel from Cork and Shannon when the situation allows. I welcomed the confirmation by the CEO of Aer Lingus that there is no strategic intent to reduce connectivity at either Cork or Shannon while acknowledging that the restoration of services would depend on market circumstances.

We also met with the CEOs of Shannon Group and Cork Airport last week to discuss the situation there. It was reiterated at these meetings, the support for the airports and their important role in regional development. This includes plans to explore the potential of the Shannon Estuary in terms of regional economic development across transport and logistics, manufacturing, renewable energy and tourism, and develop a strategy to achieve this potential, with support from the Exchequer, as set out under the programme for Government commitments. For its part, Cork Airport has taken the decision to undertake an extensive runway project in the region of €35 million-€40 million. This investment falls within the public spending code. This includes the development of a new electrical substation. Taking a range of factors into consideration, including consultation with stakeholders, Cork Airport decided that the optimal approach for completing this project would be to close the airport for ten weeks, significantly shortening the disruptive effect of project delivery from a timescale of nine months if carried out at night-time hours only.

Similar engagements took place last week with trade unions and employer representative groups, in my capacity as chair of the aviation sub-group of the Labour Employer Economic Forum. This sub-group has been investigating the option of a specially extended wage subsidy scheme for the aviation sector, and this work will continue.

I assure the House that the Government is committed to supporting the aviation sector. We recognise the importance of providing clarity on the extent and duration of supports beyond the end of June. Throughout this pandemic, Government has provided a significant level of general supports to the economy, with at least €300 million provided to the aviation sector alone through wage supports, business grants, tax and rates alleviations, and low interest loans. The bulk of this support is in the form of wage subsidies, which were designed to maintain the link between employers and their workers. In addition to these broad supports, the Government

secured almost €80 million in Exchequer funds to help passenger airports navigate this crisis in 2021. This is almost four times the usual State provision to airports and includes, for the first time, significant assistance to Cork and Shannon airports.

More than €32 million is being made available to these airports to help meet costs in the areas of safety and security and will contribute to the delivery of essential projects, such as the runway overlay project at Cork Airport. These airports will also benefit from a €20 million damages scheme that was approved by the EU in February, helping to compensate State airports for a portion of financial losses caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. This funding, which I expect to issue in the coming weeks, will give airports the flexibility to provide route incentives and airport charge rebates to stimulate recovery of lost connectivity this year. Aligned to this support is a five-year commitment to fund our smallest airports under a regional airports programme published in February of this year.

This year, with a budget of over €21 million, Donegal, Kerry and Knock will receive grant aid in the areas of safety, security and sustainability. This amount will also cover the costs associated with air service public service obligations, PSOs, between the capital and our most peripheral airports in Donegal and Kerry. In addition to this €21 million, a further €6 million was secured under an EU state aid scheme to help small airports address liquidity issues caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. As evidenced by these interventions, the Government understands that aviation is a critical lifeline to the regions and will consider what further supports may be needed to help all of our regional airports, including Cork and Shannon, as part of the upcoming Estimates process.

I am also alive to the hardship being experienced by those who depend on the aviation industry for their livelihoods, if not through job losses then through lower pay and income uncertainty. I can assure workers and all of those involved in the aviation industry that the Government will continue to support the industry and review the supports that may be required in the coming months. While we are not yet able to permit the restoration of international travel, work is under way to ensure that we are prepared. Until then, the Government will continue to provide supports to the aviation sector, as it does to all sectors of the economy.

In order to protect our population from the worst effects of the virus and to enable our healthcare system to continue to function and provide essential front-line services, it has been necessary for the Government to take unprecedented action on public health measures. I also refer to the remarks last week from the Chief Medical Officer, CMO, and concerns around the number of cases of the new Indian variant, suggesting that we must continue to be vigilant and maintain public health measures.

As we are now seeing, international travel is a route for the potential seeding of new Covid-19 cases and variants of concern while we persevere in managing community transmission. Mandatory hotel quarantine and PCR testing for international travel are among a suite of public health measures designed to mitigate this risk. Unfortunately, the impact is to the detriment of aviation and related economic sectors.

As a society, we have been rewarded for our efforts over the past few months in that we are now in a position to reopen our economy with some degree of caution. However, it is apparent, and this has been acknowledged in discussions with those employed in the aviation sector and their representative bodies, that the aviation sector will be one of the last sectors of the economy to take those initial steps of reopening.

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The Minister and I have, over the past 15 months, engaged with aviation industry representatives and the National Civil Aviation Development Forum. Last month, this group developed an aviation restart plan it believes will best provide for the restart and recovery of the aviation sector in Ireland. It includes the determination of the conditions, vaccination levels and epidemiological thresholds that allow for the de-escalation of public health measures relating to international travel. This will include a stepping down of mandatory quarantine, testing requirements and the advice against non-essential travel. It will also include clear communication of the Government's strategy for the lifting of these restrictions towards a targeted reopening at the appropriate time, a clear commitment to the implementation of the EU digital green certificate for vaccinated, tested and recovered persons as a means to free movement of EU citizens, travel within the common travel area, CTA, with the UK and between Ireland and certain third countries, in particular the United States, and the consideration of a pilot for antigen testing to replace PCR tests for international travel.

I welcomed the recent aviation restart plan produced by the aviation industry participants in the National Civil Aviation Development Forum last month. I want to acknowledge the collaborative and constructive approach of the aviation industry representatives in working through the development of the proposals in the report. The report raises a number of issues for consideration in the context of the development of the Government's roadmap for reopening international travel. Proposals regarding the introduction of EU vaccine certificates will form a central plank of the Government's plan for recovery of the sector. I have also impressed on the industry the need to get visit visibility of how key stakeholders will ramp up operations incrementally as restrictions ease, while ensuring agreed public health and safety measures remain in effect.

While acknowledging the primacy of the protection of public health, there is clearly an increasing need for a strategy for international travel that can serve as a basis to protect existing jobs, insofar as is possible, and to plan for the re-commencement of operations as soon as is practicably possible. I again thank the House for the opportunity to address it and look forward to hearing the views of Deputies on this important matter.

**Deputy Darren O'Rourke:** I very much welcome the opportunity to contribute to this important debate on international travel. For the first time in almost a year and a half there is light at the end of the tunnel, and that is very welcome. The successful vaccination roll out to date in Ireland, Britain, across Europe and the United States has radically changed the outlook for international travel in a way that we all hoped it would.

As my party's spokesperson on transport and a Deputy representing the constituency of Meath East, I am very familiar with the devastating impact Covid-19 has had on the sector and its workers. I have been in touch with hundreds of those workers individually, and their representatives, over the past 14 months. They have had hours and pay cut and hundreds of jobs have been permanently lost. Pilots demonstrated yesterday and are demonstrating again today. Tomorrow, the Joint Committee on Transport and Communications will hear from cabin crew. They are frustrated with the Covid restrictions and fear for their future. They are equally frustrated with the lack of clarity from Government and the lack of a plan and details on the reopening of international travel, and when and how it will happen.

The lack of clarity and planning and always being behind, reacting and on the back foot is a constant feature of the Government's approach to international travel. Since the outset of the pandemic, Sinn Féin's position has been absolutely clear. We called for robust checks and controls at our ports and airports, including pre-departure and post-arrival testing, 100% follow-up

and a support package for workers and the industry to protect jobs and strategic connectivity.

Last May, Sinn Féin called for temperature screening at airports, mandatory passenger locator forms, 100% follow-up and an all-Ireland approach. In June, we again called for this and for a traffic light system and international travel based on Covid risk profiles. In July we called for mandatory PCR testing. In September, when representatives from NPHEA attended a meeting of the Joint Committee on Transport and Communications, I called for antigen testing to be rolled out as an improvement on the voluntary and expensive PCR testing regime.

The Government did not do any of that. Instead, for the entirety of 2020 there was a complete failure by Government to do anything. Month after month we heard about passenger locator forms follow-up. The figures for this were 6%, 8% and 18%, which was, I understand, the highest rate recorded. It is incredible to think about that. We did not introduce mandatory testing for international travel until we were reporting 8,000 cases a day.

The failure on the part of the Government to implement proper safety checks and protocols at our ports of entry to show that international travel could happen safely led to a total breakdown in public confidence in international travel. With that track record, a Government at sea, public confidence on the floor, 8,000 cases a day and clear public health advice, the introduction of mandatory hotel quarantine was an inevitable and necessary measure at a time when we could not move 2 km from home, the vaccine roll-out had barely started and variants of concern were ravaging South Africa, Brazil and the UK.

ICUs were eating into surge capacity. As a temporary measure, a circuit breaker, that is, mandatory hotel quarantine, was necessary. It should have been matched with funding to protect jobs and strategic connectivity. Last week, the Minister and the Minister of State indicated that by the end of June the sector will have received €300 million in supports. At the weekend, that figure became €500 million. Even at that, it does not compare well with other countries. Who bears the brunt? Workers bear the brunt, particularly those who lost their jobs. Customers, who are waiting for refunds and vouchers or who lost money because airlines flew empty planes, also bear the brunt. The Government turned a blind eye to that.

From its lowest ebb, the sector is again looking to the Government. The safe return to international travel will have to be carefully planned and managed. No one wants to risk the gains and huge sacrifices we have made in recent months. It might be expecting too much from a Government that has failed at every turn to put the systems in place and build confidence in them, but there is reason to be hopeful. Vaccines have changed everything and have presented us with opportunities. Data sharing will continue to be essential. The digital Covid-19 certificate will provide an opportunity in this regard. It is a single platform with Covid-19 status, vaccine, antibodies and negative tests. This can enable a safe return to international travel but we still do not know how or when it will be implemented here. There is speculation that there are IT delays. I ask the Minister and the Minister of State to address those concerns and ensure that we are ready. We also need to share data, North and South. There has been considerable Government resistance in this regard.

Testing will continue to be essential. The Minister and the Minister of State need to listen to the Government's chief scientific adviser. Professor Mark Ferguson appeared before the transport committee a few weeks ago and outlined the role antigen testing can play in the safe reopening of international travel. He pointed to international research in Britain, Italy and the United States. PCR testing is prohibitively expensive, is done 72 hours pre-departure and on

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its own, from a public health perspective, is limited. According to Professor Ferguson, the Government's chief scientific adviser, serial antigen testing, pre-departure and post-arrival in the context of continuing vaccine roll-out, can potentially replace the need for a PCR test and quarantine at home.

The transport committee and, as the Minister of State indicated, the National Civil Aviation Forum have been calling on the Government to pilot this. I ask the Minister of State to see that this happens. The fact that vaccine roll-out is most advanced in Britain, the United States and the EU, the places people from Ireland travel to and from most, offers an opportunity. We have to be continually mindful of public health advice and the patterns of Covid-19 spread. We also have to be mindful of the potential pitfalls and, in particular, variants of concern. With the right systems in place, however, we can safely extract ourselves from the current restrictions, including home and hotel quarantine, as we all hoped and always intended.

This Government has always been on the back foot when it comes to international travel. On Friday, the hundreds of thousands of workers in the sector and related sectors will want to see a clear plan on how the systems will work and when they will come into effect. It is the least they deserve.

**Deputy Louise O'Reilly:** The aviation sector has been decimated by this pandemic. Workers in the sector are on their knees. They are on reduced hours and pay, with some are in receipt of the pandemic unemployment payment, PUP, and others the employment wage subsidy scheme, while many have been accessing jobseeker's benefit and short-term work supports. Others have suffered the loss of their jobs.

Last week, we heard the devastating announcement by Aer Lingus regarding base closures. More than 140,000 jobs depend on us getting this right and ensuring that the sector can come through this crisis, but that means the Minister and the Government need to stop the hands-off approach they have taken to date. Ours is an island nation. To get on or off this island, we have to travel by plane or boat, but the Minister and the Government have approached the crisis in the aviation sector as though we do not need the sector. They have approached it as though we could cycle to Berlin, Melbourne, Cape Town or London. Without our connectivity, we are lost. A core message this Government needs to hear is that our connectivity must be protected. Connectivity and jobs have to be front and centre. My colleague, Sinn Féin's transport spokesperson, Teachta O'Rourke, and I are blue in the face telling the Government that we need a survival and recovery plan for the aviation sector.

From the outset of the pandemic, workers and unions in the sector have called for two things, namely, supports and a plan. The supports for workers, airlines and airports are a fraction of what is needed, based on international comparisons. Countries in Europe which are connected by rail and road have invested more in their aviation sector than we have, even though we are an island on the edge of the Atlantic. The fact there have been no conditions for the protection of jobs and strategic connectivity is a disgrace.

Last week, the Minister came in and reeled off figures and schemes to us and claimed that the aviation industry should be happy with what it has got. He was just listing the supports which also exist for other sectors. The reality is that the aviation sector is unique. It has been hit much harder than other sectors and needs unique supports and a unique recovery plan. That recovery plan must include antigen testing and the digital green certificate and its quick adoption.

We need a roadmap out of this situation because, at the least, that will give Aer Lingus and other airlines, confidence they will be able to retain bases because business will be coming back. The Minister has not been giving the airlines that confidence. In fact, many have claimed that the Government does the opposite of giving confidence to the aviation sector. From talking to them, I know that people in the sector are deeply disappointed by the Government's hands-off attitude. They do not believe that the Minister in charge is committed to aviation. This Government has to step up to the plate and demonstrate that commitment through a strategic recovery plan and the necessary supports.

For the avoidance of doubt, Sinn Féin vigorously opposed the privatisation of Aer Lingus in 2015 by Fine Gael and the Labour Party. The workers in Aer Lingus have continuously been let down by successive governments. Fianna Fáil, the Green Party, Fine Gael and the Labour Party were all party to the sell-off of Aer Lingus at different points. We warned at the time the State not owning a share in this vital airline would be bad for workers and the maintenance of connectivity. Unfortunately, that decision has left the Government severely weakened in its current position, which is becoming obvious.

If Fine Gael, Fianna Fáil and the Green Party do not produce a recovery plan soon and if they do not get it right, there will be even greater damage to the sector. I am asking the Minister to engage proactively with the airlines and the aviation sector as a whole and to speak with the trade unions, including the Irish Air Line Pilots Association, IALPA, SIPTU, Fórsa and all the unions involved and with the people involved in Recover Irish Aviation about the scale, breadth, depth and nature of the plan needed to help the sector recover.

**Deputy David Cullinane:** Mandatory hotel quarantine and PCR testing are and were essential tools to prevent the importation of new and existing strains of the virus. The public health advice on both has been clear for the best part of a year. As my colleague, Deputy O'Rourke, it was something the Government came late to the table with, despite not only the public health experts in Government and those advising Government, but those outside of Government, asking the Government to move much quicker in this area.

Nobody wants any public health measures to be in place any longer than necessary. The vaccine is being rolled out. The more progressive it is and the faster and more efficient it has become and, I hope, will continue to become, presents us opportunities to start looking at easing restrictions. We are seeing that already in different sectors. We have to plan for a safe reopening of aviation travel and the wider tourist potential as well.

We do not want a situation in which some parts of Europe are open for business, in terms of tourism, and this State is left behind and not prepared. It is prudent we look at this as a Europe-wide initiative, but we also have to keep our autonomy on decisions we need to make to protect this State against new variants and to ensure the restrictions which are beginning to be eased and will continue to be eased in June and July when further easing of restrictions will happen. They to be jealously protected and guarded.

We cannot take any chances and do anything which would put reopenings in the time ahead at risk. They have to be our number one priority, because it means so much to people there is some level of normality returning. All the businesses which opened last week and the people who went back to work after a long time period out of work, will want that to be continued. We hope that it is, in terms of the restrictions we ease, and that we will not go back to any of those restrictions being in place again.

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In that context, we are having a debate on international travel. Mandatory quarantine should not be in place for a minute longer than necessary. I welcome and my party supported, the EU-wide Covid-19 certificate at European Union level. It makes sense to have a single application which pulls together all the Covid-19 related testing and the vaccine for individuals. I also welcome this will be in both digital and paper format. That is important as well.

I am taking it that it will be up to each member state to decide what element of the testing or vaccine will be required to prevent people from having to quarantine in a hotel and on any other measures in place.

*4 o'clock*

It remains to be seen how that is going to work out in this State and what the Government will do. What is certain is that whatever happens, the aviation sector will continue to be deeply affected in the months and years ahead. The sector needs to be supported, which means continuing to support airlines to make sure they stay afloat, but this also has to be about protecting jobs. When funding is being made available through taxpayers' money, which is needed to shore up and protect the aviation sector and airlines, the *quid pro quo* must be that those airlines protect jobs. We cannot be providing taxpayers' money to shore them up on the one hand and then have major job losses on the other. That is not a *quid pro quo* and would not be in the best interests of the people of this State.

**Deputy Duncan Smith:** I am sharing time with Deputy Sherlock. Without wanting to get ahead of ourselves, I am taking to my feet in a debate on aviation where it genuinely feels as though there is some light at the end of the tunnel. The EU digital Covid certificate is that light. I am somewhat encouraged by the speech of the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, and the Taoiseach's statement earlier today, as reported in the media, that it is full steam ahead for the EU digital Covid certificate. This is where the rubber meets the runway as regards whether or not aviation will recover. If we do not get this right as a country and implement it as soon as is practicable, in a manner that protects public health, then any chance our aviation sector has of a full recovery will be lost. The Government is finally getting it and is willing to push this issue as quickly as possible. I have worked with my colleague Deputy Sherlock on this matter and we do not see any obvious reason this certificate cannot be introduced as soon as possible. There are variants of concern but we have measures in place to catch and control them. We have testing at a level that we did not have a year ago, as well as mandatory hotel quarantine, which will be amended and shifted towards being a method for tackling variants and a measure of last resort. That is encouraging as well. There should not be any IT issues with this roll-out. Willie Walsh of the International Air Transport Association, IATA, gave a presentation to the transport committee last week in which he said that an awful lot of work has been done by the industry to ensure that the IT systems are up to where they need to be to deliver this. That is encouraging.

We ask that the principles of the EU digital Covid certificate also be applied to the common travel area and to areas in which vaccination levels are high, such as North America. There are 128 million fully vaccinated people in the United States at the moment - not just people with one shot but fully vaccinated - and there are 30 million people fully vaccinated in the UK. We have those data. Rapid antigen testing must play a role here. Professor Mark Ferguson, the chief scientific adviser to the Government, has delivered a strong report on the use of rapid antigen testing. That must play a role, particularly for people returning to Ireland. It is full steam ahead. We will be keeping the pressure on the Government but hopefully the penny is finally

dropping.

There are workers outside the House today representing pilots. Workers in Shannon and Cork airports have lost their jobs. Hopefully those jobs can be recovered but there is an awful lot of despair and we must acknowledge that and ensure that any work that can be done to recover those jobs is done as quickly as possible. It is lamentable that the supports given by this Government to the aviation industry were not contingent on protecting jobs and job conditions, and there will be no forgiveness for that. That is something the Government will never be able to run away from.

**Deputy Sean Sherlock:** I note the submission to the Taoiseach by the Irish Air Line Pilots' Association. Those pilots are outside this building today and we stand in solidarity with them. They refer to four pillars in their correspondence to the Taoiseach: travel within the common travel area of Ireland and the UK; travel within the European Union; travel between Ireland, the EU and the United States of America; and the application of rapid antigen testing inbound to Ireland to safely facilitate the other three pillars. In her statement to the House, the Minister of State said "PCR testing for international travel [is] among a suite of public health measures designed to mitigate this risk". Last week I told the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, that we needed to have an honest debate about the distinction between PCR testing and antigen testing and I reiterate that. We need to have an honest, reasoned and scientific debate about the difference between PCR testing and antigen testing. If the PCR test becomes the prerequisite for the digital green certificate and if the benchmarks are that people have to be vaccinated, tested and recovered, I fear that, subject to a reasoned and rational scientific debate of this House, many families will be excluded from travel throughout either the European Union or elsewhere. The issue of antigen testing has to be part of the debate.

I have noted the comments from our colleagues in Sinn Féin about the privatisation of Aer Lingus. If Sinn Féin is proposing the re-nationalisation of the airline, we would all be very happy to hear whatever proposals it might have on that issue. For now, we want to speak for Aer Lingus families and for families from any airline. There are families in Cork at the moment who are relying wholly on payments from the Department of Social Protection and because of the nature of their work and how their hours are structured annually, they are now falling off a cliff. They are getting no more money from the Department and we need to get them back to work.

**Deputy Kieran O'Donnell:** I welcome the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, and the Minister of State, Deputy Naughton. I am glad that the Minister is looking at rolling out the digital green certificate as quickly as he can. He spoke in the context of people being vaccinated. However, he qualified that by stating "the epidemiological conditions, including status of variants of concern, must also be favourable for international travel to return, and for the current advice against non-essential travel to be lifted within Europe and with third countries". The question is what will decide that and what the metrics around that are. I principally want to speak about Shannon Airport. We heard the shocking news last week that Aer Lingus will be closing its cabin crew base for 81 staff at Shannon Airport, which it announced prior to any international plan from the Government. That has huge implications for the airport, the workers and their families. We passed the pilots while coming in here and they want certainty.

I will ask three things of the Minister. First, I ask that the reopening plan deal with the common travel area and that it coincides with the digital green certificate coming on stream on 1 July. I appreciate that there are variants but we need to move away from a binary model

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that is heavy on quarantine and towards a risk-based model. We need some form of quarantine but it should be very limited and it should not be a binary decision. Second, I understand that Aer Lingus, like many airlines, is going through cash and will burn more of it when it gets going again. In respect of the Minister's discussions with Aer Lingus, any funding which comes from the State must be accompanied by preconditions in respect of the base at Shannon Airport and the retention of workers there. We must also ensure that we retain connectivity through the flights to and landing slots at Heathrow Airport. In addition, transatlantic flights are vital for us. Therefore, what I want to hear regarding the Minister's discussions with Aer Lingus is that he has got commitments from the airline concerning the cabin crew, connectivity through Heathrow and transatlantic flights. There must be certainty in that regard because of the impact of Shannon Airport on our region. The stakes are very high along the western seaboard.

We have many multinational companies, a huge reliance on tourism and Shannon Airport is the key economic driver, and central to all that is Aer Lingus. Therefore, what I want to see today are details regarding the reopening plans which will be announced on 1 July, and from that period onwards. Included in those plans should be the resumption of Aer Lingus flights, as quickly as possible, from Shannon Airport to Heathrow Airport, as well as transatlantic flights. Equally, any funds provided by the State to the airline, which it will need, must be accompanied by a *quid pro quo*, as I have set out.

We are an island nation and not everything ends at the Red Cow. A great deal happens outside Dublin. We want to ensure that can all continue, and exponentially. If we do not have connectivity in the mid-west via Aer Lingus flights to Heathrow Airport, our transatlantic flights and our cabin crew base in Shannon Airport, we will be at a major disadvantage and operating with one arm behind our back. We are at a critical juncture and I ask the Minister to get those commitments from Aer Lingus in respect of any funding provided.

**Deputy Cathal Crowe:** On the way into the Dáil, I met with a group of airline pilots from Recover Irish Aviation, all from Aer Lingus. They do not belong on a street corner protesting, but back in our skies. The announcements scheduled to be made this week, and especially on Friday, will be key in giving those pilots and the whole sector the hope desperately yearned for. We must see several developments this Friday and in that regard I address my remarks to the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, and the Minister of State, Deputy Naughton. It is crucial that we see a restoration of the Common Travel Area with the UK. It makes very little sense for Ireland, a country with more than 300 border crossings with the UK, to have any kind of restrictive regime in respect of travel to and from the UK. That aspect must be addressed immediately, with no delays until July or August before that is made possible and travel is fully reconnected.

There is also a need to wind back on mandatory hotel quarantine, MHQ. Echoing what a previous speaker said, yes, there are wild and very aggressive variants of Covid-19 extant which pose a real health risk and mandatory hotel quarantine should be reserved for travellers from the countries where those variants are coming from. It should not, however, be applied to the general European Union block, the United States or countries which have a high vaccination level compared to us. We must enable entry from those countries without any huge kerfuffle. The reality is that mandatory hotel quarantine had high relevance back in January. Looking at Friday, 8 January, 8,248 cases of Covid-19 were confirmed in Ireland. However, yesterday, we had 345 cases confirmed. The two instances are incomparable and there should be no strict mandatory hotel quarantine regime in future. It should only be used to deal with the variants which pose an acute risk to our country.

Regarding vaccinated passengers from the United States, we should also allow those people to enter Ireland without any great restriction. It is a diplomatic insult, in fact, to deny easy entry and exit for those passengers. We must regularise that aspect quickly. The digital green certificate requires a lead-in period of approximately five weeks. We are also hearing from pilots and cabin crew that their sector will need a five-week lead-in period as well. It is obvious that these two things should align. We should see the restoration of aviation around the first or second week of July, with both lead-in periods elided.

I am glad that Sinn Féin is fully supporting the digital green certificate. On 1 April, the party voted against a proposal to fast-track this initiative in the European Parliament. Here in the Dáil, on 23 February, it also put forward amendments to Bills which would have brought extensions to mandatory hotel quarantine to include many more countries. There is a place for rapid antigen testing as well and I have been making this point at the transport committee to Professor Mark Ferguson, who has been advising the Government on this matter for many months. I suggested we should trial this method on a route during this interim period of four to five weeks until the digital green certificate is in place. It could, perhaps, be tested on a route from Dublin to the UK. It is €5 for a rapid antigen test and €150 for a PCR test.

Turning to Shannon Airport, last week we heard a devastating announcement for our region, which lives and dies on foot of what happens with the airport. It is the catalyst for all economic activity. Aer Lingus seized on an opportunity to close its cabin crew base at Shannon, which has operated without stoppages or breaks since 1958. The airline is again looking to the Government for funding from the Ireland Strategic Investment Fund, ISIF, and a financial capital injection. It is crucial and imperative that we attach some conditionality to that funding, relating to key connectivity from Shannon Airport and other Irish airports. There must be commitments to the workers of Aer Lingus and its base at Shannon. In future, we must see a stimulus package specifically for the aviation and tourism sectors. The two areas are interlinked and they will be two of the last sectors to recover fully from the Covid-19 crisis. Along with colleagues in Government, I am drafting a range of policies that we will bring to the Minister next week. We ask for a favourable ear in that regard, because the sector desperately needs these policies and is crying out for them.

**Deputy Joe Carey:** I welcome the opportunity to speak in this important debate. As an island nation, international travel is of enormous importance for business and tourism. The aviation sector underpins 140,000 jobs, as does the tourism sector, on which also depend hundreds of thousands of jobs. Shannon Airport adds €3.6 billion to the GDP of our country and supports 43,700 jobs. The footprint of aviation-related companies in the Shannon area is very strong. We have aviation-related companies operating in the areas of leasing and maintenance, repair and overhaul, MRO. The devastating announcement last week from Aer Lingus concerning the shutting of its Shannon cabin crew base permanently came as a thunderbolt. It will have massive repercussions for the mid-west region and for Shannon. It is critical that the Government intervenes in this situation.

Aer Lingus is back at the table and looking for money and it is important that the State provides that money on the basis that the key strategic routes from Shannon to Heathrow, New York and Boston are maintained. It is also vital that we secure the Aer Lingus cabin crew base at Shannon Airport and the jobs of those workers as part of this deal. In addition, the Shannon-Heathrow slots must be secured for at least a decade as well. We can look at the actions of other governments across the globe, which have invested billions in supporting their aviation companies. In the case of Lufthansa, the German Government stepped up to the plate and provided

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investment, as did the Italian Government in respect of Alitalia. We must follow suit.

Regarding international travel, the Government has dragged its feet in publishing a plan. It is welcome news that this plan will be finally published on Friday. It is important that that statement deals with the harmonisation of travel in respect of the Common Travel Area between the UK and Ireland. We must fully implement the provisions of the European Commission's digital green certificate and do it in time. It is also important that we remove any restrictions on quarantine requirements concerning travel from the United States. That is an important market for us. I also support the use of antigen testing. Again, we are behind the curve in this regard. In the United Kingdom, the United States and across Europe, rapid antigen testing is widely used in societies and communities as well as in aviation. It is important that we embrace that method and take on board the scientific evidence and the report of Professor Mark Ferguson.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** We move on to Sinn Féin. I call Deputy Quinlivan.

**Deputy Maurice Quinlivan:** The discussion today takes place against the backdrop of the announcement last week of the job cuts by Aer Lingus at its base in Shannon. The Minister of State, in words that probably should not have been said, noted that it was very regrettable. The axing of 120 jobs by Aer Lingus at its base in Shannon is much more than that. It is a very bitter blow to the mid-west region and the wider community there. It is particularly devastating to the workers and their families. Many aviation staff have been receiving the state income supplements for the last 14 months and now they are also facing job losses. While these job losses are deeply disappointing, when one considers how this Government has handled aviation generally, they are hardly surprising.

I met the workers over a year ago. They still have no idea as to what Shannon will be like after we emerge from the pandemic. In respect of the aviation industry, the Government response has been slow and insufficient and the Government has been too reactive. The key issue concerns connectivity around the airport. The flights out of Shannon Airport into Heathrow, Boston and New York must continue and the jobs of the workers in Shannon and the wider region need to be retained. While responsibility for the job losses lies with Aer Lingus, it is clear that the Government aviation policy, or lack of one, has contributed to the uncertainty and frustrations faced by aviation workers. Indeed, the Irish Air Line Pilots Association has stated that lay-offs were a direct result of Government policy and its continued inaction on aviation. Fórsa, the cabin crews' trade union, added that the losses might have been avoided if the Government had moved faster to support aviation and had given a clear indication of when and how air travel would resume - an indication that we still have not received from the Minister for Transport.

I worked in the industry for 19 years. I know exactly how difficult it is to retain routes. When we lose them, they are lost. What is going on in aviation in this State is not some new crisis that has arisen unexpectedly. The aviation industry has been in crisis for over a year. Job losses, grounded operations and a lack of guidelines as to when and how the industry can reopen have led us to this point. What has the Minister done? Very little, it seems. Unfortunately, to date the Minister for Transport's contribution on aviation would not leave one optimistic for the future. He was clearly asleep at the wheel on this. Shannon Airport is literally dying in front of us. The Minister must intervene on the matter.

**Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne:** I wish to use my time to focus on Shannon Airport. It is the international airport with the longest runway in the country and was first to establish a sensory room, two years ahead of Dublin Airport.

Shannon Airport and its survival is vital to my home county of Clare and the mid-west region. Therefore, the importance of its survival post Covid cannot, and should not, be underestimated. I have attended many meetings in the past week. I have spoken to many of the workers. They are on their knees. They do not have a return-to-work date as yet so they cannot avail of the mortgage relief scheme. The workers and their families are suffering financially, emotionally and mentally, as they do not know what will happen from one week to the next.

We now know with certainty that the separation of Shannon Airport from the Dublin Airport Authority by Government has failed drastically. The proof showed itself in the Covid-19 pandemic. We in Sinn Féin, along with the trade unions, opposed separation at the time. We vigorously opposed the privatisation of Aer Lingus in 2015 under Fine Gael and the Labour Party. We argued that it would cost jobs in the long run.

The most recent announcement of Aer Lingus was another blow to the region, following a string of disappointing updates and on top of the hands-off approach of the Minister. The Minister knows that the airport is managed by a private company, Shannon Group. He assured me, in the response to a parliamentary question in July 2020, that he would oversee a review of the Shannon Group. To date we have not received an update on this, there has been no conclusion and no headway has been made. That begs the question, what is the Minister waiting for? It does not spell confidence in the airport or the region. We have heard that the Government is mooting regeneration and balanced regional development. This was an ideal opportunity to put that narrative into action.

There is also the situation around the appointment of the chairperson of Shannon Group and the debacle that ensued then, which was ultimately an embarrassment. A chairperson has yet to be appointed. Why is this the case? Why has Shannon Airport had to wait in the dark for so long? Where is the attention that the airport so rightfully deserves, and more importantly, which its staff and workers deserve, particularly after having endured the past 14 months of hardship?

There is no long-term strategy. Successive Governments have been short-sighted and have failed to produce a national aviation plan, policy or authority. Some 96% of flights leave from Dublin Airport, which is nonsensical. Shannon Airport brought in €3.6 billion to the GDP pre-Covid. It also bolsters 43,7000 jobs in the region. I implore the Minister to deliver the much-needed and much-talked about plan for recovery, as well as the necessary support and to ensure that Shannon Airport is brought back better.

**Deputy Cian O’Callaghan:** At the outset, I wish to state that in respect of the contributions of the Minister and the Minister for State, it would be reasonable for the Government to outline its position on the use of rapid antigen testing. It was namechecked by one of the Ministers. At this point, given its importance in respect of the reopening of our aviation industry, it would be reasonable for the Government to provide a detailed position and explanation on this issue. It is not a new proposal. There is plenty of evidence around it. It is being used in other countries and jurisdictions. If the Government is of the view that it should not be used here and if there is some sort of Irish exceptionalism, we should hear the rationale behind it. A simple namecheck of it as this point is highly insufficient.

On the issue of the EU digital green certificate, we need to hear directly from the Ministers if there are any capacity or IT issues with it. There have been media reports to that effect. We need to know if there is anything that will delay the implementation of the certificates on an IT

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or a logistical basis. If there is, what resources are being put in place to deal with, address and prioritise it, given how important it is for the reopening of the aviation sector? We, together with the thousands of families working in the aviation industry and the supporting industries, deserve clear explanations, information and answers from the Ministers and the Government on that issue.

I must say that I am not comfortable with how the Minister of State addressed the issue of job losses in Shannon Airport. In her comments, she acknowledged them and stated that they were regrettable, then attempted to justify and normalise them by listing off some other parts of Europe where there have also been job losses in the aviation sector. That is not a sufficient response from Government or Ministers. The Minister of State should not comment as if the Government is just a bystander or observer in this, when in fact, Government is setting policy and should be playing a much more active, hands-on role in protecting our connectivity and our jobs in this crucial industry. I ask the Government to look at that issue.

We need certainty and clarity on this issue. It has been most unhelpful over the last period that there have been such contradictory statements made by various Ministers. The contradictions are so bad in respect of aviation and the uncertainty is so bad in terms of commentary, that some Ministers even contradict themselves within days of making public comments. They may not realise the effect that this has on the industry, on those working in it and the people whose livelihoods depend on it. It creates huge uncertainty and stress. Like many other Deputies here, I have been contacted by numerous constituents. It is common, for example, for there to be two members of a household whose income is entirely reliant on the industry. Pilots are protesting outside the building today. They were here yesterday and they will be here during the week again. It is not just the pilots and cabin crew who are affected. There is a huge number of support staff members who are involved from the moment that someone enters an airport to the time when they touch down at their destination airport. All of those jobs and roles are skilled jobs. All of them are at risk.

What has happened in Shannon should be the final wake-up call to the Government that this hands-off approach is not sufficient and the aviation industry needs all the support that we can give it. In comparison with other European countries, sadly, we have been very far behind in terms of the level of support we have provided. It is welcome that the Minister has spoken about the need to build back better in terms of sustainability. I agree with him and support that. However, we also need to build back better in respect of jobs and connectivity. Regional connectivity must be at the heart of that. We must ensure that it is part of the backbone of the recovery in the aviation sector.

Looking at the supports provided in other countries, €10 billion was provided to Lufthansa, €7 billion was given to Air France and €1.2 billion was provided to TAP Air Portugal. It is clear that the Government's support here has been paltry in comparison. More than €43 billion has been provided in government supports across Europe for aviation and airlines. The contribution in Ireland has been much smaller. Given that this is an island nation, one would think that the support for workers in aviation and in airlines would be greater but, given the comments that have been made and the lack of action so far, I do not believe that this is fully grasped yet at senior level. Hopefully, we will get certainty in the announcements on Friday.

It is important that all the recommendations from the aviation task force recovery report last year are implemented. In addition, when certainty is given on Friday, and I hope it will be, that would be the time for the task force to be urgently reconvened to help map out a long-term

plan to support the sector. That is very important. Our supports for the sector must be about sustainability, regional connectivity and the role the aviation sector can play as the backbone for our connectivity, economy and society, and ensuring it reopens safely for both passengers and staff. The Government has said it will not have sector-specific income supports, but it has to look at aviation. Some people working in that sector have been far more badly hit and for much longer in terms of income. Some sector-specific supports on the income side there should be considered.

**Deputy James O'Connor:** This is an incredibly important opportunity to speak before some very important decisions are taken by the Government with regard to aviation and international travel in respect of Ireland. First, as the Fianna Fáil spokesperson on transport, I have had the privilege of working alongside many people working in aviation, including ground crew in airports, airport management, airport employees working in the fire brigade and people involved in aircraft maintenance. Today, I met many of the pilots who are protesting outside Leinster House. I have stood with those people from the start of the Covid-19 pandemic in terms of the supports they require. Obviously, they have gone through extraordinary difficulties. That must be acknowledged.

I wish to make a few important points in this area to the Minister and Minister of State. First, the implementation of the digital green certificate is very good news for aviation, but we must ensure the families who are travelling with children who are not vaccinated have clear protocols in place for how that will be possible. In addition, I strongly encourage the Government to take up the issue of antigen testing with NPHET. The Government prioritised the research for Professor Mark Ferguson's report on the benefit analysis of antigen testing, but we have yet to see serious and meaningful action in that regard. I am hopeful that the Government will examine that area this week.

Of course, many more supports will be required over the next number of weeks. I have to say it was quite difficult to listen to the Member from the Social Democrats who spoke before me talking about the incoherent messaging of the Government on Covid-19. They have mastered that art in their own right. It is very important that every political party would get behind the aviation workers. That is required if we want to get the sector back up and running.

There is a final point I wish to emphasise to the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, and the Minister of State, Deputy Naughton. The importance of the transatlantic connection to our economy cannot be understated. Some 160,000 people in this country are employed directly through foreign direct investment by US companies and companies from North America. It is absolutely imperative that the Government gives recognition to that fact and allows transatlantic travel to resume as quickly as possible by working with the US Government and its State Department. I have fleshed out some information from the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Deputy Coveney. His answers were particularly disappointing in terms of the current level of engagement he has with his US counterparts with regard to reopening transatlantic travel. That is a key requirement, and we should be seeking to do it in late July or August, at the latest. Hopefully, it can be back up and running by the autumn. It is imperative that this would happen.

With regard to the funding going to our airports in CAPEX, capital expenditure, and continued OPEX, operating expenditure, supports, that is critical to ensure our airports can continue to operate at a competitive level. I will finish on that point, and I hope those points will be taken on board.

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**Deputy Michael Creed:** It is by dint of an extraordinary national endeavour that we are having a debate here today that has a degree of cautious optimism in the context of Covid-19. The possibility raised in the speech of the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, of an earlier release from the restrictions that currently apply to international travel, even ahead of the introduction of the digital green certificate, is very welcome. As I understand it, the digital green certificate is a variation of either vaccination, a clear PCR test or a post confirmed Covid-19 case. That nails the issue of compulsory vaccination. There is also a requirement, however, to delineate clearly the extent to which a green certificate can be applied and to take steps to avoid mission creep, so it is not used to access other services. There are people who cannot be vaccinated, particularly young children and people with certain medical conditions.

Much has been said about connectivity and the Irish economy. Undoubtedly, it is critical, given our dependence on foreign direct investment, the numbers employed in that area, executives who need to travel internationally and our tourism industry. Like most Members who have contributed, we have engaged with myriad people who work in the aviation sector, such as direct employees of airlines, cabin crew and pilots and the other professions associated with it. What they need now is clarity in respect of a plan for reopening. That is evident. I would like to have seen more detail from Ministers today in that regard, but the commitment to ongoing engagement as we cautiously re-engage with international travel is very important.

It is difficult to take the hypocrisy of those who are critical of the Government's approach. Those who opposed a digital green certificate at European level, who were the most ardent advocates of hotel quarantining and more countries being added to the quarantine list and who pilloried anybody who was seen to travel through an international airport are now jumping up and down today and criticising the Government. The Government's response has been predicated on our position in terms of Covid-19 cases.

On the point about reopening and cautious optimism, and I say this advisedly as I am an admirer of NPHET and its advice generally that has got us to this position, NPHET's advice needs to be critically and forensically examined in respect of the reopening of the hospitality sector. It makes no sense to be enabled to dine in a hotel dining room, but not in a restaurant.

**Deputy Fergus O'Dowd:** This is an important debate and I wish to articulate the views of people in my constituency who have been communicating with me. Obviously, airline staff, pilots and their families are very concerned, but they all recognise, as I do, that health is the most important thing here and it is important that we get it right. The advice of NPHET, which is the Holy Grail in the context of the voice that the Government must listen to above all, must be considered and given the greatest weight.

That said, an American rang me the other day. He happens to be my brother and has a business. He operates in Ireland and in America. He made the point that he has received full vaccination and has gone through the waiting period thereafter. Then he read in the newspaper that citizens from Kuwait, Mongolia, Iran and Puerto Rico can fly into Ireland without mandatory quarantining, yet Americans like him cannot. There is something significantly wrong here. I hope that when the Government addresses this issue on Friday it will listen carefully to the business people and family members who want to come to Ireland. The longer we wait, the longer will be the delay in their business and other decisions. In addition, there are people who have families in the United Kingdom, whom they have not seen for over a year in many cases. There is a massive, pent-up demand in my constituency among people who have relatives in the UK to be able to travel there or for their relatives to be able to travel here. It is a very important

issue and I hope the Government will address it. It does not make sense that one can fly into Belfast from the UK and travel here, but one cannot do the opposite. However, I welcome the progress that is being made. I particularly welcome the concept of the European digital green certificate. It will help many families, make a lot of decisions easier and make business owners and families happier as a result.

**Deputy Richard Bruton:** I agree with Deputy Creed that, listening to this debate, it is hard to believe that this is the same Opposition which was demanding zero Covid and total mandatory quarantine for every country. The reality is that we have the most restrictive travel regime in Europe. Non-essential travel is not permitted in any circumstance. Quarantine is required for 100% of the people flying into this country, albeit many of them can spend their quarantine in a home. That has a chilling impact on people who have to come here to do business. There is mandatory hotel quarantine for travellers from Belgium, Canada, France and the USA. All of those countries are close partners of ours, with which we do continuous business.

Massive progress has been made in removing the risk associated with the Covid virus. Hospitalisation is down by 95%. The 14-day average incidence rate is now less than 0.1% of the population. Half of our population has either been vaccinated or recovered from the virus. Three quarters of over-65s had been vaccinated two weeks ago. That removed over 92% of the risk of casualty from this virus. There is a significant need to rebalance the risk, pain and suffering, both economic and social, associated with the travel restrictions. It is important that Ministers look hard at this matter. Public health advisers are, of course, experts in public health but they are not experts in seeking to balance those very substantial economic, social and personal costs that people are suffering during the restrictions against the small risks that still remain.

We must be conscious of new variants but a balance must be struck in this debate. I have not understood who is doing that balancing, looking at those other costs that occur and balancing them against the risks. As we make progress, there must be a rebalancing. I urge Ministers to consider at the importance of the changes in travel for a small island economy, as many others have said. We must listen to Professor Mark Ferguson who has said that antigen testing has a place, certainly for frequent travellers.

**Deputy Thomas Gould:** The crisis that now faces our aviation sector is unprecedented and requires unprecedented action from the Government. Sinn Féin has been calling for a survival and recovery plan for months to protect workers, their families and the industry. These workers need help to pay their mortgages and look after their families. They do not need Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael to play politics with their livelihoods. It must be remembered that Fianna Fáil privatised Aer Lingus in 2006 and the job was finished off by Fine Gael in 2015. Sinn Féin opposed privatisation at the time because we knew it would cost jobs in the long run.

More bad news has hit Cork in recent days as it was announced that 198 Aer Lingus jobs at Cork Airport will be temporarily lost for the period from September to late October or late November. These temporary job losses are bad news for workers and their families. The Government must ensure they are not lost permanently.

When Covid-19 restrictions are lifted, it is important that we have a strong aviation sector. That is critical and cannot be undermined. Connectivity is vital for somewhere like Cork as the area tries to be a reasonable counterbalance to Dublin to bring jobs into the region. The Minister has spent the past few weeks trying to play the blame game but the only people to blame here are those in government and the decision-makers at Cabinet who are not protecting

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workers' jobs. Instead of listening, this Government is blaming everyone else. It must take responsibility.

It has been unbelievable to hear Government backbenchers going on about Sinn Féin and the Opposition when, last May, the National Public Health Emergency Team, NPHE, asked the Government to bring in mandatory hotel quarantine and it refused. It took the Government nine months to bring in mandatory quarantine. The crocodile tears from Government backbenchers about the aviation sector have also been unbelievable. They should not come in here and tell me about it but instead tell their party leaders and Ministers because they are the people who make the decisions. It is not on for Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael to try to play both sides.

**Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire:** Aviation affects us all because it has such an influence on industry, investment, leisure, people's holidays and so on. The people about whom we must be most concerned are the tens of thousands working in the industry. I have raised this issue with the Minister. There is a view among those workers that the response of the Government has been sluggish at best and has verged on the disinterested at times. As far back as last summer, I raised with the Minister in the Dáil my concerns over Cork Airport. We have written to the Minister to ask for a survival and recovery plan for the aviation sector and, as far back as last October, my colleague, Deputy O'Rourke, was active in urging the Minister to examine the role antigen testing can play in the aviation industry and in supporting its recovery. I hope we are no longer ignoring the major challenges that exist, that we will instead confront them and that a plan will come forward.

The reality is that it is going to take several years for aviation to recover. I think we need a clear statement to that effect from the Minister. My constituency includes Cork Airport, which employs more than 10,000 people, directly and indirectly, and many more are dependent on connected industries. I believe that Cork Airport needs a commitment of at least three years of extended capital expenditure and contributions towards operating expenses. It is going to take that kind of time to recover and I am sure the other airports are the same. That is my view on Cork Airport.

Nearly 200 Aer Lingus workers at Cork Airport have been told that they will be laid off for ten weeks at the end of this year. That is five pay packets those workers will be without. Workers, many of whom before this announcement were already under enormous pressure, are now unsure of what the future will be for them, whether the terms of their employment will continue and so on. The concern is that after ten weeks, they will be pressured into accepting reduced terms and conditions or will not be asked to return at all. Aer Lingus has received significant support from the Government through the employment wage subsidy scheme, EWSS, and in other ways, including direct investment. I see no reason that the Government should not be putting pressure on Aer Lingus to keep these workers on, as it should and could do under the EWSS but is opting not to do on a financial basis. I have been in contact with Aer Lingus and the Minister should also make contact with the company to ask it to support those jobs. For the sake of ten weeks, and in the context of the crisis we are facing, it is only fair.

**Deputy Bríd Smith:** Much of the blame for this crisis can be laid at the door of the pandemic and the public health restrictions that ensued because people across the planet were forced not to fly and to maintain public health restrictions. In our case, much of the blame for the crisis can be laid at the Government's approach to support for the industry. We also believe that much of the blame for the crisis in aviation can be laid at the doors of employers, who slashed and burned employees' rights as a response to the crisis, with wholesale lay-offs, cuts and changes

to employment contracts. Aer Lingus displayed what seemed like barely concealed contempt for workers. It seemed incapable of even filling out forms for basic social welfare applications so that workers could receive the correct benefits. It is also notable that many of the companies currently laying off workers, reworking and tearing up workers' contracts, posted massive and sustained profits in the years preceding the onset of Covid. Such companies had huge cash reserves and were still able to pay their CEOs massive bonuses while the crisis crippled the industry.

I take any statement from the Minister professing concern about those workers with a large dollop of salt. Some months ago, I asked the Minister, along with other transport ministers across the EU, to sign a simple petition calling for respect in social matters in aviation. It was a mild-mannered petition stating that all airlines should abide by employment standards and not use bogus self-employment contracts to undermine both workers and the tax take for the State. The Minister's reply was to the effect that the Government did not want to upset Ryanair and would not support decent employment rights across Europe. It is scandalous that a Green Party Minister cannot even muster the enthusiasm that other aviation ministers across Europe have mustered.

Ultimately, we support aviation workers, their families and sensible public health measures that will make flights sensible and possible for all again. We do not, however, support prioritising an industry that cuts up the rights of workers and maintains the same unsustainable business model.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** This is a very cynical debate. Some of the contributions from the Government-supporting Deputies are extremely cynical. They are painting themselves now as supporters and defenders of workers' rights under the guise of pushing for an end to mandatory hotel quarantine. If they are serious about supporting workers' rights, they should get the Government to step in now to guarantee jobs and terms and conditions, and to renationalise Aer Lingus to do so. The Government has the power to do that. It does not have to mess around with mandatory hotel quarantine or anything else. Defend the jobs, conditions and incomes of workers in the industry.

This is not the first attack on workers in aviation. They have been on the front line again and again since Covid-19 started. Some companies have taken advantage of the pandemic to try to restructure workers' conditions in the company's favour to have a more flexible workforce and so forth. Again, I did not hear Government Deputies speaking up for those workers.

Dublin Airport Authority, DAA, workers, for example, faced the so-called new ways of working, which was a tearing up of their existing conditions that was rammed through for most groups of workers under massive pressure, which they were effectively forced to accept. The maintenance workers who refused to accept this have had their pay and working time reduced by 40% since October because they stood up to the DAA. I salute those workers for continuing to fight.

I emphasise that I do not agree with lifting mandatory hotel quarantine. To do that now would be to court making the same mistakes that were made in December, with potentially disastrous results. Instead, we should be eliminating the outsourcing that goes with it. We should be placing it under the control and supervision of ordinary working people by running it as part of the public health service with supervision from civil liberties activists. We should not be scrapping it, however. It should, in fact, be extended to Britain. The Government must listen to

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the warnings about what will happen with the Indian variant and the danger it presents if we do not move now to introduce mandatory hotel quarantine for travellers from Britain.

**Deputy Mick Barry:** Some 200 workers at Aer Lingus in Cork Airport will go to bed tonight fearful for the future of their jobs. Having been kept on the company books for the entire duration of the global pandemic, these workers have now been told that they will be laid off for a ten-week period between September and November when runway repairs are to be carried out.

These workers have been forced to live on a fraction of their wages for the duration of this pandemic. They now ask the following questions. If the Minister would care to listen instead of engaging in chats, he might hear the questions the workers are asking. After the sacrifices they have made, why are they not being kept on the books? Will all of them be rehired? If and when they are rehired, will they have the same wages and conditions?

I do not trust Aer Lingus on this matter. This is a company with a history of ruthlessly driving a race to the bottom. The workers' fears are justified, in my opinion. What action does the Minister intend to take to protect these workers?

I am a supporter of the renationalisation of Aer Lingus. There are other steps the Minister could take this side of September. If, for example, the Government is providing state aid, grant aid or an employment wage subsidy scheme, EWSS, to the company, it could and should be conditional on these workers being kept on the books.

I will conclude by saying it would be very much in the State's interest to do this as it will have to foot the bill for any lay-offs. My message is save jobs and protect wages and conditions at Aer Lingus. The Government must act.

**Deputy Neale Richmond:** I am very grateful for the opportunity to speak. I thank the Minister and the vast majority of Deputies who made such considered responses, although I was struck that Deputy Paul Murphy, who is leaving the Chamber, demanded mandatory hotel quarantine for Great Britain but made no mention of what the impact of Northern Ireland having an open border with Great Britain would be. I question his cynicism in placing ideology at the heart of this debate when the vast majority of us would like to work together on a sector that is facing immense difficulties caused by this pandemic. We would like to work collectively.

I will briefly make the point of the importance of this country seizing the opportunity with the digital green certificates. This cannot be optional. We need to be at the heart of the European conversation on this and we must be part of the first wave of EU member states which adopt and embrace the certificate.

**Deputy Alan Farrell:** Ireland is not an outlier, nor should it be. I believe the digital green certificate should be introduced in July. We made a commitment that the recovery proposal for aviation would be published in May and I am pleased to note that will happen on Friday. I am, however, dismayed at certain aspects of the Minister's contribution this afternoon on the basis that it now looks like we will introduce the digital green certificate in the middle of August. While I understand there may be moves with regard to the common travel area with the UK, which is welcome, some of our biggest markets are in the European Union and the United States, which is why I believe we should be moving faster to implement this.

As I said, we are not an outlier in the European Union. Fine Gael is a member of an organi-

sation that has been at the heart of Europe for many years. With regard to the implementation of the digital green certificate, it seems that, for some strange reason, we will be waiting until August. That is not acceptable.

More than 100,000 jobs are supported by Dublin Airport in my constituency and perhaps a couple of constituencies around it. That is not an exaggeration. The airport contributed €18 billion to our economy in 2018, which is approximately 6% of GDP.

Without providing certainty in the sector as quickly as possible, many more jobs will be at risk, not just those jobs that were lost in Shannon Airport last week. There is the potential for more job losses and those will be in Cork and Dublin in the very near future unless we give certainty to the sector. It requires time to plan the recovery.

I commend Recover Irish Aviation for putting forward such a well put together plan at a very early stage. I also commend the Minister, Deputy Ryan, and the Minister of State, Deputy Naughton, on their contributions to the process. I know they have to work on it tirelessly for weeks.

It is time we recognised that the United States and the UK are streets ahead of us in returning to aviation in terms of their vaccination programmes. Excluding them is the wrong thing to do and the wrong message to send. Some of the Deputies opposite have repeatedly referred to the importance of foreign direct investment, FDI, and the United States air routes. We must also recognise, however, that if we do not send a clear message as quickly as possible, it will have a long-lasting impact.

**Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor:** I thank the Minister and welcome the comprehensive statement on the EU Covid-19 travel certificate. I understand July is being considered but I ask that it be introduced as soon as possible. I, too, have been contacted by pilots, staff and their families. We have to be very careful and I know we must take the advice of the National Public Health Emergency Team, NPHE, but we must also be mindful of aviation.

I ask the Minister about the new travel certificate format. My understanding is that there will be a paper or digital format. In the case of the digital format, however, many constituents have contacted me to find out if it would be possible to access this certificate through a mobile telephone, perhaps with an app. No information has been given and the same applies with regard to the paper document. Should we use a credit card format? It is important that we consider that. I also appreciate that we must be mindful of people who do not get the vaccine. We need to ensure we get this right and information and timing will also be very important.

*5 o'clock*

Another concern I have is the consideration of there being three separate and distinct certificates for travel, including certification of a negative test, certification of vaccination and a certificate to confirm a person is recovering from infection. Will the Minister of State clarify whether the digital certificate will incorporate all three of those certifications or whether a person will have to carry separate certificates? This will be coming into operation in only a few weeks - the sooner the better - and I ask that people are told as soon as possible what is happening.

**Deputy Niamh Smyth:** I welcome the proposals and the action that will happen, we hope, in regard to the new EU digital green certificate. The scheme should be seen in the most posi-

tive light. It gives us the opportunity to reopen the country. The Oireachtas tourism committee, of which I am Chairman, has had representatives of the tourism recovery task force, the hospitality sector and the Restaurants Association of Ireland before it, sectors that are all hugely dependent on what we can achieve through international tourism and travel. The green certificate will provide an opportunity to set a pathway for the country's reopening.

One of my colleagues talked earlier about how people in this country have a choice when it comes to travel. We live on an island with two different jurisdictions and people have the choice to come in through Belfast. As someone from a Border county, I have seen how people, if they cannot come in through Dublin or have to quarantine when they get there, will look to Belfast as an option. The digital green certificate will eradicate the anomalies that currently arise and provide an opportunity for reopening the country. Its introduction is a positive move and I hope it will happen in July, as has been mooted, or even sooner. I encourage the Minister of State to keep moving in that direction in order to see a reopening of the country.

**Deputy Emer Higgins:** I welcome the European green certificate, which will be a key step towards reopening Ireland. The pandemic has seen us introduce restrictions that we, as a Government and a nation, never imagined we would see. Public health considerations and saving the lives of the most vulnerable among us were always at the forefront of those decisions but we are all looking forward to the day when the restrictions are no longer needed. The European green certificate is the safest way to allow people to return to travelling freely and safely within the EU. It will play an important role in the rehabilitation of the aviation industry in Ireland. In reopening, we must put public health and practicality first. The EU Covid-19 certificate is simply a commonsense approach to safer travel while we are living with the virus. It is vital that Europe works together and Ireland plays its part in adapting as quickly and effectively as possible.

There is no denying that the travel restrictions have had a huge impact on people's livelihoods. I have seen that at first hand in my constituency and throughout the country. Aer Lingus's recent announcement of closures and staff lay-offs has undeniably and understandably generated much anger and uncertainty. It is vitally important that those who have been worst impacted by restrictions know there is a plan in place for them and that we are listening. I am delighted that we are now in a position to begin lifting restrictions. As we do so, we must ensure we provide clarity to everyone employed in the aviation industry. International travel is vital for the functioning of both our economy and our society. I look forward to its safe and timely return.

In the past year, many of us have discovered more of our own country than ever before. We fully embraced the beauty of an Irish staycation. As international travel returns, it is important that the domestic tourism industry does not suffer. Ireland has a huge amount to offer as a holiday destination. I hope we will continue exploring it and that EU tourists will shortly be able to join us in so doing.

**Deputy Imelda Munster:** The aviation sector has suffered devastating consequences due to the pandemic. That was laid bare with Aer Lingus's recent announcement that it will be permanently pulling its cabin crew from Shannon Airport and there will be job losses in Cork for crew and ground staff. This is a terrible blow for the staff involved and their families. It is also causing increased anxiety for people working in the sector regarding their job security. While no one could have foreseen the disruption to international travel caused by the pandemic, the lack of protection available to workers is a direct consequence of the Fine Gael-Labour Party

Government's decision to fully privatise Aer Lingus in 2015. That significantly weakened the Government's hand in addressing the current crisis. It left regional bases and routes vulnerable and we are seeing the consequence of that in Shannon and Cork. Those decisions are leading to increased isolation for Ireland at a time when we need to increase connectivity.

Earlier in the pandemic, restrictions on international travel were required to protect public health as populations were unvaccinated and the virus was running rampant. At this stage, however, we need a clear pathway for international travel. We need to maintain and support our strategic connectivity, aviation jobs and the rights of workers. The loss of routes is devastating and it could take years to win them back, if it can be done at all. When the disastrous decision was taken in 2015 to privatise Aer Lingus fully, a €245 million connectivity fund was established. It is time to use that fund to protect jobs and routes. Even when travel reopens, the sector will remain under financial pressure for some time and supports will have to be provided.

We must take advantage of the positives. Europe's vaccination programme is progressing and plans to implement the digital green certificate are ongoing. We need to have a comprehensive plan in place for Ireland, including timelines. We also need concrete plans on testing, including antigen testing, to ensure people can travel safely internationally. We have been calling for this for months and it is time the Government delivered. The transport committee has heard expert evidence on how serial antigen testing can be used. We must include it in our testing regime. We need to prepare and antigen testing is a part of that. We must ensure there is a recovery plan in place for the sector. Without a clear plan, the significant damage the restrictions have had on aviation will worsen and it will be very hard to come back from that. The hands-off approach taken by the Minister for Transport and the Government is costing more and more jobs. We need a plan as a matter of urgency. A total of 140,000 jobs depend on it.

**Deputy Michael Lowry:** Vaccine passports, Covid passports or EU digital green certificates, call them what you will, are the way forward. At this stage, the only way to look is forward. Looking backward or standing still is not an option. When viable solutions present themselves, we must grab them with both hands. These travel documents offer a solution to one of our main issues and will ultimately be a vital component in the universal quest for normality.

Following agreement by the Council of Ministers, EU member states, including Ireland, have been given a directive to introduce Covid certificates. The primary objective is to open up Europe to free movement. Ireland is obliged to comply with the directive but it is up to us to determine the criteria we lay down for the issuing of our certificates. It is this aspect that concerns me. This is not a matter on which we can dither. It requires swift and definitive action. It is not just about allowing people to jet off to the sun. It is about salvaging our aviation industry, hospitality industry and the economic vibrancy of our country.

Our approach to formulating our criteria cannot be restrictive. It must be as constructive and encompassing as it can possibly be. There cannot and must not be a delay in setting out the criteria. The EU system is expected to be functioning next month. Despite knowledge of this plan to introduce the key that will safely open Ireland up to the rest of Europe, we still do not know who is directing the formulation of our criteria. Ireland cannot be the hurler on the ditch or last past the post on this. We are an island country. Travel is vital to our economy. It is crucial to our recovery. If Ireland is not ready to move with the first in Europe, we not only prolong the crippling effects of Covid on our aviation industry but we also risk running them out of the country. Last week we learned that Aer Lingus plans to close its cabin crew base at Shannon Airport. Ryanair has shown losses of €815 million in the 12 months to the end of

March. It has already moved aircraft from Dublin to other European bases and publicly stated it will not be moving them back.

In the face of already-seen damage, why is Ireland not top of the queue to introduce digital green certificates? Why are we not shouting their benefits from the rooftops? Digital green certificates will be available to everyone: those who are vaccinated, those who can prove immunity after recent recovery from Covid and those who have a negative Covid Test. These certificates will be all-inclusive. Every man, woman and child falls into one of these categories. The production of a negative test will most likely be the most common way for a large portion of the Irish population. Those who are stuck between the first and second doses of AstraZeneca, those who are not vaccinated at all and children of all ages will rely on a negative test to travel. This test requirement has also portrayed Ireland in a less than favourable light. The Irish Travel Agents Association has revealed that it costs €160 to have a private PCR test in Ireland. In Spain it costs just €50. This anomaly must be factored into any criteria laid down by Ireland. So too must the use of antigen testing. The delays and lack of clear decision on this invaluable screening tool defies belief. Government has acknowledged its merits, as have business and education, yet health officials contradict the findings of the Government's own chief scientific adviser, Professor Mark Ferguson, without providing any clear scientific grounds. Thus antigen testing remains the poor relation in Covid testing.

Ireland's aviation industry is in tatters. Our hospitality sector is gasping for air. The Covid vaccine was our first ray of hope and it continues to be our ray of light. The European digital green certificates provide our next significant jump towards recovery. It is of critical importance that we take urgent action and that the Government brings forward clear and unambiguous criteria to embrace, implement and roll out the digital green certificate.

**Deputy Peter Fitzpatrick:** The digital green certificate is seen by many as the only way to ensure there is safe overseas travel this coming summer. In principle I support the idea of a digital green certificate, although I have a few concerns I will outline later. On the certificates, can the Minister of State outline a realistic timeframe for when we might be able to implement this? Are we looking at weeks or even months before it can be implemented? I would welcome an update from the Minister of State in this regard. I believe that today the EU stated it will be available from 1 June. One of the main reasons I support the introduction of the digital green certificate is that it will reopen the hospitality sector to overseas travel and help our aviation sector, among many others. From speaking to and engaging with a large number of businesses in my own constituency, Louth, which are heavily dependent on overseas travel for their income, I know the past 14 months have been, quite frankly, disastrous. While I welcome the Government's efforts to support these businesses during the lockdowns it simply was not going to be enough for many of them to stay afloat.

One of the big questions I am being asked about the digital green certificate is whether the United States will be part of the scheme. Many businesses in County Louth involved in the tourism sector, and particularly those in the north of the county, rely heavily on tourists from North America. Can the Minister of State confirm what the situation is with visitors from the United States and the digital green certificate? Will such visitors be part of the scheme and if not, will a separate scheme be operated for them? As I said already, many businesses in the tourism sector, particularly areas in the northern part of the county like Carlingford and Omeath, have suffered a great loss as a result of the lockdown. Their only chance of survival is the reopening of the sector and in particular, being able to receive visitors from North America. I would therefore be very grateful if the Minister of State could give us a detailed update on this.

At the beginning of my speech I mentioned I had some concerns about the digital green certificate. As we all know, the digital green certificate is being introduced so as to give countries assurances that visitors from other countries are vaccinated and not carrying the virus. I have concerns about the forging of green certificates. Can the Minister of State update the House on the measures being taken to ensure digital green certificates are authentic and genuine? What measures are being taken to ensure digital green certificates are not fraudulent? Also, can the Minister of State confirm that once it is introduced, the same procedure will be implemented by all member states? We do not want to see some states adopting different sets of rules to others.

I come from Dundalk, a Border area, and like all other parts of the island we have suffered due to the pandemic and Brexit. Many people who live in Dundalk work in the North as teachers, nurses, or in other essential roles and most of them got vaccinated in the North. Will they be entitled to the green certificate and *vice versa*, will those from the North who get vaccinated in the South get green certificates? The big concern I have had in my constituency office over the last number of days concerns the vaccination programme. The people have been asked to register online for the vaccine and have done so for the last number of weeks. However, there seems to be a big gap because only this morning, I encountered eight different people born in 1961 who had been skipped and all of a sudden their siblings who registered a week or two later have got it. They want to get the digital green certificate. They want to either go on holidays or visit their loved ones. Can the Minister of State check with the HSE and see what exactly is happening at the moment? I ask because when these people ring the helpline looking for an update on when they are going to be vaccinated, they are basically being fobbed off and that is not very fair. As I said these citizens have been asked to register, they have done so and the least the HSE can do is give them a decent answer.

**Deputy Marc MacSharry:** The private sector is the engine of growth in this country. As a small, open economy we depend on aviation for that. With the billions upon billions of euro we have been forced to borrow to ensure people had enough to eat, live and pay bills over the course of the past year, we need aviation open as quickly as possible. This must happen first of all to support corporate Ireland and second, to support tourism, which in turn feeds into our hospitality sector, which we have beaten to death via our total aversion to risk over the course of the last year. While I acknowledge our medics have done a very good job in giving us advice on what must be avoided and undertaken, we as a Government have failed in our responsibilities to distil that down into a functioning economy and aviation is a good example of that.

I have very little time to speak this evening but anybody who is fully vaccinated should have no travel restrictions. For them there should be no testing requirements, no quarantine requirements and no restrictive movement requirements. Why else are we being vaccinated? We are up at 30% now and growing, we should lift the ban for those people immediately, particularly between here and the UK, where there is no rational reason for a ban. Obviously, people are going in through the North and up and down in any event and we need to get with the programme there.

Antigen testing seems to be working throughout the entire world but for some reason we have a total aversion to its use or benefits here. I am not a medical physician and I am not an expert but it seems that Dr. Holohan and NPHET are outliers in the world. How can their position be so different to that of the rest of the world in this context? I had hoped the senior Minister would be here, although I intend no offence to the Minister of State. I had hoped he would outline to the House what he discussed with the US Secretary of State yesterday. Did he discuss the ban on allowing people from Ireland into the USA and *vice versa*? What is the

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position for European citizens? We need an urgent update on that. What has happened to the €20 million of support for the airlines announced last November? No airline has got anything yet and it is June. Aer Lingus has lost in the region of €460 million and Ryanair in the region of €800 million. These companies are vitally important to our connectivity and employ many people. Finally, I ask that we not bring up the rear with this new digital pass. As has been said by others, as a small open economy we should be bursting at the seams to get out there and be the first to be ready to use it and be open for business.

**Deputy Paul McAuliffe:** As we have this debate on the digital green certificate, there are airport workers listening who have lost income or their jobs and who are seeking a roadmap forward. I hope that the Government will give them that roadmap on Friday. I worked in Dublin Airport and, as I said in this Chamber last September and again in January, morale there has never been as low. In managing the pandemic, the Government has neither been a zero-Covid zealot nor put the economy before public safety. It has treaded a sort of cautious and pragmatic centre road. It never closed essential travel, despite calls in this House to do so, but it has restricted non-essential travel. That often received criticism from Members on both sides but it remains the correct action to have taken.

Later this week we will speak about mandatory hotel quarantine. It is important to say mandatory hotel quarantine and the digital green certificate are not incompatible concepts, and creating safe zones and or separating zones where there are virulent variants is a sensible way forward for the industry. In the same way we tread the middle road, we will have to move away from mandatory hotel quarantine when it is right to do so. This should not be based on the name of the country but the data about the country.

Many in the aviation sector have been frustrated but just 89 days ago Sinn Féin, People Before Profit, the Social Democrats and Labour all voted for the forced mandatory hotel quarantining of people entering this country from every country, regardless of data. Instead, the Government took public health advice, listing countries from which travellers were required to quarantine in hotels and regularly updating that list. Today, there are just four European countries on that list. Three months on, the zero-Covid zealots seem to have disappeared from the Chamber but I remember when they said we should have mandatory hotel quarantine for all arrivals.

With 45% of the population vaccinated, we must protect the vaccine programme but we must also accept that this gives people the opportunity to have non-essential travel too. As I said in the House on 1 April last, antigen testing will play a part. I also acknowledged a campaign from IALPA and the Recover Irish Aviation Group, whose members I have met. There are 140,000 jobs at stake in the sector and we should pave the way forward for a safe form of travel.

**Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh:** I will be brief and focus on the digital green certificate, with two fundamental but interconnected issues, namely, freedom and privacy. On the one hand, the certificate would help facilitate the safe reopening of EU economies, with the crucial word being “safe”. People who fear putting their loved ones at risk with the simple act of spending time together no longer need to worry about that risk and tourism can slowly begin to reboot in cities, towns and villages across the EU without fear of future lockdowns. Importantly, livelihoods can be restored for sectors deeply affected over the past year and four months.

That being said, a green certificate should not inadvertently lead to discrimination between

people or groups of people when it comes to freedom of movement. It is a freedom on which we pride ourselves and from which we have benefited for generations. I reiterate the comments made by my Green Party colleagues in the European Parliament that people who have not yet been vaccinated should not be discriminated against. To my mind, this means there should be two other criteria for a certificate, which are proof of a negative Covid-19 test or of Covid-19 recovery. They need to be on an equal footing to proof of vaccination. I am conscious this may not always be possible in practice so safeguards for such circumstances must be teased out and addressed.

I also highlight the question of data protection and echo the concerns of my EU counterparts in highlighting that there should be no trade-off between people's data protection rights and the facilitation of safe travel. We need both. People across the EU and beyond must be assured that whereas a certificate will verify public health safety, it should not be used to collect, store or transmit information about where, when or for what purpose a person is using the certificate.

**Deputy Bernard J. Durkan:** I support my colleagues in this particularly important debate. Now we have reached a stage where the light at the end of the tunnel is beginning to emerge in controlling the virus, it is equally important that our economy should respond to the needs of the workforce. We must do this with the utmost urgency and in a variety of ways. The European green certificate is one way of moving forward and we should utilise this method to the fullest extent possible. We should also try to recognise the pivotal and central position that this country has long established in international air transport. We must realise that there is a major onus on air transport to facilitate not only this country's needs but also global needs. I plead for a massive amount of European support for both Aer Lingus and Ryanair because of the important job they do. I hope these moneys can be made available as quickly as possible.

**Deputy Alan Dillon:** It goes without saying that our aviation sector is incredibly important for our island but it cannot afford to wait much longer before travel starts to resume internationally. Devastated tourism and aviation industries have been crying out for a plan and the position is becoming increasingly frustrating as vaccine roll-out progresses. We have seen non-essential travel between Britain and the North resume and we must act now to harmonise the common travel area by aligning with the UK position. The European Union's digital green certificate will be an important step in allowing for the freedom of movement of people within the EU. We must act quickly to ensure there is no avoidable delay in getting the process set up and giving people the option to avail of this important initiative by the EU. In a similar way, fully vaccinated travellers from the United States should be welcomed into Ireland under a similar, if not identical, framework to the proposed digital green certificate. This should be applied to all travellers from the United States.

The Government must adopt a position on the use of rapid antigen testing, which is scientifically proven and which would enable Ireland to emerge as quickly and safely as possible from the dreadful pandemic. We have multiple test programmes running and there does not need to be a delay in implementation within the aviation sector. This is a proven technique in detecting infectious cases so I ask that this be given serious priority by the Government.

**Deputy Richard O'Donoghue:** Why must we wait for the likes of Aer Lingus to close its cabin crew base in Shannon for us to wonder why things like this happen? I told the Government that it would happen but the Government did not listen. Our airports must be attractive for airlines to use as a base for their business. We in Ireland are entering a very competitive landscape and it is too late to act when companies are closing and leaving the country. The Govern-

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ment must commit to delivering a multi-annual fund, not just for Shannon but also for other regional airports that need certainty at this challenging time. Funding must be put in place now.

There are 143,000 people working in the aviation industry and 270,000 are employed in tourism, 50,000 of them are located in the mid-west region. I call on the Government and the Minister for Transport to appoint a chairperson for Shannon Airport. This is vital for the future of the airport, Shannon, Limerick and the surrounding areas. The Minister should wake up and appoint a chairperson for Shannon so we can deal with the issues coming in there. The best thing I can say is that the Government should wake up. It is not listening. A year ago I said this would happen but the Government did not listen.

**Deputy Michael Collins:** I thank my colleagues, Deputies Mattie McGrath, O'Donoghue and Michael Healy-Rae for giving me time to speak to this very important matter. It has been well flagged for months now that thousands of aviation workers are facing permanent unemployment if the Government keeps dragging its heels. There is a further complication with Cork Airport because there are plans to close it for a few months at the end of the year for runway works. I have nothing against this work being carried out but I am totally opposed to the airport's decision to fully close the facility. I am also not happy that Cork's airport authority did not consult either me as a public representative or business and tourism representatives from west Cork about the closure. The Minister must step in and pressure must be put on the airport to complete this work at night, as it could and should be done. Otherwise, jobs will be lost and never regained as a result of this closure, which comes on top of the current Covid-19 crisis. A closure of the airport for a further three months must be avoided and we must resume a summer schedule if at all possible, which goes to the end of October. If the runway closure goes ahead, there should be a continuation of the PUP for the affected workers in the aviation sector in Cork for the period of the works. The Government needs to give a guarantee of no closure for Cork-based crew permanently.

A rapid antigen test needs to be put in place. Since the start of this pandemic I have raised this issue and I have called on the Government, over months and even last year, to put in place rapid antigen testing. The last time I spoke on this, the then Taoiseach, Deputy Varadkar, and now the current Taoiseach, Deputy Micheál Martin, both completely ignored my requests.

We need further financial support for Aer Lingus from the Government. This is absolutely vital and the bottom line is that the Government needs to step up and take action immediately to save aviation.

**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:** In the past, the Minister has stated that he does not like to see people in motor cars. I believe that the Minister really does not like to see people in aeroplanes either.

The connectivity between our country and the rest of Europe and the rest of the world is of paramount importance. The Aer Lingus workers are fighting for their survival. Cork and Shannon airports need to be enhanced and helped to grow. I ask the Minister of State and the Government to stop dumping money in Dublin Airport, an airport that does not even have a rail network going to it from the city. That is absolutely ridiculous. The amount of money being pumped into Dublin Airport at a time Shannon Airport is being left to sink is wrong and should not be allowed to happen.

I ask the Minister of State to please take on board the massive contribution being made by

people who are working in the aviation industry, be it for international business people who want to go to come here or the tourists who want to come into our country. These are all of paramount importance. It is so important that we protect those lifelines to the rest of the world. We are an island nation and do not forget it. People will have to fly in here and they will have to fly out. If we want businesses and our tourism sector to grow we need to help, but the Government is looking to tax flights into Ireland by raising enormously the cost of the aviation fuel through taxes.

With regard to our airport in County Kerry and our regional airports such as the airport at Knock, we want to ensure they continue. The great Monsignor Horan and Charles J. Haughey worked tirelessly to ensure that airport was carved out of a bog. It has served a great purpose there since, welcoming people into that part of the country. Kerry Airport is also a great regional airport and we want to ensure it is allowed to continue into the future.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** I do not know what kind of a death wish the Minister of State and the Government have on rural Ireland especially. During a Zoom meeting last Friday I listened to the heartfelt pleas of wonderful and long-serving staff from Shannon Airport. It was heartfelt fear at the sheer abandonment of the airlines by the Government and both Ministers responsible. This is at a time we should be trying to expand them. We have two wonderful airlines in Aer Lingus and Ryanair, with wonderful staff. We know what they do. It is time to look after them. Get the mayhem out of Dublin Airport and support Shannon, Knock and Cork airports. Give them some decent modicum of responsibility.

On the pandemic and the Government's response to it, I have said before that it is a pandemic, which is what it seems to be. They just want to turn off the tap on rural Ireland and cast people's lives away. There were Deputies in here, from the left parties in general, who were crying for zero Covid, including the Labour Party. Now they want to complain about the results of it. Thank God we did not go there. It has been a whole mishmash of dysfunction and being disloyal to our people while being subservient to somebody else.

On the green certificates, why was the European Commission debating the green passports in 2017, 2018 and 2019, before we ever had Covid? What is going on? I would advise people in this House to be careful what they wish for. We will all be locked up and not able to go anywhere. Big Brother will be watching us. I believe this is the Government's plan: to control, control, control, and to hell or to Connacht with the people. Certainly, anything outside of Dublin is to hell, to Connacht, to Africa or to any place else they want to go. The way the Government is blackguarding the people is shameful. RTÉ was putting fear into people last Thursday telling us that the extensions to emergency powers were being decided and being done without ever coming to this House. RTÉ and other journalists should get their facts right because we must debate that in this House this week.

**Deputy Marian Harkin:** Whoever said it was easier to lock down due to Covid rather than to open up was not wrong. We have, however, come to a point now where we must bite the bullet. All our actions take place in context and while the situation is fluid, the headlines around vaccination, hospitalisations, antigen testing, and now the EU green certificate, are all encouraging. Biting the bullet means that we now need clarity on opening up aviation. We need a roadmap to guide us. We need a funding package that underpins the opening up of the aviation sector that will protect jobs and maintain connectivity.

We need to know when the EU green certificate will be operational and what the conditions

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will be. Will the Minister of State say if we have an indicative date for the introduction of this certificate? People need to know. The aviation sector needs to know. Do we have the operating systems required to manage the use of this certificate? Can the Minister of State assure us of that today?

There has been much controversy about the rapid antigen testing. Ireland is a laggard on this. It reminds me somewhat of the debate around mask wearing at the beginning of the pandemic. I actively advocated for mask wearing from the very outset, as did others. There was real reluctance, however, from some people. The idea that the perfect was the enemy of the good was part of it, but there was also an element of whether we can trust the public to wear masks properly. There was an opinion that medical professionals wear masks and they are trained to do so, but Josephine and Joe Public do not. We had what I would call a type of medical paternalism on the issue. On the antigen testing, the Government's chief scientific adviser, Professor Mark Ferguson, published a report co-authored by Professor Patrick Mallon, Professor Mary Horgan, and Professor Kingston Mills. The report advocated the use of rapid antigen testing to enable the accelerated easing of restrictions in Ireland. Governments across the world are proactively advocating the use of rapid antigen testing as part of their return to international travel. Once again, however, Ireland is dragging its heels when it comes to rapid antigen testing. It is not perfect. No test is perfect, but it has an important role. Is there a hint of medical paternalism here in that, again, Josephine and Joe Public can use these tests themselves and the tests do not have to be administered by a medical professional? Covid can only be managed by a truly collaborative approach. As I said earlier, we are at a point where we as citizens are part of the solution. We are not the problem.

On the issue of Shannon Airport, I once had the privilege of representing County Clare in the European Parliament. I understand the vital importance of Shannon Airport as an economic driver for the region. That is not the only reason I mention this. Shannon Airport matters not just to the mid-west. It matters to the west, to the north west and to the south west. Balanced regional development is literally that: a balance of development for all the regions. If the Wild Atlantic Way has taught us anything, it is that where regions co-operate, the whole is greater than the sum of the parts.

While it is not specifically relevant to the debate, I will very briefly mention Sligo Airport. I have brought this up with the Minister of State on a number of occasions, but not in the context of connectivity or Covid. It was in the context of search and rescue provision for the west and the north west. It is beyond urgent that funding is channelled to Sligo Airport for safety works already completed. I have raised this issue many times. I will not labour it today but it needs to be dealt with now.

We are a small country. Connectivity is key. International and transatlantic connectivity is vital to the west coast as well as to the east coast. This is why I speak about Shannon. I was in this Parliament when the process of privatising Aer Lingus began in 2006. I opposed it then and, unfortunately, to some extent the chickens have come home to roost. We have to pay a price for this and so be it but we must pay it. Selling Aer Lingus was one thing. Allowing it to disengage substantially from the west coast would be unforgivable.

**Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegard Naughton):** I thank all the Deputies who made important contributions. I assure them the Government is acutely aware of the devastating impact Covid-19 is having on the aviation industry, on families and workers and on those who are impacted by the sector. I thank the Oireachtas joint commit-

tee for the work it has carried out in keeping this topic in the spotlight over the past 15 months through the various meetings that have been held during this time. This week, the committees, the Seanad and the Dáil have assisted in our understanding of the complexities of the needs and concerns of stakeholders in aviation and the public in balancing the economic impacts against the public health imperative. It is through such cross-governmental collaboration with the public interest at its heart that I believe we will navigate this crisis, with care and caution, towards an ultimate reopening of international travel. The Government is fully aware of the pressure those in aviation are under and the frustration present in the industry. The Minister, Deputy Ryan, and I will continue to engage with the aviation industry, the airports and the air carriers, individually and collectively through the national civil aviation development forum.

A number of Deputies raised important issues and I addressed many of them in my opening statement. A number raised the midwest region and Shannon Airport. There is real concern in the midwest region about the lack of transatlantic flights and about the Heathrow slots. As I said earlier, Aer Lingus has assured the Minister, Deputy Ryan, and me there was no strategic intent to reduce connectivity out of Shannon Airport. I fully expected Aer Lingus to resume flights at Shannon Airport gradually as restrictions are eased over the coming months.

I advise Deputies that in the coming weeks the Tánaiste will make an announcement as part of the programme for Government commitment to establish a Shannon estuary task force, recognising that Shannon Airport is a key economic driver and that the midwest region is critical. In total last year and this year, €30 million in Government supports has been made available to Shannon Group, through economy-wide supports and supports specific to the aviation sector. We have ensured that all of our aviation infrastructure, airports and regional airports have been supported and are in a position to be able to rebound and grow as we come out of this crisis. The Minister, Deputy Ryan, and I have placed a big emphasis on this over recent months.

The Covid-19 virus is our shared concern and the public health objective is the starting point. The Government has consistently adopted a cautious approach to international travel and has worked to ensure any necessary air travel is done safely. There was some optimism last summer that aviation in Europe would have been well on its way to recovery by the end of 2020 but, unfortunately, this did not transpire. Instead, there were significant rates of infection throughout Europe and globally in the autumn. This was compounded by the importation of the B117 variant, which swept through the country following the partial reopening during Christmas, followed by other emerging variants of concern. Flight bans were introduced here for the first time as an emergency response to the new variant strains of Covid-19. These flight bans were quickly replaced by a pre-departure test requirement. As soon as possible thereafter, a system of mandatory quarantine was established in law.

Despite some initial start-up issues, as expected with any new system, the mandatory quarantine system assisted in containing the seeding of new cases of Covid-19 and variants of concern in the State, while we endeavoured to manage persistent high rates of community transmission at the same time. However, the current course of Covid-19 means international travel is reduced to essential journeys only. In this context, the aviation sector is operating at very low levels of activity, as the House is well aware.

The industry and its employees have shown great fortitude over the past 15 months in supporting the public health measures through implementing the protocols for passenger travel, Covid-19 proofing our airports and denying boarding at the gates to those passengers who do not comply with Ireland's public health measures. Through the labour employer economic

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forum, LEAF, process which I chair, involving employer and employee representative bodies, it has been acknowledged there will inevitably be a lag in aviation reopening compared to other economic sectors. However, we will continue to explore the supports needed to sustain industry in trading its way back to recovery when that time is signalled. In particular, the wage supports have been hugely important in maintaining the connection between employers and employees. There will be no cliff edge in State supports, as has been previously outlined.

I encourage the aviation sector to continue to engage with me, the Minister, Deputy Ryan, and departmental officials in the work in bringing forward proposals and in the preparation for a recovery and restart for international travel. Of course, we need a strong and sustainable economy in which international travel and aviation are central. However, the risk to public health remains the driver of the Government's response, planning and action.

Ireland has a proud history in aviation and our reputation internationally is exceptional. It fits well with our culture of global citizenship and has always enabled the Irish diaspora to set its sights further beyond the immediate horizon. Aviation connects us with the world and we will strive to ensure that in future connectivity is maintained with Europe, the common travel area, on transatlantic routes and to many other global destinations. It is with this perspective that we will build back better and more resilient to face future shocks. The policies and targets we are setting now for sustainability and climate action will ensure this resilience. Our aviation industry, airports and air carriers will play an important role in this transition over time.

In addition, balanced regional development is at the heart of our programme for Government. We recognise that all parts of Ireland must be able to prosper. The silence that has descended over our regional airports is indicative of the disproportionate impact a crisis such as this can have on the regions, particularly our smaller regional airports such as Donegal, Ireland West Airport Knock and Kerry. For this reason, out of a budget of almost €80 million in 2021 approximately 78% is being targeted at regional airports, with Cork and Shannon receiving almost 43% of the overall budget. We will continue to do what we can to support these airports and we will keep the situation under constant review as part of budget 2022.

With regard to the immediate crisis and the need to get international travel back up and running, this is vital for the continued economic well-being of the country and remains a priority for the Government. However, this can only be accomplished through the consideration of the progression of Covid-19, the national vaccination programme, developments at EU and international level and our public health advice. The Government will set out its position this week.

### **Annexation of Palestine: Motion [Private Members]**

**Deputy John Brady:** I move:

That Dáil Éireann:

— notes that recent weeks have seen the most serious escalation of violence in Israel and the occupied Palestinian territory (i.e. the West Bank, including East Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip) since 2014, with a tragic impact on innocent civilians and loss of life, including the deaths of at least 65 children;

— condemns the targeting of civilian infrastructure, and the loss of civilian life, and

recalls the obligations on all parties under international humanitarian law and international human rights law to protect civilians;

— welcomes the announcement of the ceasefire of 21st May, and calls on all parties to support its implementation;

— emphasises the importance of immediate and unimpeded access for vital humanitarian assistance for those in need;

— affirms that a just and lasting peace requires addressing the poverty, inequality, injustice and underlying root causes of these cycles of violence, and meaningful accountability for breaches of international law; and

— recognises that the forced displacement of the protected Palestinian population and the presence and expansion of Israeli settlements, in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, undermines the prospects of peace, not just in recent weeks but over decades, and represent flagrant violations of international law;

further notes that:

— the annexation of territory, whether de jure or de facto, is a violation of the fundamental principle of international law enshrined in Article 2(4) of the United Nations (UN) Charter which states ‘All Members shall refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state, or in any other manner inconsistent with the Purposes of the United Nations’, and UN Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 2334 (December 2016) on Israel underscores ‘the inadmissibility of the acquisition of territory by force’, echoing the original phrase from UNSC Resolution 242 in November 1967;

— the Geneva Conventions of 1949, and their protocols, bind Ireland as a High Contracting Party, and provide that parties to the Conventions must respect and ensure respect for the Conventions;

— the transfer by an Occupying Power of parts of its own civilian population into the territory it occupies is prohibited under the Fourth Geneva Convention;

— in its 2004 advisory opinion on the Legal Consequences of the Construction of a Wall in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, the International Court of Justice held that the construction of the wall and its associated regime ‘create a “fait accompli” on the ground that could well become permanent, in which case, and notwithstanding the formal characterization of the wall by Israel, it would be tantamount to de facto annexation.’;

— Israel has altered and purports to alter the character and status of Jerusalem, by annexing the territory de jure, and has extended its ‘law, jurisdiction and administration’ to the occupied Syrian Golan and the UNSC has condemned both steps as having ‘no legal validity’ and constitute ‘a flagrant violation of the Fourth Geneva Convention’ in UNSC Resolutions 476 and 478 (Jerusalem) and 497 (Syrian Golan);

— there are now over 600,000 Israeli settlers living in illegal settlements established in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and the Israeli Government continues the expansion of these settlements;

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— the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Palestinian territory occupied since 1967, in his report to the UN General Assembly 73rd Session on 22nd October, 2018, concluded ‘Statements of political intent, together with Israel’s colonizing facts on the ground, its legislative activity, and its refusal to adhere to its solemn obligations under international law or to follow the direction of the international community with respect to its 51-year-old occupation, have established the probative evidence that Israel has effectively annexed a significant part of the West Bank and is treating this territory as its own’; and

— the Minister for Foreign Affairs stated on 23rd April, 2020, regarding developments in Israel, that ‘Annexation of territory by force is prohibited under international law, including the UN Charter, whenever and wherever it occurs, in Europe’s neighbourhood or globally. This is a fundamental principle in the relations of states and the rule of law in the modern world. No one state can set it aside at will’;

recalls that Ireland distinguishes between the territory of the State of Israel and the territories occupied since 1967, including illegal Israeli settlements, land appropriated for future settlements, and territory incorporated by the wall and its associated regime;

condemns the recent and ongoing forced displacement of Palestinian communities in the occupied Palestinian territory;

further condemns the annexation by Israel of East Jerusalem and its settlement activity there and in other areas of the West Bank, as serious breaches of international law and as major obstacles to peace that undermine the viability of the two-State solution;

declares that Israel’s actions amount to unlawful de facto annexation of that territory; and calls on the Government:

— not to recognise as lawful any situation created by any such serious breach of international law, nor to imply such recognition, and to not render aid or assistance to the responsible state in maintaining the situation so created and to cooperate to bring the serious breach to an end;

— to urge Israel to bring to an end all settlement activity and not to impede the collective right to self-determination of the Palestinian people as a whole; and

— to focus its efforts on bringing an end to settlement activity and to regularly update Dáil Éireann.

Recently, we have witnessed another sustained, brutal and unforgiving assault on the Palestinian people by Israel, in which hundreds of civilians, including 65 children, were slaughtered. There was the deliberate destruction of homes, media offices, libraries, police stations, the university and the only Covid test centre in Gaza. These are all breaches of the Geneva convention, in other words a war crime. This violence did not take place in a vacuum. It was a direct consequence of 54 years of Israeli occupation and colonisation of Palestinian lands. We have brought forward this motion with the support of Trócaire, Sadaka, Christian Aid, ICTU and a broad section of the Oireachtas, whom I thank for co-signing the motion. These include the Social Democrats, the Labour Party and numerous Independent Deputies.

A fundamental tenet of modern international law is a legal maxim which translates to the

effect that a lawbreaker cannot benefit from an illegal act. Since 1967, the international community has been unequivocally clear that the Israeli annexation of East Jerusalem and the West Bank broke international law and constituted a clear crime. The Israeli programme to populate Palestinian lands, otherwise known as the settler programme, has been the engine that has driven annexation. It is what has turned an Israeli military occupation into a colonisation of Palestinian lands and yet, despite all the legal rulings, the international ire, the 30 UN Security Council resolutions and the hundreds of resolutions that have emanated from the UN General Assembly, Israel has never been held to account for its actions.

The reality is that in Palestine the application of international law is determined by the variables of the power equation. I do not need to remind anyone of the disparity of power in this conflict. It is this power asymmetry that allows Israel to pursue a policy of managing the conflict rather than seek a meaningful rapprochement with Palestinians in order that the illegal policy of annexation be allowed to continue to the point where there no longer remains a cohesive coherent entity that was once the Palestinian people.

Remarkably, if we pass this motion, we will be the first European country to attempt to frame a fresh discourse around the conflict through the acknowledgement that annexation is taking place - a discourse based on the applicability of international law and of natural justice, and a belief in the moral obligation of nation states to refrain from the implementation of the policy of apartheid and the programme of colonisation which we term annexation. We will be the first European parliament to formally acknowledge that illegal annexation is taking place in the occupied Palestinian territories. For years, the EU has equivocated with the line that is a line in the sand that if it happens, they can introduce all sorts of serious measures. The EU claims to have prevented annexation from happening last summer. This is not the reality on the ground, which is that *de facto* annexation is happening. We have the potential to change the EU position.

In January, the Israeli Government approved construction of more than 2,500 settlement housing units across the West Bank, including 460 in East Jerusalem. According to Peace Now, during 2020, Israel approved or advanced construction of more than 12,000 settlement housing units - the most in a single year since the organisation began its monitoring work in 2012.

In the nine-week period from 18 January to 21 March 2021, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, OCHA, reported at least 204 Palestinian casualties in the West Bank alone resulting from clashes, protests, search and arrest operations and settler attacks.

The respected humanitarian groups, Human Rights Watch, Al-Haq and B'Tselem have all labelled the Israeli Government as an apartheid regime. The Israeli regime, which strives to promote and perpetuate Jewish supremacy in the entire area between the River Jordan and the Mediterranean Sea, is an apartheid regime. Accordingly, land is used to develop and expand existing illegal settlements and build new ones, while Palestinians are dispossessed and corralled into small crowded enclaves that are effectively Bantustans.

I acknowledge that other Deputies have brought forward amendments to the motion but I believe that it is important that we act with one voice. I agree with the measures outlined in the People Before Profit amendment but today is about generating unity around one specific issue, that is, annexation. Ultimately, the discourse needs to move onto what sanctions and measures need to be imposed as a consequence of the continuous breaching of international law. I believe

it is important that we remain focused on what we can achieve here by supporting this motion.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** Today, the Dáil speaks with one voice. Today, we condemn the illegal and ongoing annexation, the illegal seizure of Palestinian lands by the Israeli occupier. Today, we condemn the illegal displacement of Palestinian families and communities from their homes and from their land. Today, we stand in solidarity with the Palestinian people and assert their inalienable right to their homes, to their land, to their homeland and their right to self-determination - a right that can never be extinguished. Today, we condemn the Israeli occupation and Israel's illegal settlements.

We state loudly and clearly that Israel violates international law when it forces Palestinian children, women and men off their land at gunpoint and when it bulldozes their homes. Israel violates international law when it transfers its settlers to illegally occupy Palestinian homes and land. Israel has no right, claim or title to the occupied Palestinian territories. Their land grab is illegal. Their settlements are illegal. Their behaviour is criminal. They are guilty of crimes against the Palestinian people. These are the facts and the facts are not in dispute. Israel is a serial violator of international law, a serial violator of the human and democratic rights of the Palestinian people. Today, we call on Israel to cease and desist in the context of its criminal behaviour, to end all settlement activity, to return stolen land, to end its occupation and to conform with the law.

Today marks the most explicit and the most united call from this Parliament against annexation and against the illegal Israeli occupation. Long and bitter experience, of course, tells us that our calls may well land on deaf ears. Therefore, we call also on the international community, on the European family of nations and, most particularly, on our own Government in Dublin to act and call Israel to account. We challenge all of the global community to move beyond the pious politics of condemnation onto the politics of accountability and the rule of law, and to use every means necessary, every diplomatic channel, every political lever and every economic tool to end what is now generations of human rights abuses.

The Palestinian people are not seeking anything exceptional. They are not looking for more favourable treatment. They demand only the vindication of their rights - rights that neither Israel nor anyone else can take from them or render null and void. Therefore, let us assert again that these rights must be acknowledged, protected and vindicated.

The case of Palestine is the acid test for the international community. Decisions have to be made. Choices have to be made. Does the world stand with the beleaguered occupied Palestinian people or does it offer alibis and excuses for the Israeli occupier and lawbreaker? Do we stand with the brutalised traumatised refugees and people of Gaza or with the Israeli military machine? Do we, finally and most importantly, insist on calling Israel to account? Are we prepared now to face the Israeli apartheid regime down? Are we prepared to draw lines in the sand? Are we prepared to stand for freedom? I know where the Irish people stand on all of these matters. The Irish people stand with Palestine for freedom and for the rule of law. The great question now is whether our Government here in Dublin, the European family of nations and the entire international global community are prepared to act.

*6 o'clock*

The time to act is now, and that is what the global community demands.

**Deputy Imelda Munster:** We were all relieved to hear news on Friday morning of a cease-

fire in Gaza after 11 days of bombardment and slaughter. More than 250 people were killed, the overwhelming majority of whom were Palestinian, including at least 65 Palestinian children. Gaza was subjected to the targeted shelling of houses and vital infrastructure like roads, electricity and water networks. There is nothing new in that.

The Palestinian people are forced to live under an apartheid regime. Gaza is an open-air prison enforced by the Israeli occupier. The Palestinian people are subjected to blockades, checkpoints, a lack of access to basic amenities like water and electricity and every possible abuse of human rights imaginable.

Israel continues to steal Palestinian land and homes, while displacing people on a daily basis. The people of Gaza have endured unimaginable suffering. Here in Ireland we need to show leadership and take a stand. We have a seat at the UN Security Council, and that brings with it a responsibility to stand against this inhumane and unjust regime. We cannot be there to just make up the numbers. Weak statements with no teeth simply are not good enough.

A start would be to recognise the state of Palestine. A Sinn Féin motion was passed in December 2014 calling on the Government to recognise the state of Palestine and over six years later, no action has been taken. The Control of Economic Activity (Occupied Territories) Bill has been dropped by the Government, even though Fianna Fáil and the Green Party supported it before they were in power.

We have to take a stand to support the Palestinian people and hold Israel to account. As a Parliament we have to take a united stand against Israel's apartheid regime and continued land seizures. Civic society and the Irish people are behind this. We have to unite and do the right thing for Palestine.

**Deputy Pauline Tully:** We are all united in our opinion that what was happening in Palestine, and Gaza in particular, had to stop. We all welcomed the ceasefire announced last week, but how many ceasefires have there been over the 54 years of the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territory? How long will this ceasefire last before Israel starts stealing Palestinian land again, while continuing to commit war crimes and forcing the Palestinian people to continue to live in absolutely dreadful conditions?

A statement from the Government condemning Israel's abuse of Palestinians is not enough. Statements such as these have done nothing to stop continued abuse by the Israeli state against the Palestinian people. Over the past 54 years Israel has continually committed war crimes with no fear of consequences because it has never had to face any. Ireland is part of the EU and the UN. Why are these organisations not doing more to stop this cycle of violence and annexation and to put in place a workable peace process?

There needs to be a permanent end to the violence for the people of Palestine, regardless of which part they live in. They need to be able to live in peace without fear of indiscriminate bombing and shooting. The International Criminal Court must investigate the actions of Israel and investigate it for war crimes. All people in the region deserve to be able to live in peace without the fear of death or serious injury. The violence must end forever.

There are over 5 million Palestinian people living in an area which has no proper access to clean water, sewerage systems or energy supplies. They fear on a daily basis that their homes will either be demolished by a bomb or missile coming from Israel or that they will be evicted from their homes and have them taken away.

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People in Ireland sympathise and understand what the Palestinian people are experiencing as the Northern part of our country experienced similar for many years when innocent people, such as those in Ballymurphy, were shot down without consequence. It took almost 40 years for those people to be declared innocent. We had Bloody Sunday in Derry and shoot-to-kill policies. We know and understand what it is like in this country. It needs to end and the needs to be a proper peace process put in place. If action is not taken now, we will continue to see the cycle of violence, ceasefires being called, everything going quiet for a while and then everything resuming again. It is time that we in the Dáil stood together by passing an all-party motion condemning the actions of Israel and supporting the calls for a Palestinian state.

**Deputy Brian Stanley:** The State has a responsibility to call out the illegal Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands and the system of apartheid that that has enforced for over five decades. The world has looked on in horror at the barbaric violation of the basic human rights of Palestinians by Israel. The Israeli military onslaught has driven Palestinians out of their homes in the West Bank and East Jerusalem and forced them into the open-air prison that is Gaza where missiles recently rained down on top of innocent men, women and children, killing 64 children and hundreds of adults.

Palestinians are trapped and denied water, sanitation, electricity, medical supplies and basic building materials. They are rendered homeless and stateless by an army that has been complicit and has the complicit support of some of the international community who should hang their heads in shame. The European Union could have done more, but has shown itself to be a paper tiger. It has failed to take action. This can be compared to the swift action, which was correctly taken in respect of Belarus within 24 hours.

In this State, the Government has to recognise the state of Palestine. The Sinn Féin motion passed by the Dáil more than three years ago needs to be adopted by the Government. In the most recent sustained and brutal onslaught on the Palestinian people, Members will have seen the slaughter that took place. Nine primary healthcare centres, six hospitals, a Covid lab, ministry of health buildings, a university, a library and the offices of the media were all destroyed by bombs dropped from Israeli warplanes, which is in breach of the Geneva Convention.

A long-term solution is now required to bring justice and freedom to the Palestinian people. As a state which is only now finding its way out of the history of imperial oppression, Ireland has a responsibility in this regard. We have a seat at the UN Security Council and need to use it. I implore the Minister for Foreign Affairs, the Taoiseach and the Government to use that, as well as forcing the EU, to work towards a proper long-term solution and to end the Israeli war crimes in Gaza against the Palestinian people.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** The recent slaughter in Palestine is only a continuation of what Palestinians have been dealing with. Beyond that, we need to recognise as a House that what has been going on since 1967 is a modern-day colonisation, plantation and land grab. We have had de facto annexation. We need to accept that in here and use it as a weapon to apply pressure on an international basis, because there has been an abject failure by the international community across the board.

I welcome the action that has been taken in regard to Belarus but this also has to be done on behalf of Palestinians. I welcome that the Minister has said there will be no return to business as normal. We have to ensure that is the case. We have a weapon that we can give it to the Minister, namely, accepting the reality of annexation that Palestinians are dealing with. He needs

to go to Europe with this and we need to demand that there are sanctions and consequences because the Israelis have never had that.

On that basis, they have been able to deal with the Palestinians, slaughter them and steal land. We need to do to the Israeli state what was done to apartheid South Africa. It has to be made to be seen as a pariah. There have to be consequences for war crimes and international criminality.

**Minister for Foreign Affairs(Deputy Simon Coveney):** I move amendment No. 2:

To delete all words from “condemns the targeting of civilian infrastructure” up to and including the words “international human rights law to protect civilians” and substitute the following:

“—condemns the violent acts of Hamas and other militant groups, including the firing of rockets and incendiary devices from Gaza into Israel, the disproportionate and indefensible response of Israel bombing civilians and essential infrastructure in the Gaza Strip, the loss of life in both Israel and Palestine, and recalls the obligations on all parties under international humanitarian law and international human rights law to protect civilians and children while providing humanitarian supports to help rebuild Gaza.”

Today’s motion reflects the grave concern of the Irish people and Oireachtas regarding the situation in the occupied Palestinian territory. It is a clear signal of the depth of feeling across Ireland on this issue. This Government shares that grave concern in respect of the violence and conflict that we have seen in Gaza and the West Bank and Israel, and on the root causes of the situation and the manifestly unequal treatment of the Palestinian people.

I have spoken on the latest hostilities in the Seanad and in this Chamber twice in the past ten days. I have welcomed the ceasefire that came into effect on 21 May and have called for immediate unimpeded access for humanitarian assistance to those who need it most.

Since I last spoke in this House, the UN Security Council has agreed to a press statement welcoming the ceasefire, mourning the loss of civilian lives and stressing the immediate humanitarian need of the 2 million people living in the Gaza Strip. It also recalled the importance of a comprehensive peace based on two democratic states, Israel and Palestine, living side by side. I was disappointed and frustrated that it took the members of the Security Council nearly two weeks to speak publicly together on this issue. Ireland has been vocal in encouraging the Security Council to live up to its responsibilities in addressing the hostilities and in supporting efforts towards a just and lasting peace.

As I have previously stated, the scale of deaths and injuries to civilians in this most recent round of hostilities is reprehensible. Protection of all civilians, in Gaza, in the West Bank and in Israel, is of paramount importance and it is an obligation under international humanitarian law. I have called on Israel to ensure that its security forces act in full respect for the principles of proportionality, distinction and precaution in the conduct of its military operations. Accountability must be ensured for the actions of the Israeli security forces.

The acts of terror by Hamas and other militant groups, through firing rockets indiscriminately into Israel, have killed civilians and endangered Israeli and Palestinian lives. This cannot and should not ever be justified either, and again I roundly condemn these actions. The widespread loss of life, the physical and psychological injuries inflicted and the long-lasting

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damage to critical civilian infrastructure are simply unacceptable. I restate the Government's principled position that all parties to a conflict must adhere to international humanitarian law and in particular to the rules of distinction, proportionality and precaution.

It is important to acknowledge that the current escalation has not happened in isolation. Today's motion addresses some of the root causes, which have been a driver of recent tensions. When I addressed the Security Council on 16 May, I said that we must look beyond the cessation of hostilities and ask ourselves how we can move past the current recurring cycles of violence that have been ongoing for years. We cannot return to a situation of business as usual. It is simply no longer an option. We cannot return to the flouting of international law with the relentless expansion of illegal settlements in occupied Palestinian territory. We cannot return to forced evictions of Palestinians from their homes in East Jerusalem and other parts of the West Bank. We cannot return to demolition of Palestinian property, settler violence and intimidation. We must acknowledge that these actions, occurring at a rate unacknowledged by the international community for many years, are a source of legitimate grievance among the Palestinian people and undermine the prospects of peace and much-needed reconciliation.

This motion underlines the seriousness with which this House views this ongoing situation. We have seen the deteriorating situation on the ground in the Gaza Strip and across the West Bank. We have seen the impact of the decisions taken by Israel to develop and expand settlements and to enable evictions and displacement. It is, unfortunately, part of an overall approach that has impeded the rights of the Palestinian people and has failed to respect international law. Israel's actions in increasing the scope and density of settlements and surrounding infrastructure, which effectively cut off East Jerusalem from the rest of the West Bank, indicate an intention of permanency. Not only does this deny the Palestinian population access to land, housing and livelihoods, it undermines the viability of a future contiguous Palestinian state.

This, of course, is not something that the international community can sit by and ignore. The scale, pace and strategic nature of Israel's actions on settlement expansion and the intent behind them have brought us to a point where we need to be honest about what is actually happening on the ground. We need to call it out for what it is. It is *de facto* annexation. This is not something that I or this House say lightly. We are the first EU member state to do so, but it reflects the huge concern we have about the intent of the actions and, of course, their impact.

Having looked at these developments, the Government and I engaged in good faith with Sinn Féin and quite a number of NGOs on this motion before it was tabled. We had hoped an all-party motion could emerge from Dáil Éireann but that was not possible. The stumbling block was, unfortunately, Sinn Féin's refusal and inability to condemn the actions of Hamas in indiscriminately firing rockets into Israel and killing innocent civilians. Our amendment is clear and simple. It amends the motion to condemn the killing of civilians by both sides in this conflict and I urge Opposition Members to support the sentiment that emerges from this Oireachtas. I am deeply troubled that the main Opposition party in this House cannot bring itself to denounce the actions of Hamas. I am deeply troubled that Sinn Féin will not even call on Hamas to respect international law and will not denounce the killing of Israeli children by Hamas. The Government amendment simply brings the necessary balance to this motion so that we can support the overall motion when amended.

Ireland has been vocal in its opposition to the threatened evictions in East Jerusalem and expansion of settlements more generally, both of which have contributed to the current events and have done damage to prospects for a two-state solution. I highlighted this and the issue of

illegal settlements at the EU Foreign Affairs Council last week. Ireland and the EU have consistently called on the Israeli Government to uphold its international legal obligations, including under the Fourth Geneva Convention, on the treatment of civilian populations, particularly in occupied territory.

At the UN Security Council, we have urged Israel to halt continued settlement expansion, demolition activity and evictions in East Jerusalem. I have underlined at the Council that continued settlement activity is not only illegal but also erodes trust between Palestinians and Israelis. Tomorrow, with Irish support, there will be a special session of the Human Rights Council in Geneva on the grave human rights situation in the occupied Palestinian territory, including East Jerusalem. Ireland will support an independent international commission of inquiry into the matter. I also spoke on the issue with White House National Security Advisor, Jake Sullivan, and US Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, who were both passing through Shannon Airport last night. We had nearly three hours of discussion. Secretary Blinken was on his way to the Middle East. The Security Council meets again this Thursday for a monthly briefing on the Palestinian question and Ireland will continue our engagement.

As I said earlier, returning to the *status quo* is no longer an option but that will happen by default without sustained political attention to resolve the underlying problems. Without this, the cycle of violence will continue as it has done for decades. Repressive, discriminatory and provocative policies and actions take us further away than ever from the prospect of achieving a just, lasting and comprehensive peace. Breaking the cycle of repression and hatred is integral to achieving a peace settlement. Progress requires dialogue and ultimately there can be no substitute for direct negotiations between both parties. It is time to look afresh at how the international community can really assist Israelis and Palestinians to bring new thinking and a new momentum to resolving this conflict and to ensuring equitable treatment for both peoples. I hope this House will unite and support the Government, along with other parties in this House, in our joint efforts.

**Deputy Mairéad Farrell:** Perhaps there is no other western country in the world whose people feel the same sense of solidarity with the Palestinian people quite as do the people of Ireland. As we watch in horror as bombs are dropped on Palestinian homes, hospitals and media outlets, we feel their pain and critically, we know that as Irish people we have a duty to shout “Stop”. As Irish people we do not have the luxury to pretend we do not know or understand. We have a duty to stand in solidarity with the people of Palestine and call the Israeli actions out for what they are, and that is apartheid. We have seen the continued Israeli settlement expansion, the forced expulsions and the refusal to grant the right of return to Palestinian refugees. Israel says it wants peace. It says it wants a viable two-state solution but actions speak louder than words and, by God, are its actions loud. It continues to place its heavily fortified settlements on Palestinian land. It has divided up the West Bank into Bantustans with military checkpoints. It consistently lays siege to Gaza and it does all of this under the pretext of self-defence. Palestine is the tragedy of our time. The peace activist Hanan Ashwari has said that the absence of international sanctions has enabled the creation of a horror in Gaza. It is a living horror and yet prominent politicians across the world engage in bad-faith false equivalence. They use language around this conflict that is designed to obscure what is going on. They talk about Israel’s right to security. Israel is a nuclear power with the fourth largest standing army in the world. What about Palestine’s right to security? In Gaza, only one in ten people has direct access to clean water. We have seen the horrific bombings. Does that look like a secure existence? We hear talk in the media of clashes and ceasefires, which creates the false impression that this is

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a conflict between equal forces. It is anything but. It is a struggle between a coloniser and the oppressed. It is a struggle for self-determination versus a harsh and brutal system of apartheid. This July will mark 37 years since Dunnes Stores workers here in Ireland stood against apartheid. Let Ireland once again stand up to an apartheid regime and pass this motion.

**Deputy Patricia Ryan:** A philosopher once wrote that those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it. George Santayana is also known to have said that “Only the dead have seen the end of war”. Those are two very appropriate sayings for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. I recently watched two films, namely, “Schindler’s List” and “Born in Gaza”. There are many similarities between them but one that stood out to me was the use of gravestones as paving in a concentration camp in “Schindler’s List” and very similar headstones in “Born in Gaza”, when children visited the grave of their father who had been killed while they were there to water his plants. Both films are horrific and tell the stories of the ethnic cleansing of people who were very inconveniently in the way.

The international community must do more if we are not to be condemned to repeat history. Have we not learned lessons from Bosnia and Kosovo? We must address the root causes of the conflict, the occupation of Palestinian land, the displacement of the Palestinian people, the continued blockade of the occupied territories and the endless cycle of violence, which is inevitable if we do not act now.

Since 1967, Israeli authorities have uprooted more than 800,000 olive trees from an area five times the size of the Curragh of Kildare. They have targeted farmers to discourage them and their families from remaining on their own land. Ireland was instrumental in the struggle against apartheid in South Africa and we must stand up for the Palestinian people. It is time to honour the commitment to recognise the Palestinian state. It is time to enact the occupied territories Bill and to ban imports from land that has been stolen from ordinary Palestinian families. The countries of the world have shown that they can work together to solve problems like Covid-19 and climate change and to respond to natural disasters. We must turn our efforts to a two-state solution for Palestine. Israel is breaking international law and there must be consequences for that.

**Deputy Dessie Ellis:** The Gaza Strip is one of the most densely populated areas of the world. Over 2 million people are squeezed into an area smaller than County Louth, the smallest county in Ireland. The people of Gaza are discriminated against and humiliated by the Israelis on a daily basis. There has been a land, air and sea blockade of the Gaza Strip since the early 1990s, which has resulted in great hardship for its residents and has led to a serious deterioration in the population’s living conditions. This has been made worse by the global pandemic. At the end of April, fewer than 2% of Gaza’s population had received at least one dose of a vaccine, compared to over 60% of the Israeli population. Vaccinations were stopped during the recent conflict and it was impossible to carry out testing. There is a real concern that the enclave could be hit by a third wave of Covid-19. Dozens of schools that became shelters during the conflict are now feared to be super-spreaders. Israel’s disproportionate response of carrying out attacks on clearly identifiable civilian areas and complexes led to the deaths of at least 222 people, including 63 children. In a ten-day period, Israel destroyed more than 450 buildings in the Gaza Strip. Among those destroyed buildings were six hospitals, nine healthcare centres and a water desalination plant that supplied around 250,000 Palestinians with clean drinking water. Israeli forces also targeted a tower that housed various media outlets, including the Al Jazeera network and the Associated Press. Some 74,000 Palestinians, mostly women and children, are now homeless as a result of these targeted Israeli attacks on the civilian population.

These attacks by Israel violate international human rights standards. They are nothing less than war crimes, as defined under international law, and as such there is both individual and state responsibility for them. The state of Israel and those individuals responsible for the planning and carrying out of these actions should be held accountable for these war crimes.

**Deputy Chris Andrews:** The kidnapping of a young journalist by Belarus was met with loud shouts from the Government and the EU about the need for swift action, sanctions and severe consequences. The Taoiseach said the kidnapping was a state-sponsored coercive act and that the EU would respond very strongly. These strong words and plans for actions and sanctions contrast starkly with the weak and watery position and language directed at Israel for the murder and terror inflicted on Palestine over 11 days, which killed 248 Palestinians. Yesterday, EU leaders agreed a range of sanctions and actions against Belarus almost overnight. However, all we heard about from the Government during the slaughter and terror in Palestine was building consensus, how now was not the right time to recognise the state of Palestine and that we could not introduce sanctions. It is shocking but hardly surprising. The Minister and I know - we all know - that no consensus will be reached because Israel and its sponsors do not want consensus. They want to wipe out Palestine and make a two-state solution impossible. The Government talks about a two-state solution yet only recognises one of those states, and that is the apartheid, racist terror state that is Israel. US President Joe Biden has said in the past that there is no space between the United States and Israel. Over the last week, this Government has shown that there is no space between it and Israel and that there is no space between the EU and Israel. If we are going to stop the slaughter in Palestine, we need to recognise the state of Palestine. We need to implement Senator Black's occupied territories Bill. We need to boycott Israel, we need divestment from Israel and sanctions against it. We need to make it clear to Israel that its land grabs and annexation do not have Ireland's support and that when it grabs land from people and takes other people's homes, there will be consequences because until now there have been none.

**Deputy Brendan Howlin:** I commend the Sinn Féin Party on tabling this motion and providing the time for this House to debate one of the most important moral issues the world has to face. Labour Party Deputies are very proud to co-sign and support this motion. It has been worked on for some time, with the support of a number of external groups. The focus of the motion in recent weeks has been on the systematic undermining, if not the shattering, of the basis of a two-state solution to the generations of conflict and violence which have occurred between Israel and Palestine, the Israelis and the Palestinians.

We in Ireland know full well that peace can only be brought about when an acceptable situation is negotiated, embraced and agreed for both parties involved. Lasting sustainable peace cannot be achieved through repression or force of arms. One may suppress matters for a time but, ultimately, there is no lasting sustainable peace or comfort for anybody involved. The long-sought goal of two separate and sovereign states with equal rights for all, a true and permanent home for all Israelis and Palestinians, with each State and each people having the inalienable entitlement to live in peace, without threat or intimidation, and being able to develop to its fullest potential, without let or hindrance, and according to its capacity and likes; surely that is the hope and legitimate expectation of every Palestinian, and every Israeli too.

The achievable prospect of that vision, long sought by the international community, has been systematically undermined by an Israeli Government intent on eliminating a viable Palestinian state through forced evictions and the supplanting of population. Through deliberate and calculated brutal action, the Israeli Government has sought to undermine the agreed interna-

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tional objective of the creation of two peaceful states, side by side. The policy of the Netanyahu government, forcefully supported by the former President of the United States, Donald Trump, was to act in defiance of international law and, in fact, to break international law with impunity.

The situation became immeasurably more urgent with the escalation of violence in Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories in recent weeks. We looked on with horror yet again as civilians were killed, including women and, as far as we can count, at least 65 children. The pictures we have all witnessed of innocent children at play in their own homes and streets being killed and maimed is unacceptable and shocking. The notion that every effort is being made to avoid civilian casualties is belied by the reality on the ground and the horror that has been witnessed by everybody in the world.

Last week in this House, I said a ceasefire would come when Israel decided that it had destroyed all it wanted to destroy. That ceasefire thankfully happened on Friday. It was predictable, but we cannot now simply let our focus be removed from the ongoing festering wound in world affairs that is the conflict between Israel and Palestine. Periodic condemnation is simply not enough. I welcome the words spoken by the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Deputy Coveney, today. I genuinely believe that he has worked extraordinarily hard, not only in recent weeks but since he took office, to build consensus at the United Nations and at European Union level. As has become patently clear, however, it is virtually impossible to get consensus at the Security Council because the United States will veto a strong and coherent statement. Taking two weeks to provide a press statement is shocking, and it undermines the principles which led to the establishment of the United Nations in the first instance. Countries such as Hungary, and others, at the EU Council also prevent a common position emerging there.

Last week, I also cited the Norwegian sovereign wealth fund's decision to stop funding companies involved in the development of Israeli settlements in the occupied West Bank. If we cannot bring others with us, we need to be the vanguard of action ourselves. The root cause of conflict must be addressed, not only the symptoms which inevitably bubble up periodically under the repression of an entire people who have been corralled into an area and are not even allowed to fish in their own territorial seas. Many young Palestinians have never visited or set foot in Jerusalem, the capital they aspire.

Philippe Lazzarini, the Commissioner-General of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, UNRWA, stated on Sunday that "the root causes of the conflict, the occupation, the displacement, of which we had a strong reminder in East Jerusalem and Sheikh Jarrah, the blockade and the cycle of violence – this sense of normality will only be a mirage until the next conflict." Let us now resolve in this House, if need be, to act ourselves on this moral imperative for all of us. I genuinely believe the Irish people are united on this issue. We should not accept the mirage of normality, to borrow the words of the UNRWA Commissioner-General. We know that mirage is not the reality and it is not the truth.

If we are to allow the notion, and the objective and legitimate expectation, of the Palestinian people to have their own state and live in peace, as well as the legitimate, reasonable and proper expectation of the people of Israel to have their own state, without fear of intimidation or threat, and if we believe that is not only a desirable goal but one which is achievable, let us take whatever actions we now need to take. Even if those actions are ineffective because we are a small country acting alone, to ensure we show our absolute rejection of the undermining of a two-state solution, the annexation of Palestinian land and the eviction by settlers by force of arms of Palestinian people, some of whom have been promised that land since they were

first uprooted from their original homeland in the 1940s, let us act in this House tomorrow, in concert and with determination and a unified voice.

**Deputy Gary Gannon:** The Social Democrats is supporting this motion. We are proud to co-sign it, as presented by Sinn Féin and a number of different charities and NGOs working in the field.

I imagine there is no silence as deafening as that invoked by a ceasefire. What sound does a person hear when bombs stop being dropped, when screams are not heard for the first time in weeks and when fighter jets are not screeching overhead, threatening the lives of people and children in one of the most densely-populated areas on earth? It was interesting to look at the newspapers today. For the first time in over two weeks, there was no mention on the front pages of the conflict in Gaza that claimed so many lives only last week. During the horrors of the latest round of violence to be inflicted on the Palestinian people, the Irish people stood in shocked disbelief that one group of people could treat another with such barbarism and inhumanity. We were horrified by the death toll. As of today, the number of people killed in Gaza by precision missile strikes stands at 248, 66 of whom were children. Almost 2,000 people were wounded in one of the most densely-populated places on the planet. One cannot help but imagine the carnage that rained down on the people of Gaza from the sky in the form of million-pound missiles.

Images of the past two weeks will live long in all of our memories. We saw buildings being reduced to rubble from which bodies were pulled. We tried to make sense of the death toll and the number of children being killed, and entire families being clearly targeted. In some instances, three and four generations of Palestinian families were quite clearly lined up for extermination by the Israeli Defence Force, which was not only targeting the fighters but also, in many cases, children and their parents. We tried to make sense of how a country that presents itself as a modern democracy could destroy a building that contains a news outlet and journalists tasked with reporting on the conflict. We tried to make sense of how Israel could continue to expel families from their homes and meet the protest of those families and their communities with rubber bullets. We tried to make sense of how a modern democracy could storm a place of worship during the holiest period of the year for the people who were praying there and not see it as anything other than what it was, a provocation. We saw batons, rubber bullets, skunk water and precision missiles being used in response to the Palestinians having the audacity to oppose forced expulsions and for confronting the storming of their holiest sites. As already stated, 248 were killed, including 66 children. A population of over 2 million was terrorised. Today, the attention of the world has seemingly moved on.

Another authoritarian regime attacked the free press this week. Clearly, the world can only see one despot at a time. The tyrant in Belarus of whom I speak sent an F-16 fighter jet effectively to force a Ryanair plane to perform a rendition flight so that a young journalist could be kidnapped in an egregious act of state piracy over the skies of Belarus. The response from the EU Council yesterday was swift, prompt and just. However, one could not help but note the contrast that bordered on hypocrisy, given the meekness of the international response to the savagery of the Israeli Government towards the people of Gaza over the last number of weeks, months, years and decades. President Lukashenko of Belarus had the plane hijacked and the journalist kidnapped in a grotesque act that has met with sanctions and international boycotts of Belarusian airspace and a unified condemnation by world leaders. The fighter jets of Benjamin Netanyahu bombed the bureaus of Al Jazeera and the Associated Press just last week. The only collective response on which the world could agree was a meek call for a calming of hostilities

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on both sides. For this crime, there will be no sanctions, boycotts or divestments that target the pockets of the perpetrators. The world seems to have moved on very quickly. It has moved on from the scenes of destruction and death that we saw being inflicted upon the people and children of Gaza just last week.

Today, though, through our Parliament, the Irish people get to make a stand. We can give words and meaning to what our eyes can see clearly. It will be significant that the Irish Parliament, through its representatives, recognises that what Israel is doing in East Jerusalem and the West Bank represents a *de facto* unlawful annexation of these territories. It is important that we do this now and that we do not equivocate as we do so. We must be unified in our message that Israeli actions will no longer go unchallenged - if not by the international community, then certainly be by the people of Ireland who remain horrified by the barbarism that we witnessed. While the world seems to have turned its attention elsewhere, the people of Gaza remain under effective siege. The bulldozers are still moving into East Jerusalem, where opposition to their presence is crushed, and families in Sheikh Jarrah are still being forced from their homes.

We, as a truly modern and vibrant democracy, in recognising that an annexation has been carried out by the State of Israel on the Palestinian territories, are undertaking an important act that will reverberate around the world and will hopefully have some meaning for the people who are being displaced from their land. I hope that we continue to speak truth to power in this manner and go further in our condemnation of the Israeli state and its Government for their actions in this regard.

Last week, I spoke in this Chamber of how diplomacy fails when children are being blown up in their beds. It should never be forgotten that all of our hopes are for a peaceful two-State solution to this decades-long crisis. However, it is naive in the extreme to think that the right-wing hawks in the Israeli Government are interested in such an endeavour when they continue their occupation of, and illegal expansion into, Palestinian territory, and continue to inflict persecution and a form of apartheid on the Palestinian peoples in the West Bank and East Jerusalem.

Once again, I call on the Government and the State to avoid being temperate in their language or condemnation. I call for them to speak truth in whatever form it comes. I welcome the fact that across the Chamber we will agree that a form of annexation is taking place. That is important.

I gave great consideration to the Government's amendment but I will not be supporting it on the grounds that it equates to a form of "both sidesism". Of course, we condemn Hamas for firing rockets into Israeli territory and acknowledge that 12 Israelis have died in this conflict. We condemn that in all of its forms. However, not to see the disproportionality in the response from the Israeli Government would be to be meek, to create a false equivalence and to give the false impression that both sides are equal in this endeavour, when one has access Iron Dome military defences and a billion-dollar armoury that is funded by the US among others and the other is a population that is living in one of the poorest and most densely-populated parts of the world and is being bombed and targeted.

Once again, I wish to refer to what is happening in Gaza as a form of state-sponsored terrorism. Two weeks ago, Human Rights Watch referred to the situation unfolding in the West Bank and East Jerusalem as a form of apartheid. We must remember that and acknowledge it. We must be deliberate in our responses to it.

I welcome the position the Minister is adopting today. It is brave and it is a stance that will reverberate around the world. However, the Government must go further. Now is the time to enact the Control of Economic Activity (Occupied Territories) Bill 2018. We simply cannot accept that an annexation is happening but state that business will continue as usual. It cannot. We cannot trade in an area of the world in which we now recognise that an annexation is taking place. It has been a point well made, but we cannot call for a two-state solution and continue to fail to recognise Palestine as a state in its own right. I will go further than that and call for an Irish ambassador to be placed in Ramallah. It would be a most significant and important step to take.

Last week, I took the decision to co-sponsor a motion that was brought by People Before Profit calling for the expulsion of the Israeli ambassador. It was not a decision that I took lightly, but it is one that I stand over. I wish to speak on this issue in the time remaining. I believe that Israel is an apartheid state that is engaging in a brutal assault on Gaza, the most densely-populated internment camp in the world. I reiterate that 248 people were killed in the recent bombardment, many of whom were children. Of the 66 children who died, 11 were participating in a Norwegian Refugee Council programme that provides support to children in Gaza to help them deal with trauma. These innocents, who were already emotionally and physically scarred from previous violence, died under Israeli missiles. Many died under burning rubble, with their entire extended families. The Secretary General of the UN, António Guterres, stated: "If there is a hell on earth, it is the lives of children in Gaza." Those are strong words, but where was the action against Israel for inflicting this hell on those children?

The response of the international community to the carnage in Gaza has been shameful and craven. The UN Security Council could not even agree to release a statement calling for a ceasefire. The Minister of Foreign Affairs, Deputy Coveney, has stated that the expulsion of the Israeli ambassador would not be helpful. I strongly argue that words or platitudes would not be helpful.

Prior to the latest assault, Israel had been engaged in the forced eviction of Palestinian as it continued to expand its illegal settlements. There comes a time when inaction in the face of relentless human rights abuses and war crimes becomes complicity. Most importantly, this will send the message to the people of Gaza that we support them and are with them.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** I intend to move the People Before Profit amendment No. 1 to this motion. I am sharing time with Deputies Gino Kenny, Bríd Smith and Barry.

I thank Sinn Féin for introducing its motion. It makes many very important points about the annexation of territory in the West Bank and Jerusalem seized by Israel after 1967. However, our amendment, and I will mainly speak to that, seeks to go further because we believe the crimes of Israel go beyond that. They need to be called out as they are. Most importantly, we need action to hold Israel accountable for those crimes and to play our part in ending the criminal behaviour of Israel in respect of the Palestinians. To put it simply in the short time I have, we believe the Israeli ambassador should be expelled as part of a comprehensive package of economic, political and cultural sanctions against Israel for war crimes, ongoing systematic ethnic cleansing not just since 1967 but from the foundation of the state in 1948 and for being a fundamentally apartheid state in its basic laws and practices, particularly laws such as the Israeli law of return and the basic nation state law.

There is no equivalence between the two sides. Indeed, there is not two sides in this conflict.

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It is not a conflict. There is the apartheid state of Israel that has sought to ethnically cleanse the Palestinian people since its foundation in 1948. It has continued that campaign, practises systematic apartheid and has repeated relentless war crimes against the Palestinian people. We now must treat the Israeli apartheid state in the same way as we treated apartheid South Africa. For goodness sake, today there is talk of EU sanctions against Belarus, which is quite right. However, Israel has systematic apartheid policies, commits war crimes repeatedly in Gaza and ethnically cleanses the Palestinian people on an ongoing and systematic basis, yet people do not call for sanctions or for the expulsion of the ambassador. It is not acceptable and we must call it out clearly.

The only just solution is the return of the Palestinian refugees, as guaranteed under international law, to the places from which they were expelled in 1948, and the self-determination of the Palestinian people. That has to be achieved through a complete and comprehensive boycott of the apartheid state of Israel through a campaign similar to the one conducted against apartheid South Africa. Anything less is meaningless. Sure, we must call out the annexation since 1967, but the truth is that the entire Israeli project is a criminal project of ethnic cleansing and extermination of the Palestinian people and their attempt at national self-determination. It cannot be allowed to continue. My appeal is to expel the ambassador and impose those sanctions until there is true freedom, justice and self-determination for the Palestinian people.

**Deputy Gino Kenny:** I thank Sinn Féin for proposing this motion and the NGOs that put the motion together. We have had many duels with the Minister in this Chamber about this matter. I have said that I do not doubt the Minister's sincerity in this regard; what I doubt is his policy of appeasing apartheid Israel. It does not work, and it never will. One cannot appease racists and murderers. Even today, the hypocrisy of the European Union is unbelievable. It says it will sanction Belarus. A number of days ago Israel was murdering children. Over 65 children were murdered by the Israeli state. How can one quantify that? At the same time, the EU has a trade agreement with Israel that is worth billions per year, and it is never sanctioned. How is that right? It cannot be right. South Africa was isolated as a result of sanctions and international solidarity because people knew that the system was absolutely rotten to the core. Israel is the same. We must stand with the Palestinian people and say what Israel is all about. It is a racist state and it must be isolated.

**Deputy Bríd Smith:** I attended the two very large demonstrations in Dublin city during the last two Saturdays along with the Ireland Palestine Solidarity Campaign and many Palestinians who live here. I also have a friend who lives in one of the towns that was under attack for ethnic cleansing by the Zionist militia when the latest phase of ethnic cleansing broke out. I telephoned him to see how he and his Palestinian wife and children were. He said: "It is unbelievable, Bríd. If you could imagine, in your homes in Ballyfermot, marauding gangs that are armed to the teeth, with American, Russian, French and Canadian accents, coming down your street, protected by the police who will allow them to do anything, and running into your homes, throwing your family out and claiming your homes and gardens, that is literally what is going on." That is what ethnic cleansing means. I thought about that a great deal. What in the name of God would we do but scream for international support?

This is a new phase in the battle by the Zionist militias and the Netanyahu Government to make that country a Jewish-only country. When I say that, some will point the finger and say I am an anti-Semite. There is no way that I am an anti-Semite. As a young woman, I spent many months of my life defending the Jewish population against Holocaust denial, which was creeping into this country in the form of the far right. There is no way one can equate an attack

on the Zionist pogroms against the Arab people with being anti-Semitic. That is what people tried to do to Jeremy Corbyn and others, but they will not do it now. This is a new phase, and a new phase internationally. We must wake up, smell the coffee, be absolutely 1,000% with the Palestinian people and call for the ultimate sanctions - the ultimate sanction of expulsion of the ambassador, the ultimate sanction of imposing boycott, divestment, sanctions, BDS, on Israel and the ultimate sanction of full solidarity.

**Deputy Mick Barry:** We now have a ceasefire in the Middle East but there is no cessation of occupation, no cessation of oppression and no cessation of the forcible denial of the rights of the Palestinian people. In the past week, the Palestinian people will have clearly seen their allies and their enemies. The most obvious enemy is the Israeli capitalist state and its ruling class, which implement an oppressive regime of occupation, siege, racism and apartheid. Then there are the major capitalist and imperialist powers, led by the United States and the states of the European Union, that arm and back the regime. For them the Israeli state, the fourth largest military power in the world, is an asset which they can use to continue to dominate and economically exploit the Middle East, as they have done for over a century, resulting in conflict, wars and the impoverishment of its people. Despite their past rhetoric, the other corrupt repressive regimes of the Middle East are not friends of the Palestinian people. They dutifully defend and uphold an economic, social and political order which defends the interests of their super rich and those of the multinationals and oil companies that exploit the region.

The real allies of the Palestinians were seen in the inspiring mass protests in recent weeks in cities as diverse as Dhaka, New York, Baghdad, London and cities across Ireland. They were seen through the decision of the Italian dock workers who refused to handle arms destined for Israel, and the strike action taken by South African dockers against the massacre taking place in Gaza. A key ally is the working class and oppressed in the Middle East, Arab, Iranian, Turkish, Kurdish and others. Crucially, a key potential ally was seen in the actions of Israeli Jewish workers and young people who joined the public demonstrations that united Jews and Palestinians under the banner, "We Refuse to be Enemies".

*7 o'clock*

The Palestinian masses will rely on their own strength to advance their own cause, strength shown in the Palestinian general strike last week. However, the past week has shown clearly who will be their friends, who can be their friends and who will be their enemies.

**Deputy Seán Canney:** I welcome the opportunity to speak on this emotional subject. It is important that we reflect on the violence we have seen on our television screens over the past number of weeks. I condemn violence from anybody. A situation where innocent children, men and women are being killed is not the way to do business, no matter the cause. We have seen this situation recur. It is important for us to reflect on the fact that this country has had a lot of struggles and death. Many innocent people have been killed. However, we have got to a stage, through consensus, where we understand that we must respect one another and live together. We must make sure that violence does not return to our country.

Our experience and position as a member of the UN Security Council make it our responsibility to lead efforts to find lasting solutions to conflict. We can do that. Everybody in the House and country would stand with the Minister and Government in trying to lead efforts to provide a peaceful solution. It is not easy. The allies we need are the UN, the European Union and the United States. The whole motivation behind any action is to achieve a lasting peace that

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will allow people to live together and respect one another.

There is an opportunity to do this now. A ceasefire is in place. The next step will be delivering humanitarian aid to the people who have suffered so much over the past number of weeks. The third step will be to get meaningful negotiations in place. The first item on the agenda must be respect for fellow human beings. We are not here for any reason other than to live together.

The situation also reminds us that the Irish troops who work in UN peacekeeping roles all over the world need to be commended. They have kept peace in places across the world and we do not even think about it. It is only when we see violence that we realise the destruction it causes and how horrific it can be to watch people suffering. It is important that Ireland takes advantage of the privileged position it is in and the respect we have across the world as a result of our UN peacekeeping missions. We must use all that influence across the globe to try to get consensus on achieving peace.

When there is strife in any part of the world and people are dislodged from their homes, we must look in the mirror and ask ourselves if we have treated the asylum seekers who have come to this country fairly. Many of them have come here as a result of war in their home countries. They have been discommoded, taken out of their countries and dispersed to the four corners of the earth. We must look at the direct provision centres in this country and how we have treated asylum seekers who have come here. I am not proud of what is going on in modern Ireland. We must find a better way of dealing with asylum seekers.

I offer my support to the Minister in everything he does. I know he will act genuinely to ensure we reach a global consensus on this difficult issue. I hope we will see peace return, and a lasting peace at that.

**Deputy Cathal Berry:** I thank Deputy Brady for bringing this important motion before the House. It gives us another opportunity to discuss and debate this important matter, particularly in light of the significant events of the past number of days. I welcome last week's ceasefire and the tentative cessation of hostilities that it has brought about. While I appreciate it is early days yet, the truce, thankfully, appears to be sticking. I urge all sides to respect, protect and support that truce because it is all we have. It is the only hope we have and it is a first step towards, and indeed a precondition for, a lasting peace in the region.

My only regret is that the truce did not come soon enough for the hundreds of people who were unnecessarily killed, on both sides of this conflict, the vast majority of whom were innocent women and children. It is, however, self-evident from the casualty roll that the vast majority of casualties were on the Palestinian side. The vast majority were civilian. People were killed and seriously wounded. It disproportionately affected the Palestinian people in Gaza. As a doctor, I know that the worst way to die is unnecessarily and the events of the last few weeks only serve to confirm and emphasise that important point.

It is important that humanitarian aid is now allowed to flow freely and unimpeded into Gaza. I welcome the Minister's comments last week in which he announced additional humanitarian assistance for the region. An extra €1 million will go to UNRWA and an additional €500,000 will go to UNICEF. That funding is badly needed and I encourage all nations in the world to follow Ireland's lead in that regard. Gaza needs massive assistance as soon as possible, preferably now.

Now that the crisis phase of this tragedy has passed, we need to shift focus to the root causes

of the problem. As terrible and all as the events of the past few weeks have been, we must remember that they are only the symptoms of the crisis and that the underlying cause must be tackled. The cause of the conflict is downright poverty, injustice, inequality, hopelessness and, most important and more significantly, the malign interference in the region by the great powers. Unless we tackle these root causes, the conflict will inevitably persist. We must focus on those areas.

I would like to see the European Union take on a more active role in solving this crisis. It is no longer enough to be an interested observer or to leave the problem to the great powers. As we all know, the great powers' interest in the Middle East has to do with self-interest, not with the interests of the people who live there.

I thank Deputy Brady again for bringing forward this important motion and I wish the Minister, Deputy Coveney, well with his shuttle diplomacy as he seeks to kick-start the Middle East peace process by breaking the Iranian nuclear deal impasse. I wish him the best of luck in that regard.

**Deputy Michael Collins:** We have all seen across our news channels and social media the images of children, women and men who are being left distraught at what has happened between Israel and Palestine. In the past nine days or so, 66 children have been killed. That is 66 children too many. Nearly 450 buildings in the Gaza Strip have been destroyed or badly damaged, including six hospitals and nine primary care health centres, since this conflict began. A United Nations humanitarian agency has said that some 48,000 of the 52,000 displaced people have gone to 58 schools run by the United Nations.

In 2017, the then Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Deputy Charles Flanagan, said:

Ireland's views on Israeli settlements couldn't be clearer. Indeed, the views of the international community on settlements couldn't be clearer – they are comprehensively set out in UN Security Council Resolution 2334 and in the declaration of the Paris Conference ... [at which he had participated]. These settlements are illegal, they actively undermine the prospects for a sustainable negotiated two-state solution, and the relentless expansion of settlements inherently involves injustice and provocation for Palestinians.

In 2017, Deputy Flanagan also called for Israel to reverse the decision to build more settlements and to commit to the two-state solution. Ireland was one of eight EU member states to express explicit support for the UN Human Rights Council Resolution 2017 on the settlements, which involves the compilation of a database of all businesses and enterprises that have enabled or profited from the creation and growth of Israeli settlements.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** I, too, issue my comhghairdeas to the Sinn Féin Party and, indeed, to Deputy Martin Kenny for bringing forward this motion. I know the Deputy has worked tirelessly behind the scenes to try to get as much support and achieve as much unanimity as possible. We had that, or as near as possible to it, in a debate here last week. As I said then, since independence, Ireland has had a proud record of being neutral country. We were recognised worldwide and our diaspora abroad was very proud of that. I salute and thank our peacekeeping forces, from those in the Congo when I was a buachaill óg right up to the present day, for the way in which they commit to and carry out their well-recognised, sterling duties of peacekeeping in very troubled areas.

Our history teaches us about the situation in Northern Ireland and the conflict from 1969

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to 1998 where more than 3,000 lives were lost. One life lost because of political difference is one life too many. That is not to mention the women and children, homes, hospitals and primary care centres, and the savagery that apartheid Israel - one can call it nothing else - has perpetrated. The demolition and destruction of the Palestinian people is just mind-boggling and shocking.

We have a ceasefire, thankfully, after eight or perhaps nine days. It is a fragile peace but the guns and bombs are not going off. There is still an incremental takeover, wipe-out and ethnic cleansing of the Palestinian people, however. This is not acceptable in a modern world. Our voice must be heard more loudly and clearly. With our seat on the UN Security Council, we must be able to be proud and find our feet again as an independent neutral nation. We must not be afraid of vested interests and global interests and not be kowtowing to European global interests.

Call it what it is - ethnic cleansing. It is an apartheid as bad as that under Mugabe in South Africa. It is nothing short of that. It must be stopped because the children and because of our children. We do not know the day or the hour when we will be in some kind of perilous situation and need small nations around the world to show empathy, courage and bravery to try to stand up for us.

I was very disappointed in the new President of America, Joe Biden, whose words were quite measly when he half-condemned Israel but then said he also recognised the situation in Israel for what it is. The Americans are obviously welded to the Israelis and are supporting their might. They are arming them and spending a fortune in that global trade of weapons of destruction. One could say weapons of mass destruction when one compares the might of Israel with the small area and small population of the Palestinian territories. They are weapons of mass destruction from that point of view.

Tá súil agam go mbeimid ábalta píosa beag a dhéanamh. I hope we will play a small part and for history to record that we did not stand idly by, as I said a week ago when quoting former Taoiseach, Jack Lynch, but that we played our part as a sovereign country and nation. We want this stopped now.

I fully support this motion and the amendments that have been tabled. I am sorry the Government did not see its way to supporting it. Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I will hand over to Deputy Connolly.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Is Deputy Connolly sharing time with Deputies McNamara and Harkin?

**Deputy Catherine Connolly:** I am sharing time with Deputy Harkin, who has five minutes. Fáiltím roimh an deis páirt a ghlacadh sa díospóireacht seo. Fáiltím roimh an sos cogaidh freisin ach maraíodh na sluaite sular tháinig an sos cogaidh sin, de bharr nach raibh muidne in ann aon rud a dhéanamh mar nach raibh muid in ann ár nguth a úsáid.

I welcome the opportunity to take part in this debate. I believe I have nine minutes when the clock is fixed; I am anxious to keep an eye on it. I thank Sinn Féin for working hard on the ground to get cross-party support for this motion, which I believe it is very important. I also see where People Before Profit is coming from with my own sense of impatience but I went with trying to get the most voices on board. I believe the Israeli ambassador needs to be hauled in. I see where People Before Profit is coming from but I will stick to this motion for the moment.

I welcome the ceasefire, which I actually spoke about last week. It is difficult to speak on this topic without getting emotional. I welcome the work the Minister has done on it. I welcome the extra time given to me by the Rural Independent Group because it is difficult to put emotion aside and actually focus in on what we are talking about.

We have a ceasefire but only after 248 Palestinian people lost their lives, 66 of whom were children, 39 women and 17 elderly people. Of course, I condemn the loss of life in Israel equally. The imbalance of power is absolutely palpable, however. Look at the figures, and again, I am not comparing one death with another. The killing of 12 Israeli people, including two children and an Israeli soldier who lost his life, must be condemned. We cannot ignore the figures and the imbalance of power, however. Neither can we ignore the swift action from Europe and from our own country with regard to what has been described as piracy in the skies.

I honestly read with utter disbelief today that Europe acted as one with 27 voices. Nobody was killed. What happened is certainly deplorable and I condemn it. Nobody lost their lives, however, and yet 27 European countries stood together to strongly condemn the forced landing in Belarus. We called it piracy in the sky. The Taoiseach, Deputy Micheál Martin, reflected on the erosion of democratic norms.

There is an article in *The Irish Times* today by a former ambassador and, significantly, there is not a single line on Gaza. It has gone off the front page and the inside pages. That amount of life is not worthy of a comment but we have a half page from a former ambassador, significantly, telling us that the threat from what happened with the Belarusian Government is a threat to a rule-based international order. He actually quotes Bob Dylan and talks about the sound of thunder rolling out as a warning. Significantly, that gentleman, and other men and women like him, have failed to talk about the thunder in the sky that led to the deaths of babies, children, women and elderly people in Palestine. No standing together for that but we can stand together all of a sudden with regard to piracy in the sky and a threat to rule-based democracy. What rules govern the behaviour of Israel? What rules govern our response to Israel when one looks at the background with regard to Palestine?

I do not have time but I will look back at some of the events. I have absolutely no hesitation in condemning the actions of Hamas and its rockets into Israel. Since 2007, Israel has launched major offensives. Does the Minister know what they called it? "Mowing the lawn". During Operation Protective Edge in 2014, between 8 July and 22 August, 2,104 Palestinians were killed. The small numbers killed on the Israeli side were equally unacceptable. The imbalance is clear to be seen, however. I refer to Operation Pillar of Defense; this is an abuse of language. Between 14 and 21 November 2012, 167 Palestinians were killed in that operation, including 87 civilians. Six Israelis were killed, two of them soldiers and four civilians. Operation Cast Lead took place in 2008-09 and I ask the Minister to consider the name of that operation. Between 27 December 2008 and 18 January 2009, an estimated 1,391 Palestinians were killed, including in the region of 759 civilians, 344 of them children and 110 women. How many Israelis were killed? Thirteen - ten soldiers and three civilians. Only one side has clearly violated international law. When Israel acts, we call it self-defence. When the Palestinians act, we call what they do acts of terrorism. Surely the least the Minister might do is help to clarify language in this area?

I am not sure why he is not supporting this motion. I would describe it as a very modest and moderate motion. Indeed, I would have liked it to go further. However, as I said at the beginning, I am supporting it in the interest of unity in this small Parliament in this small coun-

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try, in the hope that it will use its one voice and its moral courage to stand up to what Israel is doing. My empathy, going back, has always been with the Jewish nation. That is what we were reared on. However, what has happened in regard to Palestine is simply butchery and it is unacceptable. It is a blatant breach of international law. Words fail me in this regard, which is unusual, particularly in terms of the language used regarding the piracy in the sky and the action in Belarus.

More than 100,000 people have had to leave their homes. According to UNICEF, 800,000 people have no access to piped water. Infrastructure was deliberately targeted, including schools, churches, hospitals and clinics. The headquarters of the Ministry of Health was targeted directly. We are in trouble at the moment following a cyberattack on our computers because we foolishly did not act in time to protect them. We think we have problems. All of these bombs and this thunder in the sky are being inflicted on a civilian population. Yet we cannot act in unison, we who have a proud history of standing up to colonisation, and say with one voice, "Please, you cannot do this in our name". This is colonisation by Israel. It is illegal occupation.

The programme for Government commits to recognising the state of Palestine as part of a lasting settlement. It goes on to say, because the Government anticipated it would be necessary, "... or in advance of that, when we believe doing so will progress efforts to reach a two-state solution or protect the integrity of Palestinian territory." How long more is the Minister going to wait to protect the integrity of Palestinian territory? Will he wait until there is no territory left, not to mention the men, women and children whose lives will be lost? At what point is he going to come into the Dáil and tell us now is the time to protect the integrity of the Palestinian nation and fulfil the commitment given in the programme for Government?

**Deputy Marian Harkin:** I thank Deputy Brady for bringing forward this motion, to which I was happy to add my name. When it comes to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, there are no easy answers. If there were, we would have found them by now. A two-state solution is the only solution but it only works where there is trust. There is no trust. We have seen one UN Security Council resolution after another flagrantly ignored and dismissed by Israel. We see Palestinians herded into the open prison of the Gaza Strip, often with no proper access to clean water, sanitation, energy or medical supplies.

Many Palestinians have no future. When you have no future, then you have no hope for the future. All you can do is revolt. This is not an equal conflict and it cannot be approached from that perspective. The reality of the hard-line oppression of Palestinians, the denial of their life choices and the denial of hope have created a cauldron of anger, bitterness and distrust. Annexation of stolen land, illegal settlements and forced evictions stoke the fires of conflict. This is a David and Goliath situation and we know it. We must recognise that the Palestinians are not blameless. However, we need to place the responsibility where it belongs, squarely on the shoulders of Israel.

There have been many attempts to negotiate peace between Israel and the Palestinians over the years. There have been many interventions by those who created the problems in the first place, when the British, French and Americans carved up the Middle East in their own interest. Today, self-interest is still the dominating influence on the policies of those countries, which have significantly involved oil, arms supplies and election outcomes, notably in the US. Self-interest, unfortunately, has almost always been a contributing factor to this conflict. Those who are responsible for the creation of the nations of Israel and Palestine are core veto holders of permanent seats on the UN Security Council.

I listened to what the Minister and Ambassador Byrne Nason had to say, both inside and outside the UN. I fully support the Minister but sometimes words are not enough. The pledge he made on Ireland's accession to the Security Council seat was powerful. He stated: "This means saying no at times and standing up for ourselves and our own principles, even when it is a friend coming calling." The power of those words will be immense if they are backed up. If we say "No", we must mean it. I recognise that it is easy for me to ask the Minister to act, but I do so in good faith and not in any attempt to back him into a corner. I believe his heart and head are in the right place.

Deputy Howlin spoke of the actions of the Norwegian wealth funds. The world's largest sovereign wealth fund has excluded two Israeli companies because of their construction work in the Gaza Strip. Norway's Council of Ethics, the independent body that advises this €1.3 trillion fund, stated: "[The] Israeli settlements in the West Bank have been built in violation of international law and... their existence and constant expansion causes significant harm and disadvantage to the area's Palestinian population." Its action is a small step but it matters. We also need to take a step. We could pass the Control of Economic Activity (Occupied Territories) Bill 2018), which would be a statement and a step. Whatever we do, we need to move beyond mere condemnation. We cannot salve our conscience with words or by sending aid. Both are necessary but not sufficient. We know they will not work and have never worked. We will not be alone if we take that step to action. I ask the Minister and his colleagues to take it. Even if we are alone, it will be the right thing to do and it will give heft to the words the Minister used on our accession to the Security Council seat. We need to say "No" and we need to mean it.

**Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Jack Chambers):** I thank Deputies for their statements on this important issue. The Government is deeply concerned at the intensification of violence in Gaza, the West Bank and Israel in the past two weeks. We welcome the ceasefire on 21 May and I repeat the call of the Minister, Deputy Coveney, for its full and proper implementation, not least to ensure vital humanitarian can reach those in need. We have all looked on with horror at the scenes of destruction, death and fear that have been beamed across our television screens and across social media, the fireballs in the skyline of Gaza followed by dusty bodies of those who survived as they walk from the scene and the dusty bodies of those who did not. Those scenes of terrified women and children stand in stark contrast to the hard words of hard men, which so often dominate these discussions. The events of recent weeks have been shocking; most of all they have had a lasting and dreadful impact on Palestinian and Israeli civilians. The number of child casualties - over half of all civilian fatalities - is particularly deplorable. How can this be justified? The protection of all civilians is of paramount importance and indeed is an obligation under international humanitarian law.

As was outlined by the Minister, we support the substantive motion and our amendment seeks to strengthen it. The amendment proposed by the Government condemns these attacks and also addresses the disproportionate impact of Israeli strikes on civilians in the Gaza Strip. The impact on children is especially worrying, including the long-term psychosocial impact of the trauma. As many Deputies have raised today, the escalation has worsened an already difficult humanitarian situation. Israeli air strikes in the Gaza Strip may be targeted at terrorists but they hit homes, they hit schools, they hit hospitals and they hit basic facilities for the people of Gaza. The destruction of homes and damage to vital infrastructure such as roads, electricity networks and water installations is equally unacceptable. It is particularly concerning to hear that UNRWA buildings have been damaged during military operations in Gaza. UNRWA plays a vital humanitarian role in Gaza and needs to be protected and never targeted.

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We will receive an assessment from the Commissioner-General of UNRWA at the UN Security Council meeting on Thursday. The €1.5 million in additional funding from Irish Aid announced last week will support the UN in delivering emergency humanitarian supplies to those in acute need. The support for psychosocial services is particularly important as the toll of recent hostilities will be long-lasting. I would like to take the opportunity to pay tribute to the dedicated staff of UNRWA and other UN agencies, the International Committee of the Red Cross, ICRC, the Red Crescent and the NGOs which continue to provide critical services and support even in the most harrowing of circumstances. It is our duty to do all we can to protect them and ensure unimpeded access for all the vital humanitarian supplies they need to carry out their work. Ireland will continue its development support through the Irish Aid programme managed by our mission in Ramallah. This programme focuses on a number of key areas including education and the promotion of human rights, including support to the important role of civil society. This year Ireland will provide €10 million in funding through this channel in support of the Palestinian people.

As many Members have acknowledged, the underlying causes of the situation in Gaza are political and cannot be solved by funding alone. What is needed is the lifting of the blockade in order that normal life and normal economic activity can resume. Gaza faces many challenges but the blockade dominates people's lives in Gaza to such an extent that it is difficult to address other issues. Israel's continued strategy of expanding settlements and the discriminatory practices by Israeli authorities against Palestinians are also key underlying factors in the recent escalation and tensions in the West Bank, Gaza and Israel.

Today's motion sends a clear signal of our opposition to Israel's settlement policy, which is in breach of international law and undermines the viability of a two-state solution. It is our view that this is in fact de facto annexation. The Human Rights Council is meeting in special session Geneva on Thursday to discuss the recent events in the occupied Palestinian territory. Ireland has supported the holding of this session. We fully support the need for an independent inquiry into these events. Ireland remains deeply concerned about the lack of accountability for violations of international human rights law and international humanitarian law in the occupied Palestinian territory. There are many aspects of the Israeli occupation which raise human rights concerns and Ireland supports a range of Israeli and Palestinian human rights organisations who are combating these issues directly on the ground.

Ireland has consistently and strongly opposed settlements at EU level and at the UN Security Council and will continue to do so. The Government's position on settlements is that we are absolutely opposed to them. Ireland distinguishes in all of its dealings between the territory of the State of Israel and the territories occupied since 1967. UN Security Council Resolution 2334, adopted on 23 December 2016, calls on all states to distinguish, in their relevant dealings, between the territory of the State of Israel and the territories occupied since 1967. This resolution reflected the position already held by Ireland, the EU and the UN for many years. For example, the Horizon 2020 Agreement, signed by the European Commission and Israel in June 2014, states clearly in Article 6 that the agreement does not apply to the territory occupied by Israel in 1967.

As the Taoiseach said last week, diplomatic relations maintain the channels of communication and engagement with all governments, including those that we may disagree with or that might have different perspectives on issues. As has been said already, cutting diplomatic ties will not save the life of one Palestinian, or anyone else for that matter. The Government remains committed to a comprehensive, just and lasting peace in the Middle East. As well as important

initiatives like the motion before us today, it is also critical that the international community remains fully engaged, as only by ending the occupation will these problems truly be resolved.

**Deputy Pa Daly:** Over the past fortnight, 213 people, including 61 children, have been killed in Gaza. The number of Palestinians wounded stands at 1,400, with tens of thousands being displaced from their homes, according to the United Nations. Rallies were held all over Ireland, including two in County Kerry; one was in Killarney and the other in my home town of Tralee, which is twinned with Beit Sahour in the West Bank. We sent a strong message of solidarity to them. The other rally I was at in the last fortnight was up in Gortaglanna in the north of the county, where four men were lined up and shot by the Black and Tans 100 years ago this week. One survived and was able to counter the narrative that there was a battle and that the Black and Tans had shot the three men in self-defence. With this motion we are countering the narrative that the State of Israel is acting in self-defence, the narrative that there were clashes between Palestinians and Israel, that the attacks by Israel were attacks on Hamas or that it is acceptable to bomb a building and kill 20 children because someone from Hamas is suspected to be present.

We in this county also know of gerrymandering, false majorities and about discrimination. Israel continues to refer to the Palestinians as a minority even though they are in the majority between the Jordan river and the Mediterranean. Israel maintains a veneer of democracy, even though many Palestinians are disenfranchised. The real story is that 750,000 Palestinians were removed from their homes in the 1940s. They were moved to refugee camps and according to Israel, those refugees have no connection to this land. The truth is that Jerusalem was illegally annexed in 1967 and the annexations continue to this day. The UN resolutions state that any actions to alter the status of Jerusalem are illegal. The story is that Israel continues to allow settlements to be constructed, contrary to international law. We know about the Jewish nation state law, enshrining Jewish superiority and further eroding the status of Palestinians, downgrading their language and promoting Jewish settlement. The truth is that attacks that kill 20 children are not self-defence under any recognised definition. The truth is that the international community, especially the USA and the UK, has let Israel away with it. I heard the Minister saying we will do all we can but I do not believe we are doing that. Israel is acting with impunity. Palestinians have little power. Bob Dylan was mentioned. We are standing in the doorway and we are blocking up the hall rather than doing anything about this properly. We must formally recognise the state of Palestine, implement the occupied territories Bill and demand the right of return. We are on the UN Security Council so we need implement resolutions. We need to send a strong message now. To quote Ian Brown from the Stone Roses:

How many mothers to cry? How many sons have to die? How many missions left to fly over Palestine? 'Cause as a matter of facts It's a pact, it's an act These are illegal attacks.

**Deputy Pat Buckley:** The EU has given a very clear response to this, otherwise we are giving all the wrong signals. European leaders will, I hope, send a very strong signal to a regime that is repressing its own people, expelling foreign journalists, silencing civil society and human rights defenders. If indecision or weakness is shown by the EU, it will reinforce in the minds of the decision makers in that country that we have done the right thing here. The response must be clear, tough and to happen quickly. There must be an independent international inquiry into what happened. EU leaders must make clear this will not be tolerated.

What is needed now is a specific response. The EU and its institutions have clear options in terms of sanctions but they have to be sanctions that will be noticed and cause concern. The

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structure is there. This is something that needs a very strong response in terms of sanctions. It cannot be strong words or press releases, there has to be a real edge. These are not my words, they are a reflection of the words of the Minister for Foreign Affairs speaking about Belarus this week.

It is not a point that needs to be overstated that the response to a country that has killed almost 250 people and injured thousands in bombings of civilian areas in just a few weeks requires a much stronger response. That has not come, however, and the EU and its allies fund Israel either directly or indirectly to carry out the massacre of Palestinians.

These are not my words, they are those of a former interim President of Israel, Mr. Avraham Burg. I welcome the ceasefire but in the context of the *de facto* annexation, I call on the Government to say words are not enough and strong action is needed. The Government must support the Sinn Féin motion.

**Deputy John Brady:** We have heard the arguments and we have heard the amendments. I again call on Members to remain focused on the magnitude of what we are on the cusp of achieving. We will become the first European country to formally acknowledge that the crime of annexation has taken place. The architecture of the Israeli Government strategy on the development of settlements signals the intention of making this a permanent fixture. The EU has talked about the need for Israel to avoid the red line of annexation but we have the potential to bring Europe over the line. We have the potential to move EU policy on Palestine. I welcome the comments of the Minister in formally and explicitly stating that what is taking place is *de facto* annexation.

This motion reflects the concern of the Irish people about the plight of the Palestinian people. The memory and consequence of colonisation live in the very marrow of our bones. It is right that with our unique understanding of the experience of colonisation, we will be first Parliament in Europe to call out Israel on its apartheid policies.

There is a need to address some of what I regard as the unfortunate comments of the Minister. I, along with a coalition of non-governmental organisations, reached out to the Government in good faith in respect of this motion and we were quite careful to explicitly condemn attacks on civilian population and infrastructure. I point out to the Minister that a civilian is a civilian and I do not distinguish one from another. Trying to imply otherwise does a disservice to what we are on the cusp of achieving with this motion.

Last week we had statements on Palestine following the most recent Israeli onslaught against Palestinians. What was remarkable was the evidence of cross-party unity on the matter of Palestine. I was touched by the emotion in some of the contributions and I appeal to all Members here today, of all political hues, to direct that emotion, feeling and concern for the Palestinian people towards achieving a tangible, very real victory for the cause of justice and humanity. With the potential to move the goalposts on this, we can set in train a process that can rip the gates off the open air prison that is the occupied Palestinian territories.

We all share the frustration of the Minister when he talks about the UN Security Council needing two weeks to agree a response. If we can get this motion adopted, all who speak for this Dáil will carry the imprimatur of the Irish people. What next? On this I turn to a letter from Professor Stanley Michael Lynk, United Nations special rapporteur for the situation of human rights in the Palestinian territory occupied since 1967, who felt compelled to write to the

Minister, Deputy Coveney, on the strength of this motion coming before the Dáil. He states:

Accordingly, I would call upon your Government to adopt meaningful accountability measures respecting the Israeli occupation that would include:

- Halting all Irish economic activity and trade with the illegal Israeli settlements;
- Reviewing and downgrading Ireland's military relationship with the Israeli military;
- Recognizing that Israel has *de facto* annexed much of the West Bank, which is as illegal under international law as *de jure* annexation; and
- Using its voice within the European Union for Brussels to support measures to review and downgrade its economic, cultural, military and diplomatic relationships with Israel until the occupation fully ends.

The comments of the special rapporteur spell out what this Dáil needs to do. We must pass the occupied territories legislation. We must look at sanctions. We must formally recognise the state of Palestine. The Israeli ambassador should go.

In passing this motion we are mandating our Government to move forward to the next stage, which is to work internationally to introduce measures that will hold Israel truly to account. I commend the motion to the Dáil and I hope it will be fully supported by all.

Amendment put and declared carried.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** I move amendment No. 1:

To insert the following after "settlement activity and to regularly update Dáil Éireann":

- publicly declare that the State of Israel is guilty of war crimes for its killing of innocent men, women and, most horrifically, 63 children in the Gaza Strip over recent weeks;
- acknowledge that:
  - the recent escalation of violence was provoked by the attempt to ethnically cleanse 28 Palestinian families from the Sheikh Jerah area of Jerusalem and replace them with illegal Israeli settlers;
  - these latest atrocities and war crimes perpetrated by the State of Israel are not isolated incidents but are part of an ongoing and systematic campaign by the Israeli State to ethnically cleanse the Palestinian people from their land and deny them basic rights under international and human rights law – a campaign that has been pursued relentlessly since the foundation of the State in 1948; and
  - Israel, in its basic laws and practices, is an apartheid state, similar to the former apartheid state of South Africa, as defined by the International Convention on the Suppression and Punishment of the Crime of Apartheid (UNGA Resolution 3068 (1973)) and that Israel's apartheid character has been confirmed by both the main Israeli human rights organisation, B'Tselem and the main United States based human rights organisation, Human Rights Watch;
- publicly assert that the Israeli apartheid system, through its ongoing ethnic cleans-

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ing, brutal state repression and murderous military violence – including four savage military assaults on Gaza in recent years, has no place among the international community of nations; and

- therefore to:

- expel the Israeli ambassador and all Israel diplomatic staff from Ireland;

- apply a comprehensive package of economic, political and cultural sanctions against the State of Israel, similar to that applied to apartheid South Africa; and

- maintain sanctions and promote them within the EU and internationally until the entire Israeli apartheid system is dismantled and all the Palestinian people enjoy national self-determination and full and equal rights, including the right to return of all Palestinian refugees expelled since 1948 and all their descendants, as required by international law (UN Resolution 194).

Amendment put.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** In accordance with Standing Order 80(2), the division is postponed until the weekly division time tomorrow evening.

## **Ceisteanna - Questions**

### **Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions**

#### **Departmental Policies**

1. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the timeline for the roll-out of the Our Rural Future - Rural Development Policy 2021-2025 strategy as promised; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [28239/21]

**Deputy Claire Kerrane:** Will the Minister provide the timeline for the roll-out of the commitments made in Our Rural Future as promised?

**Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** I thank the Deputy for raising this matter. Our Rural Future is the new rural development policy for the period 2021 to 2025. It is the most ambitious and transformational policy for rural development in Ireland for decades, focusing on sustainability and optimising opportunities for individuals, communities and businesses. The policy provides a framework to set out a vision for rural Ireland and contains more than 150 measures for delivery over the lifetime of the policy, for both short-term recovery and longer-term development. These commitments were developed in collaboration with Departments across the whole of Government.

A key commitment in the implementation of Our Rural Future is to produce annual work programmes, which will detail the actions being undertaken and associated timelines for deliv-

ery relating to the measures. The first work programme is at an advanced stage. It is currently being finalised and will be published imminently. It will outline the measures and actions for delivery in 2021, and associated timelines. It has been developed in conjunction with the Departments and agencies responsible for delivering the ambition of Our Rural Future.

The policy also commits to regular progress reports, the first of which will be published at the end of this year, with subsequent progress reports to follow every six months. Regular reports to the Cabinet committee on economic recovery and investment, chaired by An Taoiseach, will also ensure progress on the implementation of these commitments.

**Deputy Claire Kerrane:** I welcome the publication of this plan as someone who has lived in rural Ireland all of her life and who would live nowhere else. It is an ambitious plan and I acknowledge that. The difficulty is that while it is a five-year strategic plan, it is disappointing that the timelines were not there in the first place. The Minister referred to short-term and longer-term deliverables but, again, there is no distinction in the report or in the 150 commitments it contains. Much of the funding for the action plan is repackaged funding, including the €2 billion to €3 billion for the national broadband plan and the €1 billion for the rural regeneration fund. In fact, I do not believe there is any new funding, at least figuratively, in the plan. Will the Minister indicate what are the targets in the plan for job creation in the context of the 400 remote working hubs?

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** We published Our Rural Future at the end of March. It is a very ambitious five-year policy. In fairness, it has been received extremely well, not just here in Ireland but also internationally. When the World Economic Forum, the Financial Times, CNBC and *The New York Times* comment on our strategy, and to see it described as the most ambitious plan of its kind in Europe, it is very encouraging. We have a very strong policy, which is acknowledged by everybody, but the challenge now is in delivery. I assure the Deputy that my focus is on delivery.

The work programme for this year will be published shortly and will set out timelines for specific actions to be delivered this year. I will hold Ministers and Departments to account and make sure they deliver for rural Ireland.

If the Ceann Comhairle will bear with me, I want to acknowledge the work of a senior civil servant, Mr. William Parnell, in this plan. Mr. Parnell put a huge amount of work into it and he retired just after the plan was published. I wish him well in his retirement because he certainly put a lot of work into making sure we delivered on this plan.

**Deputy Claire Kerrane:** I understood from the press conference after the launch of Our Rural Future that the list of actions to be worked on for this year was due at the end of that week or at least I believe it was said at the time that the timelines would be detailed in the next week. I acknowledge that this is an ambitious plan but I reiterate that it is disappointing there was not some timeframes built in there or that they were not published soon after the plan was launched.

There is a real overemphasis in the plan on non-existent broadband. The Minister for Environment, Climate and Communications, Deputy Eamon Ryan, acknowledged at the launch that just 12% of the 550,000 homes included in the national broadband plan will be connected by the end of this year. Does the Minister, Deputy Humphreys, have any engagement on the programme for Government commitment to accelerate the roll-out of broadband, and does she play any role in the possibility of that happening in a seven-year to a five-year plan?

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**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** I am in regular contact with the Minister for Environment, Climate and Communications. He is trying to accelerate the roll-out of broadband. I also live in rural Ireland. There is a lot of broadband appearing now in areas where we had very poor coverage. The private operators are moving in now, as well as National Broadband Ireland. The acceleration and the roll-out of broadband has somewhat speeded up in the past months. As we know, Covid delayed some things, unfortunately.

We are working on the actions, as I said, and we will have them very shortly. Work continues in the meantime. I was delighted that we scaled up the town and village scheme. I changed the maximum grant up from €200,000 to €500,000. There are a number of actions on which we have already started to work.

## Departmental Policies

2. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the way in which the €5 million fund to support the development of Ireland's first national network of remote working hubs will work; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [28176/21]

**Deputy Sean Sherlock:** I merely wish to ask the Minister the way in which the €5 million fund to support the development of Ireland's first national network of remote working hubs will work, and if she will make a statement on the matter.

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** The primary objective of the connected hubs call is to support and complement the development of the national hub network, which is a key action of Our Rural Future and the national remote working strategy. The connected hubs call targets shovel-ready, small capital works that will increase the capacity of existing hubs and benefit the wider economy in support of the network.

The call was launched on 29 April. The scheme document and application forms are available on my Department's website. Expressions of interest are requested by 28 May, with the deadline for applications being 17 June. My Department has hosted four information sessions for local authority staff and hub managers, which were attended by more than 170 participants. My officials have prepared a frequently asked questions, FAQ, document, which is updated on a weekly basis and published on my Department's website every Tuesday afternoon. The extensive FAQ document includes all of the questions raised at the information sessions and should provide valuable advice and guidance to potential applicants.

Potential applicant hubs are requested to commit to a three-year membership of the national hub network as a key condition of funding being made available. To ensure that the network is open to all hubs, regardless of size or location, my Department will cover the cost of onboarding and membership for three years. I look forward to launching the national hub network in the next few weeks.

There is funding of €5 million for the call. Projects that can be funded under the call include, but are not limited to, the installation of privacy booths in existing hubs or pods. We know how useful the pods are downstairs here in this premises when sometimes one needs to have private conversations. It is great to be able to use that type of facility.

**Deputy Sean Sherlock:** I can internalise and understand where the Minister is going re-

garding the connected hubs fund. If I understand it correctly, she is referring to pre-existing infrastructure. The reason I ask the question is to speak for people in places such as Killavullen and Mitchelstown in north Cork, for example, from where I have received queries and where there are no pre-existing hubs. This situation is reflective of the entire country really. The people asking me about these two specific locations are wondering if they can get a slice of the action there. Mitchelstown is a small- to medium-sized town while Killavullen is a village where connectivity would be an issue. Can people who live in areas where there is currently no hub reasonably expect that they will get a slice of the €5 million?

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** The connected hubs call is open to existing public and private hubs. The grants available can range from €10,000 up to €250,000. Through the fund, we want to expand the capacity and the quality of our existing hub facilities, providing more hot desks, office pods for when one needs some privacy, and audiovisual facilities.

*8 o'clock*

Some of the funding can be used towards marketing costs, which is important because we want people to know the hubs are available to them. In areas where there are no hubs and there is very poor broadband, and I am not sure whether this is the case in the area the Deputy is speaking about, I would tell people to get in touch with their local authority and we will look at providing a broadband connection point. We have been rolling these out throughout the country. They are in areas where there are poor broadband facilities. They may be in a community hall. If there were some place such as this, and the community hall needed to buy additional equipment, I would advise those involved to apply to this fund, which is available to support them.

**Deputy Sean Sherlock:** I thank the Minister. What she is clearly articulating to me, so that I can report back to the people who have made representations to me, is that the €5 million connected hub funding does not apply to a person or entity trying to start from scratch and that it is for pre-existing infrastructure. This is what the Minister is clarifying. If this is the case, we will advise accordingly in respect of locations where people want to create something in the community where people can come together in appropriate locations, which are not necessarily community facilities and might be privately owned facilities, such as pubs, for instance. There is now massive potential for such connectivity and bringing people together - I will not say in an unorthodox way - in a way reimagining what the local pub would look like. If the Minister is telling us there is scope for connectivity in such circumstances we would welcome it.

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** Funding is available through the town and village renewal scheme, in which there is a big focus on derelict buildings that could be renovated and used as co-working spaces. There is an opportunity for people to apply for this funding. There is a great project in Donegal, which was funded through the rural regeneration development fund. An old Ritz cinema in Donegal was converted into a hub. The Deputy is familiar with the Ludgate hub in Cork. Not that long ago, €206,000 in funding was allocated to create the rural digital innovation hub strategy and the pipeline implementation strategy. This project is supported through the rural regeneration and development fund. The Ludgate hub received funding through the town and village renewal scheme. There are opportunities and I am happy to speak to the Deputy about the individual case he has mentioned.

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## Rural Schemes

3. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the specific measures in place to address the issue of vacant and derelict buildings in rural towns and villages; the financial supports and incentives that are in place to assist persons with renovating and revitalising buildings in these areas; her plans to improve same, as per the commitment in Our Rural Future - Rural Development Policy 2021-2025; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [28240/21]

**Deputy Claire Kerrane:** This question is to ask the Minister about the specific measures in place to address the issue of vacant and derelict buildings in rural towns and villages, particularly in town centres, and the financial supports and incentives in place to assist people in renovating them.

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** The refurbishment of vacant properties is being addressed through a number of funding streams delivered by my Department, in line with the commitments contained in Our Rural Future.

In April, I announced investment of €81 million for 25 landmark projects for funding under the rural regeneration and development fund. The projects will combat dereliction, increase the vibrancy of rural towns and villages, and regenerate town centre buildings to provide remote working hubs, libraries, e-learning, cultural, enterprise and community spaces.

On Monday, 3 May 2021, I announced the availability of €15 million funding under the 2021 town and village renewal scheme. In line with Our Rural Future, a key focus of this year's scheme is to renovate derelict and vacant buildings in our town centres. I have increased the maximum grant available under the scheme to €500,000 to permit projects of additional scale to be funded. I will also shortly be announcing a new €2 million scheme to fund the development of town masterplans, which I expect will identify strategic actions tailored to address the vacancy and town centre living issues specific to each town.

There is a range of other initiatives outlined in Our Rural Future, which will contribute to addressing vacancy in our towns and villages. In particular, an interdepartmental group has been established to develop a town centre first approach, with a focus on vacancy and dereliction, and to bring forward recommendations to Government. As part of budget 2022, and in the context of the town centre first approach, we will examine the scope to introduce new supports and incentives for the refurbishment of vacant properties to increase town centre living.

**Deputy Claire Kerrane:** I thank the Minister for outlining a number of schemes. Are the findings of the report on the town centre living initiative, in which there were pilot programmes in six towns, being taken into account with regard to the schemes to be introduced to improve and restore derelict buildings in towns? As the Minister knows, it cited a lack of co-ordinated national supports, difficulties for property owners in accessing advice and supports for bringing properties back into use, and the fact there are no financial disincentives for underuse. While the Minister mentioned a number of schemes, we will need many more incentives to tackle dereliction given the extent of it in so many towns and villages throughout the State. With regard to the focus on this in the rural plan, has the Minister had engagement with the Minister or Department with responsibility for housing specifically on the residential use of these buildings?

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** I thank the Deputy. We had the pilot study and all of the in-

formation has proved to be very valuable in terms of developing the town centre first initiative. The Minister of State, Deputy Peter Burke, chairs the committee. The Department feeds into it and we are looking at a number of initiatives. I am working very closely with the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, on what we can do to address dereliction in town centres. The town and village renewal scheme has been repurposed this year, with €15 million additional funding from which individual projects can receive up to €500,000. I want to see a big focus on projects that bring vacant and derelict buildings and sites back into use as multipurpose spaces, remote working hubs and for residential occupancy. The town centre first policy framework is advancing very well. It will bring forward actions during the summer to look at how communities and local authorities can be supported to develop and deliver tailored plans for their own towns to address vacancy and town centre living.

**Deputy Claire Kerrane:** I welcome the town centre first approach. In fairness to the town and village renewal scheme, it includes a real and excellent level of consultation with those in the communities in which the scheme is, hopefully, going to work. I want to raise an issue. Actively working against this is the town centre public realm enhancement scheme. In Ballaghaderreen, which is my home town, there are plans to remove 67 parking spaces and replace them with a number of small green areas, with approximately 20 trees and benches. This will have a devastating impact on businesses. There will not even be loading bays for deliveries. This is a matter of huge concern. The sum of €3 million is a huge investment and badly needed in a town such as Ballaghaderreen, but if the people in the town were asked, they would call for a childcare facility in the town to be re-established or for public transport to be improved because it is a blackspot. With regard to vital funding for towns such as Ballaghaderreen, will the Minister please look at the public realm enhancement scheme, which will do huge damage to businesses and work against the very good schemes that are there?

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** With regard to the particular scheme the Deputy has mentioned, it is funded by the Department through the local authorities. It is up to the local authorities to consult with communities to have a clear path forward as to how to address the issues in their villages. The Deputy knows that I am very much in favour of a bottom-up approach. I like to engage with communities and identify the problems on the ground. My job as Minister is to provide the funding to facilitate the growth of these town centres. Deputy Kerrane lives in Ballaghaderreen. I think it would be fair to say that in Boyle there has been a really good project where they approved €2.1 million from the first call for category 1 applications under the rural regeneration fund. That includes the refurbishment of the old Royal Hotel into an enterprise hub. That is a case of where there has been wonderful engagement and it has worked well. I hear what the Deputy is saying.

### **Departmental Programmes**

4. **Deputy Paul Donnelly** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development when SICAP funding will be increased to its 2008 level at €84 million given that current funding is at 50% of this amount. [28312/21]

**Deputy Paul Donnelly:** I ask the Minister when Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme, SICAP, funding will be restored to its 2008 level of €84 million, given that current funding is at 50% of this amount and given that this affects the most disadvantaged people within our communities.

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**Minister of State at the Department of Rural and Community Development (Deputy Joe O'Brien):** I thank the Deputy for his question and the focus on the Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme.

My Department is providing funding of €190 million over five years for the current SICAP programme, which is our country's primary social inclusion intervention. This year over €39 million was allocated to the programme, supporting front-line workers in local development companies to deliver SICAP on the ground.

The programme does vital work in helping individuals and groups, by improving the life chances of those who are marginalised in society, living in poverty or unemployed. Indeed, since 2018, the programme has supported over 80,000 individuals and 6,219 local community groups. SICAP also supports social enterprises. In 2020, for example, 448 social enterprises received support through the programme. In addition, it supports collective community engagement and the development of more sustainable and stronger communities, improving the quality of life of those facing social exclusion and inequality.

The funding for SICAP is subject to the annual budgetary Estimates process. Modest increases in the annual allocations have been achieved over the duration of the current programme. I acknowledge that funding for social inclusion measures was reduced after 2008. However, since then, other social inclusion measures have been initiated and funded. I realise the importance of continuing to address this. I want to assure the Deputy that I review the level of funding of all programmes each year as part of the budgetary process and it remains my intention to continue to prioritise funding for SICAP.

**Deputy Paul Donnelly:** Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire Stáit.

The funding over the five years of €197 million, if it was at the 2008 level, should be approximately €470 million. There is a massive difference between what people are getting now in SICAP funding and what they were getting 13 years ago.

There is strong evidence that we are not all in this together. The Covid crisis has shown even more that communities, particularly disadvantaged communities, are severely disadvantaged in supports.

In terms of SICAP, the funding is not sufficient. Can the Minister of State give a commitment that over the next years that will be increased? It is very important for our communities.

**Deputy Joe O'Brien:** I can give a commitment to prioritise SICAP. In terms of the programmes that I oversee, it is one of the ones that I have been shouting about most since I came into office.

It is something that we need to raise the profile of across communities as well because so much good work goes on. We have over 500 posts for SICAP workers across the country doing really good work, particularly last year during the crisis. That is not often recognised. I always appreciate the programme being raised here in the Dáil.

To put it on people's radar as well, next week we will be running a promotional programme for SICAP that details much of the good work that was done, in particular, last year. It really came into its own last year in the value that it brought to communities in terms of innovating and responding to the issues that emerged from Covid-19. I can assure the Deputy it is very

high on my priority list.

**Deputy Paul Donnelly:** At the Joint Committee on Social Protection, Community and Rural Development and the Islands meeting last week, the chair and the CEO of the Irish Local Development Network, ILDN, stated clearly that SICAP providers have played a central role in communities across the country in responding to the needs which emerged during the Covid lockdown and beyond. As the Minister of State stated, they helped over 2,200 individuals on a daily basis who came to their service during the lockdown.

As I said, this is so important. There is no single group of people who have been as affected by disadvantage, cuts and Covid as many of these communities, and particularly the communities that I represent in Dublin 15. It is not good enough. I do not blame the Minister of State personally. This is something that has happened over a period of 13 years. It is not good enough to say that the funding will be €197 million over five years yet if it was 2008 we would be looking at close to €500 million being provided. That is not acceptable or good enough.

**Deputy Joe O'Brien:** The Deputy makes a relevant point in relation to the decrease that SICAP has taken over time. I am very aware of that, to acknowledge that again.

I draw attention to some areas that come under the area of social inclusion that have received increases in funding in that time period as well. One of them is the Community Enhancement Programme which provides small grants to community groups to enhance facilities in disadvantaged areas. From 2018 to 2020, it has provided €25 million to support 8,000 community groups and organisations. The 2021 allocation is €4.5 million.

Also relevant is the scheme to support national organisations, SSNO, in the community and voluntary sector. It is a key element of the Department's support for the role of the sector in contributing to the development of a strong and vibrant civil society and improving outcomes for those most disadvantaged. A large majority of the organisations under SSNO will work in areas of social inclusion. Funding for SSNO has increased significantly since 2008 and that needs to be acknowledged as well.

### **Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions**

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** We are moving on to the other questions. I do not see the Deputies. If I am missing somebody, he or she can shout at me. Moving back to Deputy Donnelly, the Deputy is next with Question No. 7.

*Questions Nos. 5 and 6 replied to with Written Answers.*

### **Departmental Programmes**

7. **Deputy Paul Donnelly** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development if there has been progress in relation to the multi-annual funding of community projects. [27959/21]

**Deputy Paul Donnelly:** The Covid crisis has shown us all clearly that the digital divide is as wide as every other divide in our society. If you are from a disadvantaged community then due to digital poverty your opportunities for education and work are limited. Will the Minister

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detail the provisions being implemented to deal with digital poverty in our communities?

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Which Minister is responding? The Minister, Deputy Humphreys?

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** I do not have that question on digital poverty. That is Question No. 6.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** It is Question No. 7 on the Order Paper on multi-annual funding of community projects.

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** That is a different question the Deputy is asking. The Minister of State, Deputy Joe O'Brien, can answer Question No. 7.

**Deputy Joe O'Brien:** I can answer Question No. 7 but it is not the question Deputy Paul Donnelly asked.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** The Minister of State will have to answer Question No. 7 because Question No. 7 is in Deputy Paul Donnelly's name. Has the Deputy got it in front of him?

**Deputy Paul Donnelly:** I have it here.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Deputy Paul Donnelly has asked about multi-annual funding of community projects.

**Deputy Paul Donnelly:** That was not the one I referred to.

**Deputy Joe O'Brien:** I am happy to take the question on the basis that it is the multi-annual funding question.

**Deputy Paul Donnelly:** Okay, go ahead.

**Deputy Joe O'Brien:** In August 2019, my Department launched Sustainable, Inclusive and Empowered Communities, the strategy to support the community and voluntary sector in Ireland. This strategy was developed in consultation with the cross-sectoral group and a work plan to progress its implementation has been agreed.

Work in 2021 is ongoing in respect of a number of the objectives outlined in the strategy including: a training needs assessment to identify gaps and make recommendations on how best to build capacity in the sector; a draft values and principles document has been developed with a view to it being adopted by all who engage with the community and voluntary sector; funding has been provided to support work promoting appropriate standards in training of community development practitioners; and proposals for a civic forum or national consultative event in 2021 are being examined.

Objective 4 of the strategy commits to scope and develop a sustainable funding model to support the community and voluntary sector, recognising the importance of a multi-annual funding approach. Some of my Department's programmes already operate on a multi-annual basis, including SICAP, as mentioned, the community services programme, CSP, and the scheme to support national organisations, SSNO.

However, I recognise that many community and voluntary organisations receive funding

from the State on an annual basis. My Department recently commissioned Pobal to commence work on a scoping exercise for a centralised grantee database which could be a useful first step in increasing visibility across government on the funding provided by that sector.

**Deputy Paul Donnelly:** I welcome the fact that there are moves in regard to multi-annual funding and the response from the Minister of State. It is critically important for community organisations to be able to plan, strategise and keep staff, which is one of the major issues in some projects that are running on year-to-year funding. It is very difficult to maintain the continuity of staff required.

Funding is important for the safety and security of projects. They are then able to consider other types of funding and know that they have three or five years of core funding and they can now use other funding to plan for training, which is another serious deficit in a lot of community organisations. I welcome the response and look forward to many more community projects being able to get multi-annual funding which will provide them with security.

**Deputy Joe O'Brien:** I will provide more detail on the training side of things as the Deputy brought it up. We have prioritised training in this year's action plan, which comes under the community and voluntary sector five-year strategy. The cross-sectoral group has prioritised training. There are three aspects to that. First, the process is ongoing and there will be a report on the training needs of local communities and development committees by the end of June. The second aspect relates to voluntary board members of community and voluntary organisations. Third, later this year we will examine the training needs of smaller community organisations, many of which are dependent on volunteers. In terms of the training side of things, we are putting some resources into that this year and developments are ongoing.

**Deputy Paul Donnelly:** I thank the Minister of State and appreciate his reply. As a voluntary member of many boards, and a current board member of the Dublin 15 community drug team, it is something that we have recognised in terms of our risk analysis of the project. In a review, we identified that training for volunteers and voluntary board members and staff and how we retain and maintain continuity is something that is important.

As I said, it is critical for the future of community development structures and how they operate that we provide the appropriate type of funding. We need to ensure that, unlike what happened between 2008 and 2011, the first people to be cut and affected by cuts are not those working in the community, voluntary and charity sectors.

**Deputy Joe O'Brien:** I thank the Deputy. We are in the process of scoping out where multi-annual funding might begin to grow. As part of the process, we have to pin down exactly what we are funding and what Departments are funding organisations. We do not fund all community and voluntary organisations, of which a large number - 11,000 - are registered with the Charities Regulator.

To give the Deputy a little more information on that development in terms of the scoping exercise, the Department recently entered into an agreement with Pobal to conduct a scoping exercise on a proposal for a centralised grantee database of community and voluntary organisations which have a funding relationship with the State. The objective is that this would be a source of information more generally about the investment being made by the State across communities and will serve to reduce the administrative burden on funders and grantees by adopting a "file once" principle.

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I must stress, however, that this is a preliminary scoping exercise and is exploring potential options at this very early stage. If the project is approved on foot of the scoping exercise, it will likely take a few years before the process would be completed and operational.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** The next question is in the name of Deputy Claire Kerrane.

**Deputy Claire Kerrane:** I have permission for Deputy Paul Donnelly to take this question.

**Deputy Paul Donnelly:** I think this must be-----

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** It is to ask when SICAP funding will be increased.

**Deputy Paul Donnelly:** We have done that one.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** The one before that was the multi-annual funding of community projects. That is the question that was answered. We are moving onto Question No. 8 in the name of Deputy Claire Kerrane that you are taking.

**Deputy Paul Donnelly:** There must be a mistake because the question on SICAP funding is the one we have already gone through. There is a mix-up in the order. That has already been answered.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** That is the question we are on. It has been answered.

**Deputy Paul Donnelly:** Yes.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** We will not go through it again, unless you want to.

*Question No. 8 replied to with Written Answers.*

## **Community Development Projects**

9. **Deputy David Stanton** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the supports provided by her Department for the maintenance and enhancement of community facilities; the way in which local community groups may access this funding; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [27985/21]

**Deputy Neale Richmond:** I am taking this question on behalf of Deputy David Stanton. I wish to ask the Minister of State about the supports provided by the Department for the maintenance and enhancement of community facilities, the way in which local community groups may access this funding and if he will make a statement on the matter.

**Deputy Joe O'Brien:** A range of my Department's programmes contribute to the enhancement of community facilities. They include a €4.5 million 2021 community enhancement programme, which was launched on 10 May. The programme provides grants to enhance facilities in disadvantaged areas and is administered by the local community development committees, LCDCs, in each local authority area. A €49 million CSP for 2021 supports 420 community organisations to provide local, social, economic and environmental services. Another programme is the town and village renewal scheme, which involves project support and the rejuvenation of rural towns and villages, including public realm projects, remote working hubs, town centre enhancements, encouraging town centre living and addressing vacancy and dereliction. The

connected hubs fund of €5 million will expand existing hub facilities to provide additional hot desks, office space and meeting rooms for remote working, the installation of electric car charging points, the upgrading of disability access and the improvement of IT facilities located within hubs or broadband connection points.

The dormant accounts fund provides funding for community initiatives and supports, including support for social enterprises. The outdoor recreation infrastructure scheme provides funding for the development or enhancement, or both, of outdoor recreational infrastructure such as trails, walkways, cycleways and blueways in rural areas. The 2021 CLÁR programme is providing support for schools and community safety measures, outdoor community and recreation facilities, community gardens and allotments, and mobility and cancer care transport. The €250 million LEADER programme grant aid is available to rural communities and businesses for projects focused on economic and enterprise development, job creation, social inclusion and supporting the rural environment. All schemes are open to applications from eligible groups during the application timeframes set for each scheme or programme.

**Deputy Neale Richmond:** I am very grateful for the thorough overview of the many supports available from the Minister of State. In asking this question, Deputy Stanton has asked me to convey the very clear point that over the past year we have all spent a lot more time close to home in our local communities which has allowed us to take full advantage of the amenities available to us, including community facilities and groups, as the Minister of State outlined. While many of us have relied on these groups over the past year, it has been very difficult for many groups and clubs to adapt to social distancing requirements and an increase in funding is required.

In my constituency, this includes groups such as men's sheds, youth clubs, parish halls and community groups or, in Deputy Stanton's area, Muintir na Tíre. The crux of my supplementary question is to ask what efforts can be made to make this funding accessible for these groups to ensure they can get the most out of this funding and continue to provide these vital services.

**Deputy Joe O'Brien:** The Department makes quite an effort in terms of getting the information out. Pobal will be of assistance in making applications. I also direct people to local development companies and local authorities. Some of the funding schemes have different ways of applying. The rural regeneration and development fund, RRDF, will generally need to go through the local authority, so engagement with the local authority would be important. Some applications for the outdoor recreation scheme can come through the local development companies. Large projects can also come through State agencies.

The local improvement scheme, LIS, is open since 14 May. Local authorities generally approve that and the Department of Rural and Community Development funds it. In terms of other programmes, such as the Covid-19 stability scheme, community groups can apply directly to those. The local community development committee, LCDC, is the key player in the community enhancement programme.

As a general answer, my advice would be to talk to the local development companies.

**Deputy Neale Richmond:** I thank the Minister of State for that thorough answer. I agree with the closing line, which is so important, but there is a job of work to do to ensure groups know who their local community development committees, LCDCs, are. We take it for granted because we work in this are everyday, be it as county councillors, Senators, Deputies or Minis-

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ters of State such as the Minister of State, Deputy O'Brien. However, given how stressed and up against it these groups have been for the past year, and Deputy Stanton agrees, there is a huge amount of work still to be done to make this as user-friendly as possible. It may be working well at the moment, but can always work better. However, I am grateful to the Minister of State for such thorough responses.

**Deputy Joe O'Brien:** Deputy Richmond touched on a fair point. We use many acronyms such as LCDCs, local development companies and PPNs. It is important for local communities to recognise them. I draw attention to a piece of work we are doing at the moment, with the public participation networks. There are 15,000 community group members of public participation networks, PPNs, throughout the country. We are doing a review of PPNs at present, in terms of how they operate, but also how the public is aware of them. We will be doing an awareness-raising exercise after that to ensure the community at large is aware of their PPNs, because PPNs are very often the road into the knowledge of what is available in terms of funding supports. The PPNs will play a crucial role in that regard.

### **Digital Hubs**

10. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the status of the roll-out of an integrated national network of 400 remote working hubs; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [27969/21]

41. **Deputy Alan Dillon** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the role of her Department in the formulation and implementation of the remote working strategy and national hub network. [27878/21]

**Deputy Claire Kerrane:** I ask the Minister of State about the 400 remote working hubs to be rolled out.

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** I propose to take Questions Nos. 10 and 41 together.

I thank the Deputies for raising this issue. Remote working has the potential to transform rural Ireland, allowing people to build careers in good-quality jobs while continuing to live closer to home and to generate increased economic activity in our rural towns. The commitment to establish a comprehensive and integrated network of 400 remote working hubs is a key plank in the Government's new rural development policy, Our Rural Future.

An interdepartmental working group, chaired by the Secretary General of my Department, was established last October to oversee the development of a national hub network. After undertaking an extensive discovery process, the working group provisionally identified more than 400 hubs across the country. As the lead agency building the network, the Western Development Commission, funded by my Department, the Department of Rural and Community Development, has now engaged with, surveyed and mapped more than 300 of these hubs.

My Department and the other members of the interdepartmental group are engaged in the establishment of an integrated network of these remote working facilities with shared back-office services and a common booking platform for hub users. I look forward to launching the national network, which will operate under the connected hubs brand, later this month. Our ambition is for the national network to have at least 40 hubs using the shared platform at launch

and more than 100 on board by year end.

In addition to the supports and tools being developed under the national hub network programme, I have allocated €5 million to fund a connected hubs call under the town and village renewal scheme this year. This initiative will provide funding to support small-scale capital works in existing hubs and broadband connection points.

The type of things we want to support with that €5 million call are the insulation of pods; access control and security systems in existing hubs; the conversion of existing open-plan space to pods; perhaps the upgrade of meeting rooms; upgrading disability access; external signage; in particular, IT network upgrades in terms of wiring and access points and to make sure we have a secure control system; innovative measures to assist existing hubs to deal with Covid-19 challenges; and promotion and marketing campaigns to raise awareness of improvements made to drive increased hub usage.

We have mapped out 326 hubs and another 43 are in progress, so we will soon have close to 400 hubs mapped out. That is a mixture of private sector hubs and local authority and public sector hubs. We have been working with local authorities and communities throughout the country in developing these facilities. We want to improve the facilities which are there and encourage more people to take up the option of working in a co-working space.

We all know Covid-19 has taught us one thing, that we can change and have a better quality of life and we do not need sit for hours in traffic when we can work from home. A co-working space is a better place to go, so we have identified this network of hubs and we want to facilitate people. They can go online and book their hub and there are advantages to the hub operators engaging with us in this process.

**Deputy Claire Kerrane:** The 326 hubs which have been mapped out are welcome. Obviously, things are progressing quickly, which is welcome. Is the detail on the locations mapped out published, or when will it be published? If 100 hubs are expected by year end, when will the detail of the locations of those hubs be known, so local communities and workers can plan? It is hoped workers will be going back to the office this year or be making a decision on how they will work, in terms of doing it remotely two or three times per week, or whatever way they want to do it.

Are any of the hubs which have been mapped out on our islands? Can the Minister provide an update on the use of rural pubs or other buildings? Has there been continued engagement on the use of pubs, in particular?

**Deputy Alan Dillon:** I thank the Minister for her tremendous work in the rollout of the remote working strategy. We need to maximise the opportunity and momentum which presents itself to rural Ireland in making our remote working network a reality. I thank the Minister and welcome her allocation of €5 million last month for the development of Ireland's national hub network. This funding will go a long way to putting in place the infrastructure to build on the planned rollout of the national broadband.

Remote workers require much more than greater infrastructure, alongside the high-speed broadband. Some people are happy with the options of hot desks shared between multiple users, but others require a more dedicated private setting and office space. I am talking about those who want to remain as long-term remote workers. I welcome the Minister's initiative in this space.

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**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** In answer to the question raised, we have mapped out these hubs and will have 100 by the end of the year and possibly more. I will be announcing them next week.

I look forward to visiting County Mayo next Monday to launch the national hub network in Swinford, when I will also be officially opening the new Swinford digital west hub. I am delighted my Department has been able to support the development of that hub under our rural regeneration fund. An 18th century courthouse has been refurbished into a hub, so not alone is the fund supporting remote working and enabling people to work locally in the west, it is giving an old building a new, 21st century use.

As regards Deputy Kerrane's point, only a few weeks ago I was delighted to attend virtually and officially launch the Roscommon broadband connection points, BCP, network, and as part of that I also officially launched the new digital hub in Tulsk.

**Deputy Claire Kerrane:** Regarding the hubs that have been mapped out, I ask the Minister to come back to me on whether remote working hubs have been identified on the islands off the coast. The use of pubs was also a big part of the rural action plan. Has there been continued engagement on that?

**Deputy Alan Dillon:** I am delighted to hear that the Minister will visit Mayo next Monday. The digital hub being established in Swinford is evidence that the Government is delivering for rural Ireland. It is a fantastic project and will be of major benefit to the town and the community. The Western Development Commission has done amazing work throughout the Atlantic economic corridor in mapping the remote working hubs available.

To answer Deputy Kerrane's question, Clare Island has a broadband connection point. I had the pleasure of visiting the island, where there are a number of remote workers who can work in a professional manner within the community centre and do not have to travel long distances or commute to the mainland. That is fantastic news for the islanders, as well as for rural Ireland and west Mayo. I look forward to the Minister's visit to Swinford next Monday for the roll-out.

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** As the Deputy said, there are remote working hubs on the islands. When I launch the network on Monday I will outline all the details of the hubs that have joined it. We wanted to do a full and detailed mapping exercise and we funded the Western Development Commission to identify where all the hubs are. We will then be able to see any gaps and work on them. Some 100 hubs have signed up to the network, which means that if people need a space in a particular part of the country they can log onto a website and book a desk there for half a day, a full day or even a week. When travelling the Wild Atlantic Way, they could spend half the day working, if it suits, and the other half on leisure activities. It is about getting that balance so people can work remotely in a place that is safe. This is the game changer we all need for rural Ireland.

## Departmental Policies

11. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the status of her work towards remote working as per the Our Rural Future - Rural Development Policy 2021-2025 document; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [27844/21]

**Deputy Neale Richmond:** My question follows on from those of Deputies Kerrane and Dillon. What is the status of the Minister's work on remote working, as per the Our Rural Future rural development policy? I refer in particular to the commitment to have 20% of the public sector workforce working remotely or from home by the end of this year.

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. Our Rural Future, the new national rural development policy, is an ambitious blueprint for rural development in Ireland over the next five years that has the potential to have a transformative effect on rural communities. Through the policy, the Government has a vision to breathe new life into rural areas, with a focus on improved connectivity facilitated by the roll-out of high-speed broadband and the opportunities that presents for remote working. This will enable a more connected, cohesive society with more people living and working in our rural towns and villages.

While Our Rural Future complements the ambitions set out in the Government's national remote working strategy, for which the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment has lead responsibility, it also contains a number of measures specifically for delivery by my Department. A number of these will be referenced in the Our Rural Future 2021 work programme that will be published shortly, including the €5 million connected hubs call, which was launched on 29 April. This initiative will support and complement the development of the national hub network, which is another key action in Our Rural Future and the national remote working strategy. My Department is also investing heavily in remote working infrastructure through the €1 billion rural regeneration and development fund and the 2021 town and village renewal scheme. My Department will continue to work with colleagues across government to ensure that the potential of remote working is realised in line with Our Rural Future and the national remote working strategy. The Deputy represents a Dublin constituency but I know he is very familiar with rural areas in County Cavan and can appreciate the difference this will make to rural areas across the country.

**Deputy Neale Richmond:** I assure the Minister that my cousins in Cootehill, Ashfield, Newbliss and many other places will understand the importance of this proposal. While I represent a Dublin constituency, it is one that includes a large swathe of a rural area throughout the Dublin Mountains. The programme the Minister is championing is important to the revitalisation of every aspect of rural Ireland, be that in Dublin, Monaghan, Cavan or any of the townlands previously mentioned. The crux of the matter for those of us representing Dublin constituencies is that there are reasons, both selfless and selfish, that we might want to see this developed in all rural areas. The possible transformative revitalisation to which the Minister referred may succeed where aspects of the decentralisation policy failed. What sort of efforts are happening on a cross-departmental level to ensure this change is led by the public sector?

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** As part of the programme for Government we have committed that 20% of public servants will be allowed to work remotely. However, we can be much more ambitious than that because if Covid has taught us one thing, it is that remote working works. It reduces people's commute, improves their quality of life and is good for the environment. Sometimes working at home all the time can be quite lonely and that is why the Government has invested heavily in co-working spaces. Those spaces have two roles. We have identified a considerable number of derelict buildings across the country. County Donegal recently benefited from an €18 million allocation of funding to develop an old cinema that was going to ruin, as well as a department store. There are many opportunities in that regard.

**Deputy Neale Richmond:** I reassure the Minister that there is much excitement in New-

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bliss regarding the renovation of the building mentioned. As someone who represents a suburban constituency, it struck me that since the outbreak of the pandemic I am the only person on my suburban street of 40 homes who has been regularly travelling into the city centre to work. The vast majority have been working from home in a blended manner and many look forward to the opening of a remote working centre in Stepside in the coming months. While we are only 11 or 12 km from the city centre as the crow flies, at the height of rush hour traffic people might lose 45 or 60 minutes of their working day in the car, on the Luas or on the bus. I ask the Minister to provide a little more detail on how we are going to ensure that all of Ireland, whether suburban or rural, has its infrastructure and broadband needs met.

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** The Deputy will appreciate that, as Minister for Rural and Community Development, my priority is how we can enhance our rural towns and villages, which he will acknowledge have faced many difficulties. There has been significant investment in this area and remote working will be a game changer for them. However, there has also been major investment in urban areas and in libraries. Many libraries also have co-working spaces in them. This plan is about using all our public buildings to maximise the benefits for the community, whether that be co-working spaces or the other facilities libraries provide. The library in Stillorgan has had funding approved and there are opportunities to include a co-working space in that development. It is about working with local authorities and communities and coming up with the right solutions to suit those areas.

### Departmental Policies

12. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the degree to which her Department has continued to monitor and identify areas throughout the country deficient in adequate modernisation and development to meet modern-day challenges; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [27944/21]

**Deputy Bernard J. Durkan:** This question relates to the tremendous work already undertaken by the Minister and to extending that further. In that regard, I am enquiring to what extent it is to be expected that areas will look well and be well in respect of having the ability to attract investment. In that context, to what degree will not only working from home be a desirable target but also the possibility of working from near home?

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. My Department provides a range of supports and programmes to address economic and social imbalances and bring positive impacts to people's lives in urban and rural areas. Our Rural Future, the Government's rural development policy for the period from 2021 to 2025, articulates an ambitious vision for rural areas, recognising their integral role in a thriving, modern Ireland. The policy outlines more than 150 commitments across Government aimed at strengthening the resilience of rural communities. The Government has committed to providing €1 billion for a rural regeneration and development fund from 2019 to 2027. Initial funding of €320 million for 2019 to 2022 has been allocated, and this represents an unprecedented commitment by the Government to strengthen our rural economies and communities. In addition to the rural regeneration and development fund, my Department also provides a variety of supports to communities across the country through programmes such as LEADER, the town and village renewal scheme and CLÁR funding.

The sustainable, inclusive and empowered communities strategy sets out Government poli-

cy for the community and local development and the community and voluntary sectors. Funding to communities provided by my Department, and local support structures which drive local engagement and decision-making, assist communities in identifying needs in their areas. My Department will continue to provide supports to communities throughout the country to meet existing and emerging challenges, enable economic development and support resilient communities. Indeed, there have been several investments in the Deputy's area already. The Royal Canal greenway was opened recently, and that passes through the Deputy's constituency. It is to be welcomed because all these investments add to the vibrancy and attractiveness of areas.

**Deputy Bernard J. Durkan:** I thank the Minister for her comprehensive reply. Furthermore, to what extent can modern facilities be made available in urban and rural areas throughout the country to reduce commuting times for many of the people working in bigger corporations who may sometimes be travelling as much as 100 miles or 150 miles each day to get to work? Is it also possible to relocate sufficient resources to communal facilities in towns and villages to enable people to go to an area near their homes and still be able to work from an official working environment? In a sense, those people could be at home and at work at the same time, and I ask about this point because of the necessity of encouraging the collegiality which goes with working in a workplace.

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** The Deputy's point is absolutely right. We are all social animals and we need to meet people. That is why investing in co-working spaces and remote working hubs is the way forward. There has been huge investment in towns and villages throughout the country to create these facilities. However, we have also managed to incorporate the revitalisation and regeneration of old and run-down buildings which have been out of use for many years. I cite the example, again, of Donegal, where the old cinema has now been converted, as has an old department store. Regarding the Deputy's own area, it is not that long ago that I was down in Naas, under the auspices of the rural enterprise development fund, to turn the sod with the Deputy in respect of the building of a new remote working space. Many people were then travelling to work in Dublin from Naas, and they do not have to do that anymore because of the changes I have detailed.

**Deputy Bernard J. Durkan:** I thank the Minister again. We will welcome her whenever she wishes to return to my constituency. In a further enquiry on this issue, to what extent does the Minister and her Department liaise with the major corporations with many employees to seek the possible relocation of a portion of their staff to an area which may alleviate the need for long daily commutes?

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** As the Deputy is aware, the agency with responsibility for many of these companies is either IDA Ireland or Enterprise Ireland. IDA Ireland is engaging with companies that have already invested here, as well as with companies thinking of coming here, and it has certainly highlighted benefits of investing in the regions. In addition, we have always heard there is a need for a well-trained and highly skilled workforce, and we have such a workforce available. We can now allow people to work remotely in safe environments in the co-working spaces and remote working hubs. We have been investing in those endeavours over the years and we have identified almost 400 hub locations. We will be able to sell this development as a benefit to those companies coming to this country. We will be able to tell them this is the place where it is possible to locate and find a workforce with the requisite skill sets, and we will develop this aspect further with IDA Ireland.

**Deputy Bernard J. Durkan:** I thank the Minister.

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## Island Communities

13. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development when her Department will publish its islands policy and strategy to support island and coastal communities; the areas of focus that are being prioritised within the strategy; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [27972/21]

43. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the status of the new policy for the islands; when she expects it to be finalised; the number of occasions the interdepartmental committee for the development of the islands has met to date in 2021; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [27957/21]

**Deputy Claire Kerrane:** This question is to ask the Minister when she will publish the new islands policy, which will be the future strategy for our islands. I also ask her to give some detail on the consultation process and the areas on which this forthcoming policy will focus.

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** I propose to take Questions Nos. 13 and 43 together.

Question No. 43 is from the Leas-Cheann Comhairle herself, and I am taking it along with this question from Deputy Kerrane because I know she has a particular interest in the islands as well. The development of a new islands policy is one of the key elements of Our Rural Future, the Government's new rural development policy. The central objective of the islands policy will be to ensure sustainable, vibrant communities continue to live on the offshore islands. A consultation process was undertaken by my Department last year to inform this process and ensure the island communities were and are central to this process.

The consultation process assisted in identifying the main challenges faced by communities on the offshore islands. Issues which were highlighted by the island communities included education, health, housing, energy, employment, broadband and access to services. My officials are now engaging bilaterally with relevant Departments and agencies to discuss the outcome of the consultation, and I expect those Departments and agencies will be providing input regarding and expertise on elements of the policy as it is developed. The interdepartmental committee convened in January this year and it will meet again in June to review progress. I hope to have a draft policy document by the end of this year. Once agreed, the policy will be supported by a series of action plans across the Government to support, promote and empower our island communities.

**Deputy Claire Kerrane:** Regarding the policy document itself, will the Minister be seeking to include timeframes and specific costs for the commitments in it? In addition, was the policy on the islands due sooner than the end of this year? I appreciate it may have been delayed with the consultation, but I thought it was closer to being completed than perhaps it is. Turning to the consultation process itself, I take it from the Minister's response that it is now fully complete. Equally, regarding engagement with other Ministers and Departments, I take it the policy will go through proposals and commitments in a wide range of areas, from housing to health.

*9 o'clock*

Perhaps the Minister could provide more detail on that.

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** The process was delayed by the Covid-19 pandemic and the related restrictions. Topics proper to a wide range of Departments have been raised. Officials

are now discussing these with the relevant parties. This will inform the policy and the action plans.

As the Deputy is aware, an extensive consultation process was undertaken and there was a high level of engagement by the communities. When completed, the plan will set out the high-level strategic ambition for the islands. It will be supported by dynamic action plans delivering both short- and long-term actions to support island communities. It is important that we support our communities. Indeed, I must say that when I became Minister for Social Protection, one of the first things I did was to increase the island allowance. I was the first Minister in 20 years to do so. That is an indication of my personal commitment to supporting the islands.

**Deputy Claire Kerrane:** I ask the Minister to provide some detail on the implementation of the plan and how she plans to implement the policy in the years ahead, following its publication. Is it a five-year strategy, for example?

I welcome the Minister's engagement and the extensive consultation with people who live on the islands. Of course, they are best placed to tell the Minister how their islands need to be developed and what supports they need. That is most important.

I ask the Minister to provide further detail on the implementation of the plan, following its publication. I also ask the Minister to provide further information in relation to the costings in the budgetary implications. I assume, from the Minister's response, that the policy paper will not be published ahead of the budget this year.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I believe Deputy McHugh also wanted to speak on this issue.

**Deputy Joe McHugh:** I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. I acknowledge that the Minister did visit Arranmore Island. There is no better consultation than coming onto the island. The community are very grateful for that.

I would like to raise two points. The Minister stated that cross-departmental communication is happening currently. On the issue of planning for island communities, it is most important to emphasise that there are difficulties around planning for those seeking to return to the islands. I know the Minister is aware of that. I ask the Minister to look into it.

There was a recent announcement of funding for the Islands. On the chance that there is extra money or room in the budget towards the back end of the year, it would be imperative that the budget for island roads is looked at again for Donegal. I know that the Minister is aware of the situation with the Lighthouse Road on Arranmore Island.

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** The draft plan will be drawn up. We have done extensive consultation as part of the work. I have not seen the findings yet. A lot of work has been put into it. We have consulted with many Departments. I look forward to seeing the policy document as soon as possible.

On the issues raised by Deputy McHugh, I take on board his point. I have been to two islands. I have visited Clare Island and Arranmore. It was a real pleasure to visit them. I am hoping to visit Inis Oirr. The Leas-Cheann Comhairle will understand because she has spoken to me about the island. We are working on that.

In terms of the planning and getting planning permission, the issue has been raised with me.

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Deputy McHugh has also raised it with me. If people are willing to move back to the island that they were originally from, we should be looking at it. I have raised the issue with the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Deputy Darragh O'Brien.

If the Leas-Cheann Comhairle would indulge me, she met with me to discuss the issue of the Inis Oírr pier. I wish to state that the business case has been approved and Galway County Council has permission to put the project out for tender.

*Question No. 14 replied to with Written Answers.*

### **Rural Schemes**

15. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development if consideration will be given to extending the local improvement scheme to areas of Cork city which were formally Cork county and should not be disadvantaged as a result of the boundary change; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [27833/21]

**Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan:** I will be brief because I know that we are under time constraints.

I would like to ask the Minister about the local improvement schemes and the community involvement schemes, in particular, in areas that were formerly within the boundary limits of Cork County Council, and which now, on account of the boundary change, find themselves within the boundary limits of Cork City Council. As a result of the change, they are no longer eligible for funding. I ask the Minister to comment on the matter.

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. The local improvement scheme, LIS, is a programme for improvement works on small private or non-public roads in rural areas which are not under the normal maintenance of the local authorities. The scheme is funded by my Department and is administered through the local authorities. I launched the 2021 LIS on Friday, 14 May. I was also pleased to secure a 5% increase in funding for the scheme, bringing the funding available for this year to €10.5 million.

Local authorities in Dublin and the city councils in Cork and Galway have not been eligible for funding under the LIS. This is due to the nature of the scheme, which provides funding for improvement works on small private or non-public roads in rural areas and is typically linked to access to agricultural land. I have no plans at present to broaden access to the scheme to the city councils.

However, I do acknowledge that there were areas of Cork that were previously eligible under the scheme but are now not eligible as a result of the recent boundary change. If both local authorities in the county were agreeable to including these areas affected by the boundary change as part of the scheme for County Cork, it is open to them to submit a joint proposal to my Department for consideration. I have indicated this previously. Any such proposal would need to be made in the context of the existing allocation provided to the county, and without any additional funding requirement from my Department. Roads selected for inclusion in the scheme would, of course, have to meet the criteria of the scheme.

I hope that brings some clarity to the Deputy.

**Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan:** I received the same response to parliamentary questions that I submitted previously on the issue. The difficulty is that it is very unlikely that Cork County Council will share its own limited budget with Cork City Council. That is the realpolitik of local authorities.

To make the case again, these communities were located within the county council boundary and now find themselves within the boundary of the city council, despite the boundary extending in nonsensical ways, for example, 20 km into rural hinterland. They are communities that were lined up to deliver on the scheme proposals. They had dealt with local engineers, had money in the bank and had collected their own percentage in preparation. Unfortunately, now they find themselves on the wrong side of an arbitrary boundary after doing all of that hard work. They have been left in no man's land. That is the reason for the appeal.

It comes against the backdrop of the publication today of a report by the All-Island Research Observatory of Maynooth university. I do not know if the Minister has had a chance to look at it yet. The report found that roads in County Cork, in particular, are massively underfunded in comparison with the national level. It is in that context that I make the appeal to the Minister on the issue.

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** I must say, the Department is willing to be flexible in this situation. If both councils come together and come to an agreement on how the areas impacted by the boundary change can be covered, we are happy to work with them. I recommend that they take that course of action. There will be no net increase in the funding allocation to Cork, but the Department is happy to accommodate a proposal whereby areas affected by the boundary change are included. They have the choice to do that. Some €10.5 million in funding was announced this month for repairs and improvement works. Cork will receive an increase this year in its budget. Cork actually has the highest allocation in the country and of course is the biggest county. By the end of the year, Cork will have seen investment of some €5.3 million in rural laneways under the LIS since 2017.

**Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan:** I am not going to dispute that the allocation has been increased this year for Cork. The Minister is right to state that Cork has the longest road network in the country. Indeed, the northern division of Cork has a population equivalent to places like County Kilkenny. West Cork, for example, has the largest road infrastructure network in the country. It is for that very reason that per head of population, Cork does receive less funding from any of these projects, whether it is in terms of roads, as I am speaking about now, or CLÁR programme funding. County Cork was massively underfunded in terms of that programme. That is the case with roads, which I am speaking about now, while County Cork's share of CLÁR programme funding is massively underfunded. As regards LEADER funding, Cork is among the lowest in the country in terms of what it receives. In the case of the town and village renewal scheme, Cork has more settlements than any other county in the country, and it is estimated in the report issued today that it is likely to be 11 years before certain settlements in Cork receive their fair share. Cork is a massive county and I believe it deserves special consideration. I am not just saying that from a parish pump point of view. It is the reality on the ground that, *per capita*, it does not get its fair share.

**Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh:** I thank the Minister for answering the questions about the LIS. Mayo is one of the largest counties and has the greatest number of LIS roads as well. In addition to the severe underfunding and the impact it has, the fact that people are now paying property tax but do not have access to their homes is a major problem. Will the Minister along

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with the Department look at the number of LIS roads that have been taken over by local authorities? One of the main problems is that once the LIS roads are done they are not being taken in hand by the local authorities. That means the number is not reducing all the time, so there are more roads taking out of the same pot. An instruction and resources must be given to the local authorities to enable them to take over the LIS roads and bring them under the councils.

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** I thank both Deputies for raising this. I am very familiar with local improvement schemes and I understand the issues the Deputies have raised regarding funding. I will outline a little of the history of the LIS. It was originally a Department of Transport scheme. In fairness to my predecessor, Deputy Ring, he recognised there was a clear need for the scheme and he reintroduced it under the Department of Rural and Community Development. However, the scale of the backlogs in local authorities is far beyond the resources of my Department alone. I have raised the issue of co-funding with the Minister for Transport, Deputy Eamon Ryan. He did not rule it out, but his budgets for this year are committed. I will continue to raise it with the Minister and, perhaps, he might have some unspent moneys in other areas that we could divert into the LIS. I urge local authorities to spend what they have this year. If there is any spare money at the end of the year, I will certainly do what I can or examine the situation at that stage.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** We are running out of time. There is only time for one more question.

*Questions Nos. 16 to 18, inclusive, replied to with Written Answers.*

### **Departmental Policies**

19. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development when her Department will publish the rural proofing model which underpins the Our Rural Future - Rural Development Policy 2021-2025 strategy; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [27968/21]

**Deputy Claire Kerrane:** This question is about the rural proofing model referred to in Our Rural Future.

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** Our Rural Future is the new rural development policy covering the period 2021 to 2025 and, as I said earlier, is the most ambitious and transformational policy for rural development in Ireland for decades. It recognises that rural areas play an integral role in the economic, social and cultural well-being of the country and sets out a vision for vibrant and thriving rural towns, villages and communities. The policy contains more than 150 commitments, focusing on long-term sustainability and optimising services and opportunities for individuals, communities and businesses in rural areas.

Urban and rural areas are interdependent, and we must avoid an asymmetrical recovery which risks leaving people behind. This requires not only fulfilling the letter of Our Rural Future, but also the spirit of it on a cross-government basis. The policy commits to developing an effective rural proofing model that will ensure that all Departments fully consider the effects of new proposals on rural communities, the need for possible adjustments to better target the challenges and opportunities facing rural areas and to highlight any unintended impacts that may arise. Any rural proofing process adopted by the Government must be effective, efficient

and implementable. The development of a rural proofing model will begin later this year with a scoping exercise that will include assessment of international best practice in this area. Finally, it is of note that in addition to the development of the rural proofing model, formal structures for the monitoring of policy implementation are in place and are overseen by the Cabinet committee on economic recovery and investment, chaired by An Taoiseach.

**Deputy Claire Kerrane:** It is disappointing that work will not begin on this rural proofing model until later this year. I assume that will be after the Minister makes her initial plan for what will be carried out and what her list of actions will be for this year. Obviously, a rural proofing model is long overdue in respect of the impact of certain Government policies. In many cases it will be too late. However, it is very important. The Minister mentioned the need for the recovery to be balanced. After the last recession the recovery was not balanced, and many rural towns and villages never recovered from that recession. In some cases, that was due to decisions made by the Government and Government policies because there was no rural proofing and no consideration of the impact of certain measures on rural towns and villages. We see the result of that. I ask the Minister to look at developing the rural proofing model. Who will be involved in that regard? Can she give any more details? Will she be engaging with stakeholders on what it needs to be?

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** My Department will begin the process of developing a rural proofing model this year. It will also engage with colleagues across the Government, with the higher education network that is being established this year under another commitment in Our Rural Future and with other rural development experts as part of the scoping process. This process will also involve engagement internationally, for example, with the OECD, to assess and learn from other countries' experiences of rural proofing models. To be clear, when policy documents and changes come to the Cabinet, I am there, I check them and I raise any concerns that rural Ireland may have. I am the voice of rural communities at the Cabinet, and I have many other colleagues who are also committed to rural Ireland. The point is that we are continually looking at all policy documents through the lens of rural Ireland.

**Deputy Claire Kerrane:** In regard to the engagements the Minister will have in respect of this new rural proofing model, I suggest that she engage not just internationally but also with the Northern and Western Regional Assembly which has done very good work relating to balanced regional development and the inadequacies that already exist. Unfortunately, while it is welcome to have that voice at the Cabinet, in many respects it is too late for many villages and towns. That is why we must ensure that any further Government policy decisions are considered as they relate to rural Ireland. While we all try to work together and have the schemes that are necessary to ensure all rural towns and villages have every opportunity to bounce back, we must also acknowledge the consequences of Covid-19 on top of that and the need to have protection for rural communities when it comes to Government decisions and policies.

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** To be fair, there has been unprecedented investment in rural Ireland. One need only look at the rural regional development fund, category 1 call, and the successful candidates. That amounted to €81 million. This is since the rural development policy was launched. There was €81 million for that, €15 million for outdoor recreation to support 126 new projects and €15.4 million for the town and village renewal scheme for 147 successful 2020 projects. For 2020-2021, there are calls for proposals, with €5.5 million for CLÁR, €14 million for outdoor recreation, €15 million for town and village renewal, €10.5 million for local improvement schemes as well as the €70 million LEADER transitional programme.

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The Deputy referred to the Northern and Western Regional Assembly. I work very closely with the assembly. It is doing wonderful work and I want to continue to work with it and support it in what it is doing for the region and on how we can improve on it. I know it has some exciting plans and I am happy to collaborate with it in any way I can because I believe it is doing very good work there.

*Written Answers are published on the Oireachtas website.*

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

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I wish to advise the House of the following in respect of which notice has been given under Standing Order 37 and the name of the Member in each case: (1) Deputy Alan Farrell - to discuss the quicker than expected growth in the renewable electricity sector within Europe; (2) Deputy Duncan Smith - to discuss the urgent need for a dedicated Garda unit for suburban rail lines; (3) Deputy Ciarán Cannon - to discuss the establishment of a portal for submission of video evidence to Garda authorities of close passing of cyclists by motorists; (4) Deputy Marc MacSharry - to discuss transitional arrangements for weighing of fish in factories; (5) Deputy Kathleen Funchion - to discuss the need to secure stable and adequate broadband for rural businesses in Carlow and Kilkenny through National Broadband Ireland; (6) Deputy Neale Richmond - to discuss the forced landing of a Ryanair plane in Belarus with the Minister for Foreign Affairs; (7) Deputy Réada Cronin - to discuss the granting of planning for houses where childcare facilities are included, but never built, leaving young parents in crisis; (8) Deputy Dessie Ellis - to discuss the impact of strategic housing developments in local planning in areas such as Ballymun, Finglas and Santry; (9) Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire - to discuss the delays in processing primary medical certificate applications; (10) Deputies Chris Andrews and Aengus Ó Snodaigh - to discuss a European Committee of Social Rights report, and the refurbishment of social housing and flat complexes in inner-city Dublin; (11) Deputies Dara Calleary and Bríd Smith - to discuss the design, funding and operation of the defective concrete blocks scheme to address pyrite and mica; (12) Deputy Michael McNamara - to discuss the exclusion of early monastic sites from Ireland's tentative list for classification as UNESCO world heritage sites; (13) Deputy Catherine Connolly - to discuss problems for the local community in Galway city as a result of the uncontrolled weekly event, Salthill Sundays; (14) Deputies Rose Conway-Walsh, Pádraig Mac Lochlainn and Joe McHugh - to discuss amending the defective concrete blocks grant scheme in Mayo and Donegal from 90% funded to a fully funded scheme; (15) Deputy Mick Barry - to discuss the closure of Cork Airport and the impact on jobs; (16) Deputy Holly Cairns - to discuss the review of the Health (Regulation of Termination of Pregnancy) Act 2018; (17) Deputy Maurice Quinlivan - to discuss the review of the *ex gratia* scheme for survivors of sexual abuse in day schools with reference to survivors at Creagh Lane National School in Limerick City; (18) Deputy Thomas Gould - to discuss the need for the voids scheme to be open year round; (19) Deputies Matt Carthy, Mairéad Farrell and Patrick Costello - to discuss support the Government can provide to family of Gavin McShane in their campaign for justice; (20) Deputy Bernard Durkan - to discuss the serious breach of international law involving the hijacking of a Ryanair plane travelling between two EU cities; (21) Deputy Verona Murphy - to discuss actions to address the urgent problem of the discovery of black grass in wildflower seeds; and (22) Deputy Pat Buckley - to discuss the reopening of pubs and the hospitality sector.

The matters raised by Deputies Farrell; Funchion; MacSharry; and Calleary, Bríd Smith,

Conway-Walsh, Mac Lochlainn and McHugh have been selected for discussion.

I wish to further advise the House of the following in respect of which notice has been given under Standing Order 37 and the name of the Member in each case, to be discussed tomorrow: (1) Deputy Michael McNamara - to discuss the exclusion of early monastic sites from Ireland's tentative list for UNESCO world heritage sites; (2) Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire - to discuss the delays in processing primary medical certificate applications; (3) Deputy Mick Barry - to discuss jobs in aviation including the closure of Cork Airport and its impact on jobs; (4) Deputies Jennifer Carroll MacNeill and Emer Higgins - to discuss the introduction of paid miscarriage leave for women who suffer miscarriage in early pregnancy; (5) Deputy Verona Murphy - to discuss actions to address the urgent problem of the discovery of black grass in wildflower seeds; (6) Deputy Sean Sherlock - to discuss the urgent need to ensure that inspections of rented accommodation takes place to ensure compliance with the law; (7) Deputies Pádraig Mac Lochlainn, Joe McHugh and Rose Conway-Walsh - to discuss amending the defective concrete blocks grant scheme in Mayo and Donegal from a 90% funded scheme to a fully funded, 100% scheme; (8) Deputy Ciarán Cannon - to discuss the establishment of a dedicated portal for submission of video evidence of close passing of cyclists by motorists; (9) Deputy Holly Cairns - to discuss the review of the Health (Regulation of Termination of Pregnancy) Act 2018; (10) Deputy Louise O'Reilly - to discuss the need to provide a statutory entitlement to domestic violence paid leave; (11) Deputy Paul Murphy - to discuss the lack of appropriate accommodation for Firhouse Educate Together secondary school; (12) Deputy Thomas Gould - to discuss the need for the voids scheme to be open year round; and (13) Deputy Ged Nash - to discuss the reasons for the delay in the roll-out of the Covid-19 vaccination programme to the 50-59 age cohort in Louth.

The matters raised by Deputies McNamara, Sherlock, Carroll MacNeill and Higgins, and Verona Murphy have been selected for discussion tomorrow.

## **Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate**

### **Renewable Energy Generation**

**Deputy Alan Farrell:** I cannot see the Minister of State but I know he is there. I will start by mentioning a development that occurred this evening. I am pleased to report that Fingal County Council, my local authority, voted for 1,200 houses in Donabate. Rather shockingly, although unsurprisingly, Sinn Féin opposed it. The development will provide for more than 500 social and affordable homes and 700 private homes. They will be available soon at a price of €270,000, far under the cap that will be placed on it by the Government.

I raise the important issue of the quicker than expected growth in renewable energy across Europe. Information released recently by the International Energy Agency, IEA, has shown a significant uptake in renewable energy production. This includes, of course, solar, wind and other renewables, which are growing at the fastest rate in more than 20 years. Much of that change is being driven in Europe and the US. However, China, while being a strong performer in this field several years ago, is beginning to drop off. That is slightly worrying. It underscores the importance of creating balanced progress across the globe and not just in industrialised and wealthy nations such as our own.

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Renewable energy grew by 45% in 2020, reaching 280 GW, which I understand is in excess of half of our national requirement in any given year. It is the largest yearly increase since before the turn of the millennium. The IEA earlier forecast the number to be approximately 200 GW. It is anticipated that 270 GW will be added in 2021 and 280 GW will be added in 2022. This marks the emergence of an important trend in sustained growth. The anticipated results for 2021 and 2022 represent a 25% increase on the forecast made last November by the agency.

This afternoon at a meeting of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Climate Action, we heard from the Electricity Association of Ireland. Part of our ongoing discussion was about energy security and the need for us to move away from fossil fuels, including the closure of Money-point power station in 2025, and the need for us to ensure we have the capacity in this State to deliver not only wind and solar energy, but also to deliver through interconnectors, which form a crucial part of that security of electricity supply. That applies to the North-South and east-west interconnectors, and the Celtic interconnector to France, which is slated for delivery in seven years.

These developments are a cause for optimism in our fight against climate change. Renewable electricity is a key component in helping us to hit our climate targets for 2030 and 2050. The Minister of State will welcome the announcement by the IEA in recent weeks. We have a number of targets to try to reach in the coming years in terms of policy development, incentivising the various sectors that are going to generate clean, zero emissions energy sources in the coming years to ensure that we have the necessary power. Our population is ever increasing, as is our energy demand. Our carbon footprint as a result of our energy generation must drop dramatically, as I know the Minister of State will agree. I thank him for taking this Topical Issue matter. I appreciate the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, was on his feet in the Dáil all day, so I understand his not being available. We have a huge target ahead of us. That target will only be reached if we can match it with the ambition that we, as a House, set forward. I am interested to hear the Minister of State's remarks.

**Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Malcolm Noonan):** I welcome this matter and thank the Deputy for making such a valuable contribution to it. It is important that we continue to debate this issue.

The programme for Government made recommendations for how the deployment of renewable electricity can be speeded up, for example by provision and permissioning of grid connections, such as completing the Celtic interconnector to connect Ireland's electricity grid to France. The Department's publication of the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Bill marked a milestone in Ireland's efforts to mitigate the impact of climate change. The Bill has given effect to the programme for Government commitment to achieve net zero by 2050. When enacted, the Bill will ensure a robust governance mechanism through the proposal of five-yearly economy carbon budgets by the climate change advisory committee and approval of the carbon budgets by Government. The first two carbon budgets will incorporate our programme for Government ambition by budgeting for a reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 51% over the period 2018 to 2030.

The Bill aligns with our collective ambitions as Europeans outlined in the European Green New Deal. In 2020, the Heads of Government of all member states agreed to increase the EU-wide commitment to greenhouse gas emissions from 40% by 2030 to 55% by 2030 and to set a target of net zero by 2050.

In addition to significant onshore renewable energy development, meeting the goal of 70% renewable electricity by 2030 will require development of significant offshore renewable energy generation capacity and associated grid infrastructure over the coming decade. The programme for Government commits to the achievement of 5 GW of offshore wind by 2030 and a potential of 30 GW of floating wind thereafter. Ireland has the resource potential to become a major contributor to a pan-European renewable energy generation and transmission system.

Together with the forthcoming maritime area planning Bill, the national marine planning framework will be a key enabler to achieve Ireland's climate goals and deliver a reliable supply of safe, secure and clean energy and phase out fossil fuels. Enactment of the marine planning framework Bill, led by the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, will provide the legislative underpinning and flexibility to allow Ireland to move towards a more centralised, plan-led regime. It will establish a new agency to regulate development in the maritime area. Work on the development and future operation of a new consenting regime for offshore renewable energy is under way within the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications.

When the framework is in place, the Department will launch the first offshore renewable energy support scheme, RESS, auction, known as ORESS-1. This will be the first in a series of dedicated offshore auctions designed to achieve Ireland's 2030 targets and beyond. Work is also under way within the Department to develop a new offshore renewable energy development plan.

**Deputy Alan Farrell:** I thank the Minister of State for his comprehensive response. There was a lot of information in his reply for me to consider as a member of the climate committee in the coming months. One of the issues mentioned by the Minister of State was grid improvements, and the necessity for us to invest a significant sum in upgrading our grid infrastructure to cater for demand but also for home and-or commercial generation, that is, into power stations. This is something that we encourage, of course. I know the Minister, Deputy Ryan, is working on a policy position in order that we can work on how people can not only support their local communities in terms of home energy generation but also benefit from it financially.

The Minister of State mentioned the wind energy development plan, which I am really pleased to see in the works at the moment. We have a real opportunity in Ireland, however, in terms of our offshore wind energy potential off the west coast. Deep sea turbine technology is not necessarily where it needs to be but there is an opportunity for us to develop that technology in conjunction with not only our educational institutions but also with large companies. I know, for instance, that some European companies are very interested in looking at it. There are opportunities for port developments and such, where local communities can benefit from what is a very high-skilled and no doubt very high-revenue industry, which I believe will create a significant jobs presence.

We have an opportunity. Indeed, the Dublin Climate Dialogues conference last week highlighted the importance of turning net zero commitments into viable energy policies, which, of course, will have to involve the financial sector. I am glad the Minister of State mentioned the auction.

In November of this year in Glasgow, we also have the UN Climate Change Conference of the Parties, COP26, which I believe will also be working on this. I am pleased with the Minister of State's response and thank him for coming before the House this evening.

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**Deputy Malcolm Noonan:** Again, I thank Deputy Farrell. The net zero by 2050 roadmap, produced by the IEA envisions that by 2050, global energy demand will be 8% smaller than it is today but will service an economy twice as big and a population with 2 billion more people, and that almost 90% of electricity generation will come from renewable sources.

Energy security will evolve on the path to net zero. Electricity system flexibility, cybersecurity and reliable supplies of critical minerals will all become more important. Most of the world's reductions in CO2 emissions between now and 2030 in our net zero pathway come from technologies already on the market today. In 2050, however, almost of half the reductions will come from technologies that are currently only at demonstration or prototype phase, which I believe was referenced by Deputy Farrell.

This calls for major innovation progress in this decade. Total annual energy investment is expected to surge to \$5 trillion by 2030 in an EIA pathway, creating millions of clean energy jobs and putting global GDP 4% higher in 2030 than it would reach based on current trends.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I thank the Minister of State. Members can read the rest of the reply. We will move on to the next Topical Issue matter.

### **National Broadband Plan**

**Deputy Kathleen Funchion:** I must say, I am glad to see the Minister of State, Deputy Noonan, taking this Topical Issue matter. It falls into his constituency as well so it is actually quite good. I am sure he will be aware of the situation.

In counties Carlow and Kilkenny, several businesses are having significant issues in operating online. I want to specifically discuss one business called Sunshine Juice in Tinryland in rural Carlow, which employs 50 people and has had huge issues with trying to run the business. After experiencing difficulties with Vodafone and Eir over recent years, the company was hopeful that the roll-out of high-speed broadband by NBI in the area would offer a solution. It is listed on the NBI map as being outside the intervention area as a provider, however. Vodafone has recorded it as receiving speeds of 30 Mbps.

They owners are in a situation where cables are going to be literally running past the front gate of the premises connecting homes and businesses around every side of their premises yet, unfortunately, they remain unserved. A very practical example from this company, which I believe brings this issue home, is that the owners, who are in the business of juicing, had to send an email to the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine about releasing oranges from Dublin Port. The email did not send because of the poor broadband. As a result, an employee had to drive from Carlow to Dublin. They can see that their competitors are obviously having much more success in terms of online services. It is, therefore, vital for that area.

I will take the opportunity to highlight an issue that was originally raised with me at a meeting with County Carlow Chamber of Commerce. It has also come up a lot in Kilkenny, particularly in the last number of months with many more people working from home and trying to do homeschooling.

The Minister of State may be aware of the Kilkenny LEADER Partnership proposal to allow the village of Piltown in Kilkenny to access broadband and run the service itself, which the

village would finance in conjunction with grants. The village would not only have access to the appropriate broadband but would have the benefits of running that service, almost like the old system of a co-operative. When I heard this after the Carlow Chamber meeting, I thought it was an excellent idea and not just for Carlow and Kilkenny. I am sure loads of towns and villages throughout the country would benefit from something like this. It is a really excellent idea. I hope the Minister of State will meet with the stakeholders if he is not aware of this. It could be a solution for many places.

**Deputy Malcolm Noonan:** I thank Deputy Funchion for this question. The national broadband plan contract was signed with National Broadband Ireland in November 2019 to roll out a high-speed and future-proofed broadband network within the intervention area, which covers 1.1 million people living and working in more than 544,000 premises, including almost 100,000 businesses and farms along with 695 schools.

The high-speed broadband map, which is available at [www.broadband.gov.ie](http://www.broadband.gov.ie), shows the areas that will be included in the national broadband plan State-led intervention, as well as areas targeted by commercial operators. The map is colour-coded and searchable by address and Eircode postcode.

The amber areas on the high-speed broadband map will be served by the new high-speed network being delivered by NBI. To comply with the state aid decision that enabled the contract to be awarded, NBI can only serve those premises which have been identified as amber on the high-speed broadband map.

Commercial areas defined in blue on the NBP high-speed broadband map are not included in the State-led intervention area covered by the NBP as commercial operators are already providing high-speed broadband or have indicated future plans to do so.

In line with state aid guidelines, the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications defines high-speed broadband as connection with minimum speeds of 30 Mbps download and 6 Mbps upload. The activities of commercial operators delivering high-speed broadband within blue areas are not planned or funded by the State. The Department has no statutory authority to intervene in that regard as they operate in a fully liberalised market regulated by ComReg as an independent regulator. I am taking on board the points made by Deputy Funchion, however.

Complaints about the service provision are a matter between the consumer and the service provider, in the first instance. If this avenue has been exhausted without a satisfactory resolution, the Commission for Communications Regulation may be able to assist further. ComReg is the independent body that issues licences to broadband service providers and investigates complaints to make sure that companies are delivering services in line with licence obligations.

The Department is aware of a number of blue premises that are having difficulty connecting to commercial high-speed networks and may continue to do so in the future. Officials in the Department of Environment, Climate and Communications are currently examining these premises and will ensure that access to high-speed broadband is made available either through commercial means or through the national broadband plan intervention.

Where appropriate, and if compliant with state aid rules, premises may be reclassified as amber on the high-speed map. Before reclassification of a premises can be confirmed, it must go through a formal review process. This is to ensure that the State is compliant with state

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aid rules and state aid approval, which enabled the contract to be awarded under the national broadband plan. As part of this process, when specific concerns are raised, the Department, in conjunction with the relevant network operators in the blue area, reviews the locations and ascertains definitively whether these premises will receive high-speed broadband through commercial means. If it is confirmed that a premises has no prospect of being served from a commercial operator this then enables a change to the contract with NBI to add additional premises into the intervention area.

The EU guidelines on the application of state aid rules with regard to the rapid deployment of broadband networks seek to ensure that by 2020, all Europeans have access to above 30 Mbps, in line with the digital agenda for Europe initiative. I understand the European Commission is currently reviewing the cut-off speed as part of its review of the state aid guidelines for broadband.

**Deputy Kathleen Funchion:** I thank the Minister of State. In Topical Issue debates, as with parliamentary questions for written answer, there is often a standard type of answer given. Regarding the review to which the Minister of State referred, is that a genuine process? Have there been successful outcomes to it or is it a case of saying there is a review happening in the hope it will kick the whole issue down the road? I mentioned the initiative by Kilkenny LEADER Partnership because it offers a possible solution not just in that particular situation but in many locations. We need to look at real solutions like this that can work for rural towns and villages.

The situation with the lack of broadband provision is only going to get worse because there are more people working from home. That is welcome because it can be helpful for many workers, but it is not an option for a huge number of people because they do not have proper broadband. The company I referred to, Sunshine Juice, was advised in one instance to purchase a dongle, which would not even do for standard home use. It is not an adequate solution for Vodafone, Eir or any other provider to be offering a company, particularly when we are trying to keep people and jobs in rural communities. This particular company has had to put the possibility of expansion on hold until it sees what is going to happen with broadband provision.

I would like more information from the Minister of State, not necessarily today but perhaps in writing, regarding the review process, how it is being done and whether there have been successful outcomes from it. A percentage breakdown would be useful, showing, say, that people have a 50% success rate and how the process is run. I will send the Minister of State the information, which he may already have, on the initiative by Kilkenny LEADER Partnership. That model could provide a good solution for the Department.

**Deputy Malcolm Noonan:** I am familiar with the Blue Towns community-led initiative to which the Deputy referred. I was a director of Kilkenny LEADER Partnership at the time it was being developed. It is a very viable prospect. I will have to double-check the programme for Government to see whether we secured inclusion of an objective of developing a similar initiative for areas not covered by the national broadband plan, NBP. There is real potential in that. I understand Kilkenny LEADER Partnership had piloted, or was intending to pilot, a scheme in Piltown. That would cover some of the areas not already covered either by commercial operators or under the NBP. It has a huge benefit because it is community-owned, community-led and follows a co-operative type of approach. It is something to which we should give serious consideration and I am happy to take it back to the Department.

Like Deputy Funchion, I have met with County Carlow Chamber to discuss broadband provision. There is undoubtedly a significant impact on small businesses if they are being bypassed either by commercial providers or the NBP. That is a significant challenge to the operation of a business. As we have seen, businesses are moving everything online and many retailers need to have both an online and on-street presence. It is hugely important that we try to resolve this issue. I will take the Deputy's question on the review process to the Department. I reiterate that there is an opportunity around the Blue Towns initiative and that community-owned broadband initiatives should be given real consideration.

### **Fishing Industry**

**Deputy Marc MacSharry:** With no disrespect to the Minister of State, Deputy Heydon, I regret that the Minister, Deputy McConalogue, is not here this evening to take this debate. He is very much aware of the difficulty facing our seafood producers and processors at this time. The programme for Government, on page 69, refers to "a greater focus on... stakeholder engagement... centrally co-ordinated by the Department of the Taoiseach". On page 70, there is an undertaking to implement the Sea-Fisheries Protection Authority, SFPA, capability review, which was carried out by PricewaterhouseCoopers and includes 46 recommendations, with a view to "enhancing governance" and considering "any other measures that may be necessary". There is also a specific undertaking to "work to retain factory weighing of... fish".

Why would the Government not seek to retain factory weighing of fish given that 16,500 people are employed in the sector? It is not an issue that arises only in Killybegs, Castletownbere, Kilmore Quay and Rossaveal. There are 30 processors in the east, in the Minister of State's region. There are more than 50 processors across counties Donegal, Sligo, Leitrim, Mayo, Galway and Clare, 32 in the south east and up to 160 nationally. There are approximately 5,000 people working in those plants. In Gurteen, in my constituency, Green Isle Foods, also known as Donegal Catch, employs 108 people. However, the industry has had to deal with utter stupidity and ineptitude, as underlined by PricewaterhouseCoopers in its report on the SFPA. The report states: "The overall conclusion of this review is that the SFPA is not working effectively and requires urgent attention." Yet, because of its interventions, on 13 April last, the European Commission informed the State of the decision to revoke Ireland's control plan.

The impact of this is that the SFPA is now insisting that all catch is weighed on the pier before it goes to the factories. As somebody who managed a beef export plant and processed 35,000 cattle a year - not seafood, but the principle is the same - it seems to me that nobody in the SFPA must have a clue about hazard analysis and critical control procedures in terms of food safety. They must not have a clue about what is involved in maintaining the quality of pelagic fish when it is brought ashore. Over-handling reduces the grading and makes it less exportable and less likely to achieve decent market prices. This, in turn, impacts on the 16,000 employees of the sector, whether they be producers, the trawlermen out at sea, people involved in logistics backup or the processors in the factories.

It seems the Minister has said, although not directly to me, that he cannot intervene in this matter. He must intervene. From 1 June, all 160 processors, instead of being able to weigh the fish, whether it be shellfish, crab or lobster - all catches are impacted, pelagic and demersal - will have to get it weighed on the pier. This plan is ridiculous in the extreme. It demands that either the Minister of State, the Minister or the Taoiseach go to Brussels and intervene with the

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Commission immediately to save the industry. We must secure transitional arrangements to protect the 16,000 jobs that are located in every part of the country. I gave the example of Gurteen, an inland village in Sligo. There are 32-odd processors in the Minister of State's region. I hope he will be open to the direct intervention that is required and demanded by the many people involved in this industry.

**Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Martin Heydon):** I thank the Deputy for raising this important issue, which we in the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine take with the utmost seriousness. I extend the apologies of my colleague, the Minister, Deputy McConalogue, who is in Brussels this evening and very much regrets that he is not able to take this debate. We recognise that this issue is giving rise to serious practical problems for our fishing vessels in making landings. The recent revocation by the European Commission of Ireland's sea-fisheries control plan removed a derogation that permitted all fish, including whitefish, shellfish and pelagic fish such as mackerel, to be weighed in factories. This has the result that all fish will be required to be weighed on the quayside on landing.

At the outset, I must set out the strict legal position in this regard. Under the Sea-Fisheries and Maritime Jurisdiction Act 2006, all fisheries control operational issues of this nature are matters exclusively for the SFPA and the Naval Service. The Minister is expressly precluded in the Act from getting involved in any fisheries control operational matters. Regarding the revocation of Ireland's control plan, the position is that responsibility rests solely with the SFPA and the Minister has no role in seeking any transitional arrangements. Following a European Commission audit in 2018 relating to land-based fisheries controls in the State, Ireland received a formal decision of the Commission's intention to conduct an administrative inquiry under Article 102(2) of the 2009 EU fisheries control regulation to evaluate Ireland's capacity to apply the rules of the Common Fisheries Policy, CFP. The findings of the inquiry, which were communicated to Ireland in December 2020, deemed the Irish control and sanctioning systems to be unsatisfactory. The Commission has put forward a specific package of measures to address the issues raised.

Many of the issues arising in the administrative inquiry are operational matters for the SFPA and, as I said, the Minister is precluded under statute from getting involved in these matters. The Department has commenced a process of engagement with the EU Commission in association with the SFPA, which is responsible for operational matters. In the context of this engagement, the Deputy will appreciate that the Minister is not in a position to comment on the Commission's findings and the package of measures the Commissioner has set out. To do so at this juncture would risk prejudice to Ireland's position.

In the context of the administrative inquiry, Ireland was notified last month of a Commission implementing decision revoking the approval of the Irish control plan submitted for the weighing of fishery products. The European Commission has deemed that Ireland's obligations arising from the 2009 EU fisheries control regulation were not being met by the Irish control plan as the risk of non-compliance with the rules of the Common Fisheries Policy could not be minimised. The Commission implementing decision in relation to the revocation of the control plan states that:

...operators did not have in place a "weighing system fit for purpose", as provided for under ... the control plan and the audit identified manipulation of weighing systems. Moreover, although aware of those shortcomings, Ireland did not take appropriate measures to address

such noncompliance, in particular by withdrawing the permission to weigh after transport as foreseen in ... the control plan. Consequently, the control plan does not minimise the risk of systematic manipulation of weighing pelagic catches in Ireland and the under-declaration of catches by operators.

In terms of next steps, the Minister has been advised that the SFPA has engaged directly with industry to ensure fishers and processors - those very important jobs the Deputy has highlighted - are familiar with the changes required to comply with EU weighing requirements, and we will continue to engage with the industry on this matter.

**Deputy Marc MacSharry:** There has been not one report on this area, not two, but three. They were respectively the Wolfe report, the Moran report, and the third was by the great company that is next door to us, namely, PricewaterhouseCoopers, PwC. I am sure it was at great expense. There were 46 recommendations. It said the Sea-Fisheries Protection Authority was not fit for purpose. Our programme for Government commits to changing and reforming it. The SFPA has unilaterally stuffed the whole industry in the hedge and 16,000 jobs are at risk as a result. Therefore I do not care what legislation is in place since 2005.

I will give the Minister of State an example of what could have been done, what must be done now, and indeed what was done in 2004 and 2005. At that time, we had a proper Minister with responsibility for the marine, with delegated authority, former Deputy Pat The Cope Gallagher. He went to Brussels and met the Commissioner in charge of fisheries, Joe Borg. He made the case that we could not have pierside weighing because, unlike in some other countries, our plants are away from the harbours. Then Commissioner Borg listened and understood. He came all the way to Ireland and visited Killybegs Seafoods. He saw it all in action and put a system in place. The Minister of State should not listen to me but to PwC next door. The SFPA is not fit for purpose, such that our programme for Government says we must deal with it, it has unilaterally stuffed us and all the jobs in the fishing and related industries, and we are saying we do not want to know about that.

While the Minister, Deputy McConalogue, is in Brussels, the Minister of State should give him a ring after this and ask him to go to Commissioner Virginijus Sinkevičius, who is responsible for fisheries, and get a transitional arrangement for our seafood processors and producers.

**Deputy Martin Heydon:** To answer the Deputy's question about why the Minister is in Brussels this evening, he is out there fighting for Irish farmers and Irish agriculture in probably the most important aspect of the CAP trilogues, the super trilogues, that are happening over the next couple of days. Farmers in Deputy MacSharry's constituency and mine take a great interest in what he is doing there.

There is an element of shooting the messenger in some of the Deputy's commentary. I bring him back to the point that the decisions being made here relate to EU audits and decisions. The Minister has been advised the SFPA intends to draft a new control plan with delay for consideration by the European Commission. It advised that potentially this draft plan would be applicable to landings of most species, with the specific exception of landings of bulk-stored pelagic species. The Minister understands, and I wish to reassure the House, that the SFPA will be consulting industry during this process. It is important to be aware that any a new draft plan must be accepted by the Commission and formally adopted by it under legislation.

I reassure the Deputy and the House that the Minister and the Government take very seri-

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ously the Commission's findings relating to fisheries control failures, which are at the heart of this issue, including in relation to the revocation of Ireland's control plan. The Minister and the Government are fully committed to having an effective, dissuasive and proportionate system of fisheries control in place. That is really critical. Our reputation for having good controls in place is crucial as well to those 16,000 jobs the Deputy has referenced and which are so important. I thank the Deputy again for raising this important issue and allowing me to put those remarks on the record.

### **Pyrite Incidence**

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** There are five Deputies to speak on this Topical Issue debate. I am going to start with the names as they appear here. Deputy Calleary has one minute.

**Deputy Dara Calleary:** I thank the Ceann Comhairle's office for selecting this very important issue. The defective concrete blocks scheme is a scheme to remedy the blocks used to build homes in counties Donegal and Mayo. The scheme as outlined is not working and is actually adding to the immense stress people are already under as a consequence of having pyrite, in the case of the County Mayo houses, in their blocks. They are not at fault; the residents did not put the pyrite in. It was in the blocks when they came from the quarry.

In the short time available I will outline the difficulties of the scheme. First, the cost of testing for pyrite is prohibitive. That is how a person enters the scheme and many will not be able to do that. Second, many costs are excluded so the scheme which the Minister of State will say covers 90% of costs covers nowhere near that amount. The limits on each of the options are nowhere near the current cost of building, and many homeowners will not be able to reinstate their home. The key word here is "home". I cannot begin to describe the stress homeowners are under as a consequence of pyrite and of the scheme and through no fault of their own.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I am allowing leeway and have increased the time to a minute because there are so many Deputies speaking.

**Deputy Bríd Smith:** At the weekend thousands of angry people marched in counties Donegal and Mayo to demand justice over the use of mica and pyrite in the construction of their homes. Their demands are most reasonable and must be met. They are victims of light-touch self-regulation without oversight, recourse or penalties during the building regime which dominated this country during the Celtic tiger boom. Ironically, the brick supplier in the case of the mica-contaminated bricks in County Donegal, Cassidy Brothers, still supplies Donegal County Council and has contracts with it. These people, therefore, deserve 100% redress. They deserve all their costs for relocation and assessment to be paid fully and they deserve a public inquiry. They are not alone. There are 5,000 mica homes in the north west. There are 2,000 pyrite homes in County Dublin and another 100,000 apartments that are defective as a result of the Celtic tiger light-touch regulation. All these people deserve justice.

**Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh:** I thank the Minister of State for taking this Topical Issue matter. Thousands of people lined the streets in counties Mayo and Donegal last weekend because of the sense of unfairness and unjust treatment they have been getting from this scheme. All they want is equity and fairness. They want equity, in that 90% is not sufficient to cover the costs. The big problem is the people who can least afford it are locked out of this scheme as it stands. Also, no provision has been made for families who must move out, which is most of

them, to have their rent paid while they are moved out. As it is at the moment, funding has not been allowed for the energy savings. That can be fixed and must be looked at. The windows and doors need to be included. To add insult to injury, all these families are forced to pay property tax. The Minister of State must review this scheme.

*10 o'clock*

**Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn:** Thousands of families in Dublin and north Leinster were devastated by pyrite in their homes. The Government put in place a scheme for those that was 100% funded. A scheme was introduced a year ago for the thousands of affected homeowners in Donegal and Mayo, with the Government asking that it would be 90% funded, with the banks playing a role. The banks are nowhere to be seen and people are paying a hell of a lot more than 10% of the cost. How can it be that only families in Donegal and Mayo are asked to pay sums of more than €100,000 to make their homes safe? They had no responsibility in this and it was Celtic tiger cowboys at their worst who did. There must be a fully funded scheme and equality for the people of Donegal and Mayo with the people of Dublin and north Leinster.

**Deputy Joe McHugh:** In my 20 years in politics, I have never come across a matter that has caused so much stress, anxiety and fear. Campaigners such as Ms Ann Owens and Ms Eileen Doherty worked on a scheme that we wanted 100% covered. We were presented with a 70:30 scheme and we worked really hard to get the scheme covered completely. We got as far as a 90:10 split, which we accepted at the time on the basis that it might have worked. The scheme is not working, it will not work and it cannot work. It is not working for so many people and people cannot get access to the scheme. The price of timber has increased by 40% and steel has increased by 35%.

The goalposts have completely shifted from this time last year, when we were presented with the scheme. It must be reviewed immediately and examined on the basis of accessibility, which is not there now. That is a massive concern. I have spoken to the Minister of State's colleagues, the Ministers, Deputies Eamon Ryan and Catherine Martin, as well as my party colleagues. This matter must be sorted quickly around the Cabinet table. Otherwise we will be faced with houses falling down, leading to a conversation of a different kind here.

**Deputy Malcolm Noonan:** I appreciate the Leas-Cheann Comhairle giving discretion to the Deputies to make their contributions, given that five Deputies brought it forward. It is very important and the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, is committed to meeting residents in Mayo and has met families in Donegal as well.

The report concludes the disintegration of concrete blocks used in the construction of the affected dwellings in Donegal and Mayo was primarily due to excessive amounts of deleterious materials in the aggregate used to manufacture the concrete blocks. The deleterious material in Donegal was primarily muscovite mica and in Mayo it was primarily reactive pyrite.

The National Standards Authority of Ireland published a standardised protocol in November 2018, IS 465:2018, for the assessment, testing and categorisation of damaged buildings incorporating concrete blocks containing certain deleterious materials. Rigorous analysis, therefore, has been carried out on the circumstances that led to the defective concrete block issue and the existing scheme was informed by the work of the expert panel and finalised in consultation with the Office of the Attorney General and the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform. The process also took account of the comprehensive engagement that took place between my

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Department and both Donegal and Mayo county councils, which operate and administer the scheme.

The grant limits agreed on foot of this engagement ensure the scheme can be budgeted for with the potential financial liability known at all times and also to ensure that the available budget can benefit the majority of properties and the maximum number of people. Mindful that the scheme is being funded from the Exchequer, the scope cannot be open-ended. Funding of €20 million has been provided to administer the scheme in 2021 and the scheme will be demand-led, meaning the level of funding may vary between the two local authorities.

The grant scheme targets a restricted group of homeowners who have no other practicable options to access redress and it is not a compensation scheme. It is provided in order to remediate the matter of the defective blocks or return the building to a condition it would have been in if it had not been affected by the use of deleterious materials in the blockwork, namely, mica or pyrite.

The level of funding available is subject to the maximum limits, depending on the remedial option recommended in the engineering report, or 90% of the eligible costs, whichever is the lesser. The maximum grants payable range from €247,500 for option 1 to €49,500 for option 5. I take on board the points raised about additional costs to homeowners.

The decision to go with a grant scheme as opposed to the type of scheme provided by the pyrite remediation board was intended to give homeowners the flexibility to manage their own projects and allow them to deal directly with their appointed contractor. Initially, the grant was proposed at 80:20 but following further consideration and political representations, it was changed to a 90:10 split. The Department, in formulating the scheme, concluded that a contribution of 10% from affected homeowners was appropriate to control costs, incentivise the use of appropriate remediation options and promote the reuse of materials where this is feasible.

This is also in line with how similar Government grant schemes operate or have operated in the past. The applicant contributing to the costs is a key requirement. The programme for Government sets out a number of commitments in respect of the important policy area of building defects and provides for an examination of defects in housing, having regard to the recommendations of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Housing, Planning and Local Government report, Safe as Houses.

In this regard, my Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage has been actively engaging with key stakeholders, and the Minister has had several meetings with stakeholder representative groups on this matter. The Minister appointed Mr. Seamus Neely, former chief executive of Donegal County Council, to the position of chair to the independent working group and he will oversee the effective implementation of the group's terms of reference.

**Deputy Dara Calleary:** The Minister of State has said the grant scheme targets a restricted group of homeowners who have no other practical options to access redress but this is not a practical option for many families. This will not return a building to the condition it would otherwise have been in, which is another aim of the scheme.

Tonight there are families who will leave their bedrooms to sleep in living rooms because wind is going through the house because of the effects of pyrite. That is if those people are sleeping at all because of the stress they are under. We heard today from the Irish Home Builders Association that building costs for an average semi-detached house could rise by €15,000 by

the end of the year. As Deputy McHugh has said, this scheme was well-intentioned and many people fought very hard to get it working. Many people are physically and mentally exhausted by the work they have put in over a number of years. This scheme must be reviewed urgently in light of the information provided.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** As I have allowed Deputy Calleary one minute, I will allow each of the other Deputies a minute as well.

**Deputy Bríd Smith:** It is kind of hard to believe, in hearing the Minister of State's response, that the Government is not being shamed into admitting that these families - all 5,000 that are affected - deserve 100% coverage and redress for what has happened to them. They could not be compensated enough.

An Oireachtas committee report has been mentioned and in 2017 that committee, in its mission statement, indicated that ordinary owners who purchased in good faith should not be liable for costs of remediation caused by incompetence, negligence or deliberate non-compliance. I would add greed to this, as it is the kind of ethos that dominated the building regimes in the Celtic tiger. The Governments of the time allowed a lack of oversight, redress or penalties. The State owes these families more than what it is willing to give. If the State does not give this funding, these people will be out marching again and again. We will all be beside them. This is not a Dublin versus Donegal matter. It is a human rights matter for all these homeowners suffering from these defects.

**Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh:** It is clear from listening to the contributions across parties that this scheme is not fit for purpose. Mayo and Donegal will not stand for being treated differently from people in another part of the country. We need an immediate review. I have seen how people have got sick and been brought to their knees because of what has happened to their houses through no fault of their own. They have been left hung out to dry. I plead with the Minister of State to do something about this. The scheme must be reviewed. It can be corrected and this must happen sooner rather than later so people and families can get on with their lives. I thank the Minister of State.

**Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn:** There were 2,000 families in Dublin and north Leinster supported through the pyrite remediation scheme. It was 100% funded and that was correct. This is very simple. There are thousands of families in Donegal and Mayo being asked to pay a second mortgage to fix their homes. Older people will just see their homes fall apart. It is the current state of play.

Any suggestion that this should be kicked to some kind of independent group to do more consultation is utterly unacceptable. We are seeking equality between the families affected in Donegal and Mayo and those that had problems in Dublin and north Leinster. It is as simple as that. It is a simple principle. We do not leave families behind or abandon them through no fault of their own. I will say again that these homeowners are left with this situation due to Celtic tiger cowboys. Those people must be helped on an equal basis to those in Dublin and north Leinster.

**Deputy Joe McHugh:** I take it the Minister of State is getting the message here this evening. I will just say a couple of things. I ask the Minister of State to picture this: I spoke to a woman today who lives on her own and her mother lives in the house next door. Both houses have to be demolished. They live beside each other and the daughter is the carer of the mother.

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They had to scrape together €12,500 as money up front for engineers' fees. This is the reality of a scheme that is not working, and which should be scrapped immediately. People should not have to be put in a position of coming up with €5,000 or €6,000 for engineers' fees straight away.

The Part 8 planning process, which councils introduced for their own planning applications, should be revisited again now the issue is to the fore. Can the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland, SEAI, fund and help these homeowners in the context of windows and doors? The woman I spoke with today told me that her mother's back door cannot open and her windows are warped. She has been told she can use the kitchen in the other house but it is damp and both houses are leaking. These people are living the ultimate nightmare and have been for years. We need to deal with this as speedily as possible. I thank the Minister of State for coming in.

**Deputy Malcolm Noonan:** I thank the Leas-Cheann Comhairle for giving the Deputies the opportunity to have their say on this. It is across the parties and is coming across loud and clear. On the comparisons in relation to intervention and pyrite scheme costs, this scheme would be double that of the average pyrite scheme. The aim of the scheme is to help, insofar as is possible, to reinstate the average-sized dwelling to the condition it would have been in the original blockwork, had it not been affected by pyrite and mica. Mindful that the scheme is being funded from the Exchequer, the scope cannot be open-ended. The funding that is available must be used prudently to achieve the most efficient and cost-effective outcomes.

On those initial engineering costs, it may be possible for applicants and an appointed engineer to come to an arrangement whereby an engineer is willing to wait for the local authority to pay out the grant funding in respect of the work. That is just one option.

The Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, and our Department officials are working closely. I spoke with Deputy Calleary earlier this evening about the issues in Mayo and I believe the Minister has committed to go there to meet people. He has also met with residents in Donegal.

I emphasise that the Department is engaging with the SEAI to explore synergies between existing grant schemes and the defective concrete block scheme. It is our aim to ensure that eligible applicants can access these grants while remediation works are under way.

I believe that the scheme is fair and equitable, and that it will work for the vast majority of affected homeowners with the five remediation options available. It must be acknowledged that the scheme is available to those with no other practical means to return the dwelling to a condition it would have been in had it not been affected by the blockwork conditions, namely mica pyrite.

I am taking on board and will take back the concerns raised by the Deputies, and I acknowledge the suffering and hurt it is causing to so many people in Mayo and Donegal.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I thank the Minister of State for his co-operation.

The Dáil adjourned at 10.13 p.m. until 9.12 a.m. on Wednesday, 26 May 2021.