



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

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

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Dé Céadaoin, 2 Meitheamh 2021

Wednesday, 2 June 2021

Chuaigh an Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Joe Carey) i gceannas ar 9.10 a.m.

***Paidir agus Machnamh.
Prayer and Reflection.***

Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters

Acting Chairman (Deputy Joe Carey): I wish to advise the House of the following matters in respect of which notice has been given under Standing Order 37 and the name of the Member in each case: (1) Deputy Holly Cairns - to discuss the immediate need for safe infrastructure in Kealkill, County Cork, for students to walk and cycle safely to school; (2) Deputies Paul Murphy, Richard Boyd Barrett - to discuss the planned increases in the local property tax, LPT; (3) Deputy Gary Gannon - to discuss the need for better public services to support an outdoor summer; (4) Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire - to discuss the delays in processing primary medical certificate applications; (5) Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan - to discuss the reinstatement of the school library grant; (6) Deputy Darren O'Rourke - to discuss bringing forward a survival and recovery plan for the taxi industry in response to the recent taxi protest; (7) Deputy Richard O'Donoghue - to discuss when 10,000 Irish citizens in the United Arab Emirates, UAE, can return to Ireland without undergoing mandatory hotel quarantine; (8) Deputy Joe Flaherty - to discuss the need for a dedicated fibre connection for the ambitious new public library in Edgeworthstown, County Longford; (9) Deputy Jackie Cahill - to discuss the lack of resources for early intervention services for children with disabilities in north Tipperary; (10) Deputy Martin Browne - to discuss plans to carry out a review of school transport schemes; (11) Deputy Kieran O'Donnell - to discuss the plans of the Department of Health and the HSE to address the rising rate of Covid-19 cases in Limerick; (12) Deputies Mattie McGrath, Michael Collins, Carol Nolan and Danny Healy-Rae - to discuss the serious international incident that occurred off the south west coast of Ireland involving a Spanish trawler.

The matters raised by Deputies Cairns, Flaherty, Murphy and Boyd Barrett and Browne have been selected for discussion.

Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

Road Safety

Deputy Holly Cairns: Last week I ran a consultation with primary schools from across Cork South-West on the draft county development plan. Of the 35 schools participating, two thirds identified the need for safe crossings near their school and nine out of ten wanted cycle paths.

When young people live close enough, they want to be able to walk or cycle to school, to go in with their friends and have a sense of independence. This also brings many health and environmental benefits. However, to make this possible, we need proper infrastructure that can ensure the safety of children. This is severely lacking in so many places across west Cork and rural Ireland. Belgooly needs investment to safely connect the school and village, and Ballyheda and Dunderrow national schools are just two examples of many that need traffic calming measures.

While this is a matter for many communities, my question today relates to Kealkill near Bantry. Getting to school there involves crossing the main street in the village which is also the primary route between Beara, Bantry and Sheep's Head to Cork city. There are many lorries coming through from Castletownbere and last week community members showed me and my colleague, Councillor Ross O'Connell, where the children have to cross. There are literally no traffic calming measures, no footpaths or pedestrian crossings and no legible road markings. There is absolutely nothing. Furthermore, as with many towns and villages, traffic goes through dangerously fast which increases the risk for the 190 pupils in the school in Kealkill. This is incredibly dangerous.

While all schools need and should have proper infrastructure, Kealkill is an outlier that requires immediate intervention to have a safe crossing and footpaths in place for September. We will be pursuing this matter at council level but given the immediacy of the need, I ask the Minister to ensure a safe route to school is provided to the children of Kealkill. It is a small but vibrant community that is trying to retain its population and ensure economic viability. Local groups have done incredible work in developing facilities and a parkland and they have highlighted the pressing need for a safe crossing to school as a priority.

The Minister will no doubt outline the safe routes to school initiative which specifically funds footpath upgrades and new cycle lanes to encourage more active travel to school. I can assure him that Kealkill is in desperate need of this type of investment and would greatly benefit from the programme. Last year, Belgooly primary school, which also needs support in safely connecting the village and school, showed me the significant difference that simple interventions such as bollards can make to empower children to walk and cycle to school, while in Skibbereen there is a successful cycle bus which can act as an example for other towns. We all want this type of activity and infrastructure for as many primary and secondary schools as possible.

In talking with primary school classes, over one third felt that although they were close enough to walk or cycle to schools, they did not do so because it was not safe. We need to work to bring that number down. Kealkill is one school where we can make a substantial difference. I know there are lots of areas that need these kinds of works but Kealkill is in a league of its own

in terms of the risk to people's safety. I urge the Minister to act to help put proper infrastructure in place and have it ready for students in September.

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I thank Deputy Cairns for raising this matter. As it happens, I know Kealkill well. I used to bring a lot of people up to the stone circles in Kealkill which are stunning and the school is just below that site. I know it well. That route to Cork is the one that everyone uses. It is a kind of rat run because it does not go through any town and is a relatively straight run all the way. It is similar to Belgooly, which I also happen to know through friends. They are both small villages off the main road but with a lot of passing traffic. They are on the back roads but they are very busy. I am absolutely aware of the issues in places like Kealkill.

Primarily, this is a matter for the council but it must be said that Cork County Council, in terms of its planning, has done well in comparison with other parts of the country. If one looks at places like Skibbereen, Bantry, Clonakilty, Dunmanway and Macroom, with the bypass, one can see that Cork County Council has understood the idea of the urban realm, creating villages and towns that have centres, pedestrian spaces and so on. Cork County Council is better than most which may be due to the simple fact that it has a good county architect which has led to a different design approach.

There is no shortage of funding to develop safe routes to schools but I will not list off all of the different initiatives now. What this really comes down to is political will at a local level to rethink the purpose of the roads. When I was involved in transport campaigning I met a brilliant Dutch engineer who taught me about how to create safe spaces. To simplify it, first, one has to look at the function of the road. Then one looks at the shape or the way the road is divided up and finally, one looks at behaviour. If we are going to bring about change, which we need to do for places like Kealkill, as well as for our 4,000 primary schools, and create safe routes to school, then we must devise mechanisms to achieve a transformation, to bring back walking and cycling as a safe way of getting around our communities.

If one looks at the road in Kealkill, one must ask whether it is a through road for people getting to Cork city. If I recall the village correctly, the national school is slightly away from the main roads, the one to Gougane or the one to Cork city. What is the function of the roads through Kealkill? Are the roads to serve the village or are they back roads to Cork? It should be the former. First and foremost, the function of the roads around the village of Kealkill is to serve the people of the village. When one looks at the shape of the road, one must ask whether we need to install footpaths, bollards or other mechanisms like ramps, although we do not want to do the latter if we can avoid it. We need to find better ways of managing traffic. The third thing to look at is behaviour. What is the speed of the traffic going through the village? What types of vehicles are passing through? Are we talking about big fish trucks heading to Rosslare in order to get to Spain in 24 hours? They are very threatening. Those people are doing their jobs; I am not blaming them directly.

On a village by village, primary school by primary school basis, we need to ask what the function of the road is. In my mind, it should be primarily to serve local needs, particularly safe routes to school for our children. Second, we must look at whether we need to change the shape to assist that, perhaps narrowing or maybe building out pavements.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Joe Carey): The Minister must conclude now. He will have another opportunity to respond.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I will come back in then.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Joe Carey): I must bring in Deputy Cairns, who has two minutes.

Deputy Holly Cairns: I thank the Minister for his response and his commitment to ensuring that as many young people as possible have access to cycling to school. Like I said, we will be pursuing this issue with the council and I agree that it is a council issue. I would not normally bring an issue like this to this House. It is simply the urgency of this particular issue in this particular town. I know we need better infrastructure in many places but there are no traffic calming measures and not even a road marking in the village. Like the Minister said, it is seen as a main road so people are often overtaking through the village. This is going on where a person would go to cross the road where there is not a pavement. It is simply really urgent, which is why I raised it as a Topical Issue matter.

I hope Kealkill will be made a priority for the safe routes to school initiative. There is an immediate need for safe infrastructure, which can be installed at the most effective time for the community. It highlights the types of projects we need for all our schools, from footpaths and cycle lanes to crossing points and traffic calming.

Regrettably, despite warning signs and current speed restrictions, people still drive much too quickly past schools. We need, therefore, to look at additional measures, including more 30 km per hour speed limits, especially in rural areas where schools are often beside roads with speed limits of 80 km per hour or 100 km per hour.

Safe infrastructure for cycling and walking will benefit the whole community. Cycling campaigns in Bandon and Skibbereen are calling out for segregated lanes and pedestrian crossings, which are vital for everybody, especially for people with disabilities.

The situation for schoolchildren in Kealkill is exacerbated by the volume of traffic that is going through the village too fast. Although it is a regional road, like the Minister said, it is one of the main routes connecting west Cork and the city over the Cousane Gap. The Minister spoke about the nature and function of the road and the volume of traffic, specifically with regard to trucks coming from Castletownbere. There is a clear need, therefore, to which I believe the Minister alluded, for a traffic calming analysis study to guide the types of calming measures the village requires. It arguably should not be considered a regional road anymore given that it is so predominantly used. Given the volume of traffic, this really needs to be looked at.

A part of place-making is liveable streets, and that applies to villages as much as it does towns and cities. I hope the Minister will look at providing this type of project for Kealkill too. Ultimately, as the Minister knows, the barometer for safe active travel is whether one would allow a ten-year-old to use the road with his or her friends. In Kealkill, I can tell the Minister a person absolutely would not, at any age. This needs to be a target, and not just for the easy wins in cities but for the type of transformative infrastructure we need in rural areas and the type of infrastructure Kealkill needs now.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Joe Carey): The Minister has two minutes for his concluding statement.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I do not know how big the school is. I would be interested to know the numbers.

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Deputy Holly Cairns: There are 190 pupils.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: Okay, it is quite big.

Deputy Holly Cairns: It is the biggest population in a school for the area.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: They are not just coming from the village of Kealkill; they are coming from the wider area.

Deputy Holly Cairns: All of the population is on the lower part of the town-----

Deputy Eamon Ryan: On the Pearson's bridge side.

Deputy Holly Cairns: -----and then one must drive up the hill across that main street, where all the lorries pass, to get up to the school. And there are no road markings, footpaths or anything like that.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I will make this point because I absolutely agree with the Deputy. We need to reduce the speeds and try to define the village as such. The roads serve the village and people who are driving through should realise they are going through a village area.

There is also the issue of the wider road network in the area, however. In my mind, we want to be able to make it safe for our children to walk and cycle to school. Sometimes that will be a longer distance. It might be two or three miles. That is not every case and people may find that they have to drive. No one is shaming, pointing the finger or saying that anyone has to do anything.

If at all possible, however, we need to make it safe. There is a particular culture in west Cork. I have an interest because for years I used to bring people cycling around those very roads on holidays. The same question applies, however. Is it safe and does one feel safe? Most of the time, actually, on most of the back roads in west Cork, one does, because there is that old culture with local people where one would still say hello to someone when driving by raising one's finger. One is actually not speeding from one place to another.

There are other places where that is not the case. The example of Kealkill is very true because there is this idea that people are in a hurry to get to Cork. The speed limit is probably 80 km per hour and then, in some cases, it is 100 km per hour. By and large, therefore, people are in that mindset that they are going to get there as quickly as they can within the 100 km per hour.

The question we must ask, therefore, is how we create the safer wider environment where it is safe to walk on the country road or cycle to school. What is the culture and what are the characteristics of how we drive and how the roads are treated? We need to get this right because we have such a dense network of roads.

Deputy Holly Cairns: Will the Minister carry out analysis on the volume of traffic?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: If Cork County Council wants to take Kealkill as an example, I would very much support and encourage that and use it as a test case. As I said, if we saw that working in Kealkill, we could apply the lessons in Belgooly or other places that are very similar.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Joe Carey): On that positive note, we must conclude the debate. Deputy Cairns can follow up with the Minister on that commitment.

Broadband Infrastructure

Deputy Joe Flaherty: Longford County Council and the local development group in Edgeworthstown have pioneered the development of the co:worx remote working hub in what was formerly the Ulster Bank premises in the County Longford town. It is a visionary €1 million plus project, which really found its niche as the pressures of Covid-19 kicked in and we realised the need for spaces and places to facilitate remote working and high-speed broadband in rural areas.

Next week, the project will be one of the finalists in the prestigious .IE digital town awards, which seek to promote awareness, knowledge, use and understanding of digital in Ireland by its citizens, business and communities. The awards highlight the benefits and possibilities of digital and celebrate the digital achievements of local towns, big and small, including Edgeworthstown. We are delighted to see that Edgeworthstown is one of the finalists in the medium town category this year as the town pushes ahead with its ambitious co:worx remote working hub.

The Minister would be mistaken for thinking that all is rosy and is probably wondering why I am eating up valuable Dáil time today with this success story. The reality is, however, that a major project in the county's second largest town, directly across the road from a new €3 million plus public library, which will open later this year, will not, in fact, have the high-speed broadband that the facility and its ultimate users will crave.

Essentially, the community needs a dedicated fibre broadband connection, and a separate connection for redundancy, for both the co:worx building and the new library, which will be located directly across the road. As part of the recent upgrade to the streetscape in Edgeworthstown, Longford County Council had the vision and foresight to include a 110 mm ducting network linking the two buildings. As all the good civil contractors will tell us, most of the heavy lifting has been done with regard to this project.

As I said earlier, this is the second largest town in County Longford, home to a number of leading industries and employers. While the local exchange has fibre broadband to the cabinet, there is, it seems, no provision for fibre to homes or businesses. The provision of a dedicated fibre connection is simply too costly for a start-up, and particularly a community project like co:worx.

We asked Eir to consider expediting the roll-out of its Ireland's fibre network, IFN, to Edgeworthstown, which it is currently rolling out in nearby Longford. I am aware that Eir has made provision for a similar project in Abbeyshrule, where the project is a similar co-working space called The Yard Hub. There is real hope and expectation in Edgeworthstown, and within the local community, that the organisation charged with taking this to the next digital level will see the merit in these two projects, that is, the public library and the co:worx hub, and work with the local community to ensure that we have the high-speed broadband on which both these facilities will be dependent.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I thank Deputy Flaherty for raising this issue. I recognise how vital telecommunications services are to citizens for so many aspects of their daily lives including remote working, studying and staying in touch with family members. These services have proved essential since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic and given the restrictions imposed nationally. Having local facilities such as libraries and hubs in place to facilitate digital access in towns and villages will be important in the gradual return to normality and economic recovery.

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The provision of services in a liberalised market, however, is regulated by the independent regulator, the Commission for Communications Regulation, ComReg. I do not have a direct role in investment decisions. Eir is a private, commercial company and the decision to roll out broadband infrastructure is a matter for the management of the company.

That said, with regard to connectivity on a nationwide basis, the national broadband plan, NBP, is obviously of critical importance in ensuring high-speed connectivity. Work is under way on foot of the contract, which was signed with National Broadband Ireland, NBI, to roll out a high-speed network right across the country, including 100,000 businesses and farms along with 695 schools. The NBP network will offer those premises in the intervention area a high-speed broadband service of up to 500 Mbps from the outset. Construction will commence in all counties, including Longford, in the first two years and more than 90% of premises in the State will have access in the next four years. In County Longford, almost 5,000 premises have been passed by the Eir 300K roll-out in recent years. NBI is making steady progress on the delivery of the NBP. Design work is complete or ongoing in target townlands across the country. Since 25 January 2021, retailers have been able to resell the service to householders across the NBI network.

As regards the specific query raised by the Deputy, I understand that Longford County Council is currently in active discussions with Eir and with relevant Departments, including mine and the Department of Rural and Community Development, to determine how best to ensure improved digital and broadband access for Edgeworthstown, including for the start-up hub and the library, both of which are due to open towards the end of 2021. In the context of our economic recovery, and on the day after the launch of the national economic recovery plan, we must look to the future to support the full resumption of work and to get people back to work. It is hugely important that vibrant local partnership approaches such as those being taken in all local authority areas, including through the work of the local broadband officers, be supported in driving forward digital transformation at local level for the benefit of communities. Hubs such as the one planned for Edgeworthstown will help kick-start local economies all over Ireland and facilitate co-working, SMEs, start-ups and local job creation.

There may be an opportunity in this regard. The Minister for Rural and Community Development, Deputy Humphreys, is particularly keen on the concept of hubs. I understand that the Co:worx hub in Edgeworthstown is a former Ulster Bank branch and I am sure that location would be familiar to her. What is happening in that town is exactly the sort of project at the centre of our new rural development strategy. Yesterday, it was announced that in excess of €60 million has been allocated for just these types of hubs in the new recovery and resilience plan. I will discuss with the Ministers for Rural and Community Development and Enterprise, Trade and Employment whose Department is responsible for that plan and how this particular project would fit within Government plans. It is exactly in tune with what we want to do in the recovery plan so we should do everything we can to support it. It looks like a good example of what we want.

Deputy Joe Flaherty: I am delighted to see the Minister's enthusiasm for the project. I am also delighted that his Department is engaging with the project promoters and the county council to ensure the town, the hub and the library will get improved digital and broadband access, specific to the two projects that will come on stream towards the end of the year. I appreciate that Eir is a private company with investors' capital but we will all agree that it has been gifted the opportunity to develop our telecoms network, with the profits that will doubtlessly ensue. We have a very ambitious broadband plan and it is something we simply have to get right for

future generations. It is very important that Eir is reminded of the need to work and engage with local communities. It is inconceivable that it cannot accommodate a public library worth over €3 million, which is soon to open, and such an innovative remote working hub in the county's second largest town. I am delighted that the Minister is aware of this project and enthused and engaged with it but we need to send a loud and clear message to Eir that it must engage with the project promoters and ensure they get the broadband they need. These are probably the two largest capital investments in the second largest town in the county in recent years and are worth more than €5 million to the local economy between them. It is critical that, when the doors open to these facilities towards the end of the year, both of them have high-speed broadband.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: Based on the Deputy's earlier contribution, my understanding is that the local authority is looking at supporting ducting to connect the Eir network and that the local exchange is fibre-enabled. In a sense, this looks like a public-private partnership, in that Eir is a private company coming together with the library and the hub, which is on a former commercial premises. Supporting the local authority in getting that ducting to the building would make a lot of sense for the local authority. Going back to what I was saying earlier about the town centres first policy, we do not want historic buildings to fall into disrepair. We want them to be used to the maximum extent. We have seen in other hubs across the country, such as the Ludgate centre in Skibbereen, that they can bring a lot of economic activity to an area. I would be very supportive of any support my Department can give the local authority in getting that exchange connected or putting the fibre ducting in place to get it to the relevant buildings.

Tax Code

Deputy Paul Murphy: The so-called property tax is, in reality, a family home tax. It is an austerity tax. It is a tax against which the socialist left campaigned when it was introduced in the aftermath of the household tax. People Before Profit warned at that time that if it was introduced it would rise and rise and that is precisely what is happening. The Government is proposing to hike up the property tax by approximately €100 for one in three households. That €100 might be small change for Ministers but for many households it is a big increase, especially those on low incomes, those who are retired or the very many who are out of work right now. This will hit those with large mortgages or low incomes hardest as it takes no account of people's ability to pay. Homeowners who lost their jobs due to Covid now face the double-whammy of a pandemic unemployment payment, PUP, cut and a property tax hike together. The Government likes to pretend that the property tax is about funding local services but in reality, local councils did not get an extra penny when the property tax was introduced. The Government gave with one hand, telling them they could have the property tax, and, with the other, cut back the Local Government Fund, leaving councils just as underfunded as ever. In reality, that money went to paying off the bondholders, and let us not forget that we are still paying them. Instead of hiking the property tax and instead of this equality of misery that the Government wants us all to have, we should scrap it and replace it with a genuine property tax, that is, a wealth tax on the assets of the very richest. A 3% wealth tax on the top 1% in this country would raise more than seven times the amount that will be raised by the increased property tax. All their assets should be taxed, including property, but also stocks, shares, yachts, sports cars and everything else. Instead of hitting ordinary people again, it is time we tax the rich.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: The property tax, so-called, is a fundamentally unjust tax because it takes no account whatsoever of the homeowner's income or ability to pay. It be-

comes even more unfair in the context of the disastrous failure of this Government to control a fundamentally dysfunctional housing market. Property prices have gone off the Richter scale. In areas like my own, as well as much of Dublin and many other urban centres, the value of property has gone through the roof and that will impact the rate of property tax people have to pay. Of course, that bears no relationship to the income of the person in the house. As nobody can afford these property prices, the people who happen to live in areas where prices are extremely high and have gone out of control will be punished just for living in those particular areas. In the long term this tax, as well as many other things like the failure to build social housing in these areas, will lead to a social cleansing of many of them. People on lower incomes simply will not be able to live in certain places. The property tax punishes them for the fact they happen to live in a particular place. It is noteworthy it is not only the socialist left. We have been saying this for a long time and, indeed, actively campaigned against the introduction of this tax. I note Dr. Lorcan Sirr, on “Morning Ireland” this morning, when asked directly is it a fair tax and is it a regressive tax, said that it is not a fair tax and it is a regressive tax. The Government should accept that. In the aftermath of Covid, in particular, it should not be loading it on people. The Government should abolish this tax and introduce a proper wealth tax.

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I thank the Deputies for raising this matter.

The programme for Government includes a commitment to bring forward legislation in relation to the local property tax on the basis of fairness and that most homeowners will not face an increase in their local property tax liability. In addition, there is a commitment to bring new homes, which are currently exempt from local property tax, into the taxation system.

Accordingly, yesterday the Government gave its approval for the general scheme of the Finance (Local Property Tax) (Amendment) Bill 2021. This Bill will now be drafted to give effect to a package of measures addressing the programme commitments and related matters.

Perhaps the most significant proposal is a revised method for calculating local property tax, LPT, liabilities. The new approach maintains the number of bands at 20. Band 1 is expanded from €1 to €200,000 and band 2 contains values in the range of €200,000 to €262,500. The LPT charge is fixed at the current charge for bands 1 and 2, which is €90 and €225, respectively.

A 75% increase is applied to all thresholds which is broadly consistent with the 74% increase observed in property prices up to 2020 and a forecast 2% increase for this year. In addition to this, a lower rate of 0.1029% is applied and the existing charging structure is maintained.

There is currently a higher rate for properties valued above €1 million with the first €1 million charged at 0.18% and everything above at a higher rate of 0.25%. Properties are charged on the self-assessed value at individual property level.

Under the proposed methodology, it was likely that owners of higher value properties could benefit from reductions in LPT liabilities due to the widening of the bands and the reduced rate. To address this, we propose that a higher rate should be applied to properties above €1.05 million by charging a higher mid-point rate on bands above that level and a third rate be applied to properties above €1.75 million. Properties in bands 12 to 17, inclusive, between €1.05 million and €1.75 million, will be charged a mid-point rate made up of 0.1029% on the first €1 million and 0.25% on the balance, and properties in band 20 will be charged on individual property prices up to 0.3%.

Residential properties built after the current valuation date or 1 May 2013 remain outside the charge to LPT. These properties will now become liable at the next valuation date of 1 November. Previously exempt properties purchased during 2013 and trading stock of builders and developers unsold on 1 May 2013 or sold in the period 1 January 2013 to 31 October 2021, inclusive, will now be brought into the charge.

The general scheme also provides that all new residential properties built between valuation dates will be retrospectively valued as if they had existed on the preceding valuation date. New properties becoming liable for the LPT charge at the next liability date, that is, the following 1 November, will be valued at the previous valuation date and the Revenue will provide assistance to property owners to determine this value. This will maximise the local property tax base and ensure equity.

The measures proposed for this Bill fulfil the programme for Government commitments in this area and secure the future of the local property tax.

The Government has decided to cut both the rate of the tax and widen the bands to make charges affordable. This means that the majority of homeowners are likely to see either a decrease or no change. Where increases occur, the majority will be a single band of €90 notwithstanding the significant increases we have seen in property values since 2013.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Yesterday, the Taoiseach said that what we were experiencing was the opposite of austerity. It is a bit hard to accept. There are many similarities now to what was done in 2008 when the Government responded to the crash by bailing out the banks and making ordinary workers foot the bill through cuts to public services and taxes such as this. The result was a lost decade, untold suffering for many and massive profiteering by a tiny few. Now we have the funnelling of huge amounts of money to big business with no strings attached and at the same time the hiking up of property tax for workers, cutting back on pandemic unemployment payment, PUP, supports for those who have lost their jobs, and letting landlords impose double rent hikes to drive up their profits.

We must not go back to austerity. We cannot go back to bailing out the rich. Instead, it is time that we imposed a Covid wealth tax on those who have profited from the crisis, such as Mr. Denis O'Brien whose wealth increased by €4 million every day in the pandemic. Tax the billionaires, tax the big businesses and invest in an eco-socialist green new deal.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: The property tax is not only an unfair tax; it is an utterly pointless tax. When the Fine Gael-led Government introduced it, the justification for it was that it would dampen the property market and fund local services. Now we see the reality - not a single extra cent for local government. With the removal of the equalisation fund, we will deepen the gap in the ability of local authorities to fund services depending on where they happen to be. Of course, it has done nothing to dampen the market, which has gone completely out of control. Therefore, there is no point to this tax and it is an unfair tax.

The alternative is, as Deputy Paul Murphy said, a wealth tax on billionaires. Here is another suggestion. Put a tax not on the family home but on multiple property owners. One could raise just as much money and it would be a far fairer and less regressive tax.

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: Deputy Boyd Barrett responds to what I said. Deputy Paul Murphy comes in here and reads out a script that was written a decade ago. Look at what the Government announced yesterday - €4 billion worth of investment in the future - on top of

last year's budget which led to record levels of investment in our future. Look at the employment wage subsidy scheme where the State is standing absolutely behind Irish workers and full-square behind Irish employers to maintain jobs and maintain income at exactly the time at which that help is needed most.

The two political parties represented by the two Deputies today are in favour of tackling the climate crisis but they are against any changes in carbon pricing. They want higher spending and higher investment in housing but they are against any changes in the local property tax. The kind of politics we are seeing here this morning that I expect to see more of in the coming weeks, months and years is for nothing. It is against everything.

The measure that the Government is bringing forward is looking to broaden the local property tax base so that all homes are taxed fairly. We are making changes in relation to the way in which the bands are structured and the rate is delivered to do all we can to ensure that the bill that will be presented to homeowners across January and February next year is as fair and affordable as possible.

I am aware of all the challenges homeowners and citizens face at present but that is why we brought in all the measures that we announced yesterday to help guide our country through this crisis. I am certain if I was to bring in some of the measures the Deputies are looking for and have just called for, they would find some reasons for opposing them as well.

School Transport

Deputy Martin Browne: I am raising this matter because, after all that our schoolchildren and their families have been through over the past 12 to 18 months, they can do without the seemingly endless bureaucracy and battles they face in securing school transport. Every year, parents in Tipperary are left struggling to get spaces on school buses under the school transport scheme. In some instances, people have been told that, due to distance limits, they cannot get tickets despite buses for the schools they have chosen passing their houses every morning. Sometimes, those buses are not even full. In other cases, parents of children with additional needs have found that the scheme gives no consideration to the fact that the most suitable schools for their children may not be the nearest schools, which is the requirement under the scheme.

Recently, a constituent wrote to me. She has a daughter with additional educational needs who will be moving from a particular mid-Tipperary school to the Presentation Secondary School in Thurles, but she is running into problems with school transport because Thurles is not the nearest school to them. They have chosen Thurles for the simple reason that it best supports the daughter's educational needs and has a teacher with the specialist training she needs, but her mother is having to battle to secure a place.

The family of a young chap in Rearcross, County Tipperary, applied for a ticket to attend a school in Newport. The bus passes his gate every day. His brothers get that bus, but he has been turned down because he is 300 m too far from the school. I do not know whether Google Maps is being used, but citing a distance of 300 m when his siblings use the same bus is crazy.

No matter what the needs of a child are, the current scheme does not take into consideration the geography of many areas in rural Ireland, especially in a large county like Tipperary. For

example, a school bus passing someone's gate may not be going to the school that the Department declares should be attended. The issue needs to be addressed once and for all. Families should not be going through this after all they have put up with over the past 12 to 18 months.

The first example I gave was of a young girl. Her family want to send her to a particular school because it has a teacher with the specialist training she needs. It is crazy that, in 2021, the Department says that children cannot use a school because of bureaucracy or someone sitting behind a desk using Google Maps. In the case of the young chap in Rearcross, we have discovered what the problem is. The Department measures a point from his house to the middle of Newport, which is where the 300 m measurement arises. From his house to the school is not measured, though. We are asking that a complete review of the scheme be undertaken as quickly as possible.

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): I thank the Deputy for raising this matter. Before I address it specifically, I wish to provide the House an outline of the extent of the school transport service.

School transport is a significant operation managed by Bus Éireann on behalf of the Department. In the current school year, more than 114,000 children, including more than 14,700 children with special educational needs, are transported on a daily basis to primary and post-primary schools throughout the country at a cost of more than €224.7 million in 2020. The purpose of the Department's school transport scheme is, having regard to available resources, to support the transport to and from school of children who reside remote from their nearest school. Under the terms of the primary and post-primary scheme, children are eligible for school transport if they satisfy the distance criteria - 3.2 km at primary level and 4.8 km at post-primary level - and are attending their nearest schools or education centres as determined by the Department or Bus Éireann, having regard to ethos and language.

All children who are eligible for school transport and who complete the application and payment process on time are accommodated on school transport services for the 2021-2022 school year where such services are in operation. Children who are not eligible for school transport may apply for transport on a concessionary basis only and will be facilitated where spare seats are available after eligible children have been accommodated. Where the number of ineligible children exceeds the number of spare seats available, Bus Éireann allocates tickets for the spare seats using an agreed selection process. Concessionary transport is subject to a number of terms and conditions, including the availability of spare seats on an existing service and payment of the annual charge. Routes will not be extended or altered, additional vehicles will not be introduced and larger vehicles or extra trips using existing vehicles will not be provided to cater for children travelling on a concessionary basis.

As referenced by the Deputy, a review of the school transport scheme is under way with a view to taking a fresh look at the service and its broader effectiveness and sustainability. Given the evolving situation with Covid-19, the steering group's work on the review has been delayed. However, I am pleased to confirm that an initial meeting of the steering group was recently held in order to recommence the process, which will continue over the coming period. The review is being conducted to ensure that the school transport system is fit for purpose and serves students and their families adequately. The review will build on the proposals in the programme for Government as they relate to school transport, for example, by examining the options to reduce car journeys, assessing how the school transport scheme can work in liaison with the Safe Routes to Schools programme and examining the options for providing better value and a

better service for students, including issues such as the nearest or next nearest school.

It is planned that the steering group will report to me on an interim basis as the review progresses, with a view to presenting a final report later this year with recommendations on the future operation of the Department's school transport scheme. The steering group will report to me initially on preliminary findings regarding eligibility before moving to consider and report on broader issues such as the objectives of the scheme and its alignment with other initiatives and wider Government policy.

Deputy Martin Browne: The Minister can read from a script like that all she likes, but the rules of the scheme are not reflective of the reality of rural schools and their large catchment areas. In a letter about the school transport scheme for children with special educational needs, the Minister told me that "children are eligible for transport where they have special educational needs arising from a diagnosed disability and are attending the nearest recognised mainstream school, special class/special school or unit, that is or can be resourced, to meet their special educational needs". The term "nearest school" limits their options.

Will the Minister guarantee me and the families across the country that, however long it takes for the report to be put in her hand, she will address this problem well before the children are due back in school and she will not leave it until the last minute to announce a half-hearted attempt to resolve it? Parents should not have to fight with the Minister or Bus Éireann so that their children can go to the schools they deem best suited to their children. They have been through enough. Please do not inflict more hardship on them.

The example in Rencross shows how crazy the system is. That young man's brothers are getting on a bus that passes their gate, yet the Department says that he is not eligible for the same transport. It is not an isolated case. Every Deputy, probably including the Minister, is getting told this by families continuously, especially now that we are in the school holidays and people are starting to worry that, come September, their children will not get school transport because of some silly rule that the Minister just referenced.

Deputy Norma Foley: I acknowledge the points the Deputy raises. The reason behind many of them gives rise to the necessity for a review. I come from a rural constituency and am more than familiar with the issues that have pertained to the school transport system.

10 o'clock

I deal with it with my constituents. It has been an ongoing issue for many years and it predates many of us being elected to the House. It is for this reason I was more than keen that the review of the school transport service as we know it would be given every opportunity, notwithstanding Covid and I understand there could have been issues with Covid. I was very keen that we would reconvene and get down to business and tackle many of the issues as the Deputy has outlined them. I am happy to confirm the steering group has now reconvened and its work is ongoing. To confirm, it is my intention the steering group will present its initial or preliminary findings regarding eligibility, which is one of the key issues outlined by the Deputy, in the short term. I expect to have it before the fuller and more comprehensive report is outlined by the close of year.

I appreciate that for parents this is a hugely difficult, trying and complex process. It is my intention we will do all we can to ensure it is a more streamlined service and that students are accommodated. The impetus for the entire review is to ensure the school transport service

provides the service it should provide and I look forward to the interim report in the not too distant future.

Deputy Martin Browne: It would help a lot of people.

Maternity Services: Motion [Private Members]

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I move:

That Dáil Éireann:

notes:

— that Ireland’s first National Maternity Strategy, *Creating A Better Future Together 2016-2026*, was launched by the Government on 27th January, 2016;

— that the strategy acknowledges that various reports and reviews highlighted significant service deficits and failings which undermined confidence in our maternity services and staff morale, including:

- a lack of choice for expectant mothers;
- inadequate emphasis on general health and wellbeing;
- ageing infrastructure;
- poor staffing ratios by international standards; and
- geographic variation in services;

— that the commitment to develop the strategy arose from the report entitled ‘Investigation into the safety, quality and standards of services provided by the Health Service Executive to patients, including pregnant women, at risk of clinical deterioration, including those provided in University Hospital Galway, and as reflected in the care and treatment provided to Savita Halappanavar’, and that report recommended that a strategy be developed to implement standard, consistent models for the delivery of a national maternity service that reflects best available evidence, to ensure that all pregnant women have appropriate and informed choices, and access to the right level of care and support;

— that the Programme for Government: *Our Shared Future* commits to implementing the National Maternity Strategy and the commitment in that strategy to co-locate the four standalone maternity hospitals, and the acknowledgment therein that the plans to redevelop the National Maternity Hospital on the St Vincent’s University Hospital campus ‘are well advanced and a planning application is imminent’; and

— the recommendation of the Sláintecare Report to implement the National Maternity Strategy;

further notes that the Health Information and Quality Authority (HIQA) report entitled ‘Overview report of HIQA’s monitoring programme against the National Standards for Safer Better Maternity Services, with a focus on obstetric emergencies’, published on 12th February, 2020, highlighted its concern at the overall level of progress of implementation of

the strategy, the eight recommendations set out therein and the urgent need for these recommendations to be acted upon in a timely manner; and

calls on the Government to:

- ensure the immediate development and publication of a comprehensive, time-bound and fully costed National Maternity Strategy 2016-2026 implementation plan, which spans the remaining timeframe of the strategy;
- immediately develop a plan for implementing the recommendations of the HIQA report, including clear actions and timelines for completion of the actions; and
- further ensure the public ownership and operation of the new National Maternity Hospital.

Baineann mo rún leis an straitéis náisiúnta máithreachais a foilsíodh i 2016. An aidhm a bhí ag an straitéis sin ná na cuspóirí a chur i bhfeidhm go hiomlán laistigh de thréimhse ama deich mbliana. Táim ag díriú isteach ar an straitéis inniu de bharr na heaspa dul chun cinn atá ann ó thaobh na straitéise sin. Tá moill i gceist agus tá an cur i gcrích easnamhach amach is amach. Ní hiad sin m'fhocail ach na focail ón áisíneacht HIQA. D'fhoilsigh an eagraíocht sin tuarascáil i bhFeabhra na bliana seo caite agus dhírigh siad an spotsolas ar an gá práinneach plean gníomhaíochta a fhoilsiú chun an straitéis a chur i gcrích agus na cuspóirí a bhaint amach. Tiocfaidh mé ar ais ag an tuarascáil sin.

I am delighted the Minister is here. I wish I did not have to move this motion. I see there is no amending motion from the Government but perhaps I am wrong. It would be good news. I thank Beibhinn O'Connor who works with me in the office. I also thank my colleagues for signing the motion. As I understand it, most of the parties and Independent Deputies in the Dáil support it. The next step it is what we will do with the motion.

The National Maternity Strategy 2016-2026 Creating A Better Future Together was launched by the Tánaiste, Deputy Varadkar, who was then the Minister for Health, with his full endorsement and commitment to advocate for it and fully implement it. Unfortunately, this has not happened. The vision for maternity services articulated in the strategy is an Ireland where women and babies have access to safe high-quality care in a setting that is most appropriate to their needs. Imagine we need a strategy to tell us women and babies need access to this. Women and families are to be put at the centre of all services and treated with dignity, respect and compassion.

That it took 100 years from the 1916 Proclamation, and the deaths and sufferings of so many people and children, speaks volumes. We are now midway through the strategy and the pace of its implementation, to put it at its most benign, is patchy or it is not implemented at all. This is entirely unacceptable. The continued failure to implement the maternity strategy is all the more worrying given the circumstances from which the strategy arose. The Minister is as familiar as I am with all of the reports, most particularly, the executive summary of the maternity strategy, which acknowledges that several reports and reviews over many years highlighted significant service deficits and failings, which undermined confidence in our maternity service and staff morale. There has been a lack of choice for expectant mothers, inadequate emphasis on general health, ageing infrastructure, poor staffing ratios by international standards and geographic variation in services. Unfortunately, many of these deficits remain.

More specifically, the commitment to develop the national maternity strategy arose from the death of Savita Halappanavar in my city of Galway. Among other things arising from the review into this was the national maternity strategy. I want to personalise this for a minute. Savita was 17 weeks pregnant, a 31-year-old woman looking forward to her baby and looking forward to breastfeeding that baby. This was all documented in her records. She died approximately seven days after being admitted to the hospital in Galway, which I will come back to with regard to the recommendations made arising from what happened. One of the most significant things was the lack of basic care.

The strategy is intended to provide the framework for a new and better maternity service. It acknowledges the service is hospital-based and a new model of care representing fundamental change is required. It is to be woman centred with integrated team-based care and women seeing the most appropriate professional based on need. I will not go into the strategy, the three pathways identified or the normalisation of the birth process. Imagine we have to go back to normalising the birth process and put into a strategy that we need to deal with women and children with dignity and care. We had to do this.

There is an obligation on the Government and the HSE in the strategy to produce annual plans. The last annual plan was 2018. The last implementation plan was 2017. On 12 February 2020, HIQA published an overview report on maternity services which made eight recommendations. In this report, HIQA highlighted the calls it made in October 2013 and May 2015 for an adequately resourced national maternity strategy. The report notes some of the progress made and HIQA was positive but stated it was concerned about the overall level of progress of implementation, for example the levels of funding allocated to implementation, the governance and accountability structures, and arrangements for driving the strategy at national health executive level. The first recommendation was for comprehensive planning with aligned costing measures, in other words, a fully costed implementation plan. The final recommendation was a plan to implement all of the recommendations of the report.

As I said, the strategy was launched in 2016. By the time HIQA published its report in 2020, nobody was driving it. In September 2019, nobody knew to whom they were reporting. HIQA identified that a lack of clarity on the governance and accountability arrangements of the national women and infants health programme, which was supposed to be the driver, represented a significant risk to the ongoing and effective implementation of the strategy, thereby also impeding progress on implementing national standards and greater transparency. HIQA found that progress was relatively limited and generally predated the strategy.

I said I would come back to Savita. Three reports were written about Savita Halappanavar. They highlighted a lack of basic care and basic monitoring and assessment in addition to a lack of choice. She had sepsis, which became severe, and then there was septic shock. In all of the analysis what jumps out is the absence of basic care, basic monitoring and treating a person with dignity. Of course, the eighth amendment overshadowed the whole proceedings. It was acknowledged in the report that an urgent change in the law was needed and that happened. That report was not in isolation; it was one of three.

I come from Galway and worked in Ballinasloe. There was an inquiry into Portiuncula covering a particular period of time. It started with six cases and, I understand, expanded to cover 18 cases. There were investigations in Drogheda and Portlaoise. I mention these cases only to highlight the urgency of the strategy and the urgent need to implement the strategy. That is what I am asking the Minister for today. If he agrees to that, that is good news. There must be

a time limit for the publication of the action plan and its implementation.

The last part of my motion relates to the new planned maternity hospital. I could not but mention it because it is mentioned in the national maternity strategy. On page 14 of the strategy it is acknowledged that plans to redevelop the National Maternity Hospital on the St. Vincent's Hospital campus are well advanced and a planning application is imminent. That was in February 2016. In 2008 there was a report from KPMG on co-location.

There have also been a number of different comments. I will read just a few of them. The then Minister for Health, Deputy Simon Harris, stated in June 2020 that the new maternity hospital will remain in State ownership and will be built on a site leased from St. Vincent's Hospital, which is a change from the previous position. Prior to that the Tánaiste, Deputy Leo Varadkar, said that the new national maternity hospital and another hospital will be State-owned buildings on State land. The Minister, Deputy Harris, referred to the hospital being State-owned on leased land. Dr. Peter Boylan asked the National Maternity Hospital lawyers who will own the hospital building and the response was that there would be a plethora of different structures and ownerships.

If our words, the deaths of women and children and the disabilities resulting from different operations are to mean anything, we need a commitment to a national maternity hospital that is publicly owned and operated on public land. Whether that means buying the site or a compulsory purchase order, so be it. In the 21st century, more than 100 years after the 1916 Rising, it is time to treat women with respect and dignity and as equal human beings and realise that a national maternity hospital in full public ownership is absolutely fundamental.

I am tired of the Kafkaesque - I have used this term so often - arrangements between holding companies and designated companies. It is a puppet on a string for the controlling Catholic religion behind that. I would say the same thing about any religion. It has no place in a public hospital. If the Minister can confirm today, in addition to the plan that will be published, that he is fully committed to the National Maternity Hospital being in full public ownership on public land, whether it is bought through a contract or by compulsory purchase, I would appreciate it. I will leave the remaining time for my colleague.

Deputy Thomas Pringle: I thank the Acting Chair for the opportunity to contribute on our motion on national maternity services and I would like to commend my colleague, Deputy Catherine Connolly, and her staff Béibhinn and Rachel, on their work on the motion. I was very happy to put my name to the motion to call on the Government to publish a time-bound and comprehensive implementation plan for the remaining years of the 2016-26 strategy.

It is 2021, three years since we voted to repeal the eighth amendment and nine years since Savita Halappanavar tragically lost her life. There have been many other unspeakable tragedies in maternity hospitals across the country. Our first national maternity strategy was published in 2016 and was to run until 2026. There are now five years left in this strategy and it is time for the Government and HSE to be held accountable for the commitments made. Women are consistently being let down by the State. It must be exhausting. Front-line staff in maternity services and midwifery staff are overworked, undervalued and working in physical environments with infrastructure that is not fit for purpose. I welcome that HIQA's report of early 2020 focused its recommendations on the HSE and the Government.

Covid has meant that pregnant people have been attending prenatal appointments alone. I

have made regular representations regarding Letterkenny University Hospital and support for pregnant people during Covid. I understand that there must be additional restrictions to ensure that Covid is kept out of hospitals, but there are pregnant people receiving devastating news alone and partners missing out on wonderful moments of hearing heartbeats on ultrasounds.

Just this week, on Monday, 31 May, I was informed that birthing partners are allowed a 30-minute visit each day to the maternity department in Letterkenny University Hospital after the birth of a baby. Even when everything goes perfectly there is still a need to check in on the person giving birth. We all know that there are many stories and incidents of traumatic births which may not begin to be processed until weeks or even months after the birth.

I have been told that from this week birthing partners in Letterkenny can accompany pregnant people to dating and anomaly scans. Letterkenny is now allowing the birthing partners of people in labour to attend. Partners can also attend a caesarean section done under regional anaesthesia. In those cases, partners must be screened and wear PPE - in fairness I think they are usually in scrubs when attending caesarean sections.

The spokesperson for the hospital said that if a partner has Covid-19 symptoms, is awaiting a Covid-19 test or test result or has had a positive test within the last 14 days he or she must not come to the hospital, and in this event an alternative birth partner may attend. So far, so good, but the spokesperson went on to state that partners must wear a face mask at all times, maintain social distancing and use the available hand gel to clean their hands regularly. From whom are they to maintain social distancing? Is it from the staff or the person giving birth? If they live together, why would they have to socially distance during the birth process? In cases where a baby is in the neonatal unit, just one parent at a time may visit.

On 7 and 8 August 2019, HIQA visited Letterkenny University Hospital unannounced. I welcome that the inspection report found that all standards bar one were compliant or substantially compliant. I particularly welcome that Letterkenny has a formalised process for people who have used the maternity services. It was standard 2.7 where Letterkenny Hospital was found to be non-compliant. HIQA found that the infrastructure in the maternity ward and assessment room was outdated and that infrastructure was listed as a risk on the risk register. HIQA inspectors were informed that there was no funding available to address the infrastructural deficits. The key finding included that the obstetric operating theatre for emergency cases was not adjacent to the labour ward, but is instead three floors above. There was an operating theatre there at the time but it did not have any staff.

Our motion calls for the eight HIQA recommendations to be implemented but, more importantly, that there are clear actions and timeframes for implementation and completion. As with all areas of government, progressive strategies are not worth the expensive paper they are printed on if the recommendations and changes are not put into practice.

Another example of the Government's lip service to issues of public importance is that of the ownership of the National Maternity Hospital. I fully support the campaign against church ownership of women's healthcare regarding the proposed new maternity hospital at Elm Park. For years now, activists have raised the issue of Catholic ethos practices in maternity, gynaecology and women's health services. Particularly since we repealed the eighth amendment and abortion services were rolled out across our 19 maternity hospitals, the possibility of the Catholic ethos overriding legislation is hugely concerning.

In our motion we call for legally guaranteed independence from all non-medical influence in the hospital's clinical operations within the laws of the State. However, campaigners are concerned that this is the language being used by independent legal experts advising on public engagement. Campaigners have provided documents showing that such guarantees cannot be provided within the terms of the largely private ownership and full private operational control demanded by the Religious Sisters of Charity and its company, St. Vincent's Healthcare Group. The Minister might consider raising this aspect with the relevant parties. Only full public ownership and full public governance can guarantee a full service in reproductive health.

Conversations around the need to co-locate maternity hospitals with acute general hospitals began in 2008, following a KPMG recommendation that timely access to complicated care should be readily available when needed. The National Maternity Hospital's Holles Street campus was found to be dilapidated and the need for change urgent. As per the usual pace of government change, it was 2013 before the then Minister for Health, James Reilly, announced the chosen site of Elm Park to co-locate with St. Vincent's Hospital for the National Maternity Hospital. Three years later, in 2016, a dispute emerged over the governance and ethos of the National Maternity Hospital. It was agreed a new company with clinical and operational independence should be established. This brought us St. Vincent's Healthcare Group, of which the Religious Sisters of Charity was the shareholder. Not only that, but it was also revealed that the State would gift the hospital to the group. Therefore, not only were we allowing nuns and the Catholic church to run a national maternity hospital, but we were also going to hand over ownership. It really beggars belief. I must commend the campaigners and the vocal repeal campaigners who have been keeping this issue in the media for years. In 2018, 66.4% of the electorate voted to repeal the dangerous eighth amendment, yet there were still conversations that abortion care could not take place at our new and improved national maternity hospital. Dr. Peter Boylan resigned from the executive board of the National Maternity Hospital, saying it was "blind to the consequences" of transferring ownership of the hospital to the group.

Various taoisigh have stood up in Dáil Éireann and given official State apologies to the vast numbers of people who have been hurt by the Catholic Church, and indeed the State, in the past. We talk about our dark history but there are people around us for whom this history is very, very present. There are families trying to be reunited, having had babies forcibly taken from them. There were illegal adoptions and illegal birth registrations and survivors are still not being heard. How can we atone as a country for the State's part in all this trauma without acknowledging the need to now separate the church and the State? How can we keep saying we must change our patriarchal system of delivering healthcare when we do not prioritise women's health?

There are larger conversations around the suitability of those who are accessing fertility treatment or experiencing miscarriage having to sit in waiting rooms with heavily pregnant people and joyful scenes. There are huge issues around the diagnosis and treatment of endometriosis and many other gynaecological issues. I say to the Minister that we all know that if men suffered through women's health issues, complications, and other traumas, the services would be completely different and would respond to our needs. That is what we need to do, to respond to the needs of women.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Joe Carey): The Minister has ten minutes.

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): My understanding was that I had 15 minutes. Would it be possible to check that?

Acting Chairman (Deputy Joe Carey): Ten minutes is what is listed here, so it is ten minutes.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: Is the Acting Chairman sure?

Acting Chairman (Deputy Joe Carey): Yes.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: Okay. I thank Deputy Connolly for tabling the motion on maternity care. The Government will be supporting the motion. Women's healthcare has never been prioritised as it should be in this country. It has never been invested in as it must be. Our maternity hospitals are not fit for purpose. We are reported as having the lowest rate of breast-feeding in Europe. There is insufficient choice for pregnant women in terms of midwifery-led care, community-based care and birthing options. Mental health supports are insufficient, including in identified critical areas such as eating disorders for girls and younger women. IVF supports are not good enough. Support and promotion of physical activity at all age groups is behind where it needs to be. A national conversation on menopause is speaking volumes for what has not been done for women's health and well-being. Gynaecology waiting lists are unacceptably long. Conditions like endometriosis have been largely ignored. This list goes on and on. We have incredible people working in women's healthcare, in community and hospital settings, and in maternity, gynaecology, mental health, oncology, screening, well-being and in many more areas. However, we need more of them and they need a lot more resources to provide the services that are required.

Women's healthcare is a top health priority for me and for this Government. That means extra resources, more services, quicker access, more choice and appropriate facilities. It means an approach informed by national strategies, including the national maternity strategy, and one in which women's voices are central, including the essential work of the women's health task force. The under-investment in maternity services, along with many other areas of the health service that cater for the well-being of women, has led in some instances to regrettable and tragic outcomes for women and babies. These events continue to be deeply traumatic for the women and families concerned, and I hope we will all bear them in our thoughts today as we discuss this motion.

The national maternity strategy is a central part of that learning process for improving women's healthcare. Its publication in 2016, mapping out the future for maternity and neonatal care in Ireland, was widely welcomed. Delivering on the strategy's vision of services that are safe, standardised, of high quality, with enhanced experience and more choice of care for women is the reason its full implementation is so important. It is also essential to ensuring that dignity and respect are at the forefront when we develop and deliver our services. Progress has been made to move us towards that goal and we have already seen developments in how maternity care is delivered. There has been a marked increase in the number of consultants, midwives and allied health professionals, with more than 330 whole-time equivalent posts funded under the strategy. Services have been made safer through the recruitment of maternity-specific quality and safety managers in each hospital group, the mandatory publication of maternity safety statements, and the establishment of serious incident management forums. Investment in scanning services has enabled maternity units and hospitals to now offer all women a routine anatomy scan. Midwifery services are increasingly available in community settings, and early transfer home services continue to be established. Each of our 19 maternity units and hospitals now have bereavement teams with clinical midwifery specialists, along with lactation consultants, recruited to each site.

However, I must also acknowledge that there is significantly more that needs to be done. This is why we have renewed our commitment to the strategy's implementation in the programme for Government. This year we have invested more in the development of our maternity services, and in women's healthcare in general, than ever before in a single year. Budget 2021 saw increased allocations of development funding for maternity and gynaecology services to the tune of €12 million. The funding allocated specifically for the implementation of the national maternity strategy is €7.3 million; that is the biggest investment in the strategy since it was launched. To put it in context, it is a one-year increase in the strategy of around 500%. I have also spoken with the chair of the HSE's board about regular monitoring of the implementation of these national strategies to ensure this investment is translated into the much-needed service improvements. This will significantly enhance our ability to deliver on its vision and to improve the experiences of the women and families accessing maternity care. Specifically, the funding provided in 2021 will help underpin the further development of community midwifery as well as specialist services. In addition to this, €5 million has been allocated to the women's health fund.

A number of significant initiatives in relation to gynaecology services are also being advanced. These include establishing or expanding services across nine see and treat ambulatory gynaecology clinics in 2021 and additional fertility hubs. We are establishing and expanding services across nine gynaecology clinics in 2021 in Dublin, Drogheda, Waterford, Wexford, Letterkenny, Portlaoise and counties Kerry and Mayo. It is estimated that approximately 70% of general gynaecology referrals are suitable for management in the ambulatory setting. This would include conditions such as abnormal uterine bleeding and chronic pelvic pain. In addition, care available in the ambulatory setting could encompass common investigations such as pelvic ultrasound, and diagnostic hysteroscopy as well as minor procedures, including cervical and endometrial polypectomy, and intrauterine device insertion, removal and replacement. We are establishing two new regional fertility hubs in Nenagh General Hospital and Galway this year, bringing the total number to six, one for each of our six hospital groups. The budget for this year also provided for a dedicated multi-annual €5 million women's health fund to implement a programme of actions arising from the very positive work of the women's health task force.

I recently announced the expansion of the endometriosis service at Tallaght University Hospital. This investment will help to deliver a much-needed specialist centre for the management and treatment of all forms of endometriosis, with particular focus on advanced and complex cases, treatment for which has not been readily accessible in Ireland. I was delighted to receive a proposal from the Irish College of General Practitioners for a clinical general practice lead for women's health and recently announced funding for this position. This will enable the development of a range of new educational and support services for GPs to enhance women's health services in their practices. I also recently announced further funding to the HSE of approximately €1.6 million to fund 24 additional lactation consultants, providing increased breastfeeding supports to every maternity unit in the country. To date, the HSE already has 30.5 whole-time equivalent lactation consultants. My Department is progressing a range of actions on menopause. Initiatives that are being advanced include a menopause workplace policy, provision of specialist support in the area of menopause and a health awareness campaign to increase visibility and awareness of menopause. More work can be done in that area.

Returning to our maternity services, I will reference HIQA's 2020 monitoring report. It is important to note that the report shows that there have been positive developments in maternity

services and that HIQA found high levels of compliance against most of the national standards. The HSE's national women and infants health programme has been working on a revised implementation plan for the national maternity strategy, based on HIQA's recommendations. I hope that speaks directly to the points Deputy Connolly raised. The revised implementation plan will set out the actions required to fully implement the strategy and will also reflect developments since it was published. In addition, the implementation plan will set out funding required each year to achieve the targets so that these can be considered as part of the annual Estimates processes. I agree wholeheartedly that multi-annual funding and a level of forward planning by the people involved in developing and rolling out the strategy are needed.

As referenced in the motion, the HSE is also preparing a plan in response to the other recommendations of the HIQA report, which included responding to infrastructural deficits identified across a number of maternity services. Last year, as recommended in the strategy, we saw the roll-out of the very first national maternity experience survey. Thousands of women across the country had the opportunity to tell us about their experiences. I was particularly glad to see from the survey results that many women have had very positive experiences. It is important that we recognise what we are doing well and then seek to expand those practices right across the system. It is also essential that we recognise some women did not have a positive experience and we must learn from that.

The Government is committed to the development of a new national maternity hospital on the St. Vincent's campus. The project is unprecedented and complex. We are relocating one voluntary hospital to the campus of another voluntary hospital and into a hospital building owned by the State. A legal framework is being developed to protect the State's investment in the new hospital and ensure that it remains in State ownership. The legal framework will also ensure that health services at the new hospital will be provided without religious, ethnic or other distinction. I know I am out of time but I ask the Chair to bear with for a few seconds. I want to state categorically something I previously stated at a meeting of the Joint Committee on Health and stated again yesterday when I met the National Women's Council of Ireland and others who have been involved in campaigning for these services. I will not countenance any new maternity hospital that has any governance or influence whatsoever involving any religious ethos. That is an absolute commitment. Services will be provided in accordance with the law and national policies. That is all.

There is much work to be done to ensure girls and women in Ireland have access to the healthcare and well-being services they need. Good and steady progress has been made in the past year. The task now is to increase this progress, grow services, make the experience better and better and improve access for all.

Deputy Joan Collins: I thank Deputy Connolly for bringing forward this motion and allowing for an urgent and timely discussion on the national maternity strategy. I also thank Ms Beibhinn O'Connor and Ms Rachel Hynes for the work they have put into this motion.

I listened to what the Minister said. While HIQA made the point that there has been some progress, an awful lot of issues still have not been progressed. That is why this motion was put down, calling for an annual report and plan, and for that annual plan to be brought back to the Dáil for reasons of transparency and accountability. We must accept that the national maternity strategy was initiated in 2016 with a ten-year implementation timescale. It followed a number of baby deaths in the Midland Regional Hospital in Portlaoise and the death of pregnant mother, Ms Savita Halappanavar, in Galway University Hospital. We know a public consultation pro-

cess was undertaken with 1,300 responses. Of those, 25% described maternity services as poor in terms of quality and safety. Has that changed? When will we see quantitative and reported change in that regard?

Specific concerns expressed in that public consultation process included a lack of support for breastfeeding; limited care options; lack of choice; an overly medicalised approach, especially to women at low risk; overcrowding; poor staff; and waiting times in both pre- and post-natal clinics. Years of underfunding and staff shortages have resulted in a service with serious deficiencies in a country with one of the highest birth rates in Europe. Does the Minister think we have reached the point when those deficiencies will not be reported any more? Are we reaching that point? When will those deficiencies no longer be reported? When will the plan be implemented?

All of the concerns expressed by pregnant women were confirmed in a report on maternity services across the 19 maternity hospitals for HIQA. Only one in four of those hospitals offered natal well-being scans or ultrasounds. It is not all bad, as we know from the HIQA report. Some services were described as “excellent”. Those included the domino scheme in the national maternity hospital, evidence-based practice in the Coombe, caesarean births in Limerick and home birth services in Cork, among others. However, if one lives in a more rural area, major geographical inequality still exists. Are those inequalities still there? Where are we on that? Can we have a report outlining what has been done and where we are leading to in the next five years? Units are under-staffed, infrastructure is inadequate, some care options depend on ability to pay and community midwifery is limited. Have those things changed? Where are we at in that regard? A physical report should be given to the Dáil and public representatives on those matters. There are limited mental health services for post-natal depression. In fact, such services are practically non-existent. We have one of the lowest levels of breastfeeding in the world. Where are we at on that? What has been put in place and what will be put in place in the future?

More than 60,000 babies are born every year in Ireland. The overwhelming majority are born with no problems, due to the commitment of front-line staff who work long shifts in difficult conditions. Can we have a report and accountable update of where those services are at and what jobs have been put in place?

Five years after the conception of the national maternity strategy, it has not been implemented the way it should have been. Parts of Sláintecare are still gathering dust on a shelf in the Department of Health. The question of choice in these services comes up again and again. Another issue around choice is the choice to terminate a crisis pregnancy. According to the National Women’s Council of Ireland, only one in ten GPs and half of maternity hospitals are offering abortion services. Three years after the repeal of the eighth amendment, one woman is going to the UK every day for a termination. These are difficulties, in particular, for migrants and the Traveller community. A patient needs a PPS number and Irish address to avail of the service. The upcoming review must deal with these problems if the will of the majority who voted in the referendum is to be respected.

The Minister referred to reports in his reply. Can we see a report from the HSE about what point we are at in our implementation of the national maternity strategy? What is the plan for implementing the rest of the strategy over the next five years? Where do we have to go from here?

The location of the national maternity hospital is mentioned in the national maternity strategy. Guarantees were given that the national maternity hospital would be on the basis of co-location with St. Vincent's hospital, would be built on State land and would be 100% owned by the State. Guarantees from then Taoiseach, Deputy Varadkar, and then Minister for Health, Deputy Harris, and more recent announcements from the Taoiseach, Deputy Micheál Martin, and the current Minister for Health, Deputy Donnelly, to the effect that the national maternity hospital will not have a Catholic ethos and all that implies, do not correspond with the facts. That is not happening at the moment. The reality is that the national maternity hospital will be built on land owned by the St. Vincent's Hospital Group, which will lease the land to the State on a 99-year lease. That is what we have seen. St. Vincent's Hospital Group was established by the Religious Sisters of Charity, a Catholic institution, effectively to maintain a Catholic ethos. This is now common practice as numbers in the religious orders decline in order to protect their property and the Catholic ethos into the future. This was done by religious orders elsewhere. It has been done by the Sisters of Charity here. The State has conceded on the issue of co-location. It has conceded on the issue of building on State land. With an estimated build cost of €500 million, plus another €500 million to equip the hospital, the State will build a €1 billion facility that it will not effectively own. That is the current situation.

We ask the Government to outline how it has stepped in and stated that that is not going to happen. I note the Minister stated that the hospital will not have a Catholic ethos, but what mechanism is the Government employing to ensure that will not happen? We are not seeing it at the moment and we are yet to be advised on that point. It is delusion to believe that an agreement can be reached on the issue of the ethos of the hospital. It is delusion to believe that the new national maternity hospital will be the only Catholic-owned hospital in the world to allow sterilisation, IVF and abortion procedures. What is the Government going to do to ensure that does not happen?

The new national maternity hospital must be a public hospital built on public land, run publicly by the State. The situation shows the absurdity of trying to build a modern public health-care system within the limits of a system that has never moved beyond the Victorian model of healthcare as an act of charity provided by religious institutions. It has huge implications for Sláintecare, if ever there was a real commitment to its implementation, as envisioned by all parties in their support for it.

I will finish on a note from Dr. Peter Boylan who said that the bottom line is the HSE must not approve the transfer of St. Vincent's Hospital Group to St. Vincent's Holdings for two reasons, first, that the national maternity hospital would be owned by St. Vincent's Holdings, the successor to the Sisters of Charity, with the same Catholic core values and that women's reproductive health would not be served by this and, second, that the State would be acquiescing to the ownership of a large, publicly-funded hospital group by a private company on privately-owned land with all the implications that has for Sláintecare.

I note the Minister's comments. However, we want to know what is being done to avoid the situation that we have seen publically. The St. Vincent's Healthcare Group, SVHG, has clearly set itself up. Co-location is not happening. The SVHG wants to integrate the new national maternity hospital into ethos and services of its own hospital. We are meeting with the Minister on Thursday, 17 June. Perhaps he can set out clearly at that meeting what the Government has done to date. Perhaps he could clarify if the Government has bought the land, if it has procured the land through a compulsory purchase order and if it has instructed the Sisters of Charity that they, and their Catholic ethos, will not have a role to play in the public hospital.

Deputy David Cullinane: First, I wish to thank the Independents who have brought forward this motion. I wish to commend the motion and its three main demands, namely, that there must be an immediate step change in the implementation of the national maternity strategy, including a comprehensive, time-bound, fully resourced implementation plan for full implementation by 2026; that immediate action is taken on the eight recommendations from HIQA's overview report of its monitoring programme against the new standards for safer, better maternity services; and absolute iron-clad assurance that the new national maternity hospital will be publicly owned and operated, with absolutely no room for error or mistakes.

Women's healthcare is not something in respect of which this State has a good reputation. The history of the State's attitude towards women's healthcare is not one we can be proud of - from the avoidable deaths of several babies in the years prior to the strategy, consistent negative international comparisons of the performance of maternity units, the CervicalCheck scandal, the vaginal mesh implant scandal, and the historical wrongs committed against women and their children. We need a women-centred approach to women's healthcare to be adopted very rapidly.

CervicalCheck campaigners continue to face barriers to justice with the CervicalCheck tribunal still not hearing the number of claims that would have been anticipated. It does not seem to be fit for purpose. There is little trust between women and the Irish healthcare system.

The national maternity strategy was supposed to be part of the answer, but the fact is that it was never properly resourced. The resources committed in the last budget to the national maternity strategy was a start, but it was a start after many years of underinvestment or very little investment. Several maternity hospitals have significant infrastructural deficits. HIQA has recommended that all maternity units are reviewed.

I have visited the Rotunda Hospital a number of times. I am sure the Minister is aware of how cramped conditions are and how difficult it is for staff who are trying to provide the very best maternity care in that hospital. They need capital investment to ensure that they can expand and provide a much higher standard of maternity care in a much safer way. That is the bottom line. That is only one maternity unit. There are many more.

It is highly concerning to hear that not all clinical staff involved in the management of obstetric emergencies have received the necessary multidisciplinary training. The lack of a standardised national approach and provision of training for obstetric emergencies is a huge failing in respect of mothers and their babies. There are also significant protocol deficits. There is a lack of transfer protocols to the most appropriate care settings for women and newborns and a lack of a shared learning from reviews of clinical incidents across maternity units.

Covid-19 has been blamed for the strategy falling behind, but if we are honest, it was never at the races to start with. Funding was made available for 23 consultant roles but they are not filled by permanent staff. Consultant working conditions are preventing recruitment for those roles because Government has refused to address the recruitment and retention crisis in our hospitals, and indeed, the two-tier consultant pay issue which still exists and prevails.

Talking about new public-only contracts sounds great, and that is something that I obviously support, but we have to deliver. It also has to be agreed with the Irish Medical Organisation and the Irish Hospital Consultants Organisation. We need to win support from hospital consultants and their representative groups for new contracts, so that we can attract the highest quality con-

sultants into maternity services and other areas like cancer care, as we heard at the meeting of the Joint Committee on Health this morning.

We are meant to have a community midwife-led service in all of our maternity hospitals, but five years on, only two hospitals have this service and have considered closing it. In our manifesto, Sinn Féin committed to providing an additional €70 million to fund and implement the national maternity hospital. That is the level of investment which is necessary.

I wish to finish by stating that we need an absolute commitment that the national maternity hospital will remain completely in public ownership. Why we had to go down the route of establishing a company to manage the land and the hospital, is beyond me. Surely, the land should have been gifted to the State? That is what should have happened. It should have been transferred or gifted to the State, then the national maternity hospital would be fully owned by the State. The land would be owned and managed by the HSE as opposed to being managed by others on a board. We must look at this issue. I commend the motion on highlighting the issue and seeking clarity on it.

I listened to what the Minister said earlier. He has provided some clarity, but there are still questions outstanding in relation to how it would all work in practice. The only way forward is for the land to be gifted to the State and for the hospital to be in full public ownership.

Deputy Kathleen Funchion: First, I wish to commend Deputy Connolly and her colleagues on bringing forward this motion. I agree with much of the sentiment that has already been expressed around the importance of having the national maternity hospital in public ownership and the fact that there should be no religious influence.

However, I want to take the opportunity to specifically focus on the maternity services situation in St. Luke's Hospital, which is based in Kilkenny, but provides services for the counties of Carlow and Kilkenny. There has been no easing of Covid-19 restrictions for expectant mothers in St. Luke's, for scan appointments, the labour and the birth. It is most important that the Minister looks into this issue directly. He must ensure that this hospital and these women are not left out.

The point has been made by others that pregnancy and childbirth is an important and exciting time, but it can also be a nerve-racking and scary time. It is important that women have their partners at their side not just for the labour and the birth, but also for the scan appointments. Some have referenced the 20-week anomaly scan as being significant, but I also think that some of the earlier scan appointments are important. Many women end up finding out that they have had a miscarriage when there has been no indication of a problem. They go in, have a scan and receive the very sad news that there is no heartbeat. That is devastating for people. Therefore, it must be ensured that these women can have someone with them at their appointments. It should not be the case that partners are left standing outside in the car park when a woman's whole world is falling apart. It must be ensured that those people are there. If these were issues that affected a group of men, I doubt that we would be having this debate because the issues would have already been resolved. There was a good, well-organised protest - it was organised by a number of women - outside St. Luke's Hospital some weeks ago and I was struck by the fact that when one looks at the people who are making the decisions, with all due respect to the Minister, they are all men.

It is very important that women's issues, particularly women's health, are taken seriously.

There have been countless debates about women's health in my time in this House since 2016, and there were debates well before that. There was the cervical screening situation, the problem with vaginal mesh and many other debates. There are many things that do not even get on the radar. Members may or may not have heard the recent discussions on Joe Duffy's radio programme about the menopause and the number of women who rang in who had no help or support and who were not given adequate information. Why is it always the case that when it comes to issues that affect women, and particularly their health, there is no information? It is the same with endometriosis. There is very little information, help or support. Women are being forced to go abroad. Women are suffering pain and agony for years and almost being made to feel that they are going crazy when they are told that this could not be happening or that it is something else. I know somebody very well who was on the verge of having her gall bladder removed. It was decided to carry out a last-minute scan. This person was in the gown and ready to go, but it was not the gall bladder at all. It was only then that it was decided it was endometriosis. It is actually ridiculous that we are discussing that level of lack of medical information. There is a shying away, not facing it and not knowing how to deal with it. It is not good enough for the women in this country.

I specifically ask the Minister to look at the situation in St. Luke's Hospital and in Carlow and Kilkenny. It is an excellent hospital and provides excellent care. At present, however, it is failing women who are expecting babies, who are struggling to get pregnant, and who are dealing with early miscarriage or the various situations one encounters. Then there is the labour, the birth and the level of visitation in the aftermath. I heard that some hospitals allow a 30-minute visit per day. That is not available in St. Luke's Hospital. Those issues must be examined. As I have the opportunity today to speak directly to the Minister, I appeal to him to examine that situation in particular.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: There is much talk at present about things reopening, and rightly so. It is very welcome. I do not oppose it. However, with all these areas reopening, maternity hospitals are still denying access to partners. One can go to shopping centres and, from next Monday, one can have a meal outdoors or go to a museum, yet a partner cannot be present with a woman during the labour and when she is giving birth. What is worse is that the Minister and the Government are trying to present a minimal, tiny level of access as a major reopening. It is a cod. It is presenting the problem as if it has been resolved. Yes, there are some that are even further behind, but in all instances the level of access is totally unacceptable. It is a fraud.

Just before last Christmas, my partner, Eimear, had an emergency appointment with the early pregnancy unit because she was bleeding. I waited outside in the car park, looking up at the window of the early pregnancy unit waiting room. It was as close as I could get. I am glad to say that everything was okay, but we were worried. If it had not been okay, Eimear would have had to face that appointment alone. She would have got that bad, devastating, earth-shattering news alone. The situation is still the same today. If a couple in that situation, worried about the same thing, goes to any hospital today, tomorrow or next week, the partner must stay outside the hospital door. That is an outrage. Whatever about a year ago, hospital staff are now vaccinated. Increasingly, pregnant women are vaccinated and many partners will be vaccinated too before long. That is welcome. Partners and expectant mothers almost always come from the same household and present the same Covid risk. There is no justification.

The South/South West Hospital Group website advice on when a partner can have access when a mother is giving birth says the partner can join after the woman is in strong active labour

and soon after birth is kindly asked to leave. Women in labour need support, full stop. The WHO and the chief medical officer say so. The idea that an arbitrary decision on how many centimetres dilated a woman is should dictate when she needs support is ridiculous and outrageous. On the same website there is a link to the Royal College of Midwives report which states that having trusted birth partners present is known to make a significant difference to the safety and well-being of women. Once more, however, they are asked kindly to leave. When a woman has been through all that, and God knows how many hours the labour might have been, and when she needs to rest and recuperate the partner who can help her do that, even for little things like a shower or a rest, must leave. The Minister must stop dragging his heels on this and force action. He must stop presenting these minimal changes as enough. Women need their partners during all the labour, after the birth and at key appointments. Partners are not visitors; they are essential support.

Deputy Claire Kerrane: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this important motion. It is now five years since the national maternity strategy was launched. It was hailed at the time as setting out radical reforms of maternity and neonatal services over a ten-year period. However, last year HIQA published a report following inspections of 19 maternity units and hospitals, during which it discovered that the HSE had no plan for how to implement the strategy. Years after launching the plan, the HSE did not know how it would be implemented. That makes it appear that the launch was just put together to make it look as if something was being done.

A key recommendation in the strategy was that maternity services should be woman-centred. Unfortunately, for the best part of the last year maternity services have not been woman-centred. They are still not today. Women are being left without the support of a partner at appointments, at scans, during the full labour and after the birth, and there are restrictions on visiting. They do not have the support of their partner to allow them just to have a rest or a sleep after giving birth. Trinity College Dublin carried out research last year on women's experiences of maternity care during the Covid pandemic. Women spoke about feeling emotional, anxious and fearful when entering the maternity hospital alone. While women described their midwives as being very supportive during their early labour experience, for most this was not enough. They needed their partner. Many women described the unusual situation of their partner waiting in the car park while they were in early labour. They spoke about going out to the car park to walk with their partner, to pass time and to be with their partner in sharing the experience. I cannot begin to imagine how worried and scared those women were.

It is bad to launch a maternity care strategy and not implement it up to now, and then to leave women in the situation they were left in during the Covid pandemic, particularly when it comes to labour. The least the Government can do now is implement the strategy with full funding.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: Women are an afterthought in many instances, but particularly with regard to healthcare. Over the decades, time and again we have seen scandal after scandal in women's healthcare. That must stop now. It is unacceptable for maternity care to be pushed to the margins as we move out of lockdown. While golfers are back on the greens and we will be able to drink a pint outside from next week, pregnant women are once again forgotten. I have been contacted by many mothers and fathers who have been damaged as a result of this. One woman told me she gave birth in my local hospital in Galway last June. She was alone for most of the labour while her husband sat in the car park, also alone. He spoke about the devastation of dropping her off, alone, and waiting for her outside. I am sure the Minister can accept that this caused a great deal of stress for both parents. She said: "I was alone in the bath for hours without the company of anyone, just a midwife to check on me every so often". These

are harrowing words. I was also contacted by a father who missed the birth of his child as a result of the restrictions.

The Government must act and end the restrictions. The CEO of the HSE has said that the conditions are right to end maternity restrictions and the CMO has said there is no good reason to continue the restrictions. However, three weeks later I still cannot get an answer from University Hospital Galway as to why it is continuing the restrictions. It refers to when active labour is initiated. I am not told what active labour is.

11 o'clock

Labour is labour, and that includes early labour. Induction of labour is labour. Early labour is labour. They have not specified at what point in labour partners may attend. I am blue in the face trying to get an answer to these questions. In University Hospital Galway, partners are only allowed to visit between 7 p.m. and 9 p.m. and only for half an hour in the neonatal intensive care unit. This does not go far enough. Fathers are not visitors. They are parents who are as responsible for their child as the mothers and their support and presence during the first days of their child's life are essential.

Deputy Pauline Tully: The recommendations in HIQA's maternity overview report found a lack of clarity and national leadership within the HSE regarding the responsibility for implementing the national maternity strategy. This strategy provides a framework for a new and better maternity service that will improve choice for women and ensure that smaller maternity units in particular are better supported to provide sustainability, high quality and safe care. It recommended the expansion of community and home-based care to ensure greater access to midwifery-led services in all geographical locations.

This was echoed in the Programme for Government: Our Shared Future, which committed to implementing the national maternity strategy. In June 2019, while in opposition, the Minister brought forward a motion on national maternity services that called, among other things, for progress to start in 2019 on all projects not yet commenced and for investment in community-based pathways to ensure choice for mothers. Despite all these commitments and promises, midwifery-led services are still only available in two locations - Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital in Drogheda and Cavan General Hospital. Indeed this was almost reduced to one midwifery-led unit last year when the lack of clarity and national leadership within the HSE that was highlighted in the maternity services overview report was in evidence. In total contrast to the recommendation of the national maternity strategy, there was an effort to subsume the excellent midwifery-led unit at Cavan General Hospital under a new consultant-led model of care. It took a public backlash to halt this contradictory proposal and bring about a commitment to undertake a review of the maternity services at Cavan General Hospital, which eventually recommended that the midwifery-led unit service be expanded. The commitments and promises made by this Government with regard to the expansion of midwifery-led services across all geographical locations must be delivered. Women have waited too long for these commitments to be realised.

There is growing public disquiet about the ownership, governance and ethos of the planned new national maternity hospital. I believe there are many legitimate concerns about the implications of private ownership of the national maternity hospital by a company with a religious ethos. The site is to be leased to the State but ownership will be retained by a private entity. Although the proposed facility can be expected to cost taxpayers over €1 billion, only the shell of the hospital will be publicly owned. The State is to have no involvement in the private com-

pany set to own the new facility and no role in its operations. I have serious concerns regarding the potential impact of this on women's healthcare and services and believe these should be provided in a publicly owned hospital. A public hospital and its grounds should be fully owned by the State rather than a private company. I support the motion.

Deputy Alan Kelly: I thank Deputy Connolly and her colleagues for bringing forward this motion, which we will support. I note the Deputy's track record on this because I know we have been raising similar issues for many years. I am disappointed the Minister left just before I began to speak. Perhaps he was afraid I was going to remind him of what he said in opposition regarding all these issues because it was quite comprehensive. If he was to implement in government what he called for while in opposition, it would be great.

I will cover three areas. The first concerns access to maternity services. In fairness, the contribution from Deputy Ó Laoghaire summarises what I have been saying here for months. I have told many stories of many friends who are being treated so badly because they cannot be with their partners. I have heard some really horrific stories. This issue needs to be dealt with once and for all.

The second issue relates to the national maternity strategy. This strategy is five years in and is going nowhere as regards scale. It is completely wrong. Mark Molloy resigned in June 2020 because it was going nowhere. Given the credibility of the other members, I would be surprised if they stay on board as well. In fact, I would not advise them to stay on board. It is not my business. This is going nowhere in scale. Obviously we need multiannual funding, which still has not happened. Regarding the issues outlined by HIQA, only Cork, Cavan, Drogheda and Wexford meet the requirements. The other 15 maternity units need significant upgrading and refurbishment. Local maternity services to me are in Limerick, where my children, my brother and I were born. Essentially, it has not changed. The structures are still the same. It is completely archaic and out of date. It is scandalous. The Government cannot even find enough money to push that forward. I will make a suggestion about that later on.

While I welcome some developments regarding the fertility hub in my local hospital in Nenagh, they are small by comparison to the overall scale of what is required. We must learn lessons relating to the scandalous situation that has affected so many women across the country. We made multiple promises that services to women would improve. I know because I have been fighting with regard to the CervicalCheck issue for years. Look what is happening with the tribunal. Look at what is happening with regard to gynaecological services where there are waiting lists of two years or more for some procedures and diagnostics relating to issues like endometriosis. That is just not good enough. That is reality. It is not good enough yet we make all these promises. Promises are a waste of time unless they are fulfilled.

Finally and most comprehensively, I want to deal with the ownership of the national maternity hospital. I have literally been dealing with this issue since 2017. This is the crux of the issue. The original decision regarding the national maternity hospital should not have been made. The officials who drove that decision have questions to answer. The Government that drove that decision has questions to answer. I believe we are now in a deadlocked situation. In the programme for Government, the Government said it would "Conclude the governance arrangements and commence the building of the new maternity Hospital at St Vincent's Hospital, Dublin." It did not say anything about ownership. Until the ownership structures are sorted out, we cannot proceed. I looked at what the Minister said. He was quite equivocal regarding where the ownership would go, which I welcome, and said he would not do anything until it is

sorted. Frankly, he will not be doing anything unless he does something about the ownership model that was structured and put in place in 2017 and has been thundering along since then. It has to be dealt with. This nettle must be grasped. The model will not work unless this is done through compulsory purchase order or is gifted. It is as simple as that.

While we are wasting time on all of this, the national maternity strategy is not progressing. Could we, at least, deal with the Rotunda and Limerick hospitals by pushing them on while we are losing all this time on the national maternity hospital, of which I am a huge supporter? I am a huge supporter of the national maternity strategy. I am on record as saying it is one of the best healthcare strategies in Ireland that has ever been written. This must be dealt with. I believe the 2017 decision to give sole ownership of the site to the religious Sisters of Charity was wrong. I believe in co-location but it could not have been done this way. In May 2017, under pressure from myself and others, the Sisters of Charity said it would not be involved in the running of it but it needed to get divestment permission from the Holy See. It received permission but there were conditions under Canon Law 1293. The cat was then let out of the bag when the Catholic primate, Eamon Martin, said he would oppose certain actions in the hospital such as abortion. We then saw the 2017 annual report of St. Vincent's Hospital, which said it would be obliged to uphold the values and visions of Mother Aikenhead. That showed where this was going but we have had no movement of any substance since then. We are at a point now where, as the previous Minister, Deputy Harris, said, there are three tests before this can be moved on: that the building would be completely in State ownership; that there would be no religious association in any way, shape or form in the articles of association of the company; and that the board would be fully orientated towards the State.

There was also a very clear point made, which is the sticking issue, that this Government or any future Government, would have to make a decision to proceed. It would not just be a Minister's decision; the Government would have to make the decision. We are now at the point where a Government needs to make a decision. It, however, is a kind of tipping away and hoping that it will be gifted. If that does not happen then it must be done by compulsory purchase order, CPO. While we are doing that we need to progress the national maternity strategy in relation to an overall strategy, and especially in relation to capital investment for the likes of the Rotunda and Limerick hospitals.

This hospital needs to be independent. We must get it right. We must guarantee State ownership. We must guarantee and ensure the legal arrangements around this with regard to the board of directors are proper. The new national maternity hospital cannot be a subsidiary as currently constructed under the St. Vincent's Holdings CLG. It needs to be owned by the State, it needs to have its own governance and budgetary independence, and it needs to be absolutely bereft of any religious interference whatsoever. We are at a critical point and the Government needs to move this one. It needs to make a decision and to stop pussyfooting around on the issue and it needs to be open and transparent on it.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: I am absolutely disgusted that the Minister, Deputy Donnelly, has left the debate this morning. He has come up with a speech that has all the right words in it, and yet he will not be in the Chamber to listen to women's voices and women's opinions on this matter. I am really annoyed that the Minister has left the debate and not given us the respect of listening to what we have to say on the issue.

I stand here today as the Social Democrats spokesperson for children. I stand here as Wicklow's only female Deputy, and despite the Minister for Health and the previous Minister for

Health being my constituency colleagues. I stand here as a mother of two daughters. I stand here as someone who campaigned and voted to repeal. I stand here as someone who fundamentally believes that women's healthcare deserves to be free from religious influence, and that women deserve to have the healthcare they need and want, when and where they need it. I am really angry that the Minister is not in the House to listen to this.

I will specifically talk about the National Maternity Hospital and I thank the Minister of State, Deputy Mary Butler, for being here to listen to this today. I thank Deputies Connolly and Pringle and their colleagues for bringing this motion forward. It is a hugely important issue and one which the Social Democrats will absolutely stand behind.

I will speak specifically on the ownership of the National Maternity Hospital. In his speech, the Minister said that "[t]he legal framework will also ensure that health services at the new hospital will be provided without religious, ethnic or other distinction." This does not mean that the services provided will be without religious distinction; it means the hospital would not discriminate against people on their religion or ethnicity in the context of access to the hospital. The Minister also said:

I will not countenance any new maternity hospital that has any governance or influence involving any religious ethos. Services will be provided in accordance with the law and national policies.

This completely rings hollow because this is the same Minister who, a number of weeks ago, said there was no legal, policy or health reason maternity restrictions were required when it came to women who were giving birth under Covid restrictions at the moment, and that there was absolutely no reason for partners not to be allowed in with them. The Chief Medical Officer said there was no legislative or health reasons that could not happen. It is clear that the Minister does not have control over what is happening in the hospitals across the State. There are many women who must face the very vulnerable position of going for healthcare, having scans and then giving birth without their partner or support person. It does not make any sense in a situation where people will very soon be able to go to the pub and enjoy a pint. Yet, women cannot have the very person they need with them while they give birth. The Minister is saying that he will make sure that the national maternity hospital will meet all its legal and national policy requirements, but that he cannot do so when it comes to maternity restrictions at the moment. I am sorry, but the Minister's assertion absolutely rings hollow. I am not taking him on his word. Promises have been made repeatedly on this over the years and the Minister and the previous Minister have still not provided the governance and clarity on who will own this hospital, who will run it, and under which ethos and influence maternity care will be provided.

In my constituency in Wicklow 74% of people voted to repeal. We did not vote to repeal on condition. We did not say that it was repeal only for some women in the State or for only some hospitals. Every single woman in Ireland and every single woman in our constituency of Wicklow deserves to have the healthcare she needs, when she needs it, and to make choices about her own body in accordance with her wishes and not some puppet that holds governance over her.

Deputy Holly Cairns: I join the other Members in thanking Deputy Connolly and her team for bringing forward this very important motion. Over the past year I have had to repeatedly raise the issue of restrictions in maternity hospitals. Despite reassurances that this issue would be dealt with, it was not. While the rest of society had opened up, and while we could even go to the pub, mothers were and still are expected to go through labour mainly alone, while part-

ners are lucky if they get to attend the birth of their own child.

Reflecting on this past year, it is very apparent that pregnant people do not have a lobby group and that they are not an economic priority. One year later and some efforts have been made to address this, but it is not enough. Last December, for example, the HSE reclassified partners as essential accompanying persons for the purpose of the 20-week scan, but then they became unessential for the remainder of the maternity journey, which makes no actual common sense to anybody.

That the Minister has left the House for this debate says it all. Maternity services are relegated because they are a women's issue and they are overlooked because they can be. This is changing, however, and it is changing fast. The recent maternity restrictions campaign has shown an incredible solidarity and it is not only the people currently affected but also other parents. Other women are showing an incredible solidarity and families are sharing their stories of miscarriages and the need for more supports. There is a new strength of purpose in ensuring that maternity services are better for the women next to come in the door. The Government would do well to note this solidarity.

Today's motion brings us to the reality of implementing a strategy that is about resourcing, staffing, and paying for the healthcare that parents and babies are entitled to. Crucially, we need the staff and facilities to run a safe and dignified service. Last year's HIQA report into maternity services outlined how midwifery staff are working overtime to address staffing deficits and to maintain service levels. The Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation, INMO, has consistently highlighted that our midwife-to-birth ratio is much higher than it should be. The Government must implement robust recruitment and retention strategies to make nursing and midwifery careers more attractive and to ensure that all our nurses and midwives in training are properly paid and have the option of working in Ireland.

Disgracefully there is essentially no consideration of disabled women in the current strategy. Witnesses at the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Disability Matters have highlighted the systemic barriers these women face, including the lack of proper infrastructure, absence of interpreters, and inadequate information for informed decision making in all aspects of maternal health. The strategy implementation plan needs to consider the needs of people with disabilities, as well as vulnerable or marginalised groups.

This motion rightly insists on the public ownership of the new national maternity hospital. It is unbelievable that in 2021 we have to even discuss this. Maternal healthcare needs to be free of private interests or religious control. It is intolerable that a particular ethos would determine what healthcare people get rather than medical need. The Minister needs to give an absolute guarantee today that the new national maternity hospital will be publicly owned and operated.

The current national maternity strategy is Ireland's first. As we pass through a decade of centenaries, we are reminded that it took almost 100 years for the State to take a properly organised approach to maternal healthcare. Instead, women were too often sent to institutions, the mother and child scheme was heavily resisted, and until 2018 those in need of abortion care were shipped abroad. These realities reflect the position of women's healthcare in our society. In case Deputies think I am exaggerating, they should read the motion, as the only reason we have a national maternity strategy is the very tragic death of Ms Savita Halappanavar. As well as the specific findings surrounding Savita's passing, the HIQA report highlighted the lack of co-ordination and inconsistencies in the provision of maternity services. For the national ma-

ternity strategy to mean anything, it must be implemented and resourced properly. It is outrageous that we need this motion but we do.

The Government needs to listen. We do not need lists of the achievements the Department of Health has written for the Minister but rather real political decision-making to immediately provide a comprehensive, time-bound and fully costed implementation plan. Anything less is unacceptable.

Deputy Bríd Smith: I thank Deputies Catherine Connolly, Joan Collins and Thomas Pringle for tabling the motion. I know the debate is being keenly watched by people campaigning to ensure our National Maternity Hospital is in public control and I am not very reassured by the statements this morning from the Minister.

Three years after the referendum repealing the eighth amendment to the Constitution, which ensured we could finally access abortion services in this country, we are faced with the promised state-of-the-art new national maternity hospital being controlled and run by a religious order of the Sisters of Charity. I do not know what kind of imagination the Minister has but I cannot see how it would sit comfortably with that order to provide abortion services, IVF treatment, vasectomy, which it currently refuses to provide, sterilisation and operations such as gender realignment. I do not understand how the Minister can assure us on that. He stated that a legal framework is being developed to protect the State's investment in the new hospital and ensure it remains in State ownership without religious, ethnic or other distinction. It is difficult to understand or accept.

We need our Government to take the new national maternity hospital into public ownership. It should own the land on which it sits and control every aspect of it. Looking at the cost of the national children's hospital, it is likely that nearly €1 billion or more will be spent on the maternity hospital building. The Government has said it endorses this motion but it is like it is asking us to trust it and the Sisters of Charity. During the campaign to repeal the eighth amendment, we constantly asked people to trust women and I trust them to make their own choices. I cannot trust the State and the Department of Health with the record they have on reproductive healthcare and women's rights. It is absolutely appalling, whether we start with the mother and baby homes, the Magdalen laundries, the X case, Savita Halappanavar, the A, B, C and Y cases, women being forced abroad, the symphysiotomy and CervicalCheck scandals or vaginal mesh surgeries. You name it and the Department of Health and this State have overseen it with some of the worst treatment of women and their healthcare needs.

If all the decisions are being made by the State in that hospital, there are some glaring contradictions in the Minister's contentions. At the end of this, we need agreement with the Ministers concerned that this session on the motion, although very welcome, important and timely, should be continued with a longer debate with questions and answers to the Minister on the specifics of this deal. These specifics are being obscured and glossed over and the language is very worrying. We must demand at the Business Committee to go through these matters.

There is disquiet about the ownership, governance and ethos of the planned new maternity hospital for good reason. New information has recently emerged that assurances given on the ethos in 2017 cannot be relied on. The proposed facility, although expected to levy a cost on the taxpayer, will not be publicly owned and the State will have no involvement with the private company running it. There is no way of compelling the new private company, as planned, to provide services that fly in the face of Catholic ethos. A 2019 Government-commissioned

report on the role of voluntary organisations in publicly funded healthcare indicated its premise on the fact that legally the State cannot compel private Catholic entities to provide services contrary to their ethos. The nuns have yet to divest themselves of the assets and they still own the lands and particularly the site on which it is planned to build the hospital.

According to the Catholic Church, abortion is one of the most serious crimes of all and one must ask what precaution has been taken by the nuns to ensure the services will be provided in the new national maternity hospital that could undermine their own teaching. Legal instruments relating to ownership and governance structures, constitutions, leasing and licensing arrangements, along with staff contracts and conditions, are all aimed at enforcing compliance with the ethos of the Catholic Church. A clear statement of this ethos can be found in the hospital's job specification, which cites that the core values of the Religious Sisters of Charity, under the new holding company, St. Vincent's Holdings CLG, will set its healthcare delivery in a religious framework.

Honestly, how can we be expected to trust the Government when we read that the St. Vincent's Holdings company directors are legally bound to uphold the ethos of the congregation? That is not my ethos or that of the vast majority of people. It is not what delivered us a massive change in this country with the referendum on repealing the eighth amendment.

There can no longer be obfuscation and confusion about where we are going with this new national maternity hospital. If we are not going to sit down and have an honest debate, with the Minister forensically questioned about all the matters relating to the contract and holding company arrangements, we are going nowhere. We cannot just fire statements back and forth here without such forensic questioning. Like everybody else, I am extremely worried that this is hurtling to a conclusion and the hospital deal will be done very soon. I appeal to everybody in the House to demand that cross-party debate to bring this matter forward.

Deputy Mick Barry: Last Tuesday, 25 May, under questioning from me on Leaders' Questions, the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications, Deputy Eamon Ryan, stated the new national maternity hospital "will be operated by two separate voluntary hospitals". He did not mention the identities of the two separate voluntary hospitals and I can only presume they comprise the boards of the current National Maternity Hospital and the St. Vincent's Healthcare Group.

I am sure the Minister does not need reminding that the St. Vincent's Healthcare Group is the lay successor organisation to the previous owner of St. Vincent's Hospital, the Sisters of Charity, who are nuns. He also does not need to be reminded that they are obliged to uphold the values and vision of the founder of the Sisters of Charity, Mary Aikenhead, or in other words, Roman Catholic doctrine. The Minister does not need to be told the provision of abortion services, sterilisation, IVF, gender reassignment surgery, etc., is completely inconsistent with the upholding of Roman Catholic doctrine.

Will the Minister tell the House why the Government has articulated support for giving operating rights to a privately owned Catholic lay successor organisation at our new national maternity hospital, which is being built exclusively by the State at a cost of more than €500 million to the taxpayer? The St. Vincent's medical group is hardly likely to provide abortion services at our new national maternity hospital so is the Minister honestly trying to tell us one medical team at the hospital will provide these services while the other will not? Is this not precisely the kind of Irish solution to an Irish problem that the people signalled they wanted rid of when

they voted so overwhelmingly to repeal the anti-abortion laws three years ago?

The new national maternity hospital must be 100% publicly owned and fully provide abortion services, IVF, sterilisation and gender reassignment services. That is instead of having a bit over here and a bit over there.

Deputy Seán Canney: I compliment Deputy Catherine Connolly and her colleagues on bringing forward the motion. It might have been an ill-judgment of the Minister to leave before some of the contributions were made. I say this with no disrespect to the Minister of State, Deputy Mary Butler, and I acknowledge her presence. The Covid-19 situation and all the restrictions that came into being gave rise to angst and anger because of the disruption caused to maternity services. Nobody is to blame for Covid-19. One of the things we must learn from the pandemic is that maternity services were affected in a way that meant partners were excluded from what were special occasions in the lives of families. Those were sometimes also traumatic and sorrowful occasions, with high stress experienced by the mother and the partner.

We are now opening the country. As other speakers have said, however, there seems to be a reluctance on behalf of the management of hospitals across the country to do the same. It is very hard to justify it being possible for people to go for a drink, into a hotel and to do all of these types of things, yet partners, who are more than likely living together, cannot be together for these special, and sometimes sad, occasions that occur during maternity.

The biggest problem I find with this situation is that the Department of Health has divorced itself from all responsibility in respect of hospital management. Hospital management in different areas has operated under rules. This has again created confusion and a question about who is in charge. Therefore, rather than just talking about this matter, it is important that the Minister issues a directive to the management of hospitals concerning how to proceed.

The other issue I want to raise is the national maternity strategy. I have often listened to people talking about strategies since I was elected to this House. A few Deputies said that the strategy was written in a given year. The easiest thing is probably to write a strategy, but the crucial aspect should be implementing it. However, that is not happening. There was a case in my constituency of a couple that had a traumatic experience in the form of a miscarriage, which was their second miscarriage. The problem faced by that couple was that when an issue arose over a weekend they were first directed to the emergency services, and then subsequently sent to maternity services. No CT scan services were available at the weekends.

A reply I received from the HSE is worrying, because it referred to a concentration on normal services and times of operation. CT services would be available for emergencies, but I do not believe we can have a service that is *ad hoc* from Friday evening until Monday morning. Whether it is maternity services or any other medical service, we need a more flexible approach in respect of people being available to carry out scans. That will cost money, but we are talking about having people available to ensure that we treat expectant mothers, the mothers of children and children themselves with the highest of respect and with the requisite services.

Another issue that came up during my conversation with this couple was that of training for staff when a miscarriage is suffered. I refer to how they deal with that situation and how they deal with the patient and the partner. It must be handled with compassion, and that is how many people act. However, in a situation where staff are overrun with work, sometimes a little of the required compassion cannot be given. We must ensure, therefore, that the requisite resources

are provided and that every member of staff is trained in how to deal with a patient who suffers such a trauma, and including everyone in that training, even down to the person bringing in a cup of tea.

We have lost sight of many of the simple things because we get so involved in and buried within strategies. An example in that regard is antigen testing. Why can we not use that method in the maternity hospitals to allow partners to attend? That should not be done in just one hospital or another, but nationally. Let us have a national drive using this approach and ensure everybody is singing from the same hymn sheet.

We have heard from Deputies regarding their own experiences in this area. It has been a long time since my wife last gave birth, and that baby is now 35 years old, but it was a special time in our lives. It is a special time in the lives of those lucky enough to be in that position. We should, therefore, ensure that the women and newborn children of this country are treated properly. We do not need just a written strategy, but one that is implemented and that will continue to be implemented in a transparent way. Returning to the very start of when we began talking about maternity services, we have heard much talk about strategies, but what we must do is decide what we are going to do with the national maternity hospital in Dublin. We must get that sorted out and then move on, get the maternity services in place and increase the infrastructure in all the hospitals where it is needed.

We cannot have our hospital staff working in archaic buildings where they cannot provide a proper health service and then blame them for the outcome. If the experience of Covid-19 has shown us one thing, it is that our HSE workers are the best in the world and we must ensure that we recognise that fact. Recognising it is one thing, but, equally, we must also ensure that we continue to support those workers with the necessary infrastructure and resources to allow them to deliver excellent services throughout the health service, and particularly in the area of the maternity services.

Deputy Carol Nolan: Tá áthas orm labhairt ar an rún seo, atá fiorthábhachtach. We must not forget that Ireland and our maternity services are recognised internationally for the level of care given to expectant mothers. It is also important to acknowledge that this results from the hard work and dedication each day of the midwives and nursing staff in our maternity services. The motion refers to the various reports from HIQA and the failings identified. We must also remember that HIQA consistently found good practice in how maternity services detect and respond to obstetric emergencies. It also identified opportunities for improvement to ensure that maternity services remain safe and effective in future. One of the most recent HIQA reports also made it clear that an overall level of professionalism, teamwork and commitment is displayed by the staff providing maternity care in what is a highly pressurised and demanding environment.

Having said that, however, problems persist in how maternity services operate. All we must look at in that regard is the way in which many expectant mothers and their partners and husbands have been treated in respect of the Covid-19 public health restrictions. The restrictions on partners being allowed to attend important scans were cruel and harsh and went too far. I have repeatedly raised this issue since September. Upset constituents and midwives have contacted me in this regard and I ask that this issue be addressed. My understanding of what is happening here is that the HSE seems to be calling the shots and that it has repeatedly ignored the Minister for Health and the Government on this matter. The Minister must now step up to the mark and put an end to what is happening with the HSE. Partners should be allowed to at-

tend important scans.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: I congratulate the Acting Chairman on the birth of his new granddaughter, who came into this world after 1 o'clock this morning. I congratulate the parents, all the extended McGrath family and on their behalf I thank all the excellent maternity staff in Clonmel hospital. It is only right to acknowledge that and it is a proud day for the Deputy and his family.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Mattie McGrath): Go raibh maith agat.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: We are all very glad to see lovely new little babies coming into this world, and not just in Clonmel and County Tipperary but in County Kerry and the rest of the country as well.

The motion we are discussing concerns a serious issue and I have been inundated with communication regarding partners not being allowed into scans. It is still an issue. I was grateful to the Minister for Health and the Department for making the HSE write to the State's 19 maternity hospitals telling them it was time to lift the restrictions on partners visiting. Unfortunately, that directive was not complied with. We have to be respectful to the management in hospitals and maternity units. I am sure they think what they are doing is for the best but, at the end of the day, there are partners who want and need to attend. It is a very special time. It can be an upsetting time or a happy time. Some scans are critical, when little or big difficulties might arise and it is so important that people are there to support each other. For once and for all, I want to see the hospitals complying with the requirement to treat partners properly and give them the opportunity to be with the person who is having a baby.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I am glad to have the opportunity to speak on this very important matter. Like other Deputies, I have been constantly queried about this and asked when the restrictions will be lifted. Other Deputies have criticised the senior Minister for leaving the Chamber but I have the utmost faith in the Minister of State, Deputy Butler. I have every confidence that she will deal with this and respect our wishes. She, as much as anyone and more than some, values the birth of a child. I know that her views on this are the same as my own. The birth of a child is a joy and a pleasure for the mother and father and the wider family. It is very important for the future of our country that babies are born and are looked after properly. I am calling on the Government to ensure that these restrictions are lifted sooner rather than later. It is very important that the partner is there and that they start off together, being together for everything that concerns the baby coming into the world. Why are some hospitals complying with the Minister's direction and allowing partners to attend? It is good that husbands and partners want to be with mothers. It makes for a good start when they start out together. I am calling on the Government to do everything possible to reopen hospitals and allow partners to attend.

Finally, it is very sad to see so many babies being lost through abortion. I call on the Department, the Minister for Health and the Government to ensure that advice is given to expectant mothers who are considering abortion that will help them to keep their babies and bring them into the world. The babies in the country are our future.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: I thank Deputy Connolly and her colleagues for tabling the motion. I congratulate the Acting Chairman on the birth of another grandchild, which is fantastic for him and his family.

There are 19 maternity hospitals in Ireland, with approximately 150 babies born every day.

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It is estimated that 25,000 babies were born during Covid, with between ten and 12 born in the maternity hospital in Limerick. The scientifically recommended ratio is one midwife for every 29.5 births but the ratio in Ireland at present is one for every 40 births. This must be addressed. The recent relaxation of restrictions in hospitals is very welcome but it does not go far enough.

My wife and myself are the parents of four boys. We are also the proud grandparents of a child who was born during Covid. We saw first hand what our son and his partner went through because of the Covid-19 restrictions and understand what such restrictions mean for the families waiting at home. A half an hour after the birth of our grandson, Noah, our son was allowed in for half an hour. That is not good enough for either partner. One of the most important events in life is the birth of a child and on coming into the world, he or she should see both parents. Mothers also need support during childbirth.

I want to thank those providing maternity services, particularly midwives and nurses, for everything they have done during Covid. I commend them on the support they provided when the management of certain hospitals did not allow partners to attend.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): In closing, I again thank Deputy Connolly and her colleagues for tabling the motion. The quality of our maternity services is, for me, a reflection of the importance we place on women and their infant babies. It is not that long ago that such esteem was not clearly visible, something this House and the country as a whole should not easily forget. As an Irish woman and a mother, I am well aware of how important this issue is and am very happy to be able to contribute to the debate.

As the Minister for Health outlined, this Government is fully committed to delivering better health outcomes for the women of Ireland, not just in terms of maternity care but right across the board. We are determined to ensure that the success achieved so far in women's health is further progressed and built on for generations of Irish women and girls into the future.

Recent developments, as noted by the Minister, and the very significant funding made available for 2021, certainly build on progress made in women's health. This includes the ongoing implementation of the national maternity strategy, improvements in screening services and in sexual assault services and the implementation of the sexual health strategy. Key to this progress has been the inclusion of women's voices. We have seen the very positive contribution of women to the development of the national maternity strategy through its public consultation process and through their inclusion on the steering group that developed the strategy. More recently, the views and experiences of hundreds of women have informed the work of the women's health task force through its radical listening exercise. The national maternity experience survey has given voice to thousands of women regarding their experience of our maternity services.

Listening to those voices is one thing; it is quite another to understand them and to act. That is why I am very proud of the efforts made by the Government to ensure those thousands of voices have been taken on board. We have, to borrow a phrase, put our money where our mouth is by putting significant funding into women's healthcare. We heard from the Minister for Health earlier that €7.3 million has been allocated to the national maternity strategy this year. This funding will ensure that there is a renewed focus on delivering the vision of the strategy for our maternity care system. What is equally welcome is the focus on issues that have not always made the headlines, in particular gynaecology with its historically long waiting lists, and endometriosis, a condition that many women have borne silently for years. The investment made in

2021 will significantly enhance capacity in a system that requires further improvements.

It is only in recent years, and in particular since the national maternity strategy was published, that we have seen a deliberate focus on the area of maternity and women's health more generally. Over that period, we have seen the recruitment of additional midwives, consultants, theatre staff, ultrasonographers and quality and safety managers. However, this year, through funding allocated to the national women and infants health programme, an additional 139 posts will be added to our maternity and gynaecology services, significantly boosting staff numbers. The benefit of this cannot be overstated and will undoubtedly make a very real and tangible difference to the women and families accessing services.

On perinatal mental health, it is important to note that the national maternity strategy firmly recognises the need to provide better supports to women during and after pregnancy. In November 2017, the HSE launched the document, *Specialist Perinatal Mental Health Services: Model of Care for Ireland*, which supports the actions on mental health outlined in the national maternity strategy. The model of care continues to be rolled out on a hub-and-spoke basis, with funding for the six specialist perinatal mental health hub teams provided to a total of €3.6 million. This funding covers the cost of the full hub teams in each of the six maternity hospitals, and recruitment of the outstanding team members is currently taking place. An integral component of the model of care is the deployment of a mental health midwife to each of the 13 maternity spoke sites. The newly appointed mental health midwives based in spoke hospital sites work with the local liaison psychiatry services. With 12 of the 13 spoke mental health midwives in place, I am glad that the model of care has progressed significantly.

While I was in opposition, I often noted my disappointment with the slow progress to implement the national maternity strategy. As stated by the Minister, while highlighting that there have been positive developments in maternity services and high levels of compliance against most of the national standards, HIQA's inspection report raises some concerns about the implementation of the strategy.

I am pleased, however, that the national women and infants health programme is in the process of developing a revised implementation plan with timelines and associated costs. The work being progressed through the programme now, and the timely implementation of that plan, will ensure that the strategy's vision is fully realised for the benefit of the thousands of women and families who access care every year in our maternity hospitals and units.

As part of the Government's broader focus on promoting women's health, including the implementation of the national maternity strategy, the programme for Government includes a commitment to the co-location of all remaining stand-alone maternity hospitals with adult acute hospitals. The development of the new national maternity hospital on the Elm Park campus will be the first of these relocation projects to be progressed.

I understand that concerns have been raised regarding the ownership and clinical independence of the new national maternity hospital. I am advised that the corporate and clinical governance arrangements for the new maternity hospital are set out in the Mulvey agreement, however. The agreement provides for the establishment of a new company, that is, national maternity hospital at Elm Park designated activity company, DAC, which will have clinical and operational, as well as financial and budgetary, independence in the provision of maternity, gynaecology and neonatal services. The Mulvey agreement ensures that a full range of health services will be available at the new hospital without religious, ethnic or other distinction.

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As the Minister for Health emphasised earlier, these overriding objectives will be copper-fastened through the legal framework that is being developed. The Minister has also committed to seeking Government approval for the legal framework once it has been finalised.

Progressing with the national maternity hospital relocation project is critical to providing women with the necessary infrastructure and environment to enable the delivery of a modern, safe, quality maternity service for women and infants. This is key to achieving the vision of the national maternity strategy.

I will conclude by reiterating to the House that this Government remains fully committed to renewing its focus on the development of maternity services through the implementation of the national maternity strategy. This Government has started as it intends to continue by providing investment in maternity and women's healthcare services, and it will continue to support the national women and infants health programme in progressing those goals.

I agree wholeheartedly on a personal note with everyone who spoke about the challenges faced by mothers who are delivering babies in hospital or who are going for their 20-week scan. As a mother of three who had three induced deliveries, I believe it is essential that husbands, partners or a family member be allowed to be present at this most joyous occasion. Unfortunately, however, as has been stated, for some the news can sometimes be sad and devastating. The support of having a loved one present cannot be underestimated. One can understand why restrictions had to be put in place when we were having 8,000 cases of Covid-19 per day during January and February. As we start to exit Covid-19 and with 50% of the adult population now vaccinated, however, I appeal to hospitals to adhere to the advice of the CMO, the HSE and the Minister. It is very important that on this most joyous occasion for many mothers, which can be very upsetting and traumatic for others, women would be allowed to have their partners present as much as possible during the births and scans.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Mattie McGrath): We will now move to Deputies Harkin and Connolly.

Deputy Marian Harkin: I also congratulate the Acting Chairman on the birth of his granddaughter; it is a happy time.

I sincerely thank my colleague, Deputy Connolly, for bringing forward this motion, which me and all my colleagues in the Independent Group were happy to sign. This motion refers to the national maternity strategy, the recommendations of the Sláintecare report on implementing that strategy and the HIQA report, which monitors the national standards.

In the short time available, I will concentrate on the 2020 HIQA report. It is the most recent and gives us some overview as to how the national maternity strategy is being implemented in individual hospitals and hospital groups. This report also deals with important issues such as governance, overseeing care pathways for women and babies, co-ordination between hospitals, co-ordination between medical professionals, staffing levels, staff training, etc. It is-----

Acting Chairman (Deputy Mattie McGrath): We are running out of time because we have Leaders' Questions at 12 noon. Will the Deputy give a number of minutes to her colleague, Deputy Connolly, who introduced the motion? Deputy Harkin can see the clock. We have run behind; I am sorry.

Deputy Marian Harkin: I thought I had five minutes. We have eight minutes and 49 sec-

onds left, according to the clock.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Mattie McGrath): Yes, but we went over time during the debate. I am sorry. The Deputy might try to do as best as she can with her colleague.

Deputy Marian Harkin: What time do we have left?

Acting Chairman (Deputy Mattie McGrath): There are only four minutes left in total.

Deputy Marian Harkin: Then I will defer to my colleague. This is not right. This should have been sorted during the debate. I will not complain or take Deputy Connolly's time. It is not good enough, however.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Mattie McGrath): I accept that; I am sorry.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I concur completely with my colleague. What has happened is most unfair.

Deputy Marian Harkin: Absolutely.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I would have thought that sometimes, on the odd occasions when we run over time, there is discretion. I have exercised that discretion in my capacity as Leas-Cheann Comhairle. I would have liked to have heard my colleague's opinion and views. She has signed the motion.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Mattie McGrath): The Leas-Cheann Comhairle is always very decent with her discretion so I will allow extra time.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I will hand back to my colleague.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Mattie McGrath): Deputy Harkin may carry on again.

Deputy Marian Harkin: Okay, I will be as brief as I can. I do not want to take from Deputy Connolly's time.

As I said, the HIQA report found high levels of compliance overall. It was clear from reading this report that there are weak links in the chain, however. That is why we have a national maternity strategy in place. While there is progress, we can see that certain gaps exist and until those gaps are filled, women and babies will be at risk.

One of the conclusions from the HIQA report stated, "The HSE needs to immediately develop a comprehensive, time-bound and fully costed National Maternity Strategy implementation plan", which to me is the most important point. The fact that we do not have that in place is an issue.

I am really concerned about the time left for my colleague, Deputy Connolly. I will finish with one point about which many colleagues had spoken. We need absolute clarity on the public ownership and operation of the new national maternity hospital. We need a debate in this House with the Minister present in order that we can have a to and fro to deal with this issue. Equally, however, we need to make sure the recommendations within the national maternity strategy are fully implemented.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank Deputy Harkin. I call Deputy Connolly.

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Deputy Catherine Connolly: I thank all my colleagues, and indeed, the Ministers, for their support of the motion. I welcome that; it is certainly positive. The urgent nature of it is lacking, however.

In its report, HIQA said the implementation of the recommendations was an imperative. I see no time span and no sense of urgency. Right up until February 20, or shortly before that, the driving body, that is, the national women and infants health programme, could not report precisely to HIQA what the report was. We need the implementation of a costed plan within the time span allowed. That is not happening.

12 o'clock

The question has to be asked here today. Why did it take the motion? Why are those responsible still working on it? Why have the Ministers - especially the senior Minister - not asked the HSE where in God's name is the implementation plan for the HIQA report, which dates from back in February 2020?

I am not in any way reassured by the comments of the Minister or the Minister of State today on the National Maternity Hospital, unfortunately, in respect of the way forward. I want a firm commitment to public ownership of the National Maternity Hospital on public land. That public land has to be either acquired by compulsory purchase or bought or situated on a different site. We have to stop fiddling around with a mechanism that allows for Canon Law or religious law or a smokescreen. I support the call. I gather it will come with a full motion in due course and I call on the Minister to support it.

I am a stickler for time. According to the clock I have three minutes remaining but there has been such a commotion about time that I am going to concede. Perhaps we can improve our time management.

Question put and agreed to.

Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I have raised with the Taoiseach time out of number the matter of the extortionate rents that workers and families are paying. They hand over an extraordinary proportion of their hard-earned cash to landlords every month. As a result of this, an entire generation is locked out of home ownership. Let us face it: they do not stand a chance of saving for a mortgage deposit while forking out up to €2,000 in rent every month.

This was the case long before Covid-19. However, the pandemic has hit generation rent hard. Many renters lost their jobs and were prevented from going to work. They have seen their incomes collapse. Many are not back at work yet. On top of colossal rents they now face the prospect of the Government cutting their income supports.

Yet, the bills keep coming thick and fast. Renters are really struggling to keep their heads above water. As if this was not bad enough, tenants could be hit with a hike of up to 8% when the Government withdraws emergency protections next month. This arises because of a loophole in the disastrous rent pressure zone legislation that will allow renters who did not endure a 4% increase last year to be hit on the double with a double whammy this year. Renters are already being fleeced so any increase in these extortionate rents will literally break the backs of

workers and families.

I come in here every week and ask the Taoiseach to show up for struggling renters. We in Sinn Féin have made proposals that would make a real difference. We asked the Government to cut rents by putting one months' rent back into the pocket of each renter. The Government said "No". We asked the Government to legislate to ban rent increases for a period of three years and the Government said "No". We asked the Government to stop apartments being bought up by investment funds that drive up rents and the Government said "No". In fact everything that Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Green Party do makes life easier for big landlords and investment funds and makes life so much harder for ripped-off renters.

This is not only a social crisis but an economic one. The Taoiseach should know there is real concern within the business community that the lack of affordable accommodation for workers will stifle the chances of making Dublin and other cities living cities that will drive our national recovery. I have been talking to representatives of the chambers of commerce in Galway and Dublin in recent days. They reflect this strongly.

This has to change fast. The Taoiseach cannot allow 8% increases in rents. In fact, he cannot allow any increase in rent. There are solutions. There are things he could do today to protect renters. The Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, says he plans to bring a Bill to the Dáil in the autumn to replace the 4% increases permitted under the rent pressure zone legislation. This will be far too late for renters. This legislation needs to be fast-tracked now. The Minister needs to bring the Bill before the Dáil before the summer recess. A ban on rent increases for three years must be part of that legislation. The Taoiseach also needs to reinstate the full ban on evictions until the end of the year at least. These are the kinds of things that need to be done now to give generation rent a chance of recovery and a shot at making it.

The Taoiseach: First of all, I do not accept the Deputy's assertions in respect of the Government's position during the past year and a half, in particular in respect of tenants more generally and protecting tenants. We are doing everything we possibly can to help tenants who need enhanced protection from the State during Covid-19 and we have been doing that. Rental protections remain in place for those most in need of such protections. Any person negatively impacted by Covid-19 who is experiencing arrears, who is at risk of homelessness and who makes a declaration can avail of protections under the Residential Tenancies Board. Those rental protections are a proportionate response because the Government has to balance constitutional issues with the common good.

The targeted ban on rent increases is due to expire on 12 July. The majority of tenants in the private rental sector have not been protected from rent increases since 1 August. We acknowledge that. The Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage will shortly bring proposals to the Government to extend rental protections further beyond 12 July. This is to give more time to vulnerable tenants to recover their financial stability.

I will comment on the broader situation. The Government's policies in respect of housing, housing supply and the construction of more housing are key to helping those who are currently paying exorbitant rents. We want to provide affordable housing to people. We want to provide social housing to those who are currently under the housing assistance payment situation and who are renting. That is our target. It would be important that all parties at local and council level support that by giving the green light to housing construction projects that are ready to go and to stop objecting to them and opposing them. That is the first thing. We need to get housing

supply up to improve the rental market.

The Minister is planning to change rental legislation and is planning for legislation to provide long-term security of tenure for tenants at affordable rents. The annual 4% cap was introduced some years ago in the context of rent pressure zones. I am conscious of the issue that the Deputy has raised and I have discussed it with the Minister. The Minister is keen for long-term security and for the issue of the scale and level of increase to be curtailed in future. We have been legally advised and, in our view, the outright banning cannot happen. In other jurisdictions where that did happen, it had negative unintended consequences. During the emergency period of Covid-19 from August 2020 to January 2021 we were able to support tenants. We did that in a targeted manner where we were legally entitled to do so. We cannot break the law from the Government perspective. We take on board seriously the issues that are arising. The Minister intends to bring in legislation to sort this out for the longer term for tenants in terms of security of tenure and affordable levels of increases in rent rather than what has been happening prior to the pandemic.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The Taoiseach says he does not accept my assertions. Which assertions?

The Taoiseach: The general assertions.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Is it my assertion that rents are extortionate or that renters are being ripped off? Is it my assertion that renters are struggling or that a whole generation is living with the fear of not making rent and losing the roofs over their heads? Is it my assertion that a whole generation is effectively locked out of any real prospect of home ownership? Are those the assertions the Taoiseach questions? Those are the facts on the ground. Perhaps the assertion that troubles him is my assertion that the Taoiseach should get the finger out and act on behalf of these struggling renters. The Government is supporting institutional investors and big private investor funds. It makes sure they are okay but it has left renters in the lurch. If that was not bad enough, many of these renters now face the real prospect of increases in rent of as much as 8%. That cannot happen. The Taoiseach needs to act now. He cannot put this on the never-never. We have given him the answer to supporting these people and families. The jig is up. People can see exactly the stance the Taoiseach has taken. Now is the moment to act for renters.

The Taoiseach: I challenge the Deputy's assertion that Government did nothing to help renters during the pandemic. That is the assertion I challenge. I also challenge the Deputy's sincerity and accuse her of a lack of honesty in this regard. Just last week, she opposed plans for 1,200 houses in Donabate. What about renters there who could have got affordable housing or those who could have got social housing from that project? What did the Deputy's party do? It opposed the development. How many more housing projects from which people who are currently renting could have got houses has it opposed? With regard to housing, the Deputy's party has been engaged in hypocrisy on a grand scale. It has no coherent proposals. It just keeps attacking and opposing housing project after housing project. That is the level of sincerity that the Deputy's party and the Deputy as its leader have been articulating for quite some time. It is all about votes. It is all about exploiting an issue rather than contributing to its resolution. We have protected renters during the emergency period of the pandemic. We have done everything we possibly can within the law to do so and we are going to do more but, fundamentally, we have to provide more affordable housing for young people and more social housing. I would appreciate it if the Deputy and her party would get the finger out, start doing something about

that for once and support parties on every council across the country to get housing built.

Deputy Paul Murphy: The Taoiseach is clearly very touchy about the subject of his Government's lack of care for renters. The reason for that is that we have a government of landlords, for landlords. I will provide some facts rather than assertions. The cost of renting has more than doubled in the last ten years. Dublin has the fifth highest rents in all of Europe. Rents here are more expensive than in Paris, Berlin or Rome. Irish renters pay an average of 40% of their income in rent, the highest proportion in the world. There is a crisis facing renters in this country. The Government always said - and we have heard an echo of this from the Taoiseach today - that it could not introduce a ban on evictions, a rent freeze or proper rent controls that would bring rents down to affordable levels because the Constitution says "No". When Covid hit and the Government was under massive pressure, it found a way. Now that Covid is receding it is back to normal business for the Government and the landlords it represents.

The eviction ban is being lifted and the rent freeze with it. It is not enough, however, for the corporate landlords to return to their normal increases of 4% a year, which is, in effect, what the Government's rent controls meant. They want to make up for the 4% they missed out on last year. They want a double rent hike - two years of rent increases in the one year. As things stand, from 13 July literally hundreds of thousands of renters are facing rent increases of up to 8%. Jane, who lives in a very ordinary house in Tallaght, has been told that her rent is going up by €160 a month, an 8% increase to €2,140. Philip lives in an apartment in Islandbridge. His landlord is increasing the rent by €107 a month, an increase of 7.7%. Samantha in Dún Laoghaire is facing a 10% increase. Her rent is going up by €166 to €1,780 a month because the last time her rent was increased was in January 2019. Many of these people are the same people who are facing cuts to their pandemic unemployment payments. How are they meant to find this extra money to pay the landlords?

When I raised this issue with the Tánaiste last week, he said "I must admit to not being aware of that" and "I did not envisage that people would be able to apply a retrospective year." When I asked the Taoiseach about it yesterday he said, as he has said again today, that the Minister "is examining the situation". It speaks to the Government being entirely out of touch with renters that it did not know that this was coming. Does the Taoiseach not know any renters? Does the Tánaiste not know any renters? Now the Government says that it is going to deal with the issue but Philip, Jane and Samantha want assurances that the Government will prevent these double rent increases from occurring in July and they want those assurances today. They also want assurances that these double rent increases will be prevented from occurring in August, September or October, the door to this having been opened in what the Taoiseach just said. They want proper rent controls to be put in place to bring rents down to affordable levels.

The Taoiseach: As I said earlier, the Residential Tenancies and Valuation Act 2020 provided that rent increases were not permitted to take place during an emergency period from August 2020 to 10 January 2021 for tenants with rent arrears due to Covid who were at risk of losing their tenancies and who made the necessary declaration. The Government made legislative provision to protect tenants during the emergency period. Clearly, the legal capacity to institute a blanket freeze on rents outside of the emergency period is limited by the Constitution. Those are the facts. Having said that, the Minister is going to amend the legislation brought in which allowed for the 4% increases with a view to security of tenure and to the rate. He is going to bring in legislation quickly to deal with the 8% increase with regard to those who are most vulnerable and most at risk. He will respond in that manner.

Again, Government does not represent landlords. I certainly do not and I have no interest in doing so. I do, however, believe that we need an adequate supply. I have seen nothing from the Deputy which contributes to the supply issue. That is a key point in improving the overall housing situation. We did approximately 20,000 houses last year. Covid-19 impacted on construction. We need more affordable housing and affordable rents. We need more cost-rental accommodation. The Minister is providing for the first ever national cost-rental scheme this year. We are providing new schemes of State-built affordable housing so that people who are currently paying rents that exceed what they would pay as a mortgage payment will be able to afford to buy housing. I know that is what people are paying. I know many renters, by the way. I want to change the current situation. It is not acceptable and we are setting about changing it.

As we come out of the first global pandemic in 100 years, we are going to focus 100% on the issue of housing. That is a clear objective of Government. During the Covid-19 pandemic, we have sought to protect renters from eviction and excessive rent increases. We brought in legislation to protect renters in that regard. The earlier legislation the Deputy referred to which allowed for increases of 4% per annum in the rent pressure zones is the law. The Minister is committed to changing that law. I fully accept that rents are too high for many people but it is equally important that we give people the opportunity to buy houses and to access more social housing. That is why we have put in place the largest ever social housing programme for the next five years.

Deputy Paul Murphy: This is another example of the Government's argument, the Constitution says "No". The Taoiseach says that we cannot have a blanket freeze on rents because of the Constitution. He says those are the facts. I do not believe they are. The Government is hiding behind that argument precisely because it represents developers, but let us concede that those are the facts. Let us accept the idea that the protection of private property in the Constitution means that there are limits beyond which we cannot go in terms of rent controls, an eviction freezes and so on. We concede that. Can I take it then that the Government will support the Thirty-ninth Amendment of the Constitution (Right to Housing) Bill 2020 from People Before Profit on Second Stage tomorrow? This Bill will introduce into the Constitution a right to secure, affordable, dignified housing appropriate to need and, accordingly, delimit the right to private property where that is necessary to ensure the common good. The Bill seeks to remove this excuse and, therefore, say that we can introduce rent controls, rent freezes and a ban on evictions. Will the Government be supporting the right to housing Bill as, for example, the Green Party did in 2017? People Before Profit will be running a major campaign on this issue. The Government will not be able to have it both ways.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you very much. Time is up Deputy.

Deputy Paul Murphy: The Government says that it would love to do this, but it cannot do it because of the Constitution. It should support our proposed constitutional change so that it can do it.

The Taoiseach: The legislation is being allowed to proceed to Committee Stage, but the Government will bring forward an approach to the insertion of a right to housing in the Constitution. It may be different from the construct suggested by Deputy Murphy, but Government parties are committed to a right to housing in the Constitution and will set about preparing for that in a proper, comprehensive and constructive way. That in itself will not solve the immediate issues or the issues over the next while in terms of building more houses. As I said earlier - I really mean this - there are too many people on councils across the country objecting to too

many housing projects. We all accept that there is a crisis in terms of housing for renters and people who cannot get housing, be that social housing or otherwise, and there is not enough affordable housing for people to buy. It is a crisis. If we all accept that, then we all need to act accordingly as well. We do not have the luxury of opposing housing schemes that could provide 1,200 houses in a given area or 500 houses in another area-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you Taoiseach. Time is up.

The Taoiseach: -----because it does not fit one's particular ideological type of approach. We need a collective consensus approach to getting projects built. Until we get more houses built, we are not going to solve this problem.

Deputy Cathal Berry: I would like to focus my question this afternoon on the national recovery and resilience plan published yesterday afternoon. This plan is being exclusively funded from Brussels. For the first time ever the European Union is centrally borrowing to the tune of €750 billion - a massive amount of money - and distributing that money among member states. I wish this facility had been available to us ten years ago when we needed it most. It would have offset much of the unnecessary suffering and hardship.

Deputy Alan Kelly: Hear, hear.

Deputy Cathal Berry: I have one concern with regard to Ireland's allocation, which is €915 million. Notwithstanding that Ireland's population is more than 1.1% of the European Union, its allocation is less than 0.75%. I ask the Taoiseach to outline what criteria was used at a European level to determine the allocations for individual member states and to confirm if he is happy and satisfied with Ireland's allocation. My second question is again in regard to the €915 million. I ask the Taoiseach to confirm if it is a grant that does not have to be paid back to Brussels or if it is a loan that has to be paid back over time.

I would like to make a third point. I agree with the overarching objectives of this programme. It is about decarbonisation, digitalisation and resilience. In the time remaining to me, I will focus on the resilience piece. Over the last 15 or 16 months two organisations in particular have excelled and demonstrated once again that they are critical when it comes to national resilience in the face of the strategic shock we have just been through, that is, An Garda Síochána and the Defence Forces. Ironically, these are the two organisations that get very little, if any, funding directly from Brussels. This is an opportunity to right that wrong. I note in the plan a commitment for deep retrofitting of public service buildings. I ask the Taoiseach to consider or, at least, not to forget the many old and cold Garda stations and military barracks all over this country. They were formerly owned by the Royal Irish Constabulary, RIC, and the British Army and we took them over almost 100 years ago. They are in deep and serious need of refurbishment. I ask the Taoiseach not to forget about them.

There is another commitment in regard to funding of the technological universities. Again, there are two technological universities that have been consistently forgotten about, that is, the Garda College in Templemore and The Military College in the Curragh Camp, both of which are crying out for funding. Soldiering and policing in the 21st century are tech-heavy professions and they need to be funded. I ask the Taoiseach not to forget about these two institutions. They have served us well over the last 100 years. I ask that any funding available through this stream be directed to those two institutions.

The Taoiseach: I thank Deputy Berry for the questions. First, the €915 million is a grant,

not a loan, although the facility exists for Ireland to submit an application for loan facilities as well from the European Union's recovery and resilience facility. I actively supported the creation of a new European Union initiative, the recovery and resilience facility, at the European Council meeting last year. In my view, it is historic and unprecedented, but correct, that Europe would work collectively in a once in 100 years crisis to borrow money to enable Europe as an entity to get through the Covid-19 pandemic. In that context, as a small open economy, we benefit if the European economy is refloated through exporting goods and services to the Single Market and to more than 450 million citizens. That ultimately is what will drive the Irish economy into the future.

The allocation is provided to member states in two stages, with 70% paid in 2021-2022 and 30% in 2023. For 70% of the total €312.5 billion available in grants, the allocation key takes into account a member state's population, the inverse of its GDP *per capita* and its average unemployment rate over the five years from 2014 to 2019, all of which are compared to the European average. For the remaining 30%, the formula will replace the 2015-2019 unemployment rate indicator with the observed loss in real GDP over 2020 and the observed cumulative loss in real GDP over the period 2020 to 2021.

Ireland's strong economic performance relative to other countries, plus our population, is the key factor in terms of the amount we have received in grant terms. The recovery and resilience submission is taken as a substitute for the semester process, which is the annual country-specific recommendations issued by the Commission. Ireland has made its submission. The plan has been submitted. It very much reflects the emphasis on the green economy and on digital transformation as key elements.

In terms of the other issues, the Defence Forces built infrastructure programme is in place. It is a five-year plan financed to 2025. On the provision of infrastructure in the Curragh Camp, there are a number of notable projects identified for delivery. The Deputy may wish to note that progression is well advanced on procurement and design of a new cadet school headquarters in the Curragh Camp. It is intended, subject to procurement, to commence construction of this much-needed building as quickly as possible. On upgrade of The Military College, the five-year plan identifies the development of that facility, with a planned construction start in 2025.

Deputy Cathal Berry: I thank the Taoiseach for clarifying that the funding is a grant rather than a loan. That is really important because what we are going through at the moment is not a stand-alone economic crisis; it is a natural disaster that has become an economic crisis. It is important to make a distinction in that perspective.

I note from the plan that there is a potential opportunity for a second round of European Union funding in 2023, which obviously has to be negotiated. I would urge the Taoiseach to push for a second allocation of €750 million, if possible. Ireland should fight as much as possible for its *pro rata* entitlement. The more money we can throw at this problem the better. We need to inflate the economy and to reinflate our society and get on with our lives.

The Taoiseach: I appreciate the Deputy's point, but we will not be able to get a similar amount in the second round. It will not be of that scale because the metrics, in terms of the application of the GDP measurement, is going to make it challenging for us. We will keep open the idea and possibility of borrowing from the facility but, given the fact we can borrow quite cheaply, or I might say at low cost, on the markets at the moment, it is something the Minister for Finance continues to evaluate.

The importance of this recovery and resilience plan is its focus on decarbonisation of the economy. There are significant jobs available now, and will be available, in retrofitting, for example, under the national retrofit programme and in terms of public transport development. The rail project in Cork is a very good illustration of that. The Beggars Bush development will provide a state-of-the-art public building for the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications, which will then become an exemplar for other public buildings in terms of how they should be developed. The river basin management plan is also important. Investment in schools will see connectivity provided for 1,000 or 1,100 schools. There is also the national grand challenges scholars programme, which will give substantial funding for research across the country.

An Ceann Comhairle: We move now to Deputy Harkin of the Independent Group.

Deputy Marian Harkin: I want to raise the issue of the complete downgrading of Sligo from the perspective of policing. Approximately 18 months ago, there was a complete U-turn on building a new Garda station. The OPW had purchased a new site and plans were drawn up to build this badly needed Garda station. Even though all that money was spent and promises were made, a complete U-turn saw the entire project scrapped and a completely useless refurbishment programme set in place. Yesterday, Garda management in Sligo, the OPW and the local authority housing section met to discuss the suitability of the station. It is my understanding that there was general acceptance at the meeting that the footprint of the existing station is insufficient. Double the space is needed and the only way the existing station would be suitable is if certain facilities, such as disability access, were cut back. Up to now, it was rank-and-file gardaí saying this but it is now my understanding that it is also the position of Garda management.

To add insult to injury, we also have a situation where there is no armed response unit in Sligo. I checked the situation yesterday and found that from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m., an armed response unit, if needed, would have had to come from Ballyshannon, if it was not already engaged in north, south, west or east Donegal. From 7 o'clock last night to 7 o'clock this morning, if an armed response unit was needed, it would have had to come from Galway, some 140 km away. That is assuming it was not needed in counties Galway, Roscommon or Longford, in which case a unit would have had to come from Cavan. It is totally untenable that for 12 hours out of every day, sometimes in the daytime and sometimes at night, if an armed response unit is needed in counties Sligo or Leitrim, it has to come from Galway. In the case of towns like Manorhamilton, for example, that is a distance of 160 km.

It seems the message from the Government to the people and the Garda in Sligo is that policing there is being downgraded. People need answers from the Taoiseach and his Government as to why this is happening.

The Taoiseach: I thank Deputy Harkin for raising this issue. We have provided substantial resources to An Garda Síochána. Some of the issues she has raised are operational issues. Garda management, I am told, keeps the distribution of resources under continual review in the context of policing priorities and crime trends to ensure their optimum use. As the Deputy knows, the Garda Commissioner is responsible by law for the management and administration of An Garda Síochána. That includes the deployment of resources and personnel matters. Allocation of Garda resources is made in the light of operational demand, which includes the deployment of personnel across the various Garda divisions.

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A total of €1.952 billion was allocated to the Garda Síochána in 2021, which is an unprecedented budget. Obviously, Covid-19 is a factor in that and has placed considerable strain and stress on An Garda Síochána, the members of which have responded magnificently to the challenges of the pandemic. I want to acknowledge that. The budget for 2021 will allow for the recruitment of up to 620 new gardaí and an extra 500 Garda staff. Substantial resources have been allocated.

On Sligo Garda station, I do not have the details in respect of the sequence of events the Deputy outlined. Other Deputies, including Deputy MacSharry, have been in touch with me on this issue. I will talk to the Minister for Justice and ask whether we can get a report back on it. We believe and accept that all facilities have to be fit for purpose for An Garda Síochána to operate within. There have to be quality buildings. There are obviously challenges and the capital programme is there to improve and enhance. This is something we believe in. I will talk to the Minister in regard to this issue. As I said, all other matters are, in essence, operational matters for Garda management and the Garda Commissioner.

Deputy Marian Harkin: I thank the Taoiseach for his response and for undertaking to speak to the Minister for Justice. It is the case that many of these decisions are operational. However, I have a letter from the Minister dated 16 February telling me that a review of the decision to build a new station in Sligo determined the project to be no longer justified. What does that mean? Back in 2017, more than 150 gardaí walked out of Sligo station because of deplorable working conditions. How bad was it for that to happen? This is not a politician saying a new Garda station is needed. It is the gardaí themselves and Garda management saying it.

The Taoiseach stated that approximately €2 billion is allocated to the Garda Síochána. To where has that money been allocated? He said there will be 620 new gardaí. I can tell him they will not be accommodated in Sligo Garda station because it is bursting at the seams. This decision needs to be revisited now.

The Taoiseach: First, I accept the Deputy's commitment to this issue. As I said, I will discuss it with the Minister. Fundamentally, Garda management is responsible for the deployment of resources and it may have a particular perspective on the facilities. I will seek a report on this matter and the background to it from the Minister. As I indicated, very substantial resources of close to €2 billion have been allocated to the Garda. By any yardstick, that is a very significant increase and represents a demonstration of the Government's commitment to resourcing An Garda Síochána in challenging times. I do not get involved in the operational allocation of that funding, be it capital or current. I will engage with the Minister in regard to this specific issue.

Message from Select Committee

An Ceann Comhairle: The Select Committee on Enterprise, Trade and Employment has completed its consideration of the Sale of Tickets (Cultural, Entertainment, Recreational and Sporting Events) Bill 2021 and has made amendments thereto.

Ceisteanna ar Reachtaíocht a Gealladh - Questions on Promised Legislation

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I have repeatedly drawn the Taoiseach's attention to the rents people are paying. I put it to him today that as we emerge from the pandemic, our people face a cost-of-living crisis. Rents are soaring, people are being ripped off by greedy insurance companies and they now face multiple hikes in energy bills. To add to all of this, the Taoiseach now proposes to increase the tax on people's family homes. His Government, the same Government that allows wealthy investment and property funds to accumulate billions in profit without paying one cent in tax on their massive income from rent, and without paying capital gains tax or corporate tax, is going to squeeze ordinary homeowners on the one asset they have worked their whole life to have - their family home.

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

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Will the Taoiseach explain to us-----

An Ceann Comhairle: The time is up.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: -----why the hard decisions he and his Government take are always at the expense of families and workers? Will he please explain the rationale, as we look to get back on our feet, behind-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Please, Deputy. You are taking other Deputies' time.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: -----increasing the tax on people's family homes? Could we have the justification for this action, this decision, from the Taoiseach, please?

The Taoiseach: The Deputy is being politically dishonest. How do I know this? The evidence is very clear as to what her party does when it has financial responsibility. Just one hour's drive from this building, in Northern Ireland, Sinn Féin runs the Department of Finance. It is the largest party in five out of 11 local authorities. It has no problem whatsoever with an annual tax on the family house calculated on the basis of its value. In fact, in eight of the 11 council areas that tax bill will increase for 2021 and 2022. Just look at one council area, Mid Ulster. If you own a house valued at £150,000 in Mid Ulster, you have to pay £1,192 per year in property tax. For 2021-22 the local council decided to freeze the rate. The Sinn Féin councillor who was tasked with responding to this said that not raising the rate would be like asking council officers to do their job with one hand tied behind their backs. In the Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon council area, where the Deputy's party holds the position of lord mayor, the owner of a £150,000 house faces an annual bill of £1,360.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: What does the homeowner get for that?

The Taoiseach: You get services here as well. We want to give councils the opportunity to provide services locally. Sinn Féin will vote against this but wants the services at the same time. That is hypocrisy. That is dishonesty. This is what Sinn Féin does as a party. This is what it votes for locally. I actually agree with the Sinn Féin councillors in the North. I do not fault them. They are correct.

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

The Taoiseach: It is utter hypocrisy and political dishonesty on Deputy McDonald's part to come in here and make the assertions she continually makes.

An Ceann Comhairle: Now, could we hear Deputy Alan Kelly, please?

Deputy Alan Kelly: I was enjoying that.

We all know there is so much hurt out there felt by the survivors of the mother and baby homes and their families. They feel let down by the report of the commission. They also feel let down that the three members of the commission would not come before the Oireachtas children's committee to discuss their findings. Last night, however, Oxford University advertised an event to be held by the university at which a member of the mother and baby homes commission, Professor Mary Daly, will speak virtually. Is it not wrong that a member of the commission will speak at an academic event about the findings of the mother and baby homes commission but the same commission will not come before the Oireachtas children's committee, before which it has been repeatedly asked to appear? This is not an academic exercise; it is people's lives and their lived experiences. Will the Taoiseach today join me in requesting publicly that, considering this commission member's decision to appear at the Oxford event, she and her colleagues now appear also before the Oireachtas committee, where the elected Members of Dáil Éireann will get to ask questions rather than people signing up online for an academic exercise at Oxford University?

The Taoiseach: Collectively, we have to work this out and make up our minds on the types of inquiries we want in this country. I say that genuinely because the commission of investigation model was introduced, as the Deputy will know, to make for a better type of inquiry. In some cases it has worked; in other cases it has not worked. The commission rarely comes before Oireachtas committees because that creates-----

Deputy Alan Kelly: Why are they going to Oxford?

The Taoiseach: I do not know the circumstances of that at all.

Deputy Alan Kelly: Is it not strange?

The Taoiseach: Through the Chair, could I make my point? I have no responsibility for the individuals concerned.

Deputy Alan Kelly: I know.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy knows that. I would have no issue with the commission coming before the committee and giving its perspective on this. However, we have an issue as to how we are to proceed if we are to initiate further inquiries into different issues, be they social or historical issues going back a long time or current issues. The current situation is not satisfactory.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: Today a very sad report was published showing that in 2020 the number of people experiencing homelessness who died on our streets or in homeless services increased by 80% compared with the previous year. I extend my sympathies to the friends, families and loved ones of all those who have died in homeless services and on our streets. The interim report on mortality among the single homeless population by Dr. Austin O'Carroll shows that the median age of someone who died while living in emergency accommodation was just 43 years of age. It also shows that most deaths occurred among people who were experiencing homelessness for 18 months or more. The report shows that there are critical gaps in mental health and dual diagnosis services for people experiencing homelessness. What is the

Government doing to reduce the number of deaths among people experiencing homelessness? Will the Government commit to eliminating homelessness?

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. I presume he is referring to the Dublin Region Homeless Executive's report on deaths among the homeless population in Dublin. It was prepared by Dr. Austin O'Carroll, who is a founding member of the Safetynet GP services for homeless people. The Minister has a copy of the report and will meet Dr. O'Carroll this Thursday to discuss it. It is an informed and evidence-based review of the deaths occurring among users of homeless services. In the Government's view, the findings and recommendations involve a key role for the Dublin Region Homeless Executive. The Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, will work with colleagues in other Government Departments - because this is a whole-of-government approach - to act on what is contained in the report. An unprecedented €218 million has been allocated for homeless services. We are getting family homelessness down. It is down by about 39%, with overall homelessness down by 19%, but that is not enough. We need an interdepartmental, multidisciplinary approach to address the issue of homelessness and issues surrounding health and the protection of those who are homeless in respect of mortality and severe illness.

An Ceann Comhairle: Next is Solidarity.

Deputy Bríd Smith: People Before Profit, even.

An Ceann Comhairle: Yes.

Deputy Bríd Smith: Sixteen years ago today a young man called Terence Wheelock walked into Store Street Garda station but he never walked out. Three months later he died, having been in a coma due to the injuries he received while in custody. GSOC investigated this killing and concluded that no problems were found. GSOC is currently investigating the killing of George Nkencho and I can predict what its findings will probably be. Is the Taoiseach happy that gardaí investigating gardaí, particularly when it involves a death in their custody, is sufficient? Will he support me in calling for a public inquiry into the death of Terence Wheelock 16 years later? In recent weeks the family have acquired new evidence, including the cord from his tracksuit with which he allegedly choked himself. Will the Taoiseach now support the call for a public inquiry into this death and indeed into the death of George Nkencho? This is very important to our having faith in An Garda Síochána and to understanding that gardaí investigating gardaí is not sufficient.

The Taoiseach: These are very difficult situations for the families concerned. I do not accept the Deputy's assertion that GSOC is not independent. It is chaired by an independent chairperson, a judge. One of the difficulties we have, it seems to me, is that if, say, GSOC or HIQA carries out an investigation and its report is not deemed satisfactory or does not find what people want to be found or what Deputies or Senators believe should be found - and people might have a preconceived view as to what happened - we cannot have a public inquiry every single time after we have statutory agencies established which are independent. We really have to work out a system in this country-----

Deputy Bríd Smith: Thankfully, we do not have that many deaths in custody.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Taoiseach, without interruption.

The Taoiseach: I am not just talking about deaths in custody.

Deputy Bríd Smith: Well, I am.

The Taoiseach: I am speaking generally, across the board. We have a number of inquiries under way. Every month someone in here wants a public inquiry into something but they are extraordinarily long and enormously expensive-----

An Ceann Comhairle: We cannot have a lengthy debate on this important matter.

The Taoiseach: -----and their results are never satisfactory anyway to those who seek the inquiries.

Deputy Bríd Smith: Just like the Taoiseach's answers.

The Taoiseach: There is a challenge here. I am trying to be fair. We need to engage on this. Otherwise, it is the easiest thing in the world for people to come in and call for a public inquiry. GSOC is independent, or does the Deputy think it is not?

Deputy Bríd Smith: I think it is not.

The Taoiseach: Should we abolish it then?

Deputy Bríd Smith: No. I think that when there is a death in the custody of the Garda there should be an investigation that is entirely independent.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputies, there is no provision to have an across-the-Chamber conversation.

The Taoiseach: Of course, it should be investigated properly and by an independent body.

An Ceann Comhairle: Please.

The Taoiseach: Sorry.

An Ceann Comhairle: Good God. Will people please have some regard to the proper processes? Deputy Peter Fitzpatrick is spokesman for the Regional Group today.

Deputy Peter Fitzpatrick: In the programme for Government promises were made to develop the health service into a state-of-the-art service. Part of this was to increase the capacity and number of ICU beds. Obviously, when preparing the programme for Government, none of us were aware of the devastating effects that the Covid pandemic would bring upon us.

Will the Taoiseach confirm how many operational and permanent ICU beds were available at the end of 2019, just before the outbreak of the Covid pandemic? How many operational and permanent ICU beds are currently available to the health service? Will the Taoiseach confirm that the current number of available beds in ICUs is permanent and will remain in place once we get over the worst of the pandemic?

I am concerned that the Government has spent vast sums of money fighting the effects of the Covid pandemic. An additional €4.4 billion was spent on the health service to fight the pandemic. We need assurances that this additional investment in the health services will reap benefits for the long term.

The Taoiseach: Without question, Covid-19 has had an extraordinary impact on the country, no less so than on the health services. We have to learn lessons from the Covid-19 experience.

rience in respect of our health services. I believe we are learning lessons. It has resulted in unprecedented spending on our health services which has resulted in an increase in ICU beds as well as overall bed capacity.

The important thing now is that we embed that into the system for the long term. That will involve a broad-based revenue approach to ensure we have resources to support an enlarged and expanded health service into the future. The Government's objective is to enable us to provide for and continue to increase expenditure in health services.

One area developed is the community diagnostic framework.

An Ceann Comhairle: Time is up.

The Taoiseach: The primary care relationship with the HSE has been transformed. There are many positives which come from this as we move out of Covid-19.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Last week in the House, the Taoiseach said he did not want to see any man or woman working in the arts to be discriminated against. There is consternation in the arts industry this morning after the announcement yesterday that the lower paid, those earning under €20,000, have got nothing. They are the most vulnerable and the most in need of supports. There are three different layers for different turnovers and grant aid but there is nothing for those earning under €20,000. This has been going on for the past 12 months and it should have been sorted out long ago. I have raised this many times.

What the Taoiseach said last week must be lived up to. These are ordinary dancers, players, singers and artists, ordinary decent people. They need support because we will lose them. We will lose a wealth of talent and entertainment value to our people who need it so badly. Will the Taoiseach please look after this cohort of the lower paid? They are not big lobbyists. Senator Eugene Murphy is chairing a committee with them now with which I am involved. They need support.

The Taoiseach: Under the plan, there will be supports for the music sector and the arts sector more generally. There will be a pilot scheme in terms of a basic income for artists which the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media, Deputy Catherine Martin, along with the Minister for Social Protection, Deputy Humphreys, is developing. That is a basic income guarantee pilot scheme. In addition to that, the music and entertainment business assistance scheme, MEBAS, has been introduced to support, say, the guitarist in a given situation or the wedding band or musicians who perhaps did not get the same levels of supports because they did not have premises and so on as various schemes had different conditions. The MEBAS is being introduced to deal with that situation. I will ask the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media, Deputy Catherine Martin, to correspond with the Deputy on it.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: Bainneann mo cheist le foiréigean baile agus le foiréigean inscne agus an tuarascáil atá geallta ó Tusla maidir le leordhóthanacht na tithe éigeandála.

My question relates to a promised report from Tusla on the adequacy of accommodation for victims of domestic and gender-based violence. It has been promised for some time. I understood it was to be published on 17 May and then somewhat later than that. Will the Taoiseach give me an update on the stádas na tuarascála sin?

The Taoiseach: Ní féidir liom uasdátú cruinn a thabhairt don Teachta inniu. Níl an t-eolas

sin agam ach déanfaidh mé fiosrú air seo agus tiocfaidh mé ar ais chuig an Teachta maidir le dáta don tuarascáil sin.

Deputy Cormac Devlin: I just want to bring to the Taoiseach's attention the new national trauma system, especially for children, which came into force in March of this year. Last weekend, a child from Listowel, unfortunately, suffered a major head injury after being hit by a car. The National Ambulance Service advanced paramedics assisted the boy at the scene, assessed him and decided he required to be airlifted to Temple Street Children's Hospital to be assessed by neurosurgeons there.

This was the first and successful test of this new national trauma system. The previous national protocols would require that a patient, particularly a child, would be assessed in the local hospital and then moved to Temple Street if required. The new national trauma system enables clinicians to get the patient to the right location and into the right care in a speedy fashion.

I compliment Keith Synnott, the national lead for trauma services, and, obviously, the National Ambulance Service for the work it does-----

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

Deputy Cormac Devlin: -----and Temple Street hospital. I wish the boy a speedy recovery.

An Ceann Comhairle: There is no question there.

The Taoiseach: There is.

An Ceann Comhairle: Well, I did not hear it. Anyway, go on.

The Taoiseach: My understanding of the question is the need - it is an important point - for best protocols and practice in terms of dealing with trauma and emergency care. Getting a patient to the right place as quickly as possible is essential to better outcomes. It is important that a child or an adult would not be unnecessarily diverted to another hospital where that optimal care would not be available.

I too affirm and salute the work of Keith Synnott and the entire strategy which the Minister and the Government have endorsed around the national trauma centres, as well as the creation of such centres whereby people who need to be in them as quickly as possible get there. That is something I passionately believe in myself. I thank the Deputy for raising it in such a constructive manner.

Deputy Alan Dillon: I wish to raise an issue on behalf of Mayo's island communities. The Clare Island passenger ferry and road transport service tender was recently published. It is a five-year tender from 2021 to 2026 but, dramatically, falls short on the expectations of the Clare Island community. Twice daily return services will not suffice from my engagement. That equates to only 728 sailings per annum to Clare Island. This is especially hard to swallow when compared with Tory Island which has over 1,800 sailings; Cape Clear, 1,400; and Sherkin, 2,231.

Last month, I welcomed the announcement by the Minister for Rural and Community Development, Deputy Humphreys, of €740,000 funding to Mayo's islands, with over €500,000 to Clare Island. However, significant infrastructure projects are required for Roanagh Pier which services Clare Island and Inishturk. In addition, a helipad with neighbouring Inishturk needs

significant upgrading to allow the Coast Guard helicopter to land.

Will the Government resolve the issues concerning Clare Island residents? Will it look to provide an adequate ferry transport service?

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising an important issue for the residents of Clare Island and for those who travel in and out of the island. I will certainly consult with my Government colleagues on what further enhancements can be provided to facilitate ease of travel.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: The Government has committed to introducing a statutory sick pay Bill. Consultations have been ongoing with stakeholders. Will the Taoiseach outline the current status of this Bill? Will he provide a timeline as to when it will be brought before the Dáil?

The Taoiseach: I think I spoke on that yesterday in the Dáil. Work is progressing on it. It is under the auspices of the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment and his Department. The Government is committed to it.

Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne: I want to raise the issue of Shannon Airport again.

I o'clock

It has become increasingly clear that the separation of Shannon Airport from the DAA in 2012 has not delivered on the long-term benefits that were initially claimed, promoted and predicted. Shannon Airport is also in double jeopardy because even now, as we reopen airports and flights are on the horizon, its status as an international airport is being mismanaged and its functions delimited to those of a regional airport. In the programme for Government in 2021, the Taoiseach stressed the importance of connectivity to our overall economic development as an island nation. He stated that he was committed to delivering on the capital programmes required to support services at our State and regional airports. I urge him, along with the Minister for Transport and the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, to reinvest in Shannon Airport and to support policy to reintegrate it into a national airport authority.

The Taoiseach: We have invested in Shannon Airport and we will continue to do so. I had a very constructive engagement with all of the public representatives, including Senators and Deputies, from the mid-west region last week in respect of the absolute need for connectivity and enhancing connectivity between Ireland and the rest of the world but particularly between the regions, and in that context Shannon is very important.

On the broader issue, the decision was made a number of years ago to create an independent airport authority and that continues in respect of the broader economic development of the mid-west. For now the Government is focusing very clearly on ensuring both the support of the airport with both capital and current funding to enable it to leverage, attract and incentivise airlines to use the airport frequently to get people into the region.

Deputy Jackie Cahill: Epidyolex is a cannabis-based medication used to treat particular types of severe seizures. I have been working with a young 14-year-old girl and her family for a long time on enabling her to get access to this life-changing medication. Her father has previously appeared on the media where he gave a heartbreaking description of his daughter's situation and how it has been made so much worse by HSE inaction and bureaucracy. This young girl has an aggressive form of cancer and as a result also suffers from drop seizures. As a result of the cancer she has had to have one of her legs amputated. She cannot use her prosthetic leg

until her seizures are under control and she can have more than half a dozen seizures a day. The best medical advice is telling us that if she is given access to Epidyolex, this cannabis-based drug, she has the best chance of getting these seizures under control. I have raised the reimbursement of Epidyolex on numerous occasions in this House. I have tabled parliamentary questions for the Minister for Health and I have written directly both to the Taoiseach and to the Minister on this issue. Every time this issue is raised, the HSE come back with the same, standard, bureaucratic, kick down-the-road answer. Can the Taoiseach ensure that Epidyolex is reimbursed to the people who need it so badly?

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy as I know of his commitment in respect of this case. My sympathy goes out to the family and to the young girl as well who is going through considerable trauma. I will engage with the Department of Health. Quite a number of patients on medical cannabis get reimbursed if the product is imported under an import licence. The medical cannabis access programme has now been developed. I will engage with the Minister and the HSE in respect of this particular case and I will talk to the Deputy again about it.

Deputy Richard Bruton: The Taoiseach will be aware that there are very significant inter-generational issues in respect of home ownership. Will he take measures to promote downsizing by people? In Ireland, 70% of us live in homes that are larger than our needs, which is more than double than in the rest of Europe. For people in my age bracket, 90% of us live in houses larger than our needs. That means that every year 2 million bedrooms are empty at a time there is a crisis. The reality is that if someone seeks to downsize, everything is stacked against that person. He or she will lose out if he or she releases money and then has to move into a nursing home as every penny of it will then be taken and the person will not get the relief that would apply. Few options are being developed for people who want to downsize by our councils or by our planners.

As to planning, if one wants to adapt one's home to make it into two homes, it is very hostile to this. There is no favourable tax treatment, particularly for acquisitions. In short, we are locking people in to homes that are often larger than their needs.

The Taoiseach: I agree with the Deputy and I have pushed this point both with the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, the Minister and other colleagues. Cork Corporation introduced a very good scheme two to three years ago and won a national award where it facilitated and incentivised downsizing for people who bought their houses from the corporation many years earlier. Time had moved on and in a deal with the corporation, a substantial number of residents downsized to apartments that are now provided by the corporation but the houses were released back into corporation stock for reletting.

There is enormous potential for voluntary downsizing and it should be incentivised across the board where people could voluntarily enter into agreements that would not disadvantage them if they engaged in a downsizing experience or initiative. The Deputy has summed up the issue. There needs to be a comprehensive approach to ensuring that there is a clear pathway that would facilitate people to downsize because it would free up spare housing stock that is not currently being utilised.

Deputy Michael Collins: Last Monday week, Cork County Council published findings from a comprehensive independent report compiled by the All-Island Research Observatory at Maynooth University. This research proves that County Cork has been underfunded by successive Governments for decades. The independent report states clearly that Cork County Council

have received the lowest CLÁR funding *per capita* in spite of having the highest population. The report states that we have the fourth lowest LEADER funding in spite of being the largest county. It also states that County Cork gets the lowest share of grants and on this point states that it got a very significant shortfall in rural regeneration funds, town and village funds, local improvement scheme, LIS, funding and greenway funding. The report shockingly states that Cork county roads will need €750 million just to catch up with the rest of the country. We have now fallen 52 years behind other counties, a point I have consistently raised here. County Cork has been treated appallingly by successive Governments and this independent report proves it. I asked the Taoiseach for a task force to deal with underfunding in County Cork a number of months ago, which he refused. I ask again whether he will set up a task force. Will he also consider launching an independent investigation as to why Departments have been found to underfund County Cork?

The Taoiseach: I have not seen that report and I do not buy it, by the way. People can commission reports to get the outcomes that they might want. I have not seen it and I would like to see at first. Yesterday there was a very significant announcement for Cork in the National Recovery and Resilience Plan 2021 in respect of public transport. The urban regeneration and development fund allocation has been substantial. I will have to see that report to analyse it. No one in Cork County Council has approached me about it from officialdom nor has this been consistently articulated at all down through the years.

By the way, to wrap up, I checked with my two offices and they did not get any calls from the Deputy last week.

Deputy Michael Collins: On a point of order, excuse me, that is a disgraceful comment. I can prove it from the records of my phone that I rang the Taoiseach's office in Dublin last Friday. He also misled the Dáil yesterday by saying that I rang him looking for favours from him as I never did. He will have to prove that but this matter is going through the Ceann Comhairle's office at the moment.

An Ceann Comhairle: Please, Deputy Collins. I call Deputy Aindrias Moynihan.

Deputy Michael Collins: I did not raise this issue.

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: The leaving certificate and leaving certificate applied, LCA, classes will start their exams next week. I wish all classes every success with their exams. They have had a very tough, twisted and dizzy road going through both fifth and sixth year to arrive now at exams that they thought might never have happened. Go n-éirí go geal leis na daoine seo atá ag déanamh na scrúduithe ardeistiméireachta agus LCA an bhliain seo tar éis dhá bhliain aisteach a bheith curtha díobh. There is an increased number of CAO applications and additional students looking to move on into further education. Will there be additional opportunities in apprenticeships, post leaving certificate, PLC, courses, college places, options available for students facing into those exams and options after the summer.

The Taoiseach: I appreciate that this issue been raised and I think the Deputy is the first in the House to wish the leaving certificate cohort of this year the very best in their examinations. He is correct in saying that dhá bhliain aisteach a bhí ann. They have had two very strange and difficult years because of Covid-19 both in fifth year and in the leaving certificate year. We wish them the very best as they prepare for their examinations. The Deputy is also correct that there has been an increase in CAO places, partly we suspect because of the Brexit effect, but that be-

ing said, we do need to increase places. We increased places substantially last year. As part of the recovery and resilience plan announced yesterday, we will provide significantly more places in apprenticeships, further education and higher education. The Minister with responsibility for higher education is working on a plan to increase places, given the demand that will be there and the pressure that will be on.

Planning and Development (Amendment) (First-Time Buyers) Bill 2021: First Stage

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to amend the Planning and Development Act 2000 to provide for a specific percentage of lands in a private development to be limited for purchase by first-time buyers and to provide for related matters.

I was disappointed not to be able to avail of my scheduled spot during Questions on Promised Legislation. I remind Deputies that when they resist the efforts of the Ceann Comhairle, they deprive others of slots that have been allocated.

The Bill was first brought to the House in 2019 by the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, who was then my party's spokesperson on housing in opposition. In December 2015, 13 couples approached me because they had been gazumped by the bulk purchase of their housing estate. They were heartbroken. The only solace to the community was that the bulk purchase had been made by an approved housing body, AHB. It was no comfort to those 13 couples, but at least we knew that the homes would go to those on the housing waiting lists. Increasingly over recent months, not only have AHBs been purchasing homes that might otherwise have come to the market but investors have been doing it. Whatever was the reasoning or logic for the Fine Gael-Labour Party Government incentivising real estate investment trusts, REITs, I do not think anybody ever intended that standard family homes would be bulk purchased in that way.

The Bill, which I am reintroducing to the House, intends to give local authorities power, which the House does not often do, to reserve up to 30% of a new development for first-time buyers. I am conscious that since the submission of the Bill to the Bills Office, the Government has announced its intention to bring forward welcome changes in this area. In fact, in some cases they go beyond the measures the Minister and I have included in the Bill. The idea of expanding that 30% provision from just first-time buyers to include owner-occupiers will cover people who might be trading up from, say, a one-bedroom apartment now that they have a growing family. I have represented Dublin 9 and 11 for the best part of ten years and I know how important social mix is. It is important that we ensure there are both mixed income and mixed tenure in new developments because if we do not, it can have a detrimental impact on the people who end up living in those developments and the surrounding neighbourhoods.

Opposition to housing can often be based on NIMBYism, but it can also be based on a desire for good planning and not to repeat the mistakes of the past. I welcome the Government's announcement that it intends to give local authorities powers to ensure not only that there are mixed tenure and mixed income through this measure but also that the State will get back into the business of providing housing. I refer to the ideas of building cost-rental housing for those who do not qualify for social housing, of building council-led affordable housing on council land, of financial support being provided in the short term while all of that comes on stream,

and of reversing the reduction in the Part 5 provision introduced by the Fine Gael-Labour Party Government in 2013.

The Bill is part of a series of measures the Government is taking to restore power to local authorities and give them the tools to develop new housing. It will not be housing for housing's sake but rather housing that has a good mix and good planning principles. The Bill shares much of what the Minister has said he will introduce in the Affordable Housing Bill, and I look forward to working with him to include some of the provisions of the Bill before us in that Bill, which will be debated in both committee and plenary session of the House in the coming weeks. The toolbox is being given to every local authority to allow it to start building. Every councillor should challenge his or her local authority to start building again and to ensure the provisions in this Bill, the Affordable Housing Bill or the Land Development Agency Bill will start to be implemented on the ground in order that people can once again know that the State is back in the business of housing, and that where private development is facilitated, first-time buyers and owner-occupiers will not have to compete with one hand behind their backs.

An Ceann Comhairle: Is the Bill opposed?

Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Jack Chambers): No.

Question put and agreed to.

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

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

Question put and agreed to.

Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Bill 2021: Motion

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

That, pursuant to Standing Order 187, it be an instruction to the Select Committee on Environment and Climate Action, in relation to the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Bill 2021, that it has power to make amendments to the Bill which are outside the scope of the existing provisions of the Bill, in relation to amendments to: Part II of the Petroleum and Other Minerals Development Act 1960, for the purpose of prohibiting the granting of new authorisations under sections 7, 8, 9, 10 and 13 of that Act while also providing saving provisions to allow existing authorisations to continue to apply and to progress through the licensing stages, while maintaining the Minister's power to revoke authorisations granted under sections 7 and 10; and to section 4 of the Electricity (Supply) (Amendment) Act, 1954 which will introduce changes to the statutory governance of ESB's borrowings.

Question put and agreed to.

Ceisteanna - Questions

Government Communications

1. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the work of the Government Information Service. [25544/21]

2. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the work of the Government Information Service. [27891/21]

3. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the work of the Government Information Service. [29780/21]

4. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the work of the Government Information Service. [29783/21]

The Taoiseach: I propose to take Questions Nos. 1 to 4, inclusive, together.

The Government Information System, GIS, co-ordinates cross-government communications and comprises the Government press office and the Merrion Street content team. GIS co-ordinates communications for cross-government programmes such as the State's response to Brexit and Covid-19. The team also manages press conferences and media briefings both for the Department and in support of cross-government programmes. GIS manages the Government of Ireland identity and a communications capacity building service for public servants, including training and development and a monthly communications network meeting. The Merrion Street team manages content for the Department's *gov.ie* website as well as the Merrion Street social media platforms.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Much of the Government's communications yesterday focused on returning to work and supports for business, but pillar 2 of the recovery plan, as it is called, includes a number of commitments that fall well short of people's lived experiences. It seems that, increasingly, there is a disconnect between Government policy objectives and the outcomes experienced on the ground. No amount of spin, whoever is spinning, can hide the fact that the Government announced yesterday its intention to close the pandemic unemployment payment, PUP, scheme and reduce supports gradually for people who are out of work as a direct consequence of Covid.

We know from research published last month that young people have been hardest hit by unemployment and reduced employment opportunities and progression from Covid-19. A study published today using CSO data tells us that almost three in five of those aged between 18 and 24 were unemployed in March. That is a shocking situation. Therefore, it makes it all the more incredible that in the neighbourhood in which I live, in Cabra, Dublin, the Dublin education and training board, ETB, has decided to end the provision of further education courses at Cabra Community College. This decision was made with no consultation or alternatives offered. It is disastrous and myopic and it will fail the people, and the young people in particular, of not just Cabra but the entire district of Dublin 7. I ask the Taoiseach to raise this matter urgently with the Minister, Deputy Harris, with a view to having it reversed.

Deputy Alan Kelly: There has been significant spend on public information campaigns

during the pandemic, although we can all accept there was a necessity for public health reasons. The Department of An Taoiseach roughly estimated that €20 million has been spent since 2020. For example, €1.4 million was spent on online advertising, with a further €500,000 in 2021. Up to the end of April, €8.3 million was spent on broadcast media, of which €1.4 million has been spent thus far this year. Some €6.2 million was spent on print media, of which €1.3 million was spent in 2020, and so on and so forth. The Department has provided me with a long list of spending on this issue. There has been a considerable spend on *merrionstreet.ie* as well. Who decides what gets advertised, where and how it is advertised and where the spend is going? Who is making the final decisions? Is it Department officials or political advisers?

The second question is important, given the Taoiseach's history in terms of money being spent by Governments on promoting projects. How much of a budget, if any, does the Taoiseach expect to commit to advertising the economic recovery plan which was published yesterday? I would be shocked if there was an advertisement put out, considering the history in terms of the strategic communications unit, much of which I agreed with.

Will there be any advertising campaigns during the Taoiseach's time in government for political decisions made as regards the recovery plan or anything else? I presume not. I presume the Taoiseach will stand over what he said in opposition - I apologise; he was supporting the previous Government - regarding projects and political decisions in that they will not be promoted in a political way by his Government.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: As we speak, advertisements on the radio are inviting people to check out the Government's website on the national recovery programme and all the announcements being made. However, a couple of announcements are absent, about which I have repeatedly asked the Taoiseach. More importantly, the groups affected by the pandemic and public health measures and whose incomes and livelihoods have been decimated as a result have repeatedly been asking about them. It appears there is nothing in all the announcements for these groups.

The first of those groups is made up of the taxi drivers, who the Taoiseach met in the last week or two. Last week, for the second time, they were outside here in large numbers protesting and looking for a financial package of support to help their industry which is on its knees and will remain so as long as music, entertainment, tourism and all those areas continue to be severely restricted.

The other group is made up of the musicians. The music and entertainment business assistance scheme, MEBAS, was announced, but I was talking to musicians last night who have been campaigning on this and they said the eligibility criteria, once again, will mean the vast majority who need help will not get it. The musician I was talking to said he was not joking when he said he was having bread and jam for dinner and saving a banana for tomorrow, because he did not have the money to eat. That is how economically decimated musicians who work in pubs and clubs have been. He said, once again, despite all the promises, there is little or nothing in the economic recovery plan for the musicians and, of course, the Government is threatening to cut the pandemic unemployment payment, PUP.

Deputy Paul Murphy: The Government information spin machine has been trying to prepare the ground for a reintroduction of JobBridge, a JobBridge 2.0. Rather than debating it in the Dáil, we saw it mentioned in one of the Sunday newspapers. There will be substantial opposition to any attempt to reintroduce a JobBridge scheme, even through the backdoor. The

plans yesterday refer to a new work experience placement programme with a target of 10,000 participants. For the Government to think it can trick people into accepting the bringing back of JobBridge under another name shows there is a plan to return to austerity and keep wages extremely low, despite what the Taoiseach has said publicly.

JobBridge was about exploitation. Even the former Minister of State, John Halligan, admitted it was widely exploited by employers. I lead a campaign called ScamBridge, which outed one scheme after another, exposing the reality of what they were, in that people were working for €1.25 per hour. The Government was ultimately forced to abolish it because of public outrage. We do not need another so-called job activation scheme. We do not need these schemes to force people to work for free. Instead, we need the creation of real, quality, green jobs.

The Taoiseach: On Deputy McDonald's comments and views on the recovery plan, today hotels, bed and breakfast accommodation, guest houses and hostels are opening. This is evidence the Government's strategy is working, in terms of reopening society and the economy and getting thousands of people back to work in construction, retail, personal services, hair-dressing and childcare, which we are keen on doing. We are also providing substantial resources to provide additional job opportunities, in particular for young people. It is all about getting opportunities for young people, in terms of training and jobs.

Deputy McDonald consistently accuses other politicians of being disconnected. One gets the sense, in recent times, Sinn Féin is disconnected from reality. The Government will have borrowed €40 billion by the end of this year, in the middle of a pandemic. It is substantial. Up to €8 billion has been spent so far on the pandemic unemployment payment. Sinn Féin does not believe in raising revenue anywhere. It is just not real, in terms of what is coming from the Opposition side.

I do not know whether the Deputy has members on the education and training board, ETB. The Minister for Education cannot intervene in every ETB, but we will check that out, in respect of Cabra. I do not know the background of why Dublin City ETB has taken that decision.

On Deputy Kelly's question, it is Department officials who make decisions on the allocation. We all accept the campaigns informed citizens of all stages of restrictions, as they were introduced and, subsequently, lifted. That had to be done. Public information campaigns were used to communicate with citizens on the supports being made available by Government throughout the pandemic. Campaigns included information on business and well-being supports, postponement of the leaving certificate 2020, school reopening and the job stimulus plan.

Campaigns also encouraged key behaviours necessary to control the virus. Campaigns communicated the reopening plan in the summer of 2020 and the national framework for living with Covid-19. These are public information notices and there will be some of these notices on the recovery and resilience plan. There will not be any political advertising, but there will be public information, in respect of any new schemes which have come in, or any changes to existing schemes, which is public information citizens need to be able to access in a clear and concise manner.

Some of the campaigns have been innovative, particularly in respect of young people, because young people have lost out the most in the pandemic, in terms of opportunities and the quality of life. That has come back from research and in that context, we have refocused some advertising campaigns to connect with young people on a range of issues pertaining to the pan-

demic.

On the various schemes, we will continue, for example, the employment wage subsidy scheme. It has been extended to the end of the year. People and businesses need to know that. People need to know about the Covid-19 restrictions support scheme and the restart grant, which is very significant, in terms of doubling the rate for three weeks. That is all about real jobs. It is about making sure we protect real jobs in the economy and enable people to get back.

On Deputy Boyd Barrett's point, there will be a package for taxi drivers, which the Minister, Deputy Ryan, has been working on. I met with the taxi drivers on a range of issues. The music and entertainment business assistance scheme, MEBAS, has been announced and I will talk to the Minister, Deputy Catherine Martin. I do not know whether Deputy Boyd Barrett has related that question to the Minister, who has been committed and persevered and worked hard to support the arts through a variety of schemes, including supports for artists, not just in terms of pandemic unemployment payments, but also initiatives which endeavour to protect different types of artists and musicians in different situations.

The MEBAS is one such announcement. Work is ongoing on a pilot scheme recommended by the recovery task force, in respect of basic income for artists, which would be groundbreaking. That is where we are. I do not accept Deputy Murphy's point. Again, for him, it seems it is all about the campaign. As far as I am concerned, it is about creating jobs and providing solutions to issues people face in their daily lives, not trying to exploit the challenges and problems on a continuing basis. There is a campaign against this, that and the other. I do not get any sense of coherence as to how we create jobs in this society. Deputy Paul Murphy's position is very anti-enterprise and anti the creation of real jobs in our society and economy.

Economic Policy

5. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the work of the national reform programme. [28373/21]

6. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the work of the national reform programme. [28375/21]

7. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the work of the national reform programme. [25953/21]

8. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the work of the national reform programme. [27892/21]

9. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the work of the national reform programme. [29773/21]

The Taoiseach: I propose to take Questions Nos. 5 to 9, inclusive, together.

The national reform programme is an important element of the European semester, the annual cycle of economic and fiscal policy co-ordination which takes place among EU member states. As part of the semester, each member state prepares and submits a national reform programme to the European Commission each April. This provides an overview of reforms and policy actions, including in response to country-specific recommendations. Preparation of the

national reform programme is co-ordinated by the Department of the Taoiseach with input from relevant Departments and agencies.

For 2021, in line with guidance from the European Commission, Ireland's national reform programme has been integrated into our national recovery and resilience plan. The national recovery and resilience plan is required to access funding under the EU's recovery and resilience facility. Ireland is expected to receive €915 million in grants in 2021 and 2022, with a further set of grants to be allocated in 2023. A draft of Ireland's national recovery and resilience plan was submitted to the Commission by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform on 28 May 2021. The key aspects were also included in the Government's economic recovery plan published earlier this week.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I am on the Committee on Budgetary Oversight, which deals with a lot of these and with reports and commentaries on the Irish economic situation. It is an interesting fact that groups like the IMF, which we do not associate with left-wing ideology, have said a number of things. One is that income supports should not be pulled too early. Despite that, the Government has given an arbitrary date to pull income supports from people whose income and livelihood have been devastated by Covid and the pandemic measures the Government has taken.

I repeat the point about the musicians. There is no clear timeframe for musicians and the Government will cut their PUP. They are eating, as one reported to me last night, bread and jam for dinner. There is a problem. They say the onerous character of the eligibility criteria for MEBAS means the majority of musicians will not qualify.

Another thing various bodies commenting on the Irish post-Covid period have said is that we have to really invest in education and retraining. I have repeatedly raised the question with the Taoiseach of psychologists and the fact they have to work unpaid on placement and face shocking fees, such that it is almost impossible for people from a working-class or modest-income background to get a doctorate in psychology. Can we do something to reduce the burden of fees and stop the situation where they have to work for nothing on placement across the health service?

Deputy Paul Murphy: This national reform programme talks about climate action but, like so much else from the Government, the talk and the actions do not add up. At the same time as the fine talk, the Environmental Protection Agency, EPA, has given the green light to Irish Cement to start burning a million tyres a year in its cement kiln in Limerick city. How on earth in this day and age can it be acceptable for big business to burn tyres in the city, right beside a school, a public park and people's homes? There are major climate implications and serious health risks, especially if something goes wrong, as has happened repeatedly in the past in this factory. This plan should be resisted. Limerick Against Pollution has done great work campaigning against this over the years and the people of Limerick should not accept this. Together with the climate movement, they should organise protests and civil disobedience to stop these tyre-burning plans and protect our planet.

It also incidentally highlights a severe lack of accountability of the EPA, which has, for example, special exemptions from lawsuits despite many recommendations that it should not have such. Will the Taoiseach intervene and ensure this dangerous project does not go ahead and that there is a proper review of how it was given permission in the first place?

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Ireland's national reform programme is to be integrated into the Government's national recovery and resilience plan. The aim, as I understand it, is to mitigate the economic and social impact of Covid and make our economy and society more sustainable, resilient and better prepared for the challenges ahead. On that basis, what provision does the national reform programme intend to make for tackling poverty or committing to the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights?

Yesterday the Taoiseach was asked to report on his recent engagements with the social partners and we could summarise the Taoiseach's update as underwhelming. Despite establishing a social dialogue unit in his Department, it appears its only engagements have been with the Labour Employer Economic Forum. In its submission to the national reform programme last year, Social Justice Ireland recommended an implementation mechanism for the European Pillar of Social Rights be established involving social and civil society partners. Has the Taoiseach considered tasking his new unit with this work? Crucially, Social Justice Ireland called for this implementation of the pillar to be progressed in ways that are legally binding, aiming for equal opportunities and access to the labour market, fair working conditions and social protection and inclusion. When we look at the current and historic barriers to equality of opportunity for people with disabilities, carers, young people from areas of disadvantage or the Traveller community, it is clear we need brand new thinking and new approaches in tackling inequality.

Deputy Alan Kelly: I will make three points. First, yesterday we got the national recovery and resilience plan. The Government will have to reconsider what it is doing in relation to PUP, particularly for those in the arts and entertainment industry and a number of others sectors which will not survive if the Government continues with this cut. I think the Taoiseach knows that. It is also an opportunity to reform the employment wage subsidy scheme, EWSS, and make it more substantial. Transforming EWSS into a short-term work scheme would ensure we have a support system in place for future downturns. Yesterday was not the first time we have heard about plans to link unemployment payments to past work PAYE and PRSI contributions. This is a standard model in many EU countries. However, will there be PRSI increases or changes in the budget to fund this? It is a valid question.

Second, the general scheme of the local property tax was published today. There is not one mention of the equalisation fund. What is the Government's stance on that fund? There are 20 local authorities depending on €133 million. I presume it is staying and it is standard. Are there any changes the Taoiseach needs to notify us of?

My final point is slightly off-topic but concerns reform. I understand it is to be announced that the leaving certificate results will come out on 3 September. That gives colleges and students no time. Some colleges are back a couple of days later. Is it accurate that the leaving certificate results will be out on 3 September? How are colleges and universities meant to deal with Covid issues and this issue as regards orientation and students getting accommodation if the results only come out then?

The Taoiseach: On the points made by Deputy Boyd Barrett, we are not pulling supports early; we are extending them. Notwithstanding the fact Deputies thought we would be ending them at the end of June, we are not. We are extending the pandemic unemployment payment until September and, with reductions, from September right out to February. By then we will have reopened our economy and society. We will be getting people back to work and giving supports to people to get back to work and create new jobs.

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The EWSS alone supports 315,000 workers and it is being extended to the end of the year. The Covid restriction support scheme, CRSS, has also been enhanced in terms of the restart payment of three weeks at a double rate. That is significant. A new business resumption support scheme is being introduced. Commercial rates are being waived for another three months. The reduced 9% VAT rate will be kept going until September 2022. All of that is about jobs. Deputy Boyd Barrett does not mention any of it. He comes in here and says nothing is being done.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I do not.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy does actually. He says nothing is being done and he ignores the very substantive allocation of resources to protect jobs and to create jobs. I must put that on the record. There is a variety of support schemes. The Minister will continue to work with all those involved in the arts and music industry because we realise it has been severely hit and needs help and support. We are very committed to doing that. A number and variety of schemes have been provided.

There will be a new youth employment charter for young jobseekers; 50,000 education and training places are being rolled out; €114 million is being provided to SOLAS for a recovery skills response programme; and there is an action plan for apprenticeships extending to 2025, which will increase the number of apprentices registered to 10,000 per annum by 2025. So far, the response to the grant for the apprenticeship incentivisation scheme has worked very well and we have had a significant increase in apprenticeships, which is what we want. We want more of that.

It is a very extensive and good plan. The recovery and resilience plan we have submitted to Europe is good. It is good on the green economy, which again has been dismissed by Deputy Paul Murphy and others. It is good on education and work activation, which is important. I know, as I have experience of this. As far back as when I was Minister for Education and Science, we ran an 18 month technician training programme with Intel, Hewlett-Packard and other companies, where they provided a six months internship for people after 12 months in institutes of technology. People who were long-term unemployed got satisfying, lifelong careers from such an interventionist programme.

A range of such programmes is now in place to help people reorient and get new jobs. It is an action-focused plan, which will yield results. It will also yield results in terms of infrastructure. The investment in education is quite significant and takes up a large share of the recovery and resilience element of the funding and also the broader measures the Government is taking in particular to get people back to work and to get people opportunities in employment. As I indicated, we will work with musicians.

In terms of Deputy Paul Murphy's question, as Taoiseach I do not intervene in planning applications around the country, nor can I operationally interfere with the Environmental Protection Agency's assessments in respect of specific proposals and applications. I know it is a major issue of concern for people in the region, but the idea that I can individually go in there and just stop something is a classic overly simplistic presentation by the Deputy. He knows that full well.

In response to Deputy McDonald's question about the social dialogue unit within my Department, we are engaging, not just with the LEEF, but as I said yesterday I had quite a lengthy

and very constructive engagement with the environmental pillar, for example, in respect of issues pertaining to climate change, climate change legislation and the circular economy. I am meeting shortly with the agricultural pillar. I have also met separately with Social Justice Ireland. What we need is delivery right across the system – delivery in housing at every level. The one thing that is holding us back is constant analysis, re-analysis and second guessing of this project and that project. We need action at all levels. I cannot understand how it is taking three and four years for housing projects to get through councils and then they get voted down again and they get delayed for another three years, all the while people shout and roar in here about a housing crisis.

The same applies right across the board in terms of getting things moving, for example, on climate change. We are against property tax and carbon tax, yet we want funding to do X, Y and Z all of the time. There are always equations. There is revenue and there is spending. The carbon tax is ring-fenced to deal with fuel poverty, for example; it is also ring-fenced to enable environmental projects in farming and it is also there to retrofit housing, which ultimately in the long term will help families with their fuel bills. However, that funding must be raised and ring-fenced if we want to really put meat on the bone of climate change. Sinn Féin and the far left will oppose all of that because they are opposed to tax on this, that and the other. I do not know where they think we are going to broaden the tax base to sustain real change in climate and housing. They are against everything and they oppose everything, and they keep calling for more and more spending. What is being presented consistently by Sinn Féin and the far left in this House day in, day out is economically incoherent. They cannot have it both ways all of the time, in particular in a situation when people do it differently when they are in government.

Deputy Kelly referred to the EWSS. Its fundamental objective is to protect jobs at the moment, and it has done that very effectively. It is a generous scheme as well. Many have commented on its effectiveness. We are establishing a commission on welfare and taxation to deal with the issue the Deputy identified in terms of PRSI. We do need to move to a situation where if someone is made redundant that there would be a pay-related dimension to that and he or she would not suffer a huge reduction in salary.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: That is something we should work on.

An Ceann Comhairle: We must move to Question No.10.

Deputy Alan Kelly: What about equalisation and the leaving certificate?

The Taoiseach: The Exchequer will provide funding for the equalisation fund, but we believe that providing 100% to each local authority is the right thing to do.

Deputy Alan Kelly: And the leaving certificate.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: And the psychologists as well.

Departmental Functions

10. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the work of the international and European Union division of his Department. [28067/21]

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11. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the work of the EU and international division of his Department. [26505/21]

12. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the work of the EU and international division of his Department. [26508/21]

13. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the work of the EU and international division of his Department. [26511/21]

14. **Deputy Gino Kenny** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the work of the EU and international division of his Department. [26514/21]

15. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the work of the international and European Union division of his Department. [29412/21]

16. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the work of the EU and international division of his Department. [29456/21]

17. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the work of the international and European Union division of his Department. [29772/21]

The Taoiseach: I propose to take Questions Nos. 10 to 17, inclusive, together.

The European Union and international division of my Department works on all aspects of European Union and international policy within my Department, including issues relating to the European Union and the United Kingdom relationship.

The division assists me in my role as a member of the European Council and in my other European Union engagements. It provides advice and briefing for meetings of the European Council and other EU summits, multilateral events, and for bilateral engagements with Heads of Government of EU member states, the United States, and other countries. It works to ensure a strategic and coherent whole-of-government approach to cross-cutting European Union policies and international issues generally, including, in the context of Ireland's membership of the UN Security Council, matters such as global peace and security, international and sustainable development, and the external dimensions of climate action.

The division also supports the work of the Cabinet committee on Europe and oversees the implementation of the Global Ireland 2025 strategy, which is progressing very well. Ireland's footprint is now quite extensive, not just within Europe but across the globe.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Last week the United Nations Human Rights Council adopted a resolution to establish an independent commission of inquiry to investigate violations of international humanitarian and human rights law in Gaza and the occupied Palestinian territories, including east Jerusalem. During the special sitting of the council, the UN heard how Israeli forces had targeted homes, medical facilities, media centres, Covid-19 testing centres, schools, and a police station. It also heard that there is no evidence that any of these buildings that were targeted and destroyed had a military function, as had been claimed by Israel.

The motion passed last week by the Dáil marks the most explicit and united call by any parliament in Europe against the annexation and the illegal Israeli occupation. Important as the motion is, it will mean nothing to the people of Palestine if we do not use our collective voice to demand action from the international community and Europe to hold Israel to account. It is

the Taoiseach and the Government who have the greatest responsibility in this regard.

The Government's action must include progressing the occupied territories Bill and using our seat on the UN Security Council to progress the positions, aims and ambitions of last week's motion within the European Union. I ask the Taoiseach to set out for us when the occupied territories Bill will again come before the Oireachtas and be put on the Statute Book and how he plans to advance the positions adopted by the Dáil in our motion in the coming weeks and months.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Last week, the Government unfortunately voted against my amendment seeking to impose sanctions on Israel of the same sort we imposed on apartheid South Africa. I think that is a mistake and I think history will ultimately vindicate the view that this is an apartheid state and that it should be treated in the same way as apartheid South Africa.

Beyond that general proposition, I want to give the Taoiseach a specific instance he should investigate of the apartheid policies of Israel, which is that of Irish passport holders or European Union passport holders who are Palestinian, who cannot travel through Israeli airports to go to Gaza, the West Bank or Jerusalem. The Taoiseach can and I can, but somebody with an Irish passport who goes to Tel Aviv to try to get to Gaza will be turned back and told he or she has to go by Egypt. That is apartheid against our citizens who happen to be Palestinians. What is ironic is that Israelis get a visa waiver to come here or anywhere in Europe. Even the United States does not extend that privilege to Israel precisely because it discriminates against Palestinian co-citizens, but we do. They are discriminating in an apartheid, racist way against our citizens while we are giving a free pass to Israelis. Europe does not give that free pass to Palestinians coming into Europe, so Europe is practising apartheid against Palestinians by denying them the same freedom of access without a visa that it allows to Israelis. That is apartheid and racism, and I would ask the Taoiseach to do something about it.

Deputy Paul Murphy: There was quite a bizarre story a couple of weeks ago which illustrated a very important point about the position of Ireland in the world and the role it plays in terms of supporting and facilitating US imperialism. It was the story about the massive US air force jet landing at Baldonnel. I and many others asked a whole bunch of questions about it and what emerged was that the pilot had landed there because he wanted to go and see the Cliffs of Moher, and he had gone down low, had been facilitated by air traffic controllers, had taken a picture and so on. It highlighted the fact of relatively significant numbers of US military planes stopping in Ireland. As I asked and did not get a clear answer, I will have to presume this plane was not inspected for weapons. Perhaps the Taoiseach can provide information if, in fact, it was inspected. We also do not know, or the question was not answered, whether this plane was involved in recent military actions or military exercises, or what it was *en route* to do. It highlights the point of Ireland being used as a war port by the US military *en route* to the Middle East. Clearly, all uses of Shannon Airport, Baldonnel and anywhere else by the US military should be ended.

Deputy Alan Kelly: It is over a week since the Ryanair plane was forced to land in Belarus, which led to the detention of Roman Protasevich and Sofia Sapega. The US now joins with the European Union in imposing sanctions on Belarus over its campaign to crush critics of the President of Belarus and its diversion of the Ryanair aircraft so that anti-Government activists could be arrested. I want to get an update on what actions the Government has taken in regard to this issue, both as a nation and within the EU. My colleague, Deputy Howlin, raised this in the Dáil yesterday. We also need to know if Russia was involved in this hijacking and we need

to put questions to the Russian ambassador. Where are we at in regard to proposed sanctions? There was an awful lot of activity on this a week ago but there seems to be less now.

The second issue is in regard to the EU directive on the minimum wage which is being proposed. Where are we at in this regard? If enacted, it would be a very important endeavour and would oblige member states to take measures to boost coverage to a target of 70%. What steps has the Government taken to push this through? Is the Taoiseach supportive of it? What are the timelines around it? Will the Taoiseach update the House on where he thinks this is going? Will it be enacted? Will the Taoiseach support it?

Deputy Mick Barry: The Chinese regime wants to erase the memory of the Tiananmen Square massacre. Hong Kong has been the only Chinese city where public commemoration events have been held and not banned; for example, 180,000 people attended the event in 2019. This year, the event has been banned by the Hong Kong authorities, acting on behalf of the Chinese regime. Those who dare to attend face five years in jail and those who publicise the event face a year. Last week, when I asked a similar question, the Taoiseach said that concerns would be expressed through EU channels. This week, I want to ask him will he separately make direct representation to the Chinese Embassy here in Dublin to register opposition to the repression in China and Hong Kong, to the show trial of the 47 election candidates and to the banning of this Tiananmen vigil?

The Taoiseach: In regard to the range of questions on the Middle East, Deputy McDonald correctly raised the issue of the appalling violations of human rights in Gaza and East Jerusalem. The Irish Government has been very consistent and very strong in regard to this issue, both at the UN Security Council and in terms of our engagement at European level. The Minister for Foreign Affairs, Deputy Coveney, has pursued these issues robustly in all fora.

We have supported the collective, united approach from the Dáil in respect of the terrible violence that occurred between Israel and Gaza. We have condemned the launching of rockets by Hamas from Gaza into Israel, which should be condemned and I think all Deputies should condemn that. It is a wrong thing to do and has caused death as well. Equally, or more so, there is the wholly disproportionate response by the Israeli defence forces. The high number of casualties is shocking, particularly the number of children who have been killed and entire families have been literally wiped out by Israeli forces. When they bomb Gaza, given its high density, that is what they know is going to happen. It is unacceptable morally for Israel to do that.

The other key point I would make in respect of what Deputy Boyd Barrett has said is that Israel does place enormous restrictions in terms of access into Gaza. When I visited Gaza some years ago as Minister for Foreign Affairs, I had to go in through Egypt. I was the only Foreign Minister who managed to get into Gaza in the aftermath of the war at that time, in 2009, because I was facilitated by the Egyptian authorities. I saw at first hand the destruction the violence had caused at that stage. This is a repeated cycle of activity – bombing, destruction, then international support comes in from the European Union and others to rebuild, to be followed by another cycle of destruction. It is extraordinary what the children and families have to go through. Without the United Nations through UNRWA - the United Nations Relief and Works Agency - the European Union and others, the lives of those in Gaza and the West Bank would be extraordinarily poor and deprived, notwithstanding the extraordinary challenges they face right now and on a daily basis.

The Irish Government wants to try to work towards an international resolution, and people

can have different approaches. Deputy McDonald raised the occupied territories Bill. We are being advised that, legally, that is not compatible with European law, and that is the advice we received. That said, we have supported legal avenues to differentiate between settlements and Israel, for example, by joining a case before the European courts last year on the labelling of certain goods produced in settlements.

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The programme for Government also states the Government will “honour our commitment to recognise the State of Palestine as part of a lasting settlement of the conflict, 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.” Fulfilling that commitment is something the Government is keeping under active review.

On what is happening in East Jerusalem, Irish officials have been and are on the ground monitoring it closely in co-operation with EU partners. Ireland provides humanitarian assistance, legal and other supports to specific developments to improve the situation of Palestinians. We fund a number of civil society partners that are active on human rights issues which impact specifically on Palestinians in East Jerusalem including in relation to evictions. We have always consistently and strongly opposed settlements and we will continue to do so. We believe them to be illegal under international law.

I welcome Deputy Kelly raising Belarus, the only Deputy to do so today. It is a very serious issue in how it reflects how authoritarian leaders believe they can do anything now and get away with it in undermining the human rights of journalists or individuals who are living in the capitals of European countries such as Roman Protasevich and Sofia Sapega. Ireland, along with our European colleagues, will introduce sanctions. Last week's European meeting agreed on concrete steps to protect our citizens, including the introduction of new sanctions. We have called on all airlines to avoid Belarusian airspace and we are commencing work to ban Belarusian airlines from EU airspace. The Minister for Transport, Deputy Eamon Ryan, supported calls for transparent, independent investigation at the special meeting of the International Civil Aviation Organization on 27 May. We have concerns for Roman Protasevich and Sofia Sapega and we call for their immediate and unconditional release. There was a debate in the House on that yesterday. We will continue to work on it. We believe a strong response is required. This is not acceptable and it crosses a line.

The situation in China has been raised. As I said earlier, we consistently raise these issues relating to the Uyghur community and the restrictions on freedom of religion and belief, arbitrary detention, widespread surveillance, forced labour, forced sterilisation and birth control in general, both individually and along with our EU partners and the wider international community.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Kathleen Funchion): I am sorry Taoiseach, we are out of time for this.

The Taoiseach: I will just conclude on this quickly. We raised the matter at an international stage at the UN Human Rights Council on 15 March. Likewise, the EU has made a number of very clear statements on the situation in Hong Kong, including most recently on 11 March. Again, it is a matter of regret that fundamental freedoms, democratic principles and political pluralism that are essential to Hong Kong's identity and prosperity are under increasing pres-

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sure by authorities. We are working with our EU partners to do everything we can to raise these issues. The matter has been raised by the Minister for Foreign Affairs with the ambassador of China in Dublin during his 30 May meeting with the Chinese foreign minister, Wang Yi.

Written Answers are published on the Oireachtas website.

National Recovery and Resilience Plan: Statements

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): I am pleased to have this opportunity to speak today on the national recovery and resilience plan, which forms a key element of the Government's response to the global pandemic. The overall objective of the national recovery and resilience plan is to contribute to a sustainable, equitable, green and digital transition in a manner that complements and supports the Government's broader recovery efforts. It is important to acknowledge the scale of the Government's response so far to the exceptional circumstances we have faced, with over €28 billion in national funding made available over 2020 and 2021.

Budget 2021 provided for an overall expenditure ceiling for this year of €87.8 billion. This includes almost €12 billion to continue our response to Covid-19. This additional funding has been critical in supporting the health service and other front-line services as they respond to the crisis, and in providing the necessary supports to people and businesses who have been devastated by the pandemic. Key measures provided for to date throughout 2020 and 2021 include some €15 billion allocated to the pandemic unemployment payment, PUP, and the employment wage subsidy scheme, EWSS, and prior to that the temporary wage subsidy scheme from their introduction to the end of June this year.

Approximately €1.25 billion has been made available in business supports through the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment. Further support for businesses has been provided by the commercial rates waiver, with almost €1.2 billion in funding earmarked to meet the costs of this to the end of June. Additional funding of €4.4 billion has been provided across 2020 and 2021 to support our health service in responding to the pandemic.

Building on this response, the measures laid out in the economic recovery plan will continue this support for people and businesses. While there will be a further cost to these measures, they will provide for the continuation of necessary support for incomes, employment and activity across our economy. With the economy now reopening in clear phases, and vaccine roll-out comprehensively under way, the economic recovery plan sets out renewed supports, investments and policies for a new stage of economic recovery, providing a clear pathway for the labour market and enterprise towards new opportunities. It includes in excess of €3.5 billion in further labour market and enterprise supports as well as almost €1 billion additional funding under the national recovery and resilience plan. It will help to drive a jobs-rich recovery, with an overarching ambition of 2.5 million people in work by 2024. Crucially, these jobs will be more productive, more innovative, more resilient and in new areas of opportunity, aligned with the Government's green and digital ambitions. This reflects the acceleration of many trends, in particular increased online working and shopping, coupled with the urgent challenges we face in meeting our climate and housing targets.

The plan comprehensively expands the EWSS and the PUP. By outlining the next steps, it provides clarity and certainty for businesses and employees over the period ahead. In addition, it extends the Covid restrictions support scheme, CRSS, as well as enhancing the restart payment; it extends the commercial rates waiver until the end of September 2021; it provides for a new additional business resumption support scheme; it extends tax debt warehousing until the end of 2021; and it further extends the 9% tourism VAT rate until September 2022.

Critically, this plan is about much more than short-term decisions. It is about the sustainable rebuilding and renewal of our economy. First, it will help people back into work by extending labour market supports and through intense and comprehensive activation and accelerated training, reskilling and upskilling opportunities, including the forthcoming 2021-25 pathways to work plan, which will be published shortly. Second, it will rebuild sustainable enterprises through targeted supports for recovery and by future-proofing enterprise to be more resilient, innovative, and productive. Third, it will enable a balanced and inclusive recovery through strategic investment in infrastructure, reforms that enhance our long-term capacity for sustainable growth, balanced regional development and improvements in living standards. Fourth, it will ensure sustainable public finances, with the forthcoming summer economic statement to include further details of our deficit reduction strategy.

The national recovery and resilience plan is aligned with both the economic recovery plan and the review of the national development plan that is currently under way. It has been developed by the Government so that Ireland can access funding under the EU's recovery and resilience facility. Ireland is expected to receive €915 million in grants under the facility during this year and next. A further set of grants is to be allocated in 2023, taking into account economic developments between now and then. The recovery and resilience facility is the largest component of Next Generation EU, the European Union's €750 billion response to the global pandemic. The aim is to help repair the immediate economic and social damage brought about by the pandemic and to prepare for a post-Covid Europe that is greener, more digital, more resilient and fit to face the future. These aims are well aligned with the economic recovery plan that we launched yesterday.

The national recovery and resilience plan sets out the reforms and investments to be supported by the recovery and resilience facility in Ireland. My Department, working together with the Department of the Taoiseach and the Department of Finance, has been responsible for preparing the plan, using the input of other Departments, as necessary, and ensuring co-ordination across government.

Reflecting the requirements of the recovery and resilience facility, the plan has a particular focus on green and digital transition, in addition to supporting economic recovery and job creation. To meet EU requirements, a minimum of 37% of expenditure will be devoted to climate transition and 20% to digital transition. The plan will also address investment and reform challenges identified in country-specific recommendations made to Ireland by the EU in recent years.

The national recovery and resilience plan includes a set of 16 investment projects and nine reform measures, with a total value of around €1 billion. These focus on three priorities: advancing the green transition; accelerating and expanding digital reforms and transformation; and social and economic recovery and job creation.

Turning first to the green transition, the next few years are critical if Ireland is to address the climate and biodiversity crisis that threatens the safe future of the planet. Ireland's ambition is to more than halve carbon emissions over the course of this decade. This will be challenging and will require fundamental changes in so many aspects of Irish life and our society and economy. However, the measures contained in the national recovery and resilience plan and other key domestic plans will help us rise to the challenge. This is why the plan sees a significant allocation made to supporting investments addressing the green transition. Just over €500 million is provided for this priority. This represents a first step towards significantly reforming

and directing relevant funding towards decarbonising projects, such as retrofitting, ecosystem resilience and regeneration, climate mitigation and adaptation, and green data systems. Two reform projects included under this priority strengthen the overall governance framework by enshrining key environmental policies in national legislation. This will help to ensure that our environmental policy efforts are on a sustainable footing and that momentum is maintained into the medium and long term.

Reflecting the importance of the digital transition for Ireland and Europe in the coming years, supports for Irish businesses and citizens to adapt to and reap the benefits of digitalisation are central to our national recovery and resilience plan. Some €295 million is provided for this priority.

Ireland's ambition is to provide a better experience for citizens and businesses interacting with the Government and, equally important, to continue with and accelerate the reform agenda through improvements in the way government systems operate. Achieving this requires the digital transformation of government, which involves redesigning and rebuilding government processes and services – across organisations, if necessary – and using digitalisation and data to provide an integrated experience for citizens, businesses and policymakers. Having a user-centred focus on the design and delivery of public services, underpinned by exemplary identity and data infrastructures, will be a key driver of reforms.

The digitalisation of the public service is particularly key given the challenges presented by Covid-19, with the need for remote working, remote transferral of confidential information and a reduction in gatherings and face-to-face consultations.

Our digital transition will be one of the key enablers in our reform agenda. It will allow greater interoperability of public services within and between organisations, nationally as well as across the EU, as appropriate. It will improve the quality of service and enable the sharing of information within the public sector and with citizens and businesses, thus enhancing our public administration. Assisting and incentivising SMEs to harness digital technologies to transform their business processes has been prioritised in our plan, with supports provided to accelerate the adoption of digital and other new technologies by Irish businesses as a critical driver of enterprise productivity and competitive advantage. A reform project included under this priority focuses on mainstreaming digital literacy and digital skills across all levels of the education system. This will support the implementation of the digital reform and transformation agenda into the future.

Ireland's national recovery and resilience plan has a strong focus on supporting people's return to work and preparing for the challenges of the future. Just over €180 million is provided for this priority.

Further education and training in Ireland have long played a critical role in labour market activation and in upskilling and reskilling people. The requirements pertaining to the further education and training sector are particularly acute given the significant impact of Covid-19 on the social and economic fabric of our country. Certain occupations and sectors, such as hospitality, services and retail, have been impacted greatly. Additional skills challenges that relate to climate, Brexit and automation also still exist.

This priority area in Ireland's plan will focus on new work placements in response to the Covid-19 pandemic to keep those who are unemployed close to the labour market. This area

will also focus on equipping the Irish workforce with the necessary skills that will be required to boost the innovation and productivity of the SME sector, and the provision of skills in support of climate action. This commitment to reforming the focus of further education and training to meet the future employment Ireland strives to advance, in climate action and digitisation, will ensure there is alignment between the development of physical capital and our people, our human capital.

This priority area also includes a suite of reform projects to address several important social and economic policy needs identified in Ireland's country-specific recommendations in recent years. Implementing reforms in the key areas of health, housing, pensions, institutional frameworks, taxation and the business environment will contribute to strengthening the overall social and economic policy framework in Ireland.

The national recovery and resilience plan is aligned with both the economic recovery plan and the ongoing review of the national development plan. As the House will be aware, the Government decided to bring forward the proposed review of the national development plan to 2021. The new national development plan is being finalised and it will set out for the upcoming ten-year period to 2030 revised sectoral capital allocations, including non-Exchequer investment, in addition to providing a renewed focus on the delivery of efficient public infrastructure.

As with the existing national development plan, investment under the revised plan will be aligned with the national planning framework to support strong regional infrastructure investment, generate local employment and improve capability in respect of economic activity throughout all the regions. This level of capital investment will support substantial direct and indirect, regionally dispersed job creation over a sustained period.

The revised national development plan will include an overarching focus on climate across all sectors, with all investment proposals assessed against environmental outcomes. This is in line with the results of the public consultation process which showed near consensus on the vital importance of climate action, balanced regional development, sustainable housing, and transport. This review is due to be completed this summer. We intend to publish the plan next month.

The investment projects and reform measures set out in the national recovery and resilience plan will combine to contribute to a sustainable, equitable, green and digital recovery that is consistent with the objectives of the recovery and resilience facility in the EU and complements the broader recovery effort on which the Government is focusing.

As we head towards midsummer and the days continue to brighten, more than 15 months have passed since we first asked the country and our people to take extraordinary measures in response to the extraordinary circumstances we faced. In a national response of historic proportions, the country and our people have responded commendably to that challenge. Increasingly, our attention turns from fighting the pandemic to preparing for the recovery. That is why the national recovery and resilience plan is about investing in the areas that will help us to achieve inclusive and fair recovery in the years ahead.

I should have said at the outset that I am sharing my time with my colleagues, Deputies Moynihan, Christopher O'Sullivan and Devlin.

Deputy Michael Moynihan: I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the discussion. The Minister outlined the position in respect of regional and balanced development. With all

that the country and its citizens have suffered in the past 15 months, it is time to take meaningful stock of what has happened in society. It is vital that we look at regional and balanced development. Many people have looked at the rat race that they were in. They have looked at rebalancing their lives and moving to rural Ireland to live and set up families and homes. The Dáil and the Government owe it to them to accept what has been a life change. At various points I have said in recent months that it can be a game changer for rural Ireland if the State and the Government allow it to happen and give the facilities that are necessary to ensure proper regional development.

Much has been said recently in terms of the digital age, digital hubs and so forth. There are so many strategies to bring them to fruition. When we work down through all the regulations and announcements it is difficult to pinpoint exactly how to fund digital hubs right through to ensure that they materialise in rural communities and that new impetus is given. We can work from home and work remotely. We have shown that society can work from rural Ireland. Young people are willing to do that.

We have seen that this is a game changer throughout the country in terms of all the other crises, including the housing crisis. The Minister spoke about regional development. It is vital that this idea is taken on board in the strongest possible terms by Government to ensure it really happens this time. It is vital to ensure there is real commitment and real energy given by Government to ensure that regional and balanced development materialise for the betterment not only of rural communities but for the entirety of citizens.

The Minister spoke on job creation. We are going to face a challenge to ensure everyone gets back to gainful employment. Challenges will arise in respect of the reduction in the pandemic unemployment payment and so forth. Many issues arise.

One issue that has been raised constantly in recent weeks relates to young people who have finished school in the past two weeks. They would normally get employment in the agriculture industry. The theory tests for driving licences have stopped that. There is a clamour for the theory test. I appeal to the Minister to ensure real urgency is brought so that something is done to alleviate the crisis. Many in the agriculture community, including agricultural contractors and families, have been in contact with me and everyone who represents rural communities for these people to come on board. There are jobs but the people cannot do them because of the backlog in the theory test. It was online last week but more needs to be done urgently to ensure people can take up gainful employment during the summer. People are willing to work.

The policy and plans are in place. Europe has come up with a certain amount of money. This is a global pandemic. At the start of it everyone said we were all in it together. Serious impetus needs to be given from the European Union to help Ireland. Those involved must accept that there are major challenges for all states to ensure that we can see out the pandemic as the vaccines are rolled out. I hope the vaccines will continue to be rolled out at pace and help give normal life back to our citizens.

There will be major changes from where we were in January or early February 2020 but we have to embrace those changes. I believe there are good points. There are certainly people who have suffered greatly, especially our elderly people and our young people. We have to ensure that we stand up to the plate and do what we can to lessen that suffering.

There is an issue in terms of English language schools and challenges for them to get fund-

ing.

There is one other point on funding. A sum of €30,000 was mentioned for the reopening of the hospitality sector. I call on the Minister to ensure fair play for rural pubs. That terrible phrase “wet pubs” was coined referring to pubs that only sell drink. Funding should be available for them because they need to get back up on their feet. They are an integral part of our communities and we need to ensure they open their doors. We need to ensure every incentive is given by the Government to open their doors.

My thanks for the opportunity to speak in the debate.

Deputy Cormac Devlin: I am unsure whether Deputy Christopher O’Sullivan is above me. If he comes in I am happy to share my time with him.

I welcome the opportunity to discuss and comment on the national recovery and resilience plan, NRRP, presented to the European Commission. With the EU-wide investment of €915 billion the NRRP will be an important component in reigniting the European economy as we recover from Covid-19 and Brexit, as the Minister has said.

The recovery and resilience plan will enable us to move beyond the pandemic and invest in the future in key areas, such as climate change and digital transition. The plan will underpin the Government’s national economic recovery plan launched yesterday and will continue to support the much-needed Covid-19 business and job supports.

The overall objective of the national recovery and resilience plan is to contribute to the sustainable, equitable, green and digital recovery effort. It complements the Government’s broader recovery plan. The recovery and resilience facility is the largest component of Next Generation EU, the European Union’s €750 billion response to the global pandemic. The aim of Next Generation EU is to help repair the immediate economic and social damage brought about by the pandemic and to prepare for a post-covid Europe that is greener, more sustainable and that has greater digital interaction. Ireland is expected to receive €915 million in grants under the facility in 2021 and 2022. A further set of grants is to be allocated in 2023 taking into account our economic progress and developments between now and then.

I particularly welcome the provision of a low-cost residential retrofit loan scheme to support the retrofitting of homes. That is included in the programme for Government. I welcome the investment in public transport and the support for schools information technology and retraining young people impacted by Covid-19. I look forward to witnessing the roll out of the 16 projects mentioned by the Minister under the plan. I thank the Minister and his officials for finalising and submitting the plan to the EU.

I am unsure whether my colleague, Deputy O’Sullivan, is here as of yet.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Kathleen Funchion): He is not here yet, Deputy, if you wish to continue.

Deputy Cormac Devlin: We have various national and EU plans which have been worked on. It has been a long 15 months. Certainly, this will go a long way. It gives the Government and all of us certainty on the funding required for the mammoth task of supporting businesses and the young people who have been so badly impacted by the pandemic as well as the industries referred to by the Minister. It is most welcome. It is a good opportunity for the House to

discuss the various needs. I look forward to it being implemented.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: An tseachtain seo caite, d'ardaigh mé cé chomh seafóideach is a bhí sé plé a dhéanamh ar an gcoiste aisghabhála agus athléimneachta an tseachtain ina dhiaidh gur cuireadh isteach aighneacht an Rialtais don choiste seo. Nuair atáimid ag breathnú ar an bhfigiúir seo, is figiúir uafásach mhór atá i gceist leis an gcoiste le maoiniú de bheagnach €1 billiún d'infreastruchtúr, do dhaoine agus d'aisghabháil na tíre seo tar éis ceann de na hamanna is deacra le Covid-19. Cuirim fáilte roimh an phlé seo inniu ach ba chóir go ndearnadh plé agus mionscrúdú ar na tograí agus ar an aighneacht a chuir an Rialtas chun cinn an tseachtain seo caite. Ach ar ndóigh, táimid ag caint faoi tar éis dó a tharla. Ba í Éire ar cheann de na tíortha leis an bhforbheathnú is lú i gcomparáid le tíortha eile san Aontas Eorpach. Agus muid ag labhairt ar an tsuim airgid atá i gceist leis seo, mar gheall ar na fadhbanna atá againn leis an GDP, tá an tsuim airgid a bhfuair muid i bhfad níos lú ná an t-airgead a bhfuair na tíortha eile. Tá muidne i Sinn Féin ag ardú na fadhbanna a bhaineann leis an mbealach ina mbreathnaítear ar an GDP le fada. I dtaobh na mbeart atá luaite san aighneacht, tá go leor acu ardaithe cheana féin. Níl an t-uafás nua ann. Tá an-díomá orm nár pléadh an aighneacht seo sular cuireadh isteach é. Tá sé fíorthábhachtach go mbeadh plé agus díospóireacht ar aon rud chomh tábhachtach leis seo atá le cur isteach go dtí an tAontas Eorpach agus go mbeadh tuairimí chuile dhuine ina leith pléite agus curtha in iúl.

Last week, during a debate on the Order of Business, I voiced my concerns that we would be debating the recovery and resilience plan after the Government had already made its submission. As the Minister will be aware, at the time Sinn Féin requested that the debate be held beforehand. I tried to get it on the Order of Business last week because I really believe that a debate on this matter should have taken place. While I welcome this debate, it is taking place after the fact and after the horse has bolted. The reality is that, prior to today, there has not been substantial engagement with the Oireachtas or Oireachtas committees on the plan. As such, there has been limited Oireachtas scrutiny in the preparation of the recovery and resilience plan. That is really unfortunate. It would have been nothing but positive to include people and to allow them to speak and have a discussion on this submission rather than waiting, keeping it secret and then bringing it before the House after the fact. It was a missed opportunity on the part of the Government.

There was public consultation on the matter but it should have been spoken about in this Chamber. The Joint Committee on Finance, Public Expenditure and Reform, and Taoiseach, on which I sit, sought further information and engagement on it but, again, that did not happen. This State has had some of the lowest levels of parliamentary engagement and democratic oversight with regard to these submissions among EU member states. In my short time here in Leinster House, I have been struck by how little engagement there is with the Opposition in respect of matters like this, particularly when they cost money. We often see money messages being refused for Opposition Private Members' Bills and the like. We even see this issue in the Opposition's limited role in the budgetary cycle. When it comes to matters such as this, we have even less input. Given the scale of the funds involved and the conditions the Commission has reportedly attached to those funds, it was poor practice and a missed opportunity not to hold this debate earlier.

The draft plan is now undergoing formal assessment by the European Commission before being submitted to the Council of the European Union. We have heard that Ireland is to receive an allocation of €915 million from the EU as part of its €750 billion pandemic recovery fund. We have heard that the Government's plans outline 16 investments and nine areas for reform.

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Our allocated portion of the recovery fund is, of course, small compared to those of other EU jurisdictions. As we have said many times, our overly inflated GDP means that we look like we are in better shape than we, and the ordinary people of the State, are actually in. As a consequence, we often receive less than we deserve. For instance, Finland will receive almost three times what we are getting. Of course, Ireland is a net contributor to the EU budget. During the period from 2021 to 2027, we will be paying approximately €25 billion to the EU's budget. In this context, our allocation of less than €1 billion seems small.

Moving on from that issue, as I believe I have made my point quite clearly, I will speak on the plan itself. I will first mention the positives. Some of the things that we ourselves had suggested in this regard have been included, including an electronic system for sharing medical records, something for which we have been calling for a long time and which has long been needed. Another is the proposal for regional work hubs, which are absolutely needed. In light of how people have changed their views on where to live and work, this is important. There are also proposals to retrofit State buildings and to invest in public transport. These are all measures we had recommended so I welcome their inclusion by the Government.

With regard to some of the other measures outlined, however, it seems to be a case of reheating last night's dinner and trying to present it as a freshly cooked meal. Some of the infrastructural proposals have already been announced in the national development plan. The river basin management plan was announced three years ago. The rehabilitation of peatlands was also announced previously. It is said that, to protect the environment, we should all try to reduce, reuse and recycle but I was not aware that this also applied to Government policies.

One of the big flagship projects which is news is the retrofitting plan but it has not been well thought through. Obviously, what we want is to improve the energy efficiency of homes. People want that for their own homes. Many of my friends and colleagues are in that situation. The reality, however, is that the costs proved to be prohibitive. The average cost of retrofitting a house is approximately €50,000 and it can be up to €80,000. We again heard discussion of this on "Morning Ireland" this morning. What we are talking about here are loans. We know that the State can borrow at negative rates and that we are to receive this sum of nearly €1 billion, but the Government is expecting people to pay interest of 3.5% on a loan for a procedure which is absolutely unaffordable for many. If the Government wants significant uptake of retrofitting, we need to look at the cost. The plan does not do that. The State is the largest consumer in the economy and, through economies of scale, it could work to bring down the price. The Government, of course, knows this.

This applies not only to retrofitting but to the construction of housing. In our submission in respect of the recovery and resilience fund, we made the case that additional money, which we called capital catch-up, should be allocated to help to put the construction of housing back on track. We are badly behind targets due to the restrictions. We have heard that the Minister has concerns with regard to capital spending targets which may not be reached. This was reported in the media. Yesterday, the Government announced its economic recovery plan of which the recovery and resilience fund forms part. This document says that the Government has a target of 33,000 homes per annum. My major concern is that this target will not be reached. Of course, the issue of our housing deficit has been identified by the EU as one of the reform areas we need to address but hidden on the last page of the submission, in the annex, social and affordable housing is listed as an area on which we need to work. I can tell the Minister that this is not news to many people. Last month, we even saw the International Monetary Fund point out that we have a deficit in respect of housing so, for the life of me, I cannot understand why

this has not been given priority status with regard to the fund. I am sure that when the EU told us that we needed to address this crisis in housing, it would have been assumed that some of this €1 billion in funding would have been used to invest in housing. It seems, however, that once again the Government is just not taking the housing situation seriously.

To sum up, there are some proposals in the Government's plan that are new and some that are useful. Unfortunately, it seems that the useful ones are not new and the new ones are not useful.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I will begin by acknowledging that, as Deputy Mairéad Farrell has outlined, the statements today on the national recovery and resilience plan are taking place after the plan has been developed and submitted to the Commission. Just as the Government notified the European Council on 12 May that it had approved the own-resources decision which allowed the Commission to borrow on the financial markets - which is a huge decision in anybody's book - without any consultation or engagement with this Dáil or any of its committees, so it has already submitted a plan to the Commission which involves the drawing down and spending of €915 million. It has done this without any engagement whatsoever with the Dáil or any of its committees despite the fact that the funds drawn down through this facility are greater than the annual allocations for many Government Departments. As the Parliamentary Budget Office has noted, the Irish Government had the least engagement with its parliament in advance of submitting a plan to the Commission. In the words of this office:

...the Government has not submitted a draft or completed Recovery and Resilience Plan to the Houses of the Oireachtas. There has been no substantive engagement with the Oireachtas or Oireachtas Committees on the plan. There has been limited scrutiny by the Oireachtas in the preparation of the Recovery and Resilience Plan.

Such concerns were raised by the finance committee, but to no avail. This reflects the growing level of contempt for the Dáil on the part of the Government. On a weekly basis, the Government stymies and blocks good legislation that is brought forward by the Opposition for no reason other than that it is from the Opposition. That is not how the Dáil should operate. Now that Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael are in government they are keen to avoid scrutiny as much as possible.

This is a debate after the fact and after the submission, but it gives us an opportunity to discuss not only the details of the Government's national recovery and resilience plan, but the wider economic recovery plan published yesterday. As part of the national recovery and resilience plan Ireland is to receive an allocation of €915 million from the EU's €750 billion recovery fund in response to the pandemic. The Government's plan, which was provided in the national economic plan published yesterday, outlines 16 investments and nine areas for reform under three priorities: advancing green transition; accelerating and expanding digital reforms and transformations; and social and economic recovery and job creation. To advance the green transition, the Government has outlined seven investments, with a total of €503 million and 55% of the total allocation under the facility. I do not propose to touch on all of the investments and reforms, but in the time available to me, I will focus on two of them.

The first is the proposal for a residential retrofit loan scheme through the use of loan guarantees. The success of this scheme will be borne out by its accessibility and its affordability. The test will be whether it can be availed of by households across the income spectrums or, like many of the measures emanating from the Green Party, it will be reserved for those with

the greatest means. The average cost of retrofitting a house is between €50,000 and €80,000. The Minister is hoping that participating lenders will offer loans at 3.5%. It is difficult to see how such a scheme will be widely accessible, but we await further details from Government in that regard. I ask the Minister to outline how this retrofitting programme will compete with the limited resources and workers that are available to the housing sector and the major social crisis that has developed because of the failed Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael policies for much of a decade. What is the Government's plan to ensure that the resources needed for home building will not be diverted towards retrofitting? These are questions that need to be answered to assess the credibility of the Government's plans in this regard. Another reform under this priority is to broaden and increase the carbon tax, a tax that is known to be regressive and impacts low income and rural houses the hardest. The Government has given no guarantee that social welfare rates and cash payments will be increased annually to offset the impact of this additional tax burden.

With regard to digital reforms and transformations, I welcome many of the commitments that are being made. A focus must be placed on the IT and data infrastructure of the health service, which has been neglected for far too long with disastrous consequences for staff and patients. More broadly, Ireland's allocation is small in comparison with other EU member states. This is due, in part, to our inflated GDP figures, which fail to reflect the real measurement of our economy. The Government must engage with the Commission to ensure this never happens again. We cannot have our citizens short changed owing to economic distortions and measures that do not reflect any reality on the ground. We await the full details of the plan and how investments outlined therein will be implemented. As always, delivery, not the promises made on pieces of paper, will be key.

I want now to turn to the national economic plan. It is clear that Sinn Féin has won many of the economic arguments with the recognition by the Government this late in the day that the State can act and intervene in our economy to provide and protect better outcomes for workers and families. With that in mind, there are a number of measures in the plan that Sinn Féin welcomes. We welcome the continued and targeted supports for highly impacted sectors, for which Sinn Féin argued, including: the extension of the debt warehousing to the end of 2021, with repayments deferred until 2023; the extension of the employment wage subsidy scheme in its current form until September and beyond; and the reduced rate of VAT for the hospitality and tourism sectors, which will remain at the lower rate until September 2022. However, there are serious weaknesses in this plan which will be of huge concern and anxiety to workers across the State. The Government has chosen to pull the rug from under the feet of the tens of thousands or, perhaps, hundreds of thousands of workers by way of its announcement that it will cut the pandemic unemployment payment in September and will continue to cut it in phases over the months that follow. This is not the first time this has happened. The Government, inclusive of the Minister, Deputy Michael McGrath and his colleague, the Tánaiste, Deputy Varadkar, tried to cut the pandemic unemployment payment from €350 to €300 last September, but Sinn Féin forced it to reverse that decision. The Government then came up with a plan to cut it in January and again in February and March with a view to ending it on 1 April. Sinn Féin, again, forced the Government to reverse that decision because it was the wrong thing to do then. It is also the wrong thing to do now. The Government is abandoning these workers. So much for we are all in it together. As long as restrictions remain and these individuals cannot go back to work because of the restrictions, the supports need to be in place.

We do not know how successful the reopening will be in getting people back to work. The

Government has gone against its previous decision and opted to be driven by arbitrary dates, not data or evidence. The Government and the Central Bank have said previously that the hundreds of thousands of workers who lost their jobs due to the pandemic will remain out of work after the summer and into next year. The Government, blind to the challenges and suffering families will endure, proposes to go ahead and cut their supports from under them. It needs to reverse this decision and to do so immediately. It has instilled fear in families and workers, many of whom will not be able to go back to work.

There are other glaring gaps in the plan. For example, the Government has decided to re-commit to the failed housing policy instead of doubling capital investment in public housing, which was called for by Sinn Féin and the ESRI, despite a housing crisis being a real and present danger to our economy and its people. It also fails children, with no measures in regard to the one of the greatest barriers to women participating in employment and the workforce. The Minister, Deputy Michael McGrath, is a signatory to the statutory instrument in regard to the mica address scheme. I ask him to understand the plight of thousands of homeowners across Donegal for whom that scheme is no longer working and to commit to 100% redress for the 6,000 homes across Donegal and Mayo that, in many cases, are no longer habitable as a result of the mica scandal.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: I want to continue where my colleague, Deputy Doherty, left off in terms of the mica scandal in Donegal. There will be families in Donegal and Mayo who are following this debate on the recovery and resilience fund and will have listened in recent days to Ministers talking about retrofitting and the need to build more houses who are questioning how on Earth they could have ended up with a scheme such as the defective concrete blocks grant scheme which, where a house is demolished, does not provide for windows to be replaced or the funding of energy efficient building practices, never mind that the work is not fully funded. The contribution in respect of a house that has to be demolished will not be 10%, it will be 30%. What does that mean in real terms? It means a contribution of over €100,000, a second mortgage. In the case of people who worked all of their lives and are in their later years, they have no chance of getting the matching funding to make their homes safe and so their homes are crumbling around them.

I appeal to the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputy Michael McGrath, to work with his Cabinet colleagues, the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine, Deputy McConalogue, the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, and the Taoiseach, all members of the Fianna Fáil Party, to do what is right by the people of Donegal and Mayo. This scheme, as is, will remain in place unless the Government amends it in the next number of days. Today, we are discussing a Government submission to the European Commission that talks about retrofitting, a carbon tax and standards. Yet, the Government is facilitating a scheme that does not help families to rebuild their homes to any of those standards. It expects them, for example, to use windows that may be 20 or 30 years old.

It is an outrageous and offensive scheme. It is an insult to all the people in Donegal who worked politically with the Mica Action Group to deliver a scheme that would give people hope they could rebuild their lives. Homeowners thought they would get a scheme offering 90% cover, which was unjust in the first place, and the banks would play a role. Deputy Doherty and I have written repeatedly about this matter to the Minister for Finance and the Central Bank. I have raised the issue with the Minister in the Chamber. He said he did not know what I was talking about and he could not understand why the banks should play a role. These are the banks with assets that are worth nothing now but which will be restored to full market value.

They were nowhere to be seen.

It is time to move on now. Both the Government, with its scheme, and the banks have failed people in Donegal and Mayo. I take this opportunity, face to face with the Minister, to say to him that he needs to introduce a fully funded scheme, giving 100% cover, like the pyrite remediation scheme for the families in Dublin and north Leinster who, rightly, were given full security to rebuild their lives. That is what we are asking for and the decision on it will rest on the Minister's desk. I am asking him to sign off on it urgently.

Deputy Ged Nash: I welcome the opportunity to speak in this important debate. I want to follow on from some of the remarks made by Sinn Féin Deputies regarding the process by which the application and submission from the Government was made to the European Commission under the EU's recovery and resilience fund. It is a sad commentary on how we do business that Deputies from across the political spectrum represented in this House did not have an opportunity to debate Ireland's pitch to the EU on the recovery and resilience package in advance of the Government's submission to the Commission. At this crossroads for our economy and society, as we prepare to emerge, we hope, from a devastating public health and economic crisis, parliamentary input into this process ought to have been sought. Like others, I made a submission on behalf of my party to this process in the normal way. The sidestepping of the Dáil on a matter of such significance is deeply troubling.

It would be self-serving and churlish not to welcome many of the investments announced as part of the resilience and recovery fund drawdown. Proposals on green technology, digitalisation, innovation and research and development are welcome and will help to address the yawning gaps that have been identified in our public service provision and create platforms for sustainable growth across our economy. That is the future, however, and we need to look at what yesterday's announcements mean for people in the here and now and in a few months time. This plan represented the opportunity to do some big thinking on the concept of a new social contract. It was a chance to change direction and paint a picture of a better future. It does not pass that test. The "build back better" trope is beginning to grate. It is a hackneyed phrase that suggests the old normal of creaking health services, low pay and poor housing prospects is acceptable, with the addition of a few minor tweaks here and there.

The truth is there is little new in this new economic recovery plan, the publication of which was delayed on two separate occasions. Much of what we see in the plan launched alongside the resilience and recovery programme is a rehash of existing plans, tied up with a new ribbon. To be told that a €50 drop in income from September is not a cliff-edge fall is an insult to people in sectors like the aviation, arts and entertainment sectors who are unlikely to go back to a normal working life any time soon and have bills and fixed costs to meet. The only timelines in the plan launched yesterday are tied to welfare and business supports. The Government needs to rethink the early unwinding of these crucial supports, which have helped people avoid poverty for the past 15 to 16 months. I expect many of the Minister's colleagues in Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, at their parliamentary party meetings this evening, will express their reservations, to put it diplomatically, about the impact these changes will have.

It will be said that the pandemic unemployment payment was set at 70% of the average income rate of the sectors most impacted by the pandemic. That does not tell the whole story. The fact is that many of our welfare rates were inadequate in the first place to keep people out of poverty. That is why the Government must take another look at the adequacy of social welfare rates and commit, at the very least, to inflation-proofing them to protect the purchasing power

of people on fixed incomes, as prices for the basics will rise when the economy recovers.

I am like a broken record when it comes to my next point. I have consistently made the case to reform the innovative and welcome wage subsidy scheme and convert it into a German-style short-time work scheme to help give all firms a fair shot at viability through what may be choppy economic waters ahead. Such a scheme should come with conditions around training and upskilling when participants are not working and should include a no lay-off pledge. Instead, it looks like the existing successful scheme will be scrapped in a matter of months, before we have any sense of what the economy is likely to look like next year and the year after. I appeal to the Minister to review this position and keep the scheme in place, with adaptations, for the reasons I mentioned. It was and is a really good innovation and tool. A reformed scheme would be of some use for sectors such as aviation that will continue to face pressures.

Youth unemployment is the single greatest challenge we face. A staggering 64% of young women were shown to be out of work, according to figures for March this year. We hope to see those figures improve but, in the meantime, war must be declared on youth unemployment. While the pledges on retraining and upskilling are welcome, it is hard to discern whether the additional 50,000 places represent a new or pre-existing commitment. Moreover, it appears those places will be available not just to younger people but to all who are out of work. Every day out of employment deepens the scars for young people who are jobless. We know when the PUP will be cut for young workers but we do not have any timeline or guarantee as to when the new schemes will be up and running. That is really problematic.

Commitments around an easy to administer examinership-lite programme were enunciated in the economic plan yesterday and are likely to be made law before the summer recess. This is understandable in the economic circumstances but it is unforgivable that no corresponding pledge exists to better protect workers who are likely to be caught up in insolvencies. We run the risk of waves of liquidations as the economy finds its level. Five years on from its publication, we need to legislate to give effect to the Duffy Cahill review. We said “never again” after the Clerys debacle. Instead, we got the Debenhams debacle.

Given that our corporation tax base is vulnerable on a number of fronts, it might have been expected that this plan would say something new on how our national industrial strategy needs to pivot away from its risky over-reliance on a small number of heavy hitters in the foreign direct investment, FDI, sector for good jobs and 20% of our tax receipts. Plans to help a few more SMEs to export are, frankly, underwhelming and were, in many cases, already announced in previous initiatives. Additional investment in the green technology sector, digitalisation, innovation and research and development are welcome, but we need a much more ambitious plan to scale up our medium-sized enterprises and help them to employ more people across the regions and go global from Ireland.

In return for the drawdown of €950 million from the EU, it is there in black and white in the plan that Ireland gave way on the question of “aggressive tax planning”. The Minister and his colleague, the Minister for Finance, Deputy Donohoe, need to explain what concessions were made to the European Commission on tax policy and how they will impact on the Exchequer’s bottom line and on budget forecasts. Were the concessions offered over and above the ongoing OECD-led global corporation tax reform process? The Minister and his colleagues must publish a detailed explanation of what this latest development means for Ireland.

The planned reforms to the local property tax are long overdue. We need to broaden our

tax base and focus on wealth taxes. As a socialist, I am a firm believer in taxes on assets. The pretend progressives in Sinn Féin are not. That was a popular and populist position to hold in 2013. It was wrong then and it is wrong now. Sinn Féin says it wants wealth taxes but not on property and land. That is an utterly fraudulent and dishonest position. We cannot have wealth taxes while exempting millionaires' mansions. This is socialism 101. According to Sinn Féin's youth wing, one cannot be a socialist and favour property taxes.

3 o'clock

Sinn Féin's Minister of Finance in the North, who stands over the collection of £1 billion in rates, must not have slept very well last night. I look forward to the Sinn Féin youth wing calling for his head because clearly he is not a socialist or a republican, but I will believe that when I see it. This is Sinn Féin and its partitionism in action. It does one thing in Newry and says another thing down the road in Dundalk. It tells people what they want to hear regardless of the consequences. Deputy Doherty let the cat out of the bag on "Prime Time" last night. He said we should tax income and not property. That is not in the interests of the working class and those who are most at risk from the chronic underfunding of local councils and an unreformed local property tax system. This is an incredible position to adopt, especially at this fragile time in our recovery, and this is not the message hard-working people will want to hear as they get back to work over the coming period. Let us have a mature, informed debate on tax but let us not pretend we can do this without imposing broad and measured taxes on assets and wealth.

Deputy Richard Bruton: The greatest challenge we face is managing a recovery from a crisis the impact of which has not been even. Some, as we have heard, have €12 billion in savings accumulated while others have endured open wounds and seen their life's work go up in smoke. The country does not have the option of getting back to all that existed before now, and those who try to say we can go back to where we were would not only put us on a path that would be unaffordable but would stunt the country's future. What we have to work on is a just transition to a new future. Some in the Opposition, although I notably exclude the previous speaker, have attacked the extension of property tax, which 95% pay, to ask the remaining 5% who have not been paying to pay, but when people hear that attack, they know they are facing Members who will put out any impossible expectation to try to narrow the scope for the Government to deliver. The challenge now is to build a stronger, fairer, more balanced and more sustainable economy with a new social contract binding our communities together. This will require us being innovative in the way we align both public investment and activity and private activity. It will mean new responsibilities for the private sector, and I am glad to see that those are coming around in the form of new workers' rights, but it will also mean the public sector taking on new responsibilities. It cannot mean, as we have heard from Sinn Féin in particular, public-only solutions in crucial sectors such as housing.

The recovery plan is a good start. Viable businesses are being given an opportunity to recover. Persons displaced are being offered an opportunity to transition and there are new workers' rights for them. I welcome in particular the youth employment charter and the pact for skills. We are recognising that we need to future-proof in digital and green areas. However, housing, the NDP and the climate plan are the real meat in how much the Government embeds change. We need to make sure that the tools embedded are adequate for the ambition we have set out. We cannot hope to rely on the old infrastructures or institutions to deliver the necessary change. I have some anxieties about whether we have made enough of a commitment to change. If we want regional balance, the Land Development Agency must have the capacity to assemble substantial sites, particularly in the new cities we want to evolve. I do not see that

this is yet in place. If we want to promote compact and sustainable living patterns, investment planning in housing or at least in education, justice, transport and children must change in order that, as we develop these compact living patterns, public services are developed in tandem. We must also recognise that the social benefits of compact living are such that we cannot expect first-time buyers to carry all of that cost. If we want agricultural transition, we need to plan for massive change in land use and forestry. So far we are only scratching the surface. If we want zero environmental degradation, every sector must look at its supply chain. The public sector must lead by example and examine its supply chain. If we want to make the well-being of children central to our future strategy, we need to see reform of the senior cycle and the curriculum and assessment method, we need to build mental health resilience in our communities for young people and we need to improve our approach to the care of the child. There are, therefore, significant changes on which we need to continue to build. Today's plan is a good first step but we need to do substantially more. I look forward to the NDP and hope it will fulfil those ambitions.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: Following on from Deputy Bruton's contribution, today is a positive day. The context of this plan is that 37% of the expenditure must relate to climate initiatives and 20% must relate to digital investments and reforms. It is great, therefore, that my county, Cork, and Cork North-Central in particular, has been promised €185 million as part of the proposal for a massive job in Kent Station, replicating what has been done in the past on the eastern or Cork-Cobh line. There is also the northern line heading from Cork city through Blackpool to Blarney and, possibly in the future, Monard and Mallow. I spoke to a representative of Iarnród Éireann this morning. Iarnród Éireann is very excited about this proposal. It will involve the full electrification of the track in Cork before any other county. It has gone to tender for a number of electric locomotives and carriages. This is a massively important day for Cork. There are people in the Chamber whom I can hear below me - I cannot see them, unfortunately - and who would be the first to decry the lack of investment in the north side of Cork city. Today is a big boost for the north side and we have to welcome this news.

Putting my teaching hat on, I also welcome the reforms that will focus on digital literacy and digital skills throughout our education system. This will involve the mass purchase of ICT equipment for schools. The roll-out of broadband to more than 1,100 primary schools was mentioned. That is massive. In the context of dealing with the pandemic, it is very welcome.

An investment of €20 million is mooted for waste water treatment plants as part of a river basin management plan. While that is welcome, it only scratches the surface of the problems we have throughout the country with Irish Water and waste water treatment. The Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, plans to bring forward further funding initiatives for Irish Water later in the summer, but massive investment is required in our towns and villages to make them ripe for development into the future. We can all name towns and villages in our constituencies. In my constituency, Carrignavar and Whitechurch are both within commuting distance of the city centre, ten to 15 minutes, but unfortunately are handicapped by the fact that they cannot develop on the basis of a lack of waste water treatment services. I urge the Minister, Deputy Michael McGrath, to work with the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, into the future and address some of the shortcomings, particularly in respect of wastewater.

Deputy Brendan Smith: I welcome this plan, which outlines the Government's commitment to ongoing and much-needed supports for workers and enterprises still impacted adversely by the ongoing pandemic. There are still many challenges and difficulties for different sectors of our economy and thus for a sizeable proportion of our workforce. That cohort of people, be it employer or employee, needs the reassurance that these much-needed and essential sup-

ports will be continued. A clear message from this plan is the emphasis on job creation, which I warmly welcome, and the ambition that needs to be realised of having 2.5 million people in employment by 2024. With job creation we need employment opportunities in all regions, not just the major urban centres. In getting beyond the pandemic and rebuilding the economy, we need strong measures to regenerate many rural parts, including the Border region, particularly the counties I have the privilege of representing, Cavan and Monaghan.

Tourism and hospitality, with their reach into every parish, are critical to both the urban and rural economies and will need continued support to rebuild the sector and grow visitor numbers. Today was an important and exciting day for the sector, and many employers and employees are looking forward to reopening their businesses and greeting visitors again. Following on from this strategy will be the revised NDP. I very warmly welcome the unambiguous commitment on the part of the Minister, Deputy McGrath, some time ago, reiterated more recently, that a central focus of this plan would be regional development. Key to regional development would be the upgrade of infrastructure, including some national and non-national roads. In many instances in rural Ireland, we have good social infrastructure, including schools, local health facilities, sporting and community facilities. We need jobs, however, to retain and, hopefully, grow the population in those communities.

Alongside CAP support for our farming and agrifood sector, the national development plan should contain specific measures to support this sector which is the prime driver of economic development in rural Ireland. Farming has undergone a major transformation. As a country, we should recognise, without equivocation, the sustainable farming systems we have. The Border region and the agrifood sector will, unfortunately, face further difficulties due to Brexit. The Government's policy must continue to be supportive of a sector that has had considerable growth in employment going back to the late 1990s. The sector has obtained new markets because of the quality products manufactured by our agrifood sector. There has been huge investment in research and innovation. We must ensure that, due to the many challenges the sector will face with climate change, etc., there will be continued and much-needed Government support to ensure it continues to provide worthwhile employment, as well as generating much economic activity in every parish in our State.

Deputy Thomas Gould: It is all well and good for the Minister and the Government to talk about what they are doing for the State and to slap themselves on the back. Unfortunately, this announcement of a recovery and resilience fund does nothing to reopen the out-of-hours GP service for the people of the Cork North Central constituency, SouthDoc Blackpool. Three times this year SouthDoc has told the people of Cork North Central and me that it would reopen. It still has not. Fifteen months ago, it closed its doors under the guise of an excuse of the Covid-19 pandemic and it could not reopen.

The whole country is now opening up and there is even talk about international flights in July. SouthDoc in Blackpool, however, is closed. When I hear Deputies from my constituency talk, they do not mention it. Why? It was closed under this Government. Will the Minister explain to me where is the resilience fund for Cork North Central to reopen SouthDoc?

The cuts to the pandemic unemployment payment are unbelievable. Does this Fianna Fáil-Fine Gael-Green Party Government learn from anything? Last year, it cut the payment and then had to reverse the decision after Deputy Pearse Doherty and Sinn Féin, along with other Opposition parties, said it was the wrong thing to do. Again, this year the Government wanted to cut it. People lost their jobs, through no fault of their own because of the pandemic, but Fianna

Fáil and Fine Gael are abandoning them. I listened to Deputy Bruton speak about being fair and balanced. It reminds me of the catchphrase of the Fox News channel. I will leave it up to people to decide whether that station is fair and balanced. To cut the pandemic unemployment payment at this stage when people have lost their jobs through no fault of their own is wrong. The Government should fix this and go with Sinn Féin's proposals which are balanced.

The Government talks a lot about housing. The vulture and cuckoo investment funds are still coming in here. Until such time as the Government invests the money needed to deliver social and affordable purchase and affordable rental homes, the housing crisis will never be solved.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: There is much in this plan that Sinn Féin would have looked for and which is welcome. I acknowledge the investment in rail in Cork, although it is just one part of the jigsaw. We need to be closer to the city centre and ensure that light rail on the east-west and north-south links is expedited. These would serve some of the inner suburbs, as well as potentially the airport. We need to work on this.

There are, however, other issues in this plan which are regressive and there are significant mistakes. We all want to see a situation where everyone who lost his or her job due to the pandemic is back at work and we no longer need the pandemic unemployment payment. We are not at that stage yet, however. Some of the cuts in this programme are completely wrong.

One example of this relates to students. Many students will work when they are in college - I worked - to try to pay their way and contribute to their education. They are going to find it very hard to find jobs at a time when youth unemployment is so high. Now they will not have the pandemic unemployment payment either. That is a significant hit, particularly when so few students avail of the full SUSI grant. I urge the Minister to reconsider that.

Certain sectors are going to take a long time to recover. An obvious one is aviation. It is important, even outside of this programme, that some of the grants that the airports and airlines need are extended. There must be a two or three-year period where that funding continues as it will take that length of time for this sector to recover.

I also want to flag the need for income support to continue. There are workers being temporarily laid off by Aer Lingus. The airline is getting a lot of money from the Government and will continue to do so. The Government should make it a condition with Aer Lingus that it does not lay off those workers or put them on temporary lay-off. Instead, it should keep them on the books and the employment wage subsidy scheme, EWSS. That will only cost the majority of workers about €50 a week per worker. The cost to Aer Lingus is not enormous. The difference it would make to those workers' terms and conditions, as well as income, would be significant. I urge the Government to make contact with Aer Lingus on that.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: I welcome the opportunity for this debate. However, I would echo the points made by other speakers on the process behind the development of the recovery and resilience plan and the economic recovery plan. It would have been much better if there had been wider involvement and debate in the preparation of those plans. They are supposed to be national plans. It was short-sighted of the Government not to include all parties and all Members across the House in the development of those. It could have had the various Dáil committees feeding into the work behind those plans.

Overall, the two plans, published yesterday, are short in detail. Regarding the economic re-

covery plan, everything seems to have been thrown into that, including the kitchen sink. Many measures arising from the budget, or which had already been announced during the year, were just reheated. It is quite a hotchpotch with a lot of spin associated with it but very little detail or timelines.

Several points must be made on the pitch to the European Commission for our share of funding from the recovery and resilience fund. I very much welcome the changed attitude from the European Commission on the appropriate response to an economic crisis. The approach being taken in the context of the pandemic is very different to that taken as result of the crash following on from the banking crisis. In the latter case, it was about retrenchment and austerity. To a large extent many of us, including a large number of people in Ireland but right across Europe, are still paying the price for those austerity policies. It would seem that there has been a step change in terms of the attitude in responding to crises. I very much welcome that change of approach, particularly the change in the attitude of the ECB which, in turn, feeds into policies and approaches by national Central Banks. The intention now in providing access to substantial funds, both as grants and loans, is that we have to work our way out of this crisis through growth and job creation. I hope that those messages will be fully taken on board by this Government and I will come to some points on that later on in my contribution. This is a very different approach to what one would associate with Fine Gael, in particular, in government and also as to some of the measures that were supported by Fianna Fáil over the past number of Governments.

I will also make a point on the allocation for Ireland and to the fact that in the first tranche for this and next year that allocation is €915 million, which is a very substantial amount of money to receive in grants. The second tranche in 2023 is due to be about €420 million. There is some doubt about that which arises from the fact that our GDP does not accurately reflect the growth or lack of growth in the country. There is that distortion factor in our GDP arising from the high level of activity and exports in the pharma and tech areas. When one looks over the past year or so, where everybody had a very rough time, it is incredible to think that we are looking at a situation where our GDP says that we have had positive growth over the past year. The only reason that is the case is because those exports in pharma and tech completely distort our GDP. We should be using a different measure for GDP because the allocation of the fund from the Commission is based on GDP as well as some other related measures.

Can the Minister say if the Government has made an approach to Europe to use a different measure for our economic growth? The gross national income, GNI*, measure is a much more realistic and appropriate one. Has the approach been made to change the measurement that is being used for Ireland? One would wonder if the Government has done that. It is unlikely that it has and one then has to ask why it has not highlighted this issue. It must be the case that the Government was nervous about making much noise about this issue because it draws attention to Ireland's economic and taxation models, including the amount of corporate activity by multinationals here that does not really happen here. We know this is an issue that Ireland has dodged or made a pretence about over many years. The reality is that we are going to face something of a cliff edge on this with changed approaches and economic policy from the EU Commission over the coming years, particularly on our corporation tax and on taxation generally. Perhaps the Government should have made that case because we are now paying a price for the fact that our GDP distorts the real economy. Those with expertise in the area would say that the figures that are there at the moment do not represent the reality of what our economy has gone through over the past year. We have had 500,000 job losses and a decrease in domestic demand of over 19% in 2020. Some reliable estimates would also propose that the economy

actually shrunk by 5% last year rather than growing as our GDP would indicate.

This is a point and issue that will become very important when it comes to the second tranche of what Ireland is likely to receive. While at this point that figure is supposed to be about €420 million, it is estimated that that could be decreased and could fall back to about €68 million because of the kind of measures that could be used to determine the second tranche. That is a very significant price to pay, which would be a loss of over €300 million because our GDP does not accurately reflect the level of economic activity and the real economy.

On the plan itself, I will make a number of quick points. It is based on three different areas: advancing the green transition, the digital reforms and transformation plan; and the social and economic recovery. On the green transition, while much of that is very important and I would support, the issue of retrofitting is not being handled properly. We have seen with retrofitting in the main that households that are better off are able to afford the scheme in the way it has operated. The proposals for the new way of operating are not going to help working families on low incomes. We should be talking about a pay-as-you-go scheme whereby the energy companies could carry the initial cost and households could then pay back the cost of retrofitting over an extended period of time through their energy bills because those energy bills would be reduced with retrofitting. That is a much fairer way of doing it. On low-income families who simply will not be able to afford to take out loans, there needs to be an extension of the provisions that we have been talking about if we are serious about a just transition.

On the social and economic recovery element of this plan, I spoke yesterday about the pandemic unemployment payment, PUP, and that it is proposed to cut the PUP by 40%, even though many of the jobs that have been lost will not be replaced and there will not be employment opportunities for those people. That is wrong.

I welcome the proposals on the upskilling opportunities but there is no detail on them. It is very important that where people have lost their jobs, have gone back to reskill which is the right approach to take, there are proper training allowances for them and that they have adequate income support because they will not take on the training opportunities otherwise.

Overall, there is a great shortage of detail and timescales on this report and I hope we will be getting that critical information soon.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank Deputy Shortall. We go to the Government slot now and I call Deputy Calleary, who sharing with a number of colleagues.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I thank the Ceann Comhairle and I am sharing with Deputies O'Connor, Cahill, McAuliffe and Alan Farrell. I commend the Minister on elements of this plan but the important thing is that they are delivered upon. It would be worthwhile as we come to the first anniversary of this Government to reflect on the amount of announcements in the past 11 months and the correlation between those announcements and delivery on the ground. It is time that we did an analysis of that. Frankly, many parts of the system are not capable of delivering projects on the ground to the extent that they need to. It is worthwhile to do that and in the context of another big plan with big money, we need to ensure that the delivery mechanisms are there.

The training and education places are welcome. To echo Deputy Shortall, the detail is very important. It is, however, very important that the local employment services, LES, are involved. Current plans about privatisation or changing the mandate of the local employment

services and undermining their holistic role in employment delivery are not welcome. We need to monitor that and to protect the holistic role that local employment services give around the country, particularly in the implementation of this plan and in the sourcing of opportunities for people who have lost these opportunities in recent months.

The infrastructure commitments are very welcome. I am very conscious that we have a review due on this and I am also aware that the Minister will be doing enormous work on the national development plan in the coming weeks. The Minister and I have discussed how the kinds of infrastructural developments announced yesterday in rail programmes for Cork, Galway, Waterford and Limerick need to be replicated. We need to see the western rail project commenced and in the national development plan. The projects announced yesterday do not have to wait for an all-island rail review and the western rail corridor should not have to wait. We need a further focus on regional development in the context of the national development plan. This should be proper regional development in the context of my remarks about the capacity to deliver.

The property tax changes, particularly for those houses with pyrite, are welcome. As Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, the Minister needs to be aware that the current defective block scheme is adding to the stress of homeowners instead of relieving it. The requirements of the scheme are making it inaccessible and mean it will not work. We will need the Minister's support to make it work. Surely in the context of the retrofitting targets within this programme, these houses offer a perfect opportunity for funding from the SEAI.

This is a very good plan and many aspects of it are welcome, but we have to learn from the mistakes being made in the just transition programme in the midlands, which have been highlighted by many of our colleagues, and ensure they will not be repeated in the ambition of this plan. We must ensure that communities that take on the challenge of providing renewable power will be rewarded with jobs and placements, and that this plan will deliver opportunity in an equal and sustainable manner throughout the country in order that building back a better Ireland can be something real on the ground as opposed to an aspiration.

Deputy James O'Connor: I very much welcome the news that came from the Government yesterday regarding the significant investment to restart and rebuild the economy. In particular, I welcome the €185.4 million that will be invested in rail infrastructure, primarily in my constituency, Cork East. As the Minister will be aware, I worked closely on this with him and his Department and also with the Department of Transport and the Taoiseach, and I thank them most sincerely for their assistance over recent months on this issue. It will help greatly to reduce the level of traffic congestion in my constituency for commuters travelling into and out of Cork city, and it is very welcome news for people living in areas that are not currently served by rail connections, including those living in Blarney and Blackpool. People living in my constituency will be delighted to be able to travel to those areas via new rail connections that will be established by the Government. It just goes to show that whatever people may say about the Government, we have done everything we could to protect the economy in the most appropriate way while also being responsible with people's livelihoods and health. This is another €1 billion to try to get the economy back up and running again. It is the prudent and correct action that needs to be taken.

I am hopeful that in the coming weeks, the review of the national development plan, NDP, will be published. As a Cork Deputy, I want to be clear that the NDP drawn up in 2014 was incredibly disappointing for Cork county and city. Some of the projects left out of that plan must

be included in the review. Specifically, I want progress to be made on the Cork-Limerick motorway, which is very important to my constituents in Cork East and particularly those living in Mallow and Buttevant. In addition, I would like progress to be made on the Cobh access road, a project costing more than €100 million, and bypasses provided for the villages of Castlemartyr and Killeagh, which will probably amount to an additional sum of more than €40 million.

When I look at other areas with much lower traffic levels and how well they were serviced by that NDP through investment in road infrastructure, what happened in Cork when that document was drawn up was simply wrong and that must be rectified. It must be rectified by the Taoiseach, the Ministers who are based in Cork and other Government Deputies. I want to be resolute on that message.

Deputy Jackie Cahill: This plan is further clear evidence of the Government's commitment to investing in the economy and getting us over the Covid pandemic. The first issue I raise relates to the major plantation of trees on 33,000 ha of Bord na Móna land. This will be a great asset in our battle to reduce emissions and against climate change. I hope the carbon sequestered will be fully counted when we are calculating our figures in the context of our battle to reduce emissions. I hope licences will be issued more easily than they are to ordinary farmers at the moment in forestry and that there will not be a delay in the issuing of licences in respect of these trees, as we are all experiencing at the moment, unfortunately.

There is a projection to invest €20 million in waste water treatment upgrades, with ten plants targeted by the plan. Unfortunately, I do not think that is nearly enough. Waste water treatment plants throughout the country need significant upgrades and, unfortunately, a number of small towns and villages have no such facilities. If we are serious about water quality, we need very significant investment in waste water treatment, but €20 million is nowhere near adequate. I hope this can be reviewed and revised upwards because it is a serious challenge we are facing, and this kind of money will not go anywhere near meeting it.

We need a pilot scheme for dealing with farm slurry and waste in general. Advanced technology offers modern ways to deal with slurry. It has the potential to create energy and a by-product of the process can be used as an organic fertiliser on farmland. This would be very useful technology in our battle to reduce emissions from the agrifood sector, and I do not see any specifics on that in the plan. A total of 37% of the plan is devoted to our battle against climate change. Why is there no such pilot project in the plan? The technology is available and we can use it without hindering production at farm level. If we properly embrace the available modern technology, we can win our battle to reduce emissions. I hope that when we see greater detail, a pilot project for dealing with both farm and municipal waste will be included in the plan.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: I welcome the national recovery plan announced yesterday and the massive supports we will continue to give regarding the employment of people through the employment wage subsidy scheme, EWSS. In February, almost 500,000 people were supported under the scheme. While there will be reductions in the pandemic unemployment payment from September, there will be no cliff edge for employees supported by the EWSS, as it will continue until the end of the year. I recall Opposition Deputies telling us in the Chamber last year that we would leave people hanging when public health restrictions were reinstated, but we did no such thing. We maintained our supports in response to pandemic unemployment when it was impossible for people to go out to work. Should there be any change with further restrictions imposed, which I hope there will not be, the Government will not be found wanting.

I turn to what is included for young people in the plan. There is provision for expanded education including further education, apprenticeships and employment supports. All of that comes under the new youth employment charter, which will help thousands of young people throughout the country. I am pleased with that because the youth guarantee scheme that was piloted in Ballymun under a European Commission project, which saw great benefits on the ground, will now be rolled out throughout the country. I frequently criticise the 2011-16 Government in the Chamber, but I should give credit to the former Deputy John Lyons, who piloted that programme and was proud of it. Not only will young people in Ballymun see the benefits of it being rolled out nationally but now, equally, thousands of young people throughout the country will see them too. That is a very welcome development.

Deputy Alan Farrell: I thank the Minister of State, Deputy Fleming, for his presence during the debate. There are many good aspects of the national recovery and resilience plan and I welcome its introduction with all the stated aims and programmes outlined by the Minister, and I very much look forward to his closing remarks later. After 15 months of Covid-19, the plan's publication is a decisive moment in the pandemic, as we shift our focus from our emergence from an incredibly difficult period to an opportunity to pause, reflect and deliver on plans that will see our economy restored in a number of years, with tens, if not hundreds, of thousands of jobs created.

The plan sets forth a vision that can restore the economy to its previous position of strength and growth befitting our citizens and places a strategic importance on both education and upskilling and climate action, which is welcome. I am encouraged by the proposals to grow a sustainable economy and jobs in Ireland and I believe it will make a significant impact in the coming years. There will be benefits from decarbonising our enterprise sector and developing retrofitting, an important piece of the puzzle and a key commitment in the programme for Government. Furthermore, the plan will allow for the future electrification of public networks and further our work on developing a digital economy. In the short time I have, I refer to another issue within the plan and I ask that the Minister of State, Deputy Fleming, raise it with the Minister, Deputy McGrath, and perhaps with the Cabinet. This House needs a meaningful, scientific-based debate on the use of antigen testing in Ireland. We are proposing to use it in our education sector, and we need to expand on that. I will not be overly prescriptive about the nature of the debate, but there is not enough factual information available to Members. This is an opportunity for the Business Committee to meet and agree on that, but I want the Government's response to the resilience and recovery of the aviation sector to be heard properly. That is why I believe a debate is appropriate, preferably next week, if possible.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I agree with a considerable amount of what has been said in the sense that there is much to be welcomed, but elements of particular proposals are reheated. We all accept that using the GDP rating to determine the moneys we receive from the EU recovery and resilience fund and providing us with only €915 million in the first tranche is not necessarily the methodology we want to use in the future. This must be examined because it is an insufficient amount when compared to what other states are receiving. GDP is providing a bad read of the status of the economy. The other problem is the own resources decision. We did not deal in the House with the fact that the EU has taken a loan of €750 billion and the decisions that will be made on how that will be paid back. There are, therefore, outstanding issues in that regard..

We accept the emphasis, as we try to move beyond this pandemic, on recovery. We welcome that there must be action on the green and digital transition. In dealing with the digital transition, given the ransomware attack on our health services, this demands that we build in

whatever must be done from the point of view of securing ourselves. That means ensuring we have cybersecurity capacity at the optimum level. That goes beyond whatever will come out of the National Cyber Security Centre, NCSC, review, which will probably tell us that the NCSC is not fit for purpose at this point in time and will require further resourcing, but we must consider other protective and even offensive measures. This must be built into any plan.

Regarding some of the supports, I spoke to many Ministers about the fact that many people fell between the stools. I hope the business resumption support scheme will deal with an element of them, but we must see action in respect of taxi drivers. I welcome what was said about aviation workers. Any supports for the airlines must be connected to ensure jobs and workers' rights are maintained.

Deputy Brian Stanley: I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate. A national recovery plan is important and I want to focus on the training and apprentice element. I want to raise the importance of training and proper apprenticeships, and I emphasise "proper apprenticeships" as we attempt to recover and emerge from the pandemic.

We are in a housing crisis and it will only get more demanding. It will require an army of workers. Hundreds of thousands of homes must also be retrofitted. However, there is a shortage of construction skills. I forecast in this House eight years ago that we would reach this point. Even if we meet the modest social housing targets set by the Government in the recovery plan, along with the need in the private construction sector, because we require that as well, we will not have the construction workers necessary. This reality was highlighted in the recent TASC report on construction. It is a reality in Laois-Offaly that the skilled people to carry out the work required are not available. Therefore, the Government must encourage more young people to enter apprenticeships that can help us rebuild our economy, build houses, and do the retrofitting that is needed.

Not everyone has to or wants to go to third level. What is important, however, is that the Government enforces strong terms and conditions for apprenticeships. I am hearing reports that a practice has developed where young workers are being exploited on bogus apprenticeships. They are used as cheap labour and then let go one, two or three years after they are taken on, with new apprentices hired, *mar dheá*, in their place. There must be a proper training element, with new workers fully qualifying after four years. The Ministers, Deputies Varadkar and Harris, must clamp down on this practice if we are to see young people attracted to this sector. I emphasise that and ask that the Minister of State brings that message back because it is very important. The TASC report also highlighted that there are substantial levels of bogus self-employment in the construction sector. This is supported by the evidence we gathered recently on the Committee of Public Accounts, and gathered by Revenue, which highlights a high prevalence of bogus self-employment. If we want people to work in construction, they must be paid a fair wage and be guaranteed decent terms and conditions. Sectoral agreed rates of pay for trades and general operatives must be applied on all sides, especially to projects funded out of the public purse by the taxpayer, which is important. It is possible to do this.

We want to get people back to work. My party, Sinn Féin, wants to get people back into good quality work with proper terms and conditions, and ensure they have a living wage. I want to know whether the Minister of State and the Government intend to do this and make the construction sector an area where people want to work again.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I will share time with Deputies Murphy and Barry. Both

the Taoiseach and the Minister for Finance got quite annoyed with People Before Profit this morning saying that we never recognise the good things the Government does, and that we are just looking for reasons to give out. I refute that absolutely. Of course, we acknowledge the income and wage supports, grants to SMEs and so on to sustain people during this unprecedented pandemic and they are to be welcomed. Indeed, we have supported many of them, but it is also our job to point out deficiencies and unfairness.

We completely reject the idea that ordinary working people should pay the bill for the Covid pandemic, and that is why we oppose plans to increase taxes on the family home. It is a tax that is fundamentally unfair, which we opposed from the beginning, because it taxes the roof over the heads of ordinary working people who have paid stamp duty and so on. We have outlined the alternative ways to raise money repeatedly in budget submissions. We do not imagine someone can pluck money out of the air; in fact, for the most part we do not even suggest that we borrow to the extent the Government is borrowing, which could cause us big problems. I am not saying that we borrow nothing, because money is cheap at the moment, but we have proposed in budget after budget that the way to finance additional spending in health, education and housing, without having to impose austerity measures, is by taxing wealth and those with the highest incomes. Let us take property as an example. We propose that people with two homes should pay a substantial property tax on the second home. If they have multiple homes, a steeply progressive property tax should be imposed on what is clearly wealth in those cases. That would be fair and would redistribute wealth. It would be an actual tax on wealth rather than a tax on working people.

We also completely reject the idea that arbitrary deadlines should be set to cut the pandemic unemployment payments of people who have lost their livelihood or income because of measures, which are out of their control, taken by the Government to deal with the pandemic. I want to make an appeal on behalf of musicians, people in the arts, and so on who are a long way from recovery but the Government is threatening to cut their PUP. As I pointed out to the Taoiseach earlier, many of the musicians who need the latest music and entertainment business assistance scheme, MEBAS, are excluded from it. I have been asking for a year for a financial package for taxi drivers. The Government keeps saying it is coming but it never arrives. Will there be a recognition that taxi drivers carry costs of about €10,000 to €11,000 per year, have had no income for a year and a half and have been excluded from all the grant support schemes during Covid?

I repeat the call to expand the places and make it easier for people to fulfil their educational potential. People doing postgrads and doctorates in things like psychology, radiology and so on are burdened with excessive fees, having to work unpaid placements and living in poverty. Those issues should be addressed.

Deputy Paul Murphy: The way the Government goes on about this plan and has been lauding itself about this being the opposite of austerity and so on over the past 24 hours, one would think a massive new deal public investment was going on in the economy. The reality is very different. Look at the size of what we are talking about. The EU money and the domestic money adds up to €4.5 billion, which is a tiny amount. It is 1.5% of the size of the economy or 4% to 4.5% of the size of an annual budget. That is without going into the details of where the money is going. This is not a substantial package. Compared to an EU level *per capita*, it is about a quarter of public investment post-Covid spending in the Spanish state, for example.

What is contained in it? The Government can talk about the opposite of austerity all it

wants. However, hundreds of thousands of people will experience, on one hand, a significant drop in their income of up of 40% for those on the €350 rate of PUP. They lose money in their pockets and will have to pay out more money in an austerity tax introduced in the aftermath of the last economic crisis. It will be difficult to convince those people that what the Government is doing is not austerity. They will experience it, correctly and accurately, as an attack on their living standards.

My second point is about the price we are paying for the corporate tax haven model, a failed and deeply unjust model. The way the Government often goes on, one would think someone else is paying the price for this, that it is a global competition and – nudge nudge, wink wink – it is the poorer countries which are losing out because hundreds of millions of euro are being robbed from the state coffers of poorer countries by the kind of practices this State engages in. However, they are not the only losers. We have made the point about the losers in terms of the money we do not get to invest in healthcare, education or to resolve the housing crisis.

The concrete point here is that the amount of money the State has got from the EU for this programme is very small compared to many other countries and that is because of our leprechaun economics. It is because it is based on GDP figures, which are massively bloated by corporations registering profits here to avoid paying tax. For example, we are getting about one sixth of what Croatia, a similar sized country, is getting. We are getting less than half of what Denmark, a similar sized country with a more developed economy, is getting. It underlines the point that ordinary workers here are the losers.

The Government keeps saying there is no alternative. We have an eco-socialist alternative. We have an eco-socialist green new deal, but the Government is not interested in discussing that.

Deputy Mick Barry: I will deal with two issues: training and what is happening at Aer Lingus. On training, the plan refers to 50,000 places in education and training, with a focus on digital and green jobs. It refers to 10,000 placements in workplaces through a job experience programme. Many people who will be pushed towards training could be provided with jobs and we need jobs based on direct State-led investment. We have been here before regarding training. In the last crisis, we had the JobBridge scheme, which was synonymous with exploitation and cheap labour. Participants received €188 plus a €50 top-up. The employer in return for 40 hours of work had to pay €1.25 per hour. It was no surprise, then, that employers like Advance Pitstop exploited the scheme and hired more than 25 people in one go. The Government denies this is JobBridge 2.0. It says workers will be paid more. How much more will they be paid? Be specific. Increasing the top-up from €50 to €100 will not cut it. That is still exploitative; that is still cheap labour.

There are more issues than pay. If there is to be training, there has to be real training. How will the Government ensure there is real training and jobs at the end of it? There should be guaranteed jobs at the end of it, certainly a higher proportion than the less than 20% than was the case with JobBridge.

The EWSS goes to companies like Aer Lingus. Aer Lingus is demanding a five-year pay freeze. It wants pay cuts for the workforce, lower starting rates of €12.30 per hour and to cut the sick pay scheme and duty allowances. If this is allowed go through, it will set a dreadful precedent for trade unionists and the trade union movement. It must be resisted. I am confident the workers will resist it and I will support them in resisting it.

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I draw attention to a point regarding Cork Airport, where workers received correspondence this morning. Ten weeks of runway repairs will mean 12 weeks of a temporary layoff for them. It is strange these workers are being laid off after being kept on the books for what will be, at that stage, 17 months of a pandemic. What is the agenda here? What is going on? A condition of Aer Lingus receiving EWSS must be that the austerity plan be withdrawn and those workers in Cork be kept on the books.

An Ceann Comhairle: We go to a Government slot, where Deputy MacSharry is sharing with colleagues.

Deputy Marc MacSharry: I welcome the announcement of the €4 billion that will be spent in the time ahead and the fact we will not have a cliff edge in terms of the various supports. I would like to have seen Europe divvying up more than the €900 million. That is required and we will have to display a level of agility as we move forward in terms of additional issues that will have to be addressed to assist our economy and society in its recovery.

Second and most important is the issue of alignment of policy. It is one thing to say housing is an emergency and a priority but, if other policies are not aligned, we will not achieve that. In the north west of the country, nobody is allowed build any houses. There is no rural housing and no rural planning. There is none at all in County Leitrim. That is not consistent with the national emergency we have. People who now rightly realise they have jobs they can work from home are selling properties in Dublin for very high prices and seeking to move to Donegal, Sligo, Leitrim, Mayo, Roscommon and so on, where they compete and push local people out of the market because they have more money to spend. We need to address planning law and make it consistent with the fact we have a housing crisis. We have people willing to build houses and restore derelict cottages all over the country that would be suitable if we were to support them. We have not done that.

In terms of development finance, we have the Central Bank and the pillar banks that are not supporting lending rules that are conducive with the housing emergency. We need to do that and to look at the development plans around the country and ensure we deal with those so zoning and development plans are at their optimum in terms of encouraging development of much-needed housing. Any recovery needs to do that.

The third point I will make is also relevant to policy alignment. I support any announcement of funds with regard to our recovery but we are talking as if the recovery has begun and society is open. It certainly is not open.

4 o'clock

We have a level of paranoia and scaremongering that is not consistent with either the numbers in hospital or the daily numbers. Over the course of the weekend the CMO tweeted his outrage at seeing people out doing what we told them to do, which is to have an outdoor summer. We can have a takeaway pint or a Coca-Cola, but we cannot congregate on the canal because the gardaí are going to come along and throw it out. Where do we expect people to go?

As we speak, over in St. Stephen's Green we are fencing off the bandstands because the last thing we want is people to congregate there. We cannot have it both ways. This is replicated all over the country, for example, at the Spanish Arch. Where I live in Strandhill, there are so many bollards on the seafront that had the Nazis done it in France on D-Day, God knows what the outcome of the war would have been.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy.

Deputy Marc MacSharry: We need alignment. There is no evidence to suggest that congregation in recent weeks, not just last weekend, has led to a spike in numbers. Let us give people the summer they deserve and then we might have the beginning of a recovery.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: We cannot have it both ways, but we can have a bit of balance. I have seen people outdoors all over my constituency in small groups. I thank Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council for the effort it has made to put in appropriate outdoor seating, to change the streetscape to accommodate restaurants to make it easier to have people outside in a structured way when they reopen and to put in place public facilities such as toilets and bins. That has made a big difference. I hope to see people out and about in as safe and balanced a way as possible.

I wish to make three points as well. I thank the Government for the extension to the EWSS and the development of the CRSS. We called for that and we asked the Government to provide certainty to business, which it did back in March. It has done it again today and that is so important. I thank the Government in particular for the introduction of the business resumption support scheme. A number of very niche groups, for example, catering companies, got stuck between the CRSS and the EWSS in terms of having a rateable premises, but not being eligible for CRSS because they did not have a footfall that was cut off. I think of two such companies in my area in particular which were really struggling. I lobbied very intensively in particular the Minister for Finance, Deputy Donohoe, and the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment, Deputy Varadkar, to the point of being really annoying about it. I am so thankful to them because the decisions the Government has made are the difference being those businesses continuing to be viable and closing. They were viable businesses and they have managed to get through the pandemic and now they need support to keep going.

I wish to raise a related issue, but it is not from the perspective of the Minister for Finance. I was listening to colleagues, in particular Deputy Brendan Smith, who spoke about his constituency being strong on social supports such as schools and playing facilities, among others. Mine is slightly inverted, in that the number in employment is strong but we lack space, which continues to create pressure on space in communities for schools and playing facilities. It is just as important that we try to be imaginative and creative in how we plan our area. There is a plan, for example, to put playgrounds on the roofs of schools, as we are trying to do in Dún Laoghaire, and to provide other facilities to make sure that we get the best sort of community. Space is finite and we must develop it intelligently and well.

Deputy Brendan Griffin: I add my voice to the broad welcome for the measures that were announced yesterday by the Government. Certain voices in the House criticised some of the measures. I suppose that is the job of the Opposition, but one would think that when it comes to something as important as national recovery after a once-in-a-century pandemic that there would be an objective approach to what is going on or what is being done by the Government. Unfortunately, party politics has got in the way again of what is the most important issue, that is, that all people are helped to recover from this terrible pandemic.

I wish to home in on one particular area, namely, tourism and hospitality. I very much welcome the early signal on the 9% VAT rate in respect of 2022, which I called for in the House and at private parliamentary party meetings as well. That is a good measure, but it is very important that it would be continued long beyond September 2022. It is very welcome, but this will be a

long recovery for the tourism and hospitality sector and we will need such supports.

Deputy Carroll MacNeill referred to the extension of business supports and also to the broadening of the eligibility criteria. That is very welcome, as it is critical and will be the difference between survival and people going out of business. We need to see that continue for as long as possible.

When global aviation gets back to some semblance of normality and international tourism gets going again, it will be the most competitive ever. We will need to support aviation in terms of new routes and to support Tourism Ireland with its international marketing. A massive effort will have to be made to help Ireland to remain competitive internationally and to re-establish the routes. The CEO of Tourism Ireland, Niall Gibbons, always said that it is like resetting the clock on 1 January, that we start all over again to try to achieve the figures. This is the mother and father of all restarts. We must support the efforts of everybody who helps to bring visitors into this country once we get back to normal again and that will require financial assistance.

Deputy Ciarán Cannon: We saw a very ambitious but realistic plan being published yesterday on how we return to normal. The plan is creative in suggesting that we do not return to an old normal but a reinvigorated and deeply ambitious Ireland.

I want to deal with two aspects of the plan, both of which seek to support the artistic community. The first is the continued extension of the PUP all the way up to next February, which is exceptionally important for musicians, entertainers and artists who will find themselves on a very rocky road to recovery with little certainty ahead in terms of how they return to work. We have seen many other sectors being literally switched back on overnight, but that simply is not possible with the entertainment sector. I am deeply grateful to the Ministers and the Cabinet for extending the PUP out to February 2022 to reflect the fact that the industry will take a long time to get back to full strength.

Seamus Heaney once remarked that we are not simply a credit rating or an economy, but a history and a culture; a human population rather than a statistical phenomenon. Here in Ireland we have an extraordinary, powerful cultural tradition, one we are very proud of, and we need to see it nurtured and growing. Yesterday's announcement of a pilot for a basic income scheme for artists is a wonderful step forward. I give great credit to the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media, Deputy Catherine Martin, and the Minister for Social Protection, Deputy Humphreys, for their vision and ambition in putting this pilot in place. Credit is also due to the former Ministers, Deputy Madigan and Senator Doherty, who in 2019 put in place a scheme to allow artists to claim jobseeker's allowance for a year while pursuing their craft.

You might recall, a Cheann Comhairle, during the early days of the pandemic, when we were all deeply fearful of what the future held, our then Taoiseach, Deputy Varadkar, regularly stood up in front of a mic to tell us of the difficult days ahead and how we needed to deal with a rampant virus, but in seeking to give us hope and solace he also always carefully chose some words from our poets and storytellers because it is always the work of our artists that we turn to for inspiration. Who knows, but right now in our midst there may be another Heaney, another Hynes, another Hozier struggling to survive and thinking about giving up. Yesterday's announcement of the basic income scheme for artists must surely give artists real hope that they will finally get the support and credit they deserve.

Deputy Brian Leddin: We must recover from the pandemic in a way that increases the

resilience of our country. I am proud of the role my party has played in government to achieve this. Over half of the €1 billion investment announced yesterday will be spent on climate projects, exceeding the EU's target of 37%.

Responsible governance seeks to leave things better for future generations. We should invest in a way that tackles climate change, protects our natural environment, encourages regional development and makes life better for people, and we are doing just that. The announcement of the Cork suburban rail project, with new stations and extra capacity, is the first step in bringing a DART-style suburban rail system, which will ultimately be more extensive than Dublin's, to our second city. It will enable the building of 30,000 homes, connected to a high-quality suburban rail service, which means that many families will not be dependent on a car for a good quality of life. This project is a key enabler to deliver housing, to deliver growth outside Dublin, and to develop our economy and society in a way that provides a better quality of life and does not harm the environment.

As well as regional suburban rail, we are delivering cheap financing for home retrofitting and we are upgrading waste water treatment plants in selected river basins that will enable delivery of more housing in towns and villages and improved water quality in sensitive areas. We are supporting our SMEs to build back greener, with targeted supports. We are investing in green education and research because, as we transform from a laggard to a leader on climate action, we are going to create a significant number of new jobs, particularly in our regions. As Deputy Cannon mentioned, we are funding a universal basic income pilot for artists to support an important sector and to take the first step in reimagining a welfare system that rewards work and provides security for our citizens. I commend the Ministers, Deputies Heather Humphreys and Catherine Martin, on that initiative.

These are only the first steps. We have much more to do but I believe in the capacity of Government to invest responsibly in a way that promotes balanced regional development and leaves things better for future generations.

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Imelda Munster, who is sharing with time with Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh.

Deputy Imelda Munster: I want to express disappointment with the allocation Ireland received under the recovery and resilience fund, which is €915 million out of a total fund of €750 billion. This is very small when compared to the allocations other states are receiving. I understand Poland, for example, is expected to receive €58 billion, with almost €25 billion of that in direct grants. We need to review the State's use of GDP as a method of measuring wealth. We all know our GDP figures are farcical and, as a result, we are losing out at a time we need as much investment as we can get to help affected communities, services and industries get back on their feet.

Worthwhile projects are included in the Government's proposals, some of which were made by Sinn Féin in our submissions, for example, an electronic system for sharing medical records, regional work innovation hubs and a major retrofitting programme, which are all badly needed. Other initiatives such as investment in public transport are also welcome. We need to ensure that parts of the country that are in dire need of investment and development are not left behind, like the north west, the Border region and the north east. These areas suffered the double-whammy of Brexit and Covid in recent years and they need additional support.

In a recent scoping report into community safety and well-being in Drogheda, it was made very clear that the lack of investment in the town by successive Governments created the conditions whereby young people were vulnerable to being sucked into lives of drugs and crime. We are seeing poor outcomes as a result of the decimation of services and the neglect of the town in terms of attracting businesses and industries to keep jobs in the area. We need to get vital infrastructure, like the northern cross route, off the ground to attract businesses into the town as a matter of urgency. The northern cross route has been delayed for almost 15 years. If the Government will not fund it, we should seek other funding options such as this scheme. The delay in the project is holding back the development of Drogheda, and I cite it as just one of the many towns this applies to.

Drogheda has a lot going for it. It is Ireland's largest town, it has a young, well-educated population and it is located on the Dublin to Belfast corridor. What is missing is the Government support to develop the town to attract employment and provide housing. Successive Governments have repeatedly dropped the ball on this and it must be rectified. Neglect of urban centres has to be reversed. I hope the Government will prioritise this project and make sure the funding is secured as a matter of urgency.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: We have €915 million out of the €672.5 billion under the EU plan. That speaks for itself. We need to ask why we are getting such a small share of the cake. Distribution based on population, the 2019 GDP figures and the average unemployment rates do not reflect the reality on the ground in regard to health, housing, education or sustainable employment. Are we going to continue to use the live register to measure employment success? Are we going to tackle the issue of precarious employment conditions, zero-hour contracts, employment uncertainty and the poverty traps that affect so many people who cannot get a mortgage or ever hope to buy their own home?

We need to look under the bonnet and then we need to do a permanent and sustainable fix. I have listened all afternoon to Government Deputies asking why people cannot be happy about this. The reason is that it is not going to permanently fix anything, first, in terms of the amount we were able to lever because of all that we keep hidden, including the hidden poverty in this country, and, second, as one of the Government speakers said, we do not have policy alignment. If anyone speaks to a local authority today and asks for something, the bureaucracy that is in place to prevent money from getting to where it is needed means it is just not working. The Government loves announcements of millions of euro for this and millions of euro for that yet when I try to seek an assessment for a child with autism or something very small or simple to be done, it cannot be done. The headline figures belie the true position. There is no flexibility built into the system. I am all for governance and accountability, but there is no flexibility to spend on many of these schemes in the way that is needed, including with SEAI grants. We have grants and subsidies for people who do not need them in the first place, but too many people are excluded and are caught in a poverty trap because they are excluded from the grants and schemes the Government lauds itself for providing.

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Lowry, who is sharing with Deputies Canney and Fitzpatrick.

Deputy Michael Lowry: The country released a collective sigh of relief on Friday last as the first real signs of normality began to emerge. Covid is not yet in the rear-view mirror but there is certainly a public feeling that it has moved to the side view. However, we must be cautious and vigilant against the threat of the Indian strain. The road to recovery opens ahead. It

is time to revitalise and repair and, in many cases, it is time to rescue and renew.

Looking back at where we stood in the first quarter of 2020, Ireland is now a very different place. In addition to enduring the wrath of Covid restrictions and lockdowns, we must also factor in the changes to our economy that have taken place as a result of Brexit. To an undetermined extent, the full impact of Brexit has been masked by Covid. In this context, the damage caused by Brexit and its long-term consequences had to be factored into the programme for recovery and resilience. However, in terms of our resilience, the true fallout from Brexit will be such that restoring any equilibrium that existed prior to the UK's departure from Europe should be an entirely separate issue. Brexit could have greater long-term consequences for Ireland than Covid. While the two hit in tandem and we hope that Covid will pass, Brexit is here to stay.

Throughout the pandemic, a lot has changed in businesses across the country. Technology has not just been more widely embraced but it is now a way of life for more people than ever before. Online trading, click and collect, virtual meetings and consultations, and online shopping are the future for businesses. Smart working has become the new normal. Initially, this meant existing staff working from home for health and safety reasons but, now, it means that employers realise that their talent base does not need to be within the catchment area of their business. Employers can now cast their net much further afield. Working from home will remain the choice of many, even when businesses are fully reopened.

Many businesses will also choose to continue using this smart working model. With the increased emphasis on climate action, it will assist in reducing our carbon footprint by keeping commuters off the roads. It will make living outside large urban areas more attractive and spread the urgent need for additional housing across the country, thereby making delivery of housing units more achievable.

We have an obligation to ensure that high-speed broadband is rolled out rapidly to every corner of our small country. Progress is being made on broadband services throughout the country but, as we emerge from the pandemic, significant provision in budgeting must be continued to ensure that a lack of service is not a deterrent to recovery in any area of our country.

Lack of competition and bank closures have been a major blow to the business community across rural Ireland. The Regional Group's call to review the option of establishing a State-supported community bank has gone unanswered. The threat that has been looming over post offices is now a reality. Unrestrained closures are now on the cards and, as members of the Irish Postmasters' Union gather for urgent talks, work stoppages are a real possibility. Regions outside the country's cities and large towns have suffered enormously throughout this pandemic. As well as the business and retail closures that impacted everywhere, regional Ireland has lost all tourism and its associated revenue. It will take our smaller towns and villages much longer to claw their way back from the economic ravages of Covid.

This national recovery and resilience plan must have a major focus on regional and rural Ireland, in fact, it must be the priority. If that does not happen there will be an unbalanced recovery, which is second only to no recovery at all.

Deputy Seán Canney: The response to the plan is welcome. There are two or three issues I wish to highlight. I am concerned about the PUP being phased out for everybody. I am thinking of those who work in live music. I do not mean acts like U2 or Hozier, but the people who

play in pubs, at weddings and so on. Their sector is still being decimated and there will be no work for them for a long time. Their PUP needs to be kept at whatever level they are at until they begin to open up. That is very important.

I heard the Minister for Finance talk about the local property tax. He said the money would be good for the local authorities. I want to raise the issue of Galway County Council getting the lowest *per capita* funding from the local fund. If we are to have balanced development, we need to rectify that. This has already been cited by an independent committee which looked into the future of Galway County Council. When this money is put in place, I ask that the Government introduce an equalisation fund which will actually benefit the lower-paid counties such as Galway as well as the additional money from the local property tax.

I heard people say that infrastructure is how the economy will develop. We will not be able to put in the houses in Galway East because there are no waste water treatment plants in our towns and villages. We are being pressurised not to build in rural areas. We need a recalibration of what we are doing there. Also on regional development, I heard someone congratulate Cork on getting a new rail network which will cost so many hundreds of millions. A small section of railway needs to be put in place between Athenry and Claremorris to reopen the western rail corridor from Ballina and Westport along the west coast - through Limerick to Foynes, into Galway city, down into Cork, and as far as Waterford Port. That would cost a small bit of money. I ask the Government to include that in the national development plan.

It is important that we consider what we do after Covid. We must learn from mistakes and from the new work practices that are in place. There will be a shift but the way we are dealing with capital funding and how we spend it is so cumbersome. I had a meeting with a city manager recently who explained how when he applies for funding which is announced, he can have to go through 12 gates of approval before he actually sees the colour of the money arriving into the local authority. This is because we have set up so many different barriers and governance issues and have created industries within industries within industries like procurement. I refer, for example to all the paperwork that goes with the tender process. Everything has to go back to approval to somebody else and we cannot allow local authorities to make decisions in their own right. That is a failing in our system which we need to close off.

I now turn to small business people, who represent an important sector. These people have received supports over the past 18 months, but coming to the end of the tax year they were billed because they got supports. They got the money and spent it on trying to keep their businesses going, and then they got a bill from Revenue at the end of the day. We have to be very careful about how we deal with small business people - maybe someone who is employing one other person, or is self-employed - and how they are actually working together. Revenue can be their saviour or can kill them off. It is important that we look at that and be a voice for the small business person.

Deputy Peter Fitzpatrick: I have said many times, this is not the time to play political football with the pandemic. I strongly believe that the Government has responded well to the pandemic and we are now moving towards a new stage in the fight against Covid. Thankfully, it seems we are almost over the worst. The moneys we have needed during this time are astonishing. An additional €28 billion was made available in 2020 and 2021. Of this, over €15 billion went on the pandemic unemployment payment and the various wage subsidy schemes. An additional €4.4 billion was made available to the health services. I asked the Taoiseach earlier if this additional spending would bring long-term benefits to the health services, particularly

around increasing the number of permanent and operational ICU beds. The EU has agreed to give Ireland €915 million in grants to help our recovery from the pandemic. Will the Minister give the House a breakdown of how this will be spent? Will it be ring-fenced for certain projects or absorbed into the general budget?

From the various press releases and briefing notes, I know the national recovery and resilience plan will focus on three key areas. These include advancing the green transition, accelerating and expanding digital reform and transformation and social and economic recovery and job creation. We need to be more specific, particularly on job creation. One of the greatest challenges we now face is housing and one of the greatest challenges facing the construction sector in delivering houses is skilled labour. This becomes clear when one asks anyone who has tried to engage the services of a tradesperson in the last two years. It is nearly impossible to get a tradesman at the moment. At a time when we need to create more jobs, it is a no-brainer that we would target construction for them. Not only will it create jobs but it will also accelerate the delivery of badly needed houses. How do we attract new entrants to construction? I firmly believe that there must be an overhaul of the apprenticeship system to bring it up to date. We need to upskill existing tradesmen and make it more attractive for young people to enter these professions. Too often apprenticeship was seen as a poor relation to third level education. This mindset must be challenged. I urge the Government to re-examine apprenticeships and make them more attractive to the younger generation.

Another area is renewable energy. The existing housing stock needs a major retrofit to make it more energy efficient. We need more skilled tradespeople to carry out these works. What is being done to address the skills shortage? The Government needs to be more proactive. It is okay to say we need digital reform but surely we need to use the labour force to address the housing problem. We must all work together and not play politics.

I believe in the saying “your health is your wealth”. The additional €4.4 billion to the health services must make long-term benefits so that when the pandemic passes, we are left with permanent beds, including in ICU. We need to stop the two-tier system. When someone is sick and ends up in hospital, the last thing they want is to end up on a trolley to be left in a corridor for long periods. This is the opportunity to sort this out. The quicker someone is seen by a doctor or consultant, the quicker they recover and can go home, making room for the next person.

Everybody wants a home and we have an opportunity to give everyone the chance to have one. Reference has been made to the amount of money that will be spent on housing over the next 12 to 18 months, or two or three years. We have a chance to do something about the housing situation. I ask the Minister not to fail.

Deputy Neale Richmond: I appreciate the opportunity to contribute briefly to this very important debate, nominally about the national recovery and resilience plan. We know from the Minister’s remarks that it also includes the national economic plan, the various measures announced yesterday, the measures that have been announced throughout the pandemic and a few early pitches ahead of the budgetary cycle. The one area I would like to focus on, however, is the national recovery and resilience plan submitted by the Government to the European Commission last week as part of the massive Next Generation EU fund. I have been absolutely struck by the repeated, pre-prepared interventions by several Deputies questioning the allocation of the money. It has been quite simple. They are saying we are not getting enough and that it is based on GDP but they are not looking into the criteria that were laid down, by agreement, by all EU member states. Quite simply, it is hard to give out about good news so people find

a way to change the parameters to make a complaint. It is this sort of latent Euroscepticism, which can creep into this Chamber as it has crept into other chambers across the EU and across the water, that leads to the disruption and disinformation that conclude with extremely bad decisions.

It is quite clear that the €900 million or so allocated to Ireland out of €750 billion is absolutely proportionate. Trying to compare a country the size of Ireland, with its population and economy, with Poland is completely misleading where the general consumption of this debate is concerned. The plan provides great opportunities on the back of breakthrough policy initiatives by the European Union to raise its own resources. I refer to the innovation to create eurobonds that will go on the market this week. It is a huge step forward for the EU to be able to deliver for its citizens in this way. The plan the Government outlined to the European Commission, along with the €4 billion investment announced yesterday, is vital. It gives us a great opportunity. When we emerge from challenging times, we have to take every opportunity to build back better and create a better society and economy. I truly believe this plan that we are nominally debating today along with the other measures announced is vital in this regard. I must ask Deputies on all sides of the House to stick to the facts and the debate and leave the misleading for another day and another platform.

Deputy Joe Carey: I welcome the publication of National Recovery and Resilience Plan 2021. It is a €4 billion plan. A sum of €2 billion is to support 600,000 employees and workers through the continuation of the PUP and EWSS, which are important. It gives workers confidence and belief to employers. I have been pushing for this.

Sectors such as aviation, hospitality and tourism have been decimated by Covid. Prior to the pandemic, aviation employed 140,000 people nationally, with Shannon Airport underpinning 47,300 jobs, making a contribution of €3.6 billion to GDP. I welcome the Government's support in the form of operational and capital funding for our airports, including Shannon, throughout the pandemic. It is important that this funding be continued and that it become multi-annual. It is the driver of economic activity in the mid-west. Shannon deserves that support. This approach has been strongly recommended and advocated by the Shannon Chamber. This is a position I fully endorse.

The confirmation that we are to participate fully in the EU digital green certificate initiative is welcome. With the reopening of international travel on 19 July, airlines can finally plan and make services available but we need to adopt rapid antigen testing to bring us into line with other countries. We are an island nation and depend heavily on connectivity. It is critical that the Government secure a deal with Aer Lingus and that this deal have conditions, namely, conditions to secure the Aer Lingus base, the strategic business, tourism routes to Heathrow and North America, and the Heathrow slots.

I welcome the continuation of the 9% VAT rate until 2022. It is a vital support for the hospitality sector. The sector, including guest houses and self-catering accommodation, along with the arts, culture and entertainment sector, needs special measures to recover. These will need to be in place until summer 2022. The plan makes mention of the pilot reopening of sports and cultural events. This is most welcome. Such events are a beacon of hope. Pilot reopening events must be conducted throughout the country, not just in Dublin. We must look beyond outdoor events and embrace the use of antigen testing, similar to the rest of Europe, including the United Kingdom, and the rest of the world.

I am engaging with the Taoiseach's office seeking his support for a pilot event in Ennis, County Clare. This is a carefully considered, well-researched project supported by Ennis Chamber, the object being to host a pilot reopening of the iconic Queens nightclub through the use of antigen testing. This proposal has the support of the business community in Ennis. As Ennis is the largest town in Munster and was the first town in Ireland to achieve Purple Flag status, I strongly believe this proposal must be endorsed by the Government. I look forward to continued engagement with the office of the Taoiseach in this regard.

The word "resilience" is used to define the Government's plan. Resilience is the ability to withstand adversity and bounce back from difficult life events. In this really difficult period, we have heard a lot about mental health issues. I am disappointed that there is no reference in the plan to increased investment in mental health services. While I note there is a section on digital transformation, I do not see any reference to the acceleration of the national broadband plan. I understand, however, that there are plans in this regard. I ask the Minister to clarify this.

Deputy Colm Burke: I thank the Minister. This plan gives confidence. The words I would use are "Build back better." That is the challenge we now face. In 2012, more than 50,000 people were leaving the country per year. We faced up to that challenge. Over the following years, up to 2019, more than 400,000 new jobs were created. We have the ability to face the challenges posed by Covid-19.

In the public sector, there is protection that does not exist in the private sector. Therefore, the supports we have now put in place and that have been in place during the pandemic are extremely important. Many businesses have suffered severely. We must continue to give them their support.

On skills and upskilling people, we have a new challenge. We must incentivise companies to take on apprentices because this is extremely important if we are to meet the demand, be it in the building sector or the IT sector or in the many other areas where there are challenges.

Covid-19 resulted in people working from home. To work from home, an employee needs broadband. More than 560,000 houses and businesses do not have a broadband connection. There are very many houses and businesses on the border between the blue and amber areas. We need to make sure those areas can be fast-tracked. I understand that between 60,000 and 80,000 houses will be connected to broadband this year. That is not enough. We need to be moving faster if we really want people to continue to work from home or have that option.

I very much welcome the announcement on Cork, which follows on from the announcement earlier in the year on the development of the docklands and the announcement on rail electrification and the help with regard to the Middleton–Cork–Blarney rail line. That latter is important. An announcement was also made on the development of the North Ring Road. That is also a welcome move.

We need to prioritise addressing the issue of elective hospitals. At a meeting of the health committee this morning, it was said that if we want to face the challenges in the health sector, we need to fast-track how we deliver on our elective hospitals and healthcare. Cork, Limerick and Dublin are implicated. This needs to be prioritised.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: I welcome this economic recovery plan. On the business side, I very much welcome the continuation of the 9% VAT rate for the hospitality sector and the commercial rates waiver.

In my limited time, I want to deal with one specific aspect of the recovery plan, namely, aviation. I am a Deputy in Limerick city. Shannon Airport is on our doorstep. It is critical in terms of connectivity. I very much welcome the funding put in place to date for the aviation sector in the economic recovery plan. We want to see the capital expenditure and operating expenses as multi-annual funding for airports like Shannon Airport.

Furthermore, there is a €20 million fund. Discussions are ongoing between Air Lingus and the Government for measures to be put in place with sufficient funding. I have no wish to use the word “conditions”. The measures must ensure that Heathrow connectivity is through Shannon Airport and retention of the slots in future. Transatlantic flights must be resumed at Shannon Airport. There must be a cabin crew base at Shannon Airport. Why am I talking about that? It is not only about costs. If we have a base in Shannon, it guarantees early morning flights from Shannon Airport for the business community. If we do not have a base, that guarantee is no longer there and we cannot provide a competitive offering to the business and tourism sectors. The same applies in terms of transatlantic flights.

I am asking for the digital green certificate to be properly road-tested before 19 July. There can be no situation whereby it is not ready to be rolled out on 19 July. It has been announced publicly by the Government and we now have three weeks. Let us make certain that it works. When 19 July comes I would like to see flights resuming in the EU. The common travel area must be restored with the UK. There is need for discussions to take place between ourselves, Europe and the USA so that these arrangements can be restored. We are getting many calls from people who wish to travel to the United States. We have extensive connections there. Some areas are opening up albeit with some difficulty.

What I want is sufficient funding for Aer Lingus. Some 80% of flights in and out of Ireland were Aer Lingus or Ryanair pre-pandemic. The figure will be even greater as we resume the reopening of aviation. They must get sufficient funding to reopen but it must come with a balanced regional option with Heathrow slots operating out of Shannon and transatlantic. The digital green certificate must be road-tested heavily. We must ensure that when we resume travel to Europe, the common travel area with the UK and US transatlantic flights are opened up as well. This should be done with public health in mind.

Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne: In speaking about the national recovery and resilience plan I want to focus on the need for a clear channel of the income to be allocated to Shannon Airport and the preservation of its jobs and connectivity. The mid-west region and my constituency in particular are reeling following the announcement by Aer Lingus to close its Shannon base. This was the latest, but by no means the first, in a series of neo-liberal market-led decisions that have gravely threatened the vitality and saliency of the mid-west region and the hospitality, tourism and foreign direct investment economies based there.

Ireland is set to secure €915 million. This will be sub-divided into grants and loans. As per the EU mandate, these grants must be invested in projects that are essentially future-proofing the island as it emerges into the post-Covid-19 world. This funding offers a real opportunity to safeguard the future of Shannon Airport. We saw the repercussions of what happened when the Government sold its 26% stake in our national airline in 2010. We have seen what has happened when Shannon Airport was ejected from the remit of the Dublin Airport Authority. At the time it was mooted as a move that would ensure growth and expansion. We now know that to be not true.

The dialogue around Shannon keeps referring to the airport as a regional airport, but Shannon is an international airport with inter-continental and transatlantic routes. It boasts the longest runway and was the first to pioneer a sensory room in the country. When we needed personal protective equipment delivered, the airplane had to land in Shannon. This should give us an idea of how valuable the airport is. In 2009 the footfall through Shannon was 30,000 more than Cork Airport, but by 2019 it was 900,000 less than Cork. To say the separation from the DAA has disadvantaged Shannon is an understatement.

In 2017 the economic footprint of Shannon was €3.8 billion. Given the development of the Wild Atlantic Way as a tourism route, the airport has potential for far more than 5% of overall national flights, the volume it received in 2017. The airport must be seen as a critical element of the infrastructure network. I call on the Minister to provide for positive discrimination measures to be taken and for enough of this funding to be dedicated to future-proofing Shannon Airport and the micro-economies of the mid-west region.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: Before I address the issue of the national economic recovery plan I wish to say a word of thanks to the members of An Garda Síochána who are having their patience tested outside today. My thanks also go to the Oireachtas staff and the staff in the convention centre who are having to deal with those people. The disrespect shown to Members and staff going in and out of Leinster House has been something to behold. As I understand it, they are now on their way down here. All those involved in keeping us safe deserve to be commended.

The document on the national recovery plan is important. It will be measured in its delivery. It goes without saying that the language, aims and direction of the national economic recovery plan in terms of jobs, the economy and workers' rights are proof that Sinn Féin has won the argument on the economy and jobs. The statement in the document that the focus has to be on recovering differently is proof that the economy presided over in recent decades by the Green Party, Fine Gael, the Labour Party and Fianna Fáil was not working for ordinary people, workers or the State as a whole. The plan further states that the economy needs to diversify, become more robust and create more productive innovative and resilient jobs. Importantly, it must create secure and valued jobs too. This is what I have been blue in the face from saying since I was first elected. Some of my colleagues have been saying it for 20 years. Every time we have suggested that we need to diversify the economy to make it more robust and create decent jobs in growing sectors we have been jeered at and heckled by those on the Government benches. Sinn Féin has always been clear that the State is a critical player in the economy, in economic development and in economic direction. As we exit the Covid-19 crisis the Government must play its part in building a more robust progressive economy, a high-wage high-productivity high-growth economy that works and delivers for workers and society. That is why some of the proposals in this plan are welcome but there are measures that are not welcome. Some measures are conspicuous by their absence. The proposals for youth employment do not go far enough. The Government must ensure that young people are given all the help they need to re-enter employment where they wish to do so straight away. The Government needs to ensure others have access to training and education to help acquire the skills to enter new careers in secure and resilient jobs in high-wage high-productivity and high-growth sectors. Furthermore, the extensive focus on export and services over goods is a concern. A significant problem for the economy is that we have not grown our indigenous manufacturing base sufficiently. There should be an equal focus on developing and growing our manufacturing sector and exporting goods as on exporting services to grow our economy in real terms.

I will finish as I started. This is an important plan. We always see the expression “check against delivery” stamped on the press releases of the Minister. That is indeed what we will do.

Deputy Carol Nolan: I want to begin by saying that the national economic recovery plan is a scandal. It leaves workers and families behind. It is a betrayal of workers and their families. These people have already been devastated by Government and national public health emergency team lockdowns.

I understand from a recent report that one condition of EU funding is that 37% of the money is spent on green initiatives. Our Government is going far beyond that as usual, with 50% of the Covid-19 recovery facility to be spent on propping up Green Party policy in government. Where is the money for workers, families and communities in Laois and Offaly who are being crippled by an unjust transition? Where has common sense gone? Clearly, it is not alive and well in government. We are being governed by environmental fanatics who are out of step, out of touch and detached from what most people and small businesses want. With regard to the local property tax, 100,000 people will now be paying this tax for the first time. The new proposals have been greeted with much frustration by all those who pay the property tax because they are not seeing improved services on the ground. The tax was supposed to provide capital funding for roads and so forth but this has not been forthcoming. We have dreadful roads in Laois-Offaly. The money is clearly not going into our local authority. That needs to change. People feel aggrieved and are rightly very frustrated.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: The big question relates to the delay in the Government making the application to the European Commission under this funding programme in the first place. We must ask why Ireland has been given a much lower level of funding than other EU countries. Many small businesses have been closed for a very long time. They will reopen but the trouble is whether they will be able to stay open. That is why the wage subsidy scheme is so important. I ask the Minister of State to ensure this is kept in place for as long as businesses need it to get back on their feet. Where there is stable employment, workers should be encouraged to return to work. The airports at Shannon and Cork are vital to the economy of Kerry. I ask the Minister of State to forget about the third terminal in Dublin.

It is vital that the VAT rate is left at 9%. I am amazed and amused by Deputy Griffin, who is calling for the rate to be maintained at 9%. I remind him that it was he and Shane Ross who increased it from 9% to 13.5% in the first place. This was some of the damage they did to rural Ireland and the tourism industry. They also caused hurt to young drivers with the Road Traffic (Amendment) Act 2018, under which they cannot drive on their own to their work or apprenticeship on a provisional licence. They also denied a lot of people a couple of pints in pubs across rural Ireland. That is what they did. I will be watching him in the back. He is now making a big play of calling to keep the rate down but it was he and Shane Ross who increased it during the term of the last Government.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: What is the national recovery and resilience plan? The EU has promised a recovery and resilience fund of €750 billion with the aim of helping member states to deal with the costs arising from the Covid-19 pandemic and to boost the European economic recovery. Cash is to be paid in the form of grants. The tick boxes for these funds relate to research and innovation, fair climate and digital transitions, recovery and resilience, fighting climate change, biodiversity protection and modernising traditional policies. Why are there great delays in respect of apprenticeship schemes? I have heard several complaints that Turas Nua is blocking people from getting on such schemes. This is from where the next body

of future workers will come.

Let us look at where the grant schemes are coming from. With regard to fighting climate change, I have been saying from the start that dispersion of traffic throughout the country will be the saviour of Shannon Airport, Cork Airport and all of the other airports. Many of the grants the Government is seeking relate to this dispersion of traffic. This will ensure the future of Shannon Airport. The Wild Atlantic Way, which offers the best views and the best hospitality in Ireland, runs through Limerick and the surrounding counties. What does the Government do? It brings people to this amenity through Dublin. The Government should use these grants to promote Limerick and the surrounding tourism area. The Government should use its head and save Shannon Airport.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I too welcome some aspects of this plan. The VAT rate certainly must be maintained. I thank the county council officials for dealing with the rates waivers and the social welfare officers who have dealt with people meaningfully during the lockdown, which was imposed for too long. We caused all of this trouble. I am very disappointed that we are getting somewhat less than €1 billion out of €750 billion. Where is the solidarity?

Turas Nua is not fit for purpose and we should not be spending 40% or 50% of these funds on green initiatives. That is bonkers and if it is not stopped our economy will be flattened. It is idealistic poppycock and is not sustainable for Ireland. With regard to jobs, I have been talking to hoteliers and business people and the pandemic unemployment payment, PUP, especially for students, must be looked at. We must come up with an Xs and Os system or allow them to work 20 hours a week or something because the hospitality industry cannot get workers. We also cannot get tradespeople. Turas Nua and other bodies are not good enough at organising tradespeople. We want tradespeople to deal with our issues. The Road Safety Authority and those dealing with driving licensing and theory tests are also incompetent. The Government feels these services are not essential. Some 100,000 people are waiting. If we want our economy to recover, we must get rid of all of these blockages and loopholes. We also have to look at flexibility to allow people in receipt of PUP to work, perhaps, as I suggested, on an Xs and Os system. Something must be done in this regard.

Deputy Michael Collins: The Irish plan is structured around three priority areas: advancing the green transition, accelerating and expanding digital reforms and transformation, and social and economic recovery and job creation. The Irish application did not prioritise broadband infrastructure or housing, even though both areas are currently in a state of crisis. The big questions still relate to the delay in Government making its application to the European Commission under this funding programme and to why Ireland is being given a much lower level of funding than other EU countries. For example, Denmark is getting €1.6 billion and Croatia, which has a population smaller than that of Ireland, will receive €6.3 billion, which is more than six times the Irish allocation. Slovakia, whose population is of a similar size to Ireland's, is set to receive €6.3 billion in funding under the programme. This raises serious questions about why the Irish allocation is comparatively so low.

Another change agreed by Government will see the tax bills of approximately 33% of people who already pay property tax increased by another €100 every year. This new form of tax will punish people at a time of great challenges on many fronts. In fact, it is estimated that approximately 33% of homeowners will see an increase even greater than this €100. Ireland is in the middle of a very serious housing emergency and the Government's proposal to introduce increased taxes on property at this time is deeply flawed.

The 9% VAT rate for the tourism sector will remain until September 2022. It was the Government that increased this rate. It should be extended for much longer, as should commercial rates waivers.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: If Government stuck to the basics, the economy would be far stronger. What is it doing in respect of fishing? It is attacking the industry and letting it down. What is it doing in respect of farming? It is attacking it and letting it down. What did it do in respect of tourism? It took every negative step it could to hurt tourism. It is planning further attacks on the sector. I remind the Government that we are an island nation but, in order to pursue a green agenda, the Government is going to increase the cost of aviation fuel to such a degree that we will become a high-cost destination. Turf is one of the most basic things we have but our turf-powered electricity generating stations are being closed. Does the Government realise we came very close to experiencing blackouts in recent months because we were running so dangerously low on the energy required? What has the Government done for forestry? One of the easiest things to do in Ireland is to plant and grow a tree but what are we doing? We are importing timber from abroad, left, right and centre. Our own jobs are in serious jeopardy, as we have highlighted. Will the Government stick to the basics?

The Minister of State is talking about billions. I wish to inform him that our very excellent housing department in Kerry County Council, which operates the housing stock for local authority tenants, does not have enough money to replace a stove or fireplace for a person who is old, tired and cold in a local authority home. It is not the fault of the local authority but of the Government. The Minister of State is talking about billions while we in County Kerry cannot replace stoves or windows in our housing stock because we are told we do not have the money. If that was a person in the private sector, the local authority and the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage would tell the landlord that he or she had to replace the stove or window. The local authority does not have to do so because it says it does not have the money.

I ask the Government to get real. While the Minister of State is talking about billions, he should look at the basics, mind his own house and keep things in order. I refer to fishing, farming, tourism, turf and forestry. If Government kept its eyes on the ball, it would not be losing its mind and losing its grip on reality, as it is. I implore the Government to watch its own house and to keep things in order. If it does and if it pursues the green agenda, we will have poverty beyond belief. It is going to impose all of these new taxes on people who will find it extremely difficult to manage. With regard to the theory tests, if the Government wants to help get the economy going, it should let the youngsters, who are fit, fine, strong and able to work, do their theory tests so they can get on the road. For God's sake, will the Government open its eyes and employ some common sense?

5 o'clock

Deputy John McGuinness: Any day this amount of money can be put into the economy is a good day. Reflecting on the amount of money that has been spent in the economy since the start of the pandemic has proven that with the appropriate supports we can pull through in the most extraordinary of times. We must be careful and ensure that the supports remain in place until business can stand on its own two feet and the wage earner or earners in a household are comfortable and safe in the context of their earnings being sufficient to support their families. We must focus on these issues.

There has been much talk about billions of euro for improvements. That is true, but the

success or failure of this spend will be judged by local people and how it affects their lives. I want to highlight a number of projects that I believe should be concluded in the course of this investment. For example, in my own constituency - other Members have mentioned their constituencies - the ring road project needs to be completed. Let us fast-track that project, create local jobs and take the pressure off the local economy in terms of people being able to get from A to B in jig time.

Broadband is mentioned, but substantially more money is needed in terms of broadband. If business is to perform in what will be a new economic order, then broadband provision at higher speeds than we have currently is absolutely essential. In Castlecomer, County Kilkenny, a pharmacist who was in touch with me told me that at different times of the day the broadband signal drops, making it impossible to dispense. Likewise, when the signal drops in Carlow, credit card machines stop operating and businesses cannot continue. Broadband is an essential part of the recovery in our economy, just as much as education. I wish the Minister for Higher and Further Education, Research, Innovation and Science well in all the investment his Department is making at third level. What about the legacy issues in those departments? I take this opportunity to appeal to the Minister, Deputy Harris, and the Taoiseach, who are aware of some of the legacy issues in Cork Institute of Technology, to take a step in the right direction and arrange the appropriate discussions to bring to an end the saga in regard to a whistleblower. What is happening is wrong and unfair.

I also want to look at the green agenda. It is proposed to spend a fortune on the green agenda to bring about a new green digital economy. That is fine, but what about what we have now? I raised the issue of quarries in this House with the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications, Deputy Eamon Ryan. I explained to him that I was doing so because he was a Minister from the Green Party. I asked him to raise the issue with his colleagues in government because otherwise I would be referred to the Minister with responsibility for local government. Guess what? When I informed him, as I promised I would do, he referred the matter to the Minister with responsibility for local government. If we are talking about reform, the first piece is reform of this House. The second is in regard to transparency and accountability in the context of the Comptroller and Auditor General and how we do business that way. If we saved the money that we are continuously losing, it would make a huge difference in terms of the amount of money that we require for the future. These are small things, as mentioned by Deputy Michael Healy-Rae. If we give the power back to the local authorities, ask them to build the houses, cut out the bureaucracy and give them the money, let us see what happens then. I believe it would be far more efficient to do it that way than the way we are doing it now. It would give people pride in their place in the council areas to see it being done. We need to introduce these reforms.

Another example is the commercial rates. There is much talk all of the time about reform of commercial rates. We have a wonderful opportunity to reform commercial rates on the basis of turnover or profitability. We need to move away from the unfair commercial rates system currently in place. If the Government did that, it would give businesses all over the country a chance, a reasonable break to get up on their feet and moving again. Within an economy there is a society and a community. If we support them, we will be supporting reform and progression. For God's sake, look at the villages and towns throughout the country that are dying on their feet because they do not have financial support. It is fine to give the big figures, but the proof of the success of this initiative will be in the number of small businesses that are afforded help and succeed.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: As I have only three minutes, I will be brief. When making decisions, one must first look at the recipe. As the saying goes, “He who pays the piper calls the tune.” Some 37% of the European funding has to be spent on climate and 20% must be spent on digital, which means 57% of the spend is tied up. When it is drawing up its plans, the Government will have to do so according to the rules laid down. Otherwise, it will not be able to draw down the funding. It would be a pity to leave €915 million behind us.

I would like to touch on a few issues. Retrofitting of houses is mentioned. The reality is that the worst 20% of houses in this State need more than retrofitting; work is needed on the basic fabric of those houses. We cannot look only at insulation and things like that. We need to make those houses fit and suitable for people to live in, with no draughts and so on. In that connection, we need to look at how these projects are tendered. There should be a facility to ensure that once again the small builders of Ireland can get involved. We need a smaller procurement process than is currently in place.

The next issue I would like touch on is regional equity. We need regional equity and all boats to rise together. I regret that is not always going to happen. I note a reference to regional equity and 5G technologies to drive a greener, more innovative Ireland. That is all very fine if the Government insists that every area gets 5G technology and that it is not reserved for a coverage of 90% of the population that works out at a small percentage of the land mass. When one factors in the cities, that accounts for a large part of the population but there are large parts of the country that are relatively sparsely populated. We must have an Ireland for all.

When looking at capital projects, there are two criteria, one of which is how badly needed they are. At the moment some of those badly needed projects take years to get through planning owing to objections, court cases and so on. The second criterion, on which it is not proposed to spend money, is how quickly can we get any project worth doing up and built, particularly over the coming two or three years. There is an accumulating problem of projects not being delivered and underspends on the capital side, in part due to Covid, but even before that underspends were becoming endemic.

I am happy to see all of the investment in Cork rail and Kent Station, the electrification of the commuter line and the doubling of the line from Glounthaune to Middleton. It is a great idea. I cannot say anything against it. I just wish the western rail corridor had been included as an add-on, a cheap add-on, at a cost of €150 million, to connect the Mayo towns of Ballina, Castlebar and Westport with the Roscommon towns and Galway city. We need regional equity. What we are getting is petty change. The western rail corridor needs to be included. We need to get it done. We own the line and everything is ready to rock and roll. Let us do it now.

An Ceann Comhairle: Hope springs eternal.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: I want to take up the point made by my colleague, Deputy Ó Cuív, in regard to the 57% criteria laid down by the European Union. It is very easy to be an Independent Deputy for County Kerry and to come in here and say “coulda, shoulda, sod of turf”, mention 12 villages in one’s county and say where the money should have gone. The reality is that if we had not followed the rules, we would have waved goodbye to €520 million of EU money. The funding was specific to certain measures and that is reflected in yesterday’s plan. I agree with Deputy Ó Cuív that we would have loved to have seen some more of the money going to different regions. I will refer presently to an issue relating to my region.

There are several measures announced yesterday that are very positive. First, the extension of the PUP and the EWSS right up to the end of the year is welcome. The provision regarding the VAT rate is also very positive. As my party's spokesperson on tourism and aviation, I know that particular measure will be very welcome to the owners of hotels, bed and breakfast and self-catering accommodation, all of which are opening today. It is great to see the booking system already up and running for many premises. It will be quite a buoyant summer but those businesses will face a challenging shoulder season. This is a particular issue we need to watch, as a country and a Government, as we come into the autumn and winter. People will be back at work and school and will not typically be taking the weekends away they might take in the summer. There are slim months in any year when businesses need support. This year, above all others, the tourism sector will need supports during that season.

There are sectors that will take longer to bounce back. Beauty sector businesses such as barbers and hairdressers are booked out and will remain booked out for many weeks to come. People's hair will grow again and they will need another appointment. Those businesses are pretty much back to where they were in 2019. Many have already seen a really great bounce-back. For other sectors, such as tourism, the live performance industry, hospitality and aviation, the recovery will take longer. It will be a long time yet before we see a local hotel with 300 or 350 people enjoying a wedding on a Saturday night. There will be sectors that require continuing supports.

I will conclude by speaking about Shannon Airport. It is regrettable and reprehensible that the chief executive of Aer Lingus did not appear before the Oireachtas transport committee today. Anybody who holds a leadership role in an organisation should roll with the punches, attend meetings and engage with stakeholders. I have in my breast pocket the payslip of an Aer Lingus employee in Shannon. For a fortnight at the start of this year, this worker received €634, of which the State paid €600. This means Aer Lingus was paying that individual €17 per week to work for the company. The Government has skin in this game because it has been largely paying Aer Lingus's wage bill for the past 15 months. As such, there should be strings attached when the airline comes looking again for funding. It received €150 million in Ireland Strategic Investment Fund, ISIF, funding from the Government in February and its wage bill has been mostly covered for 15 months. Now it is back looking for money. The company needs to commit to Shannon and its workers there. The Government needs to attach some conditionality to any funding it provides to ensure there is a long-term future for Shannon. The airport is very viable and a great deal depends on it. I really hope Aer Lingus management will take the opportunity next week to come in and meet with us, instead of shying away from engagement. It has done that for too long with its workers, the Oireachtas and the unions. I hope it will take the opportunity to address the matter next week.

Deputy Michael McNamara: I am sharing time with Deputy Connolly. I agree with the previous speaker to the extent that I hope management at Shannon Airport will engage with the transport committee. However, I have to say I find it slightly laughable that a representative of a political party that cared so much about Aer Lingus's presence in Shannon Airport that it started the privatisation of the company now wants to make Aer Lingus's leaving of Shannon an issue on which it is somehow answerable to the Dáil. That is kind of slapstick at best. However, I do not want to digress too much from the subject we are discussing.

Many speakers criticised the amount we are getting from the European Union. I worry somewhat that we in the Dáil, like other national parliaments, tend to criticise the Union quite a bit without perhaps acknowledging our own faults and our contribution to decisions made at

EU level. My understanding is that the criterion for the distribution of funding from the EU was quite transparent and objective. It was based on GDP. Of course, the problem we have is that our GDP is as reliable as the commitment of the previous speaker's party to Aer Lingus's presence at Shannon Airport. We have been criticised roundly and, which is worrying, increasingly, for our corporate tax policy in international media. That includes *The New York Times*, which ordinarily would be reflective of the thinking within a particular political party in the US, namely, the Democratic Party. That party is now in power and we were all delighted when Mr. Biden took office. Ireland Inc certainly was delighted. One would almost think he was creating employment in a constituency in Ireland, we were so delighted. In fact, he is aggressively going after our corporate tax base.

I find it difficult to criticise President Biden for doing that because we have been eating other people's lunches for a long time. One can only do that for so long before people get a little annoyed that they are getting thin while we are getting fat on their lunch. That starts to grate after a while. The US Government is going after our corporate tax base and the EU will do the same. We cannot really pretend our GDP can grow 20% in a year and that is a normal thing. It is not normal. It is Leprechaun economics. That is what some people in Ireland called it back when we had an enormous growth in our GDP in the past. Such growth seems fantastic on one level but it is not really fantastic because our corporate tax structure means our country does not benefit very much from it. It also means other countries are not able to raise taxes for their citizens. Not alone does it not benefit us, it makes us very unpopular internationally. International unpopularity has a price and I fear we will find ourselves increasingly isolated if we seek to defend our corporate tax structure.

A great deal of this plan is reactionary in respect of what has happened in the past. I agree that every country's economy has been hugely and detrimentally impacted by Covid-19. However, the Government has made it worse for this country because of the measures it introduced. The Government cannot say it saved lives with its measures and also say that all the detrimental effects are down to Covid. The detrimental effects and the economic problems are deeper in this country because of the measures that were taken here. That is a different debate but it is important to make the point that the Government cannot claim credit for one side of the equation and not accept responsibility on the other side.

With regard to our GDP, one thing it does is enable our borrowings to look sustainable. That is my major worry. Our borrowings as a proportion of GDP put us approximately mid-table on a European scale. That is if our GDP continues as it is. If our corporate tax structures change, or change is foisted upon us, then channelling large amounts of profits through Ireland becomes less attractive to companies. Suddenly, our GDP will not be as high as it has been and our borrowings will not look as sustainable. We will have a huge problem if that happens. We barely ran a surplus in this country up to 2019, even with almost full employment. That is worrying. The reason we struggled was the cost of servicing our existing borrowings. Now we are going to borrow more. I do not have a problem with Keynesian economics and the idea that a economy should be stimulated when it is in recession. I have a problem with the longer-term trajectory our economy is on and our reliance on a certain corporate tax structure to attract foreign direct investment. That needs to change.

I do not have time to make my final point but I have lots of confidence in my friend and colleague, Deputy Connolly, to make several illuminating points.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this topic. The na-

tional recovery and resilience plan is what is down for discussion but we are talking about the economic plan as well. It is difficult to cover all of that in the four minutes and 41 seconds available to me. However, I am grateful for the time and I hope to use it effectively.

It has been extremely difficult to have a debate on this plan. Reference was made to the Parliamentary Budget Office, which kindly produced a paper for us and told us there has been no substantive engagement with the Houses or the Oireachtas committees on the plan. There has been limited scrutiny by the Oireachtas in the preparation of the recovery and resilience plan, which deals with almost €1 billion in funding from Europe under three headings. I will come back to those headings presently. That lack of engagement is a problem. I hope the Government will learn from it and come back with quarterly updates to the committees and the Dáil. That would be something at least to inspire confidence.

Deputy McGuinness said that any day on which this much money is being put into the economy, comprising almost €1 billion from the EU and more than €3 billion under the economic recovery plan, is a good day. It certainly is a good day and there are many positive things in the plan. My difficulty is that the pandemic affected us particularly badly because we were unprepared. We had a public health system that was not fit for purpose and hospitals that were creaking at the seams, a housing crisis and so on. We all joined with one voice to pass the Government's draconian legislation to deal with the pandemic and we all stood together in solidarity. That is now creaking at the seams. We were to learn that we could never go back, yet this plan is being hailed without scrutiny as something that will cause the economy to "take off like a rocket". That type of language does not indicate to me that we have learnt anything at all. We simply cannot let the economy take off like a rocket because that would not be sustainable on any level. This also goes back to where we were, which was not sustainable.

I look at the plan and see good things without a doubt. Everybody has a personal interest. I will not waste time setting out the three headings because the Minister, Deputy Michael McGrath, did so earlier. "Digital reform" is an unfortunate term because under that there are very good things like developing a ten-year adult literacy, numeracy and digital literacy strategy but the figure for adult illiteracy has been stubbornly high, has it not? It is somewhere between 19% and 20-something per cent. That is unforgivable and should have been dealt with earlier. I welcome that we are now going to look at it. I welcome other good things in the plan.

We are not recognising, however, that we need a completely different approach. Because of climate change and Covid, we need transformative change, and the economy we now wish to ignite must be ignited in a different way. It must have a regional balance. It must take into account our islands, our smaller towns and sustainable development. I really do not see that happening with the words "take off like a rocket". That is very worrying to me. I look at this plan and think of Galway, a city that is growing, and I welcome that, but it is growing without a master plan, without any light rail or public transport and without any park-and-ride. We have islands without an island policy. We have towns going under, both *i gcoílár na Gaeltachta* and, on the other side, in Kilmaine and Tuam. I am naming towns that need urgent help and stimulation, which is not happening. Deputy Ó Cuív mentioned the western rail corridor, which I fully support. In the guise of this sustainability and equality, Cork, because it has a Taoiseach and senior Ministers, is getting a lot. I thought we had moved away from that politics. I thought we would look at which projects are necessary. For instance, we have sewage going into our seas and rivers. I would have thought we would highlight those projects and then public transport. Of course I will fight for Galway but I would like to see public transport projects like light rail rolled out if they are the right thing to do. We need a feasibility study in that regard.

I have 13 seconds left. What can I say? Perhaps the Government will learn and come back to the relevant committees and the Dáil so we can analyse this and be part of the democratic process. Rather than labelling Opposition Deputies as negative and sidelining us, the Government should take on board what we are saying. We were elected just like the Government Deputies and have ideas just like they do. Our ideas might be slightly different but we would be delighted to work with Government Deputies in the proper forum.

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs (Deputy Thomas Byrne): Tá áthas orm bheith anseo chun freagra a thabhairt ar an díospóireacht seo. To answer immediately the point about Oireachtas scrutiny that Deputy Connolly raised, I will point out that the Minister has in fact been in touch regularly with the Oireachtas finance committee, and that engagement will continue. The Minister will be subject to ongoing scrutiny on this issue. The general public, including Oireachtas Members, were in fact invited to make their submissions on this during the process, so there was sufficient opportunity for people to put forward their views as to how this money should be spent.

Next Generation EU represents an unprecedented response from the European Union to a global crisis. The support provided to member states, including Ireland, to help them to respond to the global pandemic is tangible evidence of the solidarity that comes with EU membership. The €750 billion recovery instrument, along with the €1 trillion budget for the next seven years, is central to the EU's response to the global pandemic. The aim of Next Generation EU is to help to repair the immediate economic and social damage brought about by the pandemic and to prepare for a post-Covid Europe that is greener, more digital, more resilient and fit to face the future.

Unusually, the European Commission will now borrow on the markets at more favourable rates than many member states and redistribute the amounts. The money is provided in the form of grants and loans and, to answer a query one colleague raised, the Irish money, as things stand, will be in the form of grants. We are to receive €950 million in the form of grants under the facility in 2021 and 2022. Further grants will be allocated in 2023. Mention was made of the figures for this. Those who mentioned this failed to take into account a number of important points. One is that, as part of the overall EU budget negotiations, Ireland also receives under the Brexit adjustment reserve approximately €1.1 billion, by far the largest allocation of any member state. In addition, there is the PEACE PLUS programme, which benefits Northern Ireland and Border communities and stretches out a little beyond that, including Galway, as Deputy Connolly will be very happy to hear. That amounts to approximately €1 billion but the details of that have to be worked out. That increases the money coming into this country from Europe.

A really critical point about this programme is that it benefits the entirety of the Single Market, so when the French economy or the German economy does well, the entire Single Market does well. Which countries do best out of the European Single Market? All the research shows that within the European Union it is Luxembourg followed by Ireland. All the companies that employ people in really exciting jobs, particularly in the pharma industry in Galway and, in Deputy Mattie McGrath's constituency, the pharma industry and other really important industries in Clonmel, benefit directly when their customers in the European Single Market are in economies that are doing better. That part of this debate is not widely appreciated or understood.

I will have to respond to Deputy Michael Healy-Rae. He certainly knows Kerry better than

I do but, as an outsider to Kerry, I do not immediately associate it with fishing, forestry and turf. I think of Fexco, Kerry Group, Liebherr in Killarney and the technological university being established. Those are all very much dependent on the European Union and the European Single Market. There are tens of thousands of jobs in Kerry Group around the world. Fexco also provides thousands of jobs.

As the Minister, Deputy Michael McGrath, said, the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, working in conjunction with the Taoiseach's Department and the Department of Finance, prepared this plan with inputs not only from other Departments but also from the general public and Members of Dáil Éireann. The benefits and the individual details have been laid out. As I said, strong, healthy EU economies are very much in Ireland's interest.

Our recovery and resilience facility is structured on six pillars: green transition; digital transformation; economic cohesion, productivity and competitiveness; social and territorial cohesion; health, economic, social and institutional resilience; and policies for the next generation. There are also the seven flagship areas identified by the European Commission. The European semester process, which is the formal process of examining budgets, public expenditure and budgetary policy, has been temporarily adapted to co-ordinate with this recovery facility. The facility is designed to contribute to the four dimensions outlined in the 2021 annual sustainable growth strategy, which continues the growth strategy based on the European green deal and the concepts of competitive sustainability, environmental sustainability, productivity gains, fairness and macroeconomic stability. Member states were required to embed those measures they planned to take in national budgetary processes. An important feature of plans is that they must strike a balance between reforms, which Deputy McGuinness spoke so well about, and investments and seek to address challenges identified in the country-specific recommendations which arise as part of the European semester process.

When I was in the Dáil last July, in the aftermath of the European Council decision on the budget, we heard a lot of talk about the European semester process, that it was really about austerity, that there would be cutbacks and that the terrible European Commission would cut us back. However, I explained the reality at that time and now the reality has borne fruit in the Minister's statement and the plans that have been put forward. Nobody can criticise anything in this plan because, effectively, it is all "good stuff" and items that will benefit communities, people and our economies. When the French Government, the Italian Government or the German Government spends - the Croatian Government was mentioned - our companies here in Ireland are very well placed to benefit from that. It was mentioned that we need to give support to the tourism industry. When all those European economies are doing better, our hotels and restaurants in counties Galway, Kerry, Cork and Meath do much better as well. That is what this is all about. We have to think of ourselves as being very much at the heart of the Single Market and that it benefits us directly and more effectively almost than any other member state.

This is about jobs and social resilience. Practically every Member welcomed this but the notes of caution, surprisingly, came from left wing politicians. This is the largest stimulus ever. The term "Keynesian" was used by Deputy McNamara. This is the first of its kind by the EU. It will be on top of what individual member states, such as Ireland, have spent on stimulus packages. The European Commission has been careful to make sure that when this money is spent, it will not be on day-to-day items like most governments spend on social welfare. This is about making sure we are ready for the future and that we can compete and create jobs that last. This is about moving to the digital age confidently in a socially progressive and equal way, protecting our environment while, at the same time, creating and protecting jobs.

2 June 2021

I am delighted to have had a small role to play in this at the General Affairs Council. I commend the Departments of Public Expenditure and Reform and Finance, as well as all Oireachtas Members, on their work in ensuring this gets over the line. I thank the Taoiseach as well because he negotiated this at the European Council. He also negotiated the other parts of the European budget that are unique to Ireland, namely, the PEACE PLUS programme and the Brexit adjustment reserve, the latter in terms of the amount. We will benefit from those separately as well.

Sitting suspended at 5.32 p.m. and resumed at 6.32 p.m.

Health and Criminal Justice (Covid-19) (Amendment) Bill 2021 [Seanad]: Second Stage (Resumed)

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

Question put:

<i>The Dáil divided: Tá, 77; Níl, 51; Staon, 12.</i>		
<i>Tá</i>	<i>Níl</i>	<i>Staon</i>
<i>Berry, Cathal.</i>	<i>Barry, Mick.</i>	<i>Gannon, Gary.</i>
<i>Brophy, Colm.</i>	<i>Boyd Barrett, Richard.</i>	<i>Howlin, Brendan.</i>
<i>Browne, James.</i>	<i>Brady, John.</i>	<i>Kelly, Alan.</i>
<i>Bruton, Richard.</i>	<i>Browne, Martin.</i>	<i>Murphy, Catherine.</i>
<i>Burke, Colm.</i>	<i>Buckley, Pat.</i>	<i>Nash, Ged.</i>
<i>Burke, Peter.</i>	<i>Carthy, Matt.</i>	<i>Naughten, Denis.</i>
<i>Butler, Mary.</i>	<i>Clarke, Sorca.</i>	<i>O’Callaghan, Cian.</i>
<i>Byrne, Thomas.</i>	<i>Collins, Joan.</i>	<i>Ó Ríordáin, Aodhán.</i>
<i>Cahill, Jackie.</i>	<i>Collins, Michael.</i>	<i>Sherlock, Sean.</i>
<i>Calleary, Dara.</i>	<i>Conway-Walsh, Rose.</i>	<i>Shortall, Róisín.</i>
<i>Cannon, Ciarán.</i>	<i>Cronin, Réada.</i>	<i>Smith, Duncan.</i>
<i>Carey, Joe.</i>	<i>Crowe, Seán.</i>	<i>Whitmore, Jennifer.</i>
<i>Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.</i>	<i>Cullinane, David.</i>	
<i>Chambers, Jack.</i>	<i>Daly, Pa.</i>	
<i>Collins, Niall.</i>	<i>Doherty, Pearse.</i>	
<i>Costello, Patrick.</i>	<i>Donnelly, Paul.</i>	
<i>Crowe, Cathal.</i>	<i>Ellis, Dessie.</i>	
<i>Devlin, Cormac.</i>	<i>Fitzmaurice, Michael.</i>	
<i>Dillon, Alan.</i>	<i>Funchion, Kathleen.</i>	
<i>Donnelly, Stephen.</i>	<i>Gould, Thomas.</i>	
<i>Donohoe, Paschal.</i>	<i>Guirke, Johnny.</i>	
<i>Duffy, Francis Noel.</i>	<i>Harkin, Marian.</i>	
<i>Durkan, Bernard J.</i>	<i>Healy-Rae, Danny.</i>	
<i>English, Damien.</i>	<i>Healy-Rae, Michael.</i>	
<i>Farrell, Alan.</i>	<i>Kenny, Gino.</i>	
<i>Feighan, Frankie.</i>	<i>Kenny, Martin.</i>	

<i>Fitzpatrick, Peter.</i>	<i>Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.</i>	
<i>Flaherty, Joe.</i>	<i>McDonald, Mary Lou.</i>	
<i>Flanagan, Charles.</i>	<i>McGrath, Mattie.</i>	
<i>Fleming, Sean.</i>	<i>McNamara, Michael.</i>	
<i>Foley, Norma.</i>	<i>Mitchell, Denise.</i>	
<i>Griffin, Brendan.</i>	<i>Munster, Imelda.</i>	
<i>Harris, Simon.</i>	<i>Murphy, Paul.</i>	
<i>Haughey, Seán.</i>	<i>Murphy, Verona.</i>	
<i>Heydon, Martin.</i>	<i>Mythen, Johnny.</i>	
<i>Higgins, Emer.</i>	<i>Nolan, Carol.</i>	
<i>Hourigan, Neasa.</i>	<i>O'Donoghue, Richard.</i>	
<i>Humphreys, Heather.</i>	<i>O'Reilly, Louise.</i>	
<i>Kehoe, Paul.</i>	<i>O'Rourke, Darren.</i>	
<i>Lahart, John.</i>	<i>Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.</i>	
<i>Lawless, James.</i>	<i>Ó Murchú, Ruairí.</i>	
<i>Leddin, Brian.</i>	<i>Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.</i>	
<i>Lowry, Michael.</i>	<i>Pringle, Thomas.</i>	
<i>MacSharry, Marc.</i>	<i>Quinlivan, Maurice.</i>	
<i>Madigan, Josepha.</i>	<i>Ryan, Patricia.</i>	
<i>Martin, Catherine.</i>	<i>Smith, Bríd.</i>	
<i>Matthews, Steven.</i>	<i>Stanley, Brian.</i>	
<i>McAuliffe, Paul.</i>	<i>Tóibín, Peadar.</i>	
<i>McConalogue, Charlie.</i>	<i>Tully, Pauline.</i>	
<i>McGrath, Michael.</i>	<i>Ward, Mark.</i>	
<i>Moynihan, Aindrias.</i>	<i>Wynne, Violet-Anne.</i>	
<i>Moynihan, Michael.</i>		
<i>Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.</i>		
<i>Naughton, Hildegard.</i>		
<i>Noonan, Malcolm.</i>		
<i>O'Brien, Darragh.</i>		
<i>O'Brien, Joe.</i>		
<i>O'Callaghan, Jim.</i>		
<i>O'Connor, James.</i>		
<i>O'Dea, Willie.</i>		
<i>O'Donnell, Kieran.</i>		
<i>O'Donovan, Patrick.</i>		
<i>O'Dowd, Fergus.</i>		
<i>O'Gorman, Roderic.</i>		
<i>O'Sullivan, Christopher.</i>		
<i>O'Sullivan, Pádraig.</i>		
<i>Ó Cathasaigh, Marc.</i>		
<i>Ó Cuív, Éamon.</i>		

2 June 2021

<i>Rabbitte, Anne.</i>		
<i>Richmond, Neale.</i>		
<i>Ring, Michael.</i>		
<i>Ryan, Eamon.</i>		
<i>Smith, Brendan.</i>		
<i>Smyth, Niamh.</i>		
<i>Stanton, David.</i>		
<i>Troy, Robert.</i>		
<i>Varadkar, Leo.</i>		

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Brendan Griffin and Jack Chambers; Níl, Deputies Mattie McGrath and Michael McNamara.

Deputy Holly Cairns did not vote in this division due to an agreed pairing arrangement with Minister Helen McEntee for the duration of the Minister's maternity leave.

Question declared carried.

7 o'clock

Health and Criminal Justice (Covid-19) (Amendment) Bill 2021 [Seanad]: Committee and Remaining Stages

SECTION 1

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Amendments Nos. 1 to 3, inclusive, are related and will be discussed together. Amendments Nos. 2 and 3 are physical alternatives to amendment No. 1.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: I move amendment No. 1:

In page 5, line 9, to delete "the 9th day of November 2021" and substitute "the 14th day of July 2021".

The legislation relates to four Acts that were passed by the Oireachtas last year. By any standard, those Acts provided for the most wide-ranging and draconian powers that one could imagine. At that time, the Oireachtas gave the Government approval to introduce that draconian legislation on the basis of the crisis facing the country as a result of the pandemic. It was truly a crisis situation and nobody knew exactly what the future might hold. The Government had to move quickly to safeguard people's lives and livelihoods. It did so by introducing a range of legislation, which severely limited people's lives, restricted their movements both domestically and internationally, impinged on their civil liberties and civil rights, separated families and caused untold harm to people. We have to recognise that it was done in the interests of

public health, but those powers caused severe harm to many people, including increased levels of depression and other psychiatric illnesses, as well as loneliness. People lacked the ability to get out and mix with family and friends and to take exercise and do other basic things in life. There was a lack of ability to assemble in any way, whether in small or large groups, or to attend religious services. All kinds of activities that people take as normal parts of life were severely restricted on the basis the Government had to move fast to protect public health.

There was a recognition of that in this House. That is why the go-ahead was given to this legislation. Most of us who voted to support that legislation did so with a very heavy heart and in the expectation that, while we faced an unprecedented crisis, it would be reasonably short-lived. We know now, 15 months later, that, unfortunately, it has not been. It has lasted to the present time. The present time is, thankfully, very different from 15 months ago. That is a result of people adhering to the restrictions, of a greater knowledge of what Covid entails and, particularly, of the breakthrough in vaccinations and the successful vaccination programme we are operating. We are in a different place from where we were last year.

Many of us on all sides of this House are strongly of the view that we should not roll over these draconian powers for the Minister of Health and the Government. There is a strong view on this side of the House but, as the Minister knows, many Government backbenchers have expressed serious concerns about the continuation of these powers because they cannot be justified at this point. We were told last year there would be a sunset clause and only one extension to that. That extension has occurred. We were also told that the operation of these powers would be reviewed and that has not happened. It is entirely unreasonable and unwarranted for the Minister to come to the House and seek the extension of those draconian powers in the absence of any kind of assessment or review of the operation of those powers.

The powers that cause us most concern are those underpinned by penal implications, in terms of fines and potential prison sentences. The powers extended to the Garda to enforce those restrictions were draconian in themselves. The Garda had serious reservations about being expected to enforce those powers. In practice, gardaí were expected to enforce powers without being given guidelines on them. It put them in a difficult situation, which they did not want to be in. There is no demand from them to retain those powers for any longer than absolutely necessary and the period when they were absolutely necessary is undoubtedly past.

For that reason, the amendment proposes that, rather than extending those powers until November and giving the Minister the blank cheque he seeks, over the next six weeks or so up to the Dáil recess, he should carry out a complete and comprehensive review of the operation of those powers and come back to us before the recess to report on their operation. We have very little data on them. We have global figures from the Garda on prosecutions but we have no disaggregated figures. What exact powers were used by the force? Where was the concentration of prosecutions? Were there age or demographic implications? Were there concentrations in particular areas? We know nothing about that whatsoever. Fifteen months down the road, with all the country has come through, it is entirely unreasonable and wrong for the Minister to seek the go-ahead from this House to continue with those powers without us having any information about the full implications of them or what the operation of them was.

That is the purpose of this amendment. It is to put a stop on the automatic roll-over of these emergency powers that the Minister seeks. There is no justification for that. We would be prepared to support a six-week extension on the understanding that he comes back to us with a comprehensive review by 14 July. That is a reasonable position for us to take given all the

country has been through and all of the concerns that exist about these powers, all the limitations they put on people's lives and the erosion of basic civil and human rights as a result. We cannot just give the Minister the go-ahead on this. It would be wrong for us to do that. For that reason, the Social Democrats is taking a very reasonable view: we are saying the Minister can extend the powers up to 14 July and come back to us and reassess the situation then on the basis of having access to the facts on the operation of the powers. I urge the Minister to accept the amendment.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: I will be very brief because I am just endorsing and repeating what Deputy Shortall said. Is the Minister minded to accept any of the amendments? It would be very useful to know that at this stage. Could he confirm whether it is his intention to accept any of the amendments that have been tabled? We may not get to deal with all of them. There is a very short period available to discuss them and it would be useful for people to see what options might be possible.

Essentially, too much of what has happened has been by way of secondary legislation. That has been out of sight and we are just being asked essentially to trust the Minister until next November and potentially onwards from that to February 2022.

It is fair to say that it was a very different experience last year. We did not know what was facing us. There was a high level of collaboration at that stage right across the Dáil. There were also many briefings and engagement but that is not the case now. Essentially, the absence of information is incredibly important in terms of what we are being asked to do, which is essentially to give a blank cheque on very significant powers. I will not labour the point, but it would be very useful if the Minister would give us some indication of what amendments he intends to accept.

Deputy Denis Naughten: Does the Minister wish to indicate his intentions? It would be helpful for us all.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh): I am not inclined to pre-empt the entire debate on every amendment before any debate on them. I am sure the Minister is waiting to hear the contributions.

Deputy Denis Naughten: We are all around here a bit long to believe that. Is the Minister inclined to accommodate some of the amendments from the Opposition?

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I am very happy to respond if the Chair permits.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh): If the Minister wishes to respond, he may do so.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: I would very much like to take these amendments one by one and go through them like we did on Second Stage and in the Seanad as well.

Deputy Denis Naughten: Amendment No. 2 is in my name and that of my colleagues in the Regional Group. As the Minister will be aware, the reason we are here today is 15 months ago, my colleagues and I pressed for the inclusion of a sunset clause in the legislation, something that was accepted by all the Opposition groups and by the then Government. Had it not been put in place we might not be in a position where we are even discussing the legislation today.

When I spoke on the issue 15 months ago, I said that we would require the legislation for 12 months. Some Members were aghast that such legislation would be required over that period, but we have gone beyond 12 months and it is now 15 months later and we need to review the management of the virus and the approach that we are taking to it right across government. We need to see what works and what does not work and act in accordance with the evidence that it is now available to the Government.

As the Minister will be aware, last year when speaking in the House to the Taoiseach I was very critical of the fact that we were far too reliant on expert advice based on evidence coming from elsewhere in Europe and there was not enough focus on what was working in Ireland and could be effective in an Irish context. Opposition Members still do not have that evidence available to them, yet we are being asked to make a decision on this legislation.

I would love to be in a position where we do not require any draconian laws to be in place, but what is happening outside of this jurisdiction at the moment, in particular in the UK with the Delta or Indian variant, is something that we need to be conscious of. We have seen in the UK that the rate of infection with the Delta variant is increasing and some of the advisers to the British Government have said that while the cases are relatively low at the moment, the variant has fuelled exponential growth in the virus. There are concerns here. I have been speaking with a number of front-line healthcare staff in this country in recent weeks and they are genuinely concerned that hospitals will again be overrun with increased infection as a result of the Delta variant.

While the vaccine will impede the scale and severity of infection, it will not prevent people acquiring the infection and getting sick. There have been cases of people getting sick. We still need mask wearing. We still require social distancing and, sadly, we will require that for some time. We must strike a balance in terms of the public health measures that are needed against the virus and the variations of it and the scale of powers that is currently available to the Government. I believe that the current scale of powers is far too extensive. We do need powers. The Minister needs to have the ability to take emergency measures depending on what is happening in other jurisdictions, but there must be a balance and I do not think it is there at present. The justification has not been provided for it.

Under the legislation as it stands, the Garda have the ability to fine, arrest and to detain for very simple reasons. These are extensive powers that should only ever be reluctantly given by a Parliament. Last March, we reluctantly gave those powers, but they need to be rowed back upon now. They should only be extended on the express approval of Dáil Éireann.

I support Deputy Shortall's comments and the amendment tabled by the Social Democrats. However, if the Minister is not prepared to accept amendment No. 1, I hope he can accept our amendment. The Government is now announcing that it is winding down the pandemic unemployment payment, PUP, from September, yet we are going to keep these draconian powers in place until at least 9 November, with the possibility of extending them beyond that, even when the PUP is null and void. It does not make sense to have such extensive powers available to an individual Minister at the stroke of a pen, when the State itself is saying there will be no need to financially support people through the social welfare system and the PUP beyond September, and that payments are being wound down at that stage, yet this legislation remains in place. We are being asked to make a decision regarding this legislation blind, without evidence being provided. This is evidence that I have sought consistently over the past 12 months from the Head of Government, but we have not seen any of that here.

The amendment I tabled would mean these emergency powers cease on 9 September unless Dáil Éireann reconvenes by that date to extend them. If we still require such draconian measures by the beginning of September, then Dáil Éireann needs to reconvene anyway and be updated on what measures are being taken if we are not out of the woods in terms of Covid infection at that point in time. It is imperative that the Dáil comes back at that point and fully debates the juncture we are at, if we are still trying to manage significant outbreaks of Covid-19 throughout this country. That is why the legislation should not be extended beyond that point.

All of us have received a barrage of emails, and some of them are anti-everything while others are very genuine. I have an email here from Genghis Khan - I thought he was dead - who is against the PCR test, face masks, vaccines, and any kind of lockdown. However, many people are genuinely concerned about the impact this is having on the mental and physical health of the public. Many colleagues have spoken at length about the impact this is having on young people and older people in terms of their mental health and the question of diagnosis, particularly of cancer. These powers need to be used only at the most imperative times and, hopefully, we have moved away from that at this stage.

We are relinquishing responsibility. All Government and Opposition Members are relinquishing responsibility to an unelected body. One of those emails stated, "I did not vote for NPHET or Tony Holohan". They did not. They voted for 158 Deputies here in Dáil Éireann to make the decisions and to seek the advice of Tony Holohan and every other Tony Holohan. Ultimately, however, we are the ones who need to make those decisions based on all of the evidence that is presented to us, but that evidence has not been presented to us.

Our amendment No. 51 states that if this legislation is passed, the Minister will have the power to make statutory instruments but those statutory instruments will only remain valid for as long as they have been endorsed by the Members of Dáil Éireann. It allows for a review mechanism of any statutory instrument that is signed by the Minister or his successor and that must be presented to Dáil Éireann within seven sitting days and ratified. It will be enforced in the interim but it must be reviewed within seven sitting days.

We have taken careful consideration in regard to the challenges and issues that are there. I accept things are not easy. I accept it is a crystal ball at the moment in terms of what is going to happen next week or next month. We are talking about the Delta variant and we could be talking about another variant in a month's time that, unfortunately, might be far more resistant to the vaccines we have at the moment. I accept the risks that are there. I accept the Minister needs to have powers. I accept the principle but these particular powers are far too extensive. The evidence has not been provided to Dáil Éireann in terms of what works and what does not work, and what is the justification for each and every one of these particular measures.

At the very latest, this legislation should come back here on 9 September to be fully discussed, if Deputy Shortall's amendment is not accepted. I hope her amendment will be accepted and that we can discuss this before the recess. Second, any statutory instrument that is signed from here onwards must have a review clause whereby the Members of this House, the people who are directly elected and accountable to the people, have a direct role in saying it is the responsibility of whoever is the Minister to come in and justify why these particular measures are needed, rather than passing the buck and saying "NPHET said this" or "NPHET said that" behind closed doors. We know some of what NPHET says but we do not know some of the other evidence and we do not know the basis for that evidence because a lot of that is not being made available to us. Let us make the decisions. We have a responsibility to make those

decisions and we should not remove that power from ourselves. I urge colleagues to support the amendments.

Deputy David Cullinane: I want to speak to amendment No. 3. In February and March of last year, we were all confronted with a pandemic and a deadly virus that none of us at the time understood and we did not know the full extent of the damage that virus would do. It has been an horrendous time ever since, during which the State and every other country has had to deal with a global pandemic, where a large number of people have lost their lives and a lot of damage has been done socially and economically, and to people's mental health. Nobody in this Chamber underestimates the scale of the challenge that presented to this State, its agencies and Departments. There is a reality that most of us in opposition accept, which is that to position the State to respond to what was a deadly virus and a very dangerous pandemic, we needed to have public health measures and public health interventions. There has been a lot of support from the Opposition in regard not to supporting the Government but to supporting public health measures that were necessary to ensure our health services were not overwhelmed and we could keep people safe and, in reality, to keep them alive, because we could see what was happening in other parts of the world that had very high transmission rates before the virus got here where people were dying in big numbers.

Circumstances have changed substantially since then. After the Minister first came before the Dáil and sought the emergency powers that he was given, the goodwill shown by Members of the Opposition was squandered. I have said this to the Minister time and again. It was squandered for two reasons. The first was the nature of some of the regulations that he then brought in as a consequence of the emergency powers that he had been given. Some of them were ill-thought-out, others were plain daft and silly but all of them were brought in without Dáil scrutiny of any kind. As I said to the Minister in the past, not only was there no Dáil scrutiny of any kind, there was no consultation and certainly no debate in this House, and not even a heads-up that those regulations would be published. Very often, we would be contacted by the media, asking for responses to regulations that had just been published on the Government website. That is how the Opposition was treated after the goodwill demonstrated to put in place the emergency powers and public health measures that were necessary. When goodwill is squandered, the Minister cannot seriously come back in time and again and expect the same result, and expect the Opposition to continue to expand emergency powers which are quite extraordinary. These are emergency powers which have never been given to a Minister before in the magnitude of their powers and their draconian nature. The Minister himself used the word "draconian", and that is what they are. That goodwill has long been squandered.

I cannot credibly support this Bill in the absence of any Opposition amendments. Deputies Catherine Murphy and Naughten asked the Minister earlier if he was going to accept any of the Opposition amendments. He said that he would wait and listen to the debate and take them amendment by amendment. I would hazard a guess - maybe I am wrong - that he will not accept any of them. I hope that I am wrong but let us see - if the Seanad exchanges are anything to go by, then I certainly hold out no hope at all. I think that is disappointing.

In his Second Stage speech, the Minister trumpeted the amendments he has brought forward as some sort of concession or an effort to meet people half way by only having one opportunity to come back again by way of resolution to extend the measures further if necessary. That is not half enough. The amendments we tabled, including the one that I am speaking to now, ask that the Minister come back towards the end of this month or early July to seek approval again if it was necessary to extend the emergency powers. I accept that it is not possible to unwind

every public health measure. There are simple things like having to wear a mask and of course we want those to remain in place, but many of the emergency powers which the Minister has been given will not be necessary and hopefully will not be necessary again. We are starting to unwind many of the restrictions, which we all support and celebrate, and we want to do more of that. However, to ask the Members of the House, Opposition and Government Deputies, to extend those emergency powers until November this year is really a stretch. I cannot understand why the Minister has opted for so long a time. He could have gone for a shorter timeframe or even engaged with the Opposition, but there was no discussion on the heads of the Bill and no prelegislative scrutiny because of the rushed nature of the Bill. We had a briefing from the Minister's officials who told us they were aware of the need for a Bill from as far back as late March, early April yet the Opposition and members of the Joint Committee on Health were not informed until the last minute when everything was rushed again when we were asked to rubber stamp it and push it through because the Minister wanted to extend it until the end of November.

I will finish on this because many speakers want to contribute and everyone who wants to speak should have the opportunity to do so. There can be no more blank cheques for the Minister because when he got a blank cheque before, that was a leap of faith to give him powers to make regulations. Sometimes that was thrown back in our faces and I resent that. That is not how the Opposition should be treated. Some of the more colourful emails we have received were mentioned earlier. Many people have contacted us who are genuine in saying that they do not want us to extend these powers because of some of the Minister's misuse of the regulations he brought forward in the past and because we are being asked to extend them until November of this year and they simply do not see the sense in it. I have to say that I agree, and for that reason, if the Minister does not accept any of the amendments which have been tabled here today, certainly the ones Sinn Féin has tabled, I will not be in a position to support the Bill.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I call an Teachta Shanahan.

Deputy Michael McNamara: Is there a speaking order?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: There is a list of speakers I have in front of me from the previous Chair, from all the speakers who put their names to the three amendments. Then we will move to yourself.

Deputy Michael McNamara: Sorry. Thank you for clarifying that.

Deputy Matt Shanahan: I do not propose to take up the House's time for very long. I am speaking in support of amendments Nos. 2 and 51 put forward by the Regional Group. As Deputy Naughten said, the only reason we are here having this debate in the House is because of the sunset clause that was promoted by the Regional Group. We are discussing the need to ensure that public health, transmission and infection data continue to drive thinking. However, it has to be said the restrictions we have put in place are almost draconian. Others have spoken of the effects they are having on the population at large. We have to acknowledge that we have made significant progress on Covid despite the presence of the Indian variant. A promise was given to the people at the start of the pandemic where we were told "let's flatten the curve". We have done a lot more than flatten the curve, we have reduced it significantly. Thankfully, through international science, we have also managed to get vaccines which are having a demonstrable effect in securing the health of the most aged and vulnerable in our community. That must give us some hope into the future.

However, without doubt, we have seen the overarching authority of NPHET to the exclusion of all other health practitioners and advisers. I think that is a dangerous place to be. If the July amendment is not accepted, our amendment seeks a return to the House on 9 September to review the extension of these powers again. We should propose a review at that stage. The Special Committee on Covid-19 Response, of which I was a member, did very good work. When it was being wound up, I felt it was a mistake and I still believe that to be the case. If we are going to extend powers we should also extend the oversight of the Oireachtas to look at what we are doing. NPHET excluded other voices. We saw it with test and trace, with masks, antigen testing and mandatory hotel quarantining. People have a right to show some disquiet. We need to acknowledge the progress we are making and that we have made. Our proposal speaks to sense and sensibility, that if the Minister will not accept July then we return in September. It is only a few months away. People might be able to live with that for another while. We can look at the transmission data, what is happening, the progress of our vaccination programme and based on that, we can come back to the House and see whether these powers should be extended beyond that date.

Deputy Alan Kelly: The Labour Party is also putting its name to amendment No. 2, along with the Independent Group.

The powers that the Minister is asking us to extend are draconian in any form and nature and I assume the Minister accepts that. In any normal time, it would not even be countenanced in a normal democracy. However, we were not in normal times and it was necessary during the pandemic. We often talk about events that are going on in other countries across Europe that take away individual liberty and in some cases make people fearful. Any legislation that gives extensive powers to a government must have the utmost justification. While there was justification for this when the pandemic first hit us, it was unprecedented. None of us knew what we were facing. It was a once in a lifetime experience, I hope. We had to do it again when we went through our second and third wave. We really need to reconsider all this now. Our citizens are deeply concerned. Thankfully, we are on the way back to some level of normality and that has changed things but it is hard to understand why the Minister is asking for these powers to be extended until November and potentially later. I will keep on reminding him that since these are extraordinary powers, we need to have measurements as regards the associated decision-making. When I say measurements, they need to be proportionate, fair and justified and they also have to have checks and balances that rotate and are used at all times.

Having studied what the Minister said in Seanad Éireann, I believe he has failed to date to give a satisfactory explanation as to why the powers need to be extended until November. That needs to change. The Minister said previously he has an open mind on this. Frankly, we will find that out. Many of us in the Opposition are saying the Minister should reflect on this. We will be satisfied if he accepts the amendment of the Labour Party and the Independent Group or that of the Social Democrats. To be proportionate, he should accept one of them because the time proposed by him is simply too long. It is unfair and unjustified and does not pass the tests I spoke about.

As matters stand, the Labour Party is of the view that these measures should be in place only until September. If the Minister supports that view or the other amendments proposed, we will come with them on this journey one more time. If he does not, we will not support him. It cannot be any clearer than that.

The Minister has admitted that 80% of the adult population will be vaccinated by the end of

June or shortly thereafter. Non-essential international travel is due to begin at some time over the summer. There seems to be a complete contradiction in what the Government is saying and what it is legislating for. The opening up is proceeding at a different pace than the extension of powers. When we take these things in the round, it makes little sense to us to see the extraordinary measures being extended until 9 November if the opening up is to occur on various dates over the summer. Why can we not have a more proportionate response in line with the vaccine roll-out programme, which is going so well?

Yesterday the Government announced the unwinding of several support schemes, such as the PUP, from September. If we are seeking to unwind supports from September, we should surely be reviewing these emergency measures with a view to them ending in September. We have an opening-up programme based on one date and changes in regard to the PUP in September. An overwhelming majority of the population will hopefully be vaccinated by the same date, yet we are extending the powers for several months beyond that. It is inherently contradictory. Outdoor and indoor dining will return in June and July. As announced by the Taoiseach last week, people will be allowed back to view sports. It is hoped people will be going to League of Ireland and GAA matches over the summer. I still intend to see Tipperary win its 29th All-Ireland final this year. I have high hopes for that. If I am to attend an All-Ireland final to see Liam Sheedy and his colleagues pick up the cup, I do not see why, proportionately, we need to have extensive draconian powers like those suggested until November.

We hope that as we unwind, circulate and have an outdoor summer, with a bit of an indoor summer in proportion, numbers will be controlled and the vaccines will be rolled out. As we do that, there will obviously be less of a threat although we have to watch for the variants and keep our guard at all times. By 9 September, this House should be back. We will have seen what has happened over the course of the summer and the gradual unwinding. That is why the Labour Party believes that would be a more appropriate point to extend the restrictions, if necessary. Importantly, the situation would be reviewed. That is our proposal. We believe it is a belt-and-braces approach that acknowledges what is happening now is proportionate, takes into consideration other decisions the Government has made and, in tandem, acknowledges the roll-out of the vaccination programme across the country.

I am uneasy over the fact that there has been little or no analysis brought forward to this House on the impact of the restrictions in the past 12 months. I now want to dwell on this. We have no analysis of the impacts on people. We have no qualitative or quantitative analysis of the impacts, including the hidden impacts, on people. This work should be done in advance or early in the timeframe we propose. In all good faith, it is very difficult for the Minister to come into this House and ask us to rubber-stamp the continuation of these measures without providing context and an analysis of their effectiveness, as well as an analysis showing they undoubtedly have negative consequences for people. None of that has been done.

It was difficult but understandable that pre-legislative scrutiny was waived last March when we were literally in the thick of it with Covid, but we are in a very different space now thanks to everybody across the country. My party and, I am sure, others in the House would have been much less uneasy if appropriate time and consideration had been given, in conjunction with other stakeholders, in respect of what would have been a more proportionate response. I refer to what could have occurred if we had taken more time and examined all the data. We had time. Nobody comes into this House more often than the Minister talking about data. I am not being funny in saying that. In fairness, we had time to analyse the consequences of this and prepare.

My colleague, Senator Hoey, rightly suggested to the Minister in the Seanad Chamber that there needs to be a human rights analysis of these measures. It needs to be carried out in advance. We should not be extending these measures beyond September without proper analysis and scrutiny. I, like every other Deputy, have been inundated with correspondence from so many people. They have contacted me by email, in writing, by telephone and orally. I have heard different opinions, some realistic, some fair and some unfair, but all expressing concern. We need to ensure the rights of people we represent are respected and that the most basic tenets of democracy that we are expected to uphold in this House are honoured. There is a sense of rush here. If the Minister is not going to accept the amendments, will he commit to a review of how these laws are being implemented and how often they will have had to have been used in the House before the end of July? That, at least, would be something.

When it comes to legislation such as this, we should be presented with more information on its effectiveness and necessity. It is not good enough to come in here and use the Oireachtas as a rubber-stamping body when it comes to draconian legislation such as this. Therefore, I am asking the Minister to meet us halfway and accept one of two timelines proposed in various amendments. If he does so, we will come a little bit on this journey with him again, but we cannot do so unless the legislation is proportionate, evidence-based, justified, fair and balanced. Given what the Minister has articulated and put forward to date, it is simply none of those at this moment.

Deputy Michael McNamara: I begin by apologising to Deputy Kelly. We did not mean to interrupt. Deputy Tóibín and I were agreeing that there were more U-turns on display here tonight than anyone would see at a Garda checkpoint.

The Minister was asked a straight question as to whether he would be accepting any Opposition amendments. He said he would like to listen to the discussion on all of the amendments and then make an informed decision. I would like to believe that is the case but, unfortunately, as someone who understands how Dáil and Oireachtas procedure works, I cannot.

Yesterday, there was a vote to guillotine this Bill. That means we stop considering amendments and take a vote on the overall Bill after 150 minutes, regardless of whether amendments have been considered. That decision did not come out of nowhere because that is not how things work here. The Chief Whip to the Government - the Minister is a member of Government, so the Chief Whip is the Chief Whip to the Minister - went into the Business Committee and the guillotine was agreed. I doubt it was agreed without debate but, ultimately, whatever the Government proposes is accepted after it is debated because the Government has the numbers. The Chief Whip said we would guillotine the Bill and we would not debate all amendments because the Government could not be bothered. The view was that it was a nice night and they would go for pints as the lads wanted to enjoy themselves. They have had a difficult winter, so to hell with debate. That is how we got here tonight.

It was disingenuous of the Minister to say he would listen to amendments because we are not going to reach them. There are 60 amendments. I have no doubt the House will accept the Minister's amendments because that is what happens, but we will not be accepting Opposition amendments. That was the question Deputy Denis Naughten put to the Minister.

There is a broader issue with these amendments. I am not convinced that the issue is whether we extend these powers by six months, three months or four months. The issue is more the absolute power to make amendments that lies with the Minister. I cannot accept these

amendments. I would accept the amendments tabled by Sinn Féin and the Technical Group - I proposed a similar amendment - but, again, I do not believe they will be reached. Those amendments require explicit Dáil backing for any regulations the Minister introduces. That is real democratic oversight. In the case of my amendment, the proposal was for affirmation to be made within ten sitting days as opposed to ten days. The Minister could not say there could be an emergency during the summer and the Dáil might be unable to sit or that he would have to bring in regulations. He could not say the heavens might fall, the Dáil would not be able to sit to affirm the regulations and, therefore, they would fall and we would have chaos because no one would know what they were doing and it would be awful. That would not arise. It would mean, however, that the Dáil would have to consider the Minister's regulations and affirm them.

Even in the hands of a competent Minister for Health, these powers are dangerous and I would oppose them since they have been used in the past to restrict rights, potentially unlawfully and unconstitutionally.

When this State was founded, we copied the UK Parliament. We take most of our procedure from the House of Commons, just as we take the procedure in our courts from the courts that predated ours. The House of Commons Joint Committee on Human Rights considered this matter and stated it was glad that it was explicit that religious organisations could practise. They could open the doors of their churches, say masses and hold Sunday service. Synagogues and mosques could open. Religious organisations were expected to behave responsibly and they did. In fact, many did not open the doors of their houses of worship because they believed it would be dangerous or irresponsible to do so or they took the view that, in accordance with the tenets of their faith, it was unnecessary to do so. Nevertheless, they were allowed to do so. The Commons Human Rights Committee stated that was a good thing because to have done otherwise would be contrary to the European Convention on Human Rights. It stated that a similar level of clarity was lacking on the right to peaceful assembly and protest.

I believe we have a lack of clarity around both issues and I have raised both with the Minister repeatedly. In October, the Minister, who was sitting where he is sitting now, took umbrage when I suggested it would be a penal offence for a priest to say mass in public. The regulations said it was an offence to leave home without reasonable excuse and that a reasonable excuse in respect of a minister or priest - I am fairly certain those were the words used in the regulation - included saying mass but only if it was online. By extension, saying mass in public was not a reasonable excuse and in saying mass in public or carrying out another religious ceremony, a priest was committing a criminal offence. The Minister explicitly stated in the Dáil that he had read the regulations the previous night and assured me it was not a penal offence and would remain thus. That regulation lapsed in December when we were all having the meaningful Christmas that the National Public Health Emergency Team dreamt up. It was a disastrous campaign to justify an unnecessary lockdown at the start of October. Then the regulations were reintroduced in January word for word, comma for comma, line for line. The regulations the Minister said did not contain a penal offence were challenged in our courts and legal counsel for the Government - the Government's legal representatives - clarified to the court that it was a penal offence to say mass in public.

That concerns me on several levels. It concerns me that we are potentially infringing constitutional rights and it concerns me even more that the Minister assured the House that it was not a penal offence. He said he had read the regulations, knew what he was doing and that what was being suggested by the Opposition was simply wrong. Then the Minister's lawyers clarified the exact opposite to the courts.

Did the Minister read the regulations the night before, as he told the House, or did he not read them the night before? If he read them, did he not understand them? If he did not understand them, did he not take legal advice on them? How did we arrive at a situation in which the polar opposite of what the Minister assured the House was the case came to be the Government's position in the courts? If the Minister did not understand what he was signing with regard to religious freedom, how are we to believe that he understood what he was signing with regard to the impact the regulations would have on any of the panoply of rights that exist and that inhere in all human beings the State? I am referring to the rights in the Constitution that the constitutional order is here to protect.

I raised this matter before and the Minister said he did not understand the question. I will be simple. Did the Minister tell fibs to the House with respect to the fact that he read the regulations and understood the regulations or their import?

8 o'clock

Surely, it was one of the three. The great powers the Minister has under these regulations make me very uneasy. As I have said, were Deputy Donnelly an entirely competent Minister, I would still be uneasy but I say with sadness that, unfortunately, he has demonstrated otherwise on the floor of this House. I invited the Minister to explain the scenario. I invited him to retract what he said and explain how this came about but he declined to do so. Now here he is saying, "Trust me, guys", using the lingo of certain management consultants. It is a bit like saying "Trust me, I'm a doctor", if the Ceann Comhairle will pardon the pun.

We have heard NPHET mentioned. NPHET called for most of these powers. We have seen NPHET give public health advice. I do not have a problem with that *per se*. We need somebody to give the Government public health advice and who is better placed to do so than the Chief Medical Officer? However, advice as to whether restrictions should be policed and how they should be policed and advice as to whether people should be allowed to gather together is not really public health advice. These are State matters. I am concerned NPHET has overstepped the limits of its function massively. NPHET is led by the Chief Medical Officer. It is obvious why he and the deputy chief medical officer are on the team but there are others on it as well.

I have been contacted by many doctors from across this State over the past six months. They work in public hospitals with people who have contracted Covid. They are working in very difficult circumstances but completely oppose the position Deputy Donnelly has advocated as Minister for Health. Not only has he put forward and advocated for his position but he has made it a criminal offence not to agree with it. It is not democratic that he can do so at the stroke of a pen without being accountable to any committee or either House. Let me phrase it differently. The Minister knows when a regulation is going to expire, because it is written within the regulation. He therefore knows if he will need to introduce another regulation in a week or two, if the advice from NPHET is that it is necessary. Why then would the Minister not want to go before a committee and tease it out so that it can be clearly understood what is or is not a penal offence? In a democracy, why would he not want to tease that out? I simply do not understand why that would be so, unless the Minister has a tendency towards authoritarianism. That does not just worry me, but frightens me.

I come from a part of the country that is very proud of its tradition and tendency towards freedom and the protection of freedom, which it had for a long time before the end of British rule in this State and has had for a long time since British rule ended. Many made the ultimate

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sacrifice. In fact, some of those who did so could not even be commemorated because of the pandemic. I am not suggesting it would have been right to have had large commemorations. On the contrary, I would not feel comfortable in a large crowd at the moment. What I am saying is that it is wrong to impose public health advice through criminal law and it is even more wrong to do so by way of delegated legislation. It is still more wrong to remove any possibility of checks and balances being applied in this House and to prevent the House looking at what is being done.

Last week, last month and last year, I asked whether we had any idea of the mental health impacts of these restrictions or of their impact on suicides. I note that last week the Central Statistics Office announced the number of deaths and the number of suicides that occurred last year that had been recorded as of 22 May. I may be mistaken as to the particular date but it was certainly in May. Thankfully, the number of suicides was down on the previous year. However, that does not really tell us much. Deaths have to be recorded within three months in Ireland and the vast majority are. It can, however, sometimes take a lot longer to record the cause of death. Sometimes, a coroner's court must rule. Of course, all courts, including the coroners' courts, faced long delays last year. There is therefore a delay in establishing the cause of certain deaths. I hope that the number of suicides was down in 2020 but the information we have to hand only says that the number of suicides in 2020 recorded as of May was down. They are two entirely different things.

It is interesting the number of deaths recorded was up on the number of deaths recorded in May 2020 in respect of 2019. Again, there could be a delay in recording deaths, although this is less likely because, without meaning to be glib, it is much easier to establish whether somebody is alive or dead than it is to establish the cause of death. The deaths of most people who died in 2020 will therefore have been recorded by May. Even if there had been a delay, provided the delay in both years was similar, the number of deaths had increased by 600. That is about 2% of total deaths. I have lost more people who were close to me than many of my age will have so I know what it is like to grieve for a loved one. I know how awful it is but, equally, I know that I have to go on living for the living. I do not wish to minimise the deaths of these 600 people, as they are very important, but I wish to point out that the number was only up 600, or 2%, on the previous year. The same increase in deaths took place between 2017 and 2018 as took place between 2019 and 2020. This again causes me to question not whether there is a pandemic, because there clearly is, and not whether people need to be cautious, because they clearly do, but whether some of the restrictions that were put in place and some of the public health measures policed by An Garda Síochána were necessary, proportionate or advised. It does cause me to question that.

Deputy Paul Murphy has drawn considerable attention to an issue in respect of fines. It is hardly surprising but most of the fines have been handed out in a couple of areas in the State. Towards the end of last summer, I warned we were effectively penalising poverty through some of these Covid restrictions. That is what we have done. It was not in Greystones or east Clare that the number of fines was high but in parts of the country which the State has consistently failed, parts where people are poor. That is where fines were issued. It will be interesting to see whether they will be paid because there are all sorts of constitutional frailties in much of this legislation.

At the start, Deputy Naughten said we gave the police powers to do all of this last March. We did not. We incrementally gave the Minister more powers, rather than fewer, as the year went on. We were acting blindly in March 2020 but it was in October, through the Health

(Amendment) Act 2020, that we gave the police powers to issue lots of fines. Those powers were subsequently increased. Then mandatory hotel quarantine was introduced after Christmas, which was a fiasco. Rather interestingly, the Minister himself has said that, if the mandatory hotel quarantine regime had been in place before Christmas, it would not have stopped what happened at Christmas. I found that astounding because, if it would not have stopped what happened at Christmas, what was the point? What we have done has made Belfast International Airport a success story after many years of stagnation while Shannon Airport, which was enjoying some nascent success after facing some difficulties, has plummeted.

Deputy David Cullinane: Belfast International Airport was closed to international travel.

Deputy Michael McNamara: It is now open to international travel. Many people from this State are travelling through it to travel internationally as we speak. That is what we have achieved. I hope the Minister will withdraw the guillotine and agree that these powers are extreme and that we need to debate them, even if that means sitting tomorrow, Friday, Saturday or Sunday because I doubt there is a rock concert taking place on those days. There is plenty of time and plenty of space. Let us debate what is involved. Let us get back to democracy. Let us return to normality in some shape or form. I oppose the particular amendment.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: I appreciate the opportunity to speak to these amendments. This is an important debate. The people of Ireland have experienced a lot of anxiety and have had an awful lot to put up with. They are saying in their droves that they do not want the Minister for Health or the Government to be given a blank cheque to continue at will without having to consult us, as legislators, or them, the people. The fact is that people have had an awful lot to contend with financially, mentally and in every other aspect of their lives. We all agree that at the start of the pandemic it was right that certain measures had to be put in place. A pandemic of this nature had never before occurred in modern times. It took extreme measures to deal with and contain it. There is a point at which all that must stop. The Government, just as it is doing in regard to the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Bill 2021, is going so far east it is going west.

I will give some examples. I spoke this week to the Taoiseach on the floor of the Dáil with regard to mental health and suicide and the affects on people in terms of what they are going through. I am not for one moment saying that the suicides which are occurring are a direct or indirect result of the pandemic, the lockdown or the lack of social contact that people have had. What I am saying is that we have to look at everything in the round. We have to look at the bigger picture. There are things that the Government should be doing to help people that it is not doing.

My colleagues in the Rural Independent Group and I have put forward amendments and I am supporting other amendments that have been tabled. I am not supporting the Bill, however, because I have studied it and it can be only described as a blank cheque for the Government. I cannot for the life of me understand how, for example, Deputies from County Kerry could support the Bill and give the Government a blank cheque. If they were listening to the people in Kerry, they would hear what they are saying. They are saying, “Enough is enough” and “We have done enough.” They have put their shoulders to the wheel, but business owners are on their knees, be it hoteliers, shopkeepers, small traders, hairdressers, beauticians or the various categories of tradespeople who have worked hard to build up their businesses and who have been held back for so long. They are suffering financially and mentally, as are their families. They have been through a lot. On a daily basis, and as late as this evening, they have been say-

ing to me: “For God’s sake, will you tell them above there that enough is enough, we want to get back to normal and we do not want the Government to be able to come along at any time and do what it did in the past and go over the top.”

I have seen at first hand, as I am sure has every other Deputy here, bereaved families, brothers and sisters, sisters-in-law, brothers-in-law, aunts, uncles, nephews and nieces sitting in their cars in the yards of churches watching the burial mass for their grandfather or grandmother on their mobile phones while there were only ten people in the church. I challenge the person from NPHET who recommended to Government that only ten people should be allowed in the cathedral in Killarney. For God’s sake, it did not make sense. The people officiating at those masses, the priests, were repeatedly saying that it did not make sense because they were on the altars looking down into the churches and they could see what ten people looked like. It was an act of insanity on the part of this Government to put that restriction in place. It was grossly wrong, highly offensive and it will never be forgotten by the families involved. They will never forgive Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael, the Green Party or anybody else who thought it was a good idea to support those parties in doing that because they were denied the right to have be at the burial masses for their loved ones and they cannot get a second chance in that regard. That was the case up until very recently. Nobody could look me in the eye and tell me that that was right or proper or that it was in the interests of public health. It was absolute nonsense of the highest order that only ten people were allowed into the cathedral in Killarney. It would take a person a long time to find ten people in that cathedral. It was crazy. No matter how many times the Government was told that what is was doing was wrong, it would not listen. There are plenty of other examples, but this is an example in the extreme because that is a time in a person’s life that he or she cannot get back. For young people who loved their grandparents and lost one of them during that time it was deeply upsetting, highly offensive and wrong.

We listened to the so-called experts and we put up with an awful lot from them. They are now the prophets of doom and gloom. We have all seen the tweets over the last couple of days. Let us consider what the Government is now telling people. The Government would want to stop talking out of both sides of its mouth. I will give an example of a contradiction. The Government said recently that this summer is to be a summer of outdoor activities, eating and drinking. Everything is to happen outdoors. Yet, it is shutting down outdoor areas the length and breadth of the country by putting up barriers. It is hiring barriers and buying barriers such that there is a scarcity of barriers in the country. It is using those barriers to close off green areas and parks. It is using them to segregate and close off places outdoors. For God’s sake, where is the intelligence in that? Does Government not realise that in doing that, it will push people into other places where there will then be larger congregations. We need to allow people to spread out. I have seen what is being done in Dublin. It is crazy. It is an overreaction. What genius thinks we can save people by closing off a particular place or that that will stop them going to another place? The Government needs to make up its mind. Is this the summer of the outdoors or is Government telling the people that it is going to shut down the outdoors because it wants them to stay indoors? The Government needs to make up its mind. Could it do the opposite and trust the people, be it young people, the middle-aged or the elderly, to do the right thing? I trust the people. I trust the publicans in a way Government did not trust them. They remain closed because Government does not trust them. I believe that publicans are probably the most trustworthy and reliable people. I will explain why. They run public houses in respect of which they have to go before the courts every year for a licence to operate. Not many people in business have to do that every year. Publicans have to be respectable, reliable and dependable families. I use the word “families” because the majority of pubs and hotels are family businesses. They

are highly respected in their communities. They work with the people and they provide a nice, friendly service in a warm atmosphere for them. They should have been allowed to reopen their businesses a long time ago. I will explain why. It would have helped to stop the spread if every place had been open because we might not have had people congregating in one place. There might not have been the parties where the virus did spread, had young people not all been in one place and had they more opportunities to go to different places. However, the Government was hell-bent on going down the road of total control and total manipulation.

The killing thing about it is that the Government wants, on 2 June, to continue to do the same thing and to be given ongoing powers by way of this legislation. I really hope that enough people do not support this Bill. I hope some of the amendments that have been put forward will be supported. From this day forward, the Government should not be given any more continuing powers. I do not agree with the different dates being put forward by different groupings. The day should be now. These powers should stop now and the people should be trusted to do the right thing by themselves, which I know they will do. I could say a lot more but I would like the opportunity to speak on other amendments later.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: First, I want to make it clear that I cannot support this draconian legislation. Where is it going to end? Are we moving towards dictatorship in this country? It was always said that things would change once the most vulnerable were vaccinated. People in their 70s and over got their vaccines first and on it went down through those in their 60s and 50s. Now people in their 40s are being vaccinated. I saw a statistic today showing that chemotherapy appointments are down by 12%. Unfortunately, there are people suffering from cancer who have either been neglected or are not going into hospitals. That is going to be a problem in the next year or maybe sooner. People needing different operations, whether for cataracts or anything else, are having their treatment kicked down the road, all in the name of Covid. There are going to be consequences to that. Mental health issues, especially in young people, will be a major problem.

Looking at the recovery plan yesterday, with the billions that will be thrown at X, Y and Z, I heard it said that the country is going to take off like a Ferrari. One thing I can tell the Minister is that young people around the country will not take off like a Ferrari because they cannot get a driver licence at the moment. They cannot even get a theory test. It probably suits some people in certain offices not to have those theory tests taking place. It is absolutely scandalous. In the agricultural sector, it is not possible at this time to get a youngster who can drive a tractor to bring in silage. There are fathers and mothers on farms around the country who are reliant on youngsters to do a certain amount of tractor work. People cannot avail of the simple process of applying to answer 35 to 40 questions. There was a big hoo-ha about bringing in an online system. After 15 months of talking about it, the system is now parked because the appointments are all booked out. Everybody who got an offer of a theory test appointment, which they were told would be done in the next few days, have since received an email telling them they will not be taken. Does anyone in the Government understand that the likes of agricultural work is summer work? Do they understand that silage is made over the next month from now? It is not done in October in November, when the Government's powers will lapse. In fact, those powers may not even need to be renewed if things keep going the way the Government is proposing.

As Deputy Michael Healy-Rae said, we have had all the talk about opening up the country. I have heard many people criticising others for congregating, to drink or whatever they were at, in different parts of the country. Yet, the Government is telling everyone we will be having an outdoor summer and Tourism Ireland is promoting that. Do people forget that we were all

young once? Would any of us have liked to be locked up when we were young for 15 months, unable to go out to a nightclub or disco or to meet friends? What is going on is not normal. It is fortunate that we are in a situation where, from now on, the Minister should be able to do without these powers. A line was crossed in that regard when it came to churches. Regardless of what religion we are talking about, and I am not referring to any specific faith, we were told in the Dáil that churches and priests would not be affected. On the day members of the Garda went into a church, I believe we crossed a fine line in this country.

The Government needs to rethink and take responsibility for its decisions. We are constantly hearing that such-and-such an expert said this and such-and-such an expert said that. We do not seem to do any reports in this country but we rely on every report from every other country. Everyone else is making the decisions for us and the view is that if it goes wrong, someone else can be blamed and the Government will not have to shoulder any responsibility. Government is for governance and taking decisions. Ministers can listen to everybody and take their view into account but the Government must make the decisions.

Can the Minister do something in the Department of Transport to help young people get their licences? This issue is affecting their mental health. Young people in rural areas want to earn a few pounds by helping their parents or the contractors on farms. We are talking about a recovery and putting loads of people back to work. The first thing people need to be able to do is drive a car or tractor if they are to go to work. It is as simple as that, especially in rural Ireland. There is no bus or any other way of getting to work.

It looks like the Minister is not going to accept any of the amendments that have been put forward, including the ones tabled by my group. He has decided that he will be in charge of everything, lock, stock and barrel. He will write statutory instruments as he feels like it and then toddle along. That is not good for the country. A country should be run as a democracy and all of these decisions should be debated in the Dáil. If something crops up, one, two, three or four weeks after these powers run out, I am damn sure every politician in this House will come in here to deal with it, as they did before. They were always willing, in fairness, to give their tuppence worth and do things democratically. However, this idea of statutory instruments and so on has led to a back-door system. I recall that the habitats directive was signed into law by our now President as a statutory instrument. When such measures are not debated in the Dáil, anything can be done by way of statutory instrument.

This situation has gone too far. If the Minister listens to people, that is what they are saying. I am not talking about people who are against everything. Most people we talk to day by day are saying the time has come and the hour is here that the Government must start letting go of these powers. People do not know whether we are in level 5, level 4 or level 3 at the moment. One thing and another is opening next week and the hairdressers are already open. Have we moved away from the levels altogether and on to a different system? I ask the Minister to rethink where we are going in this. The ordinary Joe Soap speaks a lot of common sense, if one listens to what he is saying.

I have had a large number of telephone calls today from youngsters who are desperate to earn a few pounds. They will not get the PUP because they were not working before Covid. They are trying to get a few quid together. There is a major problem for farming contractors around the country, who are left with machines standing idle because of a lack of people to work them. Unless it tackles these issues and makes sure they are sorted out, all we are getting from the Government is bluster. It took five or six months of head scratching before an online driver

theory test was brought in and, within two days, it was all over, with appointments booked out until 2022 or 2023. Will the Government do something that works and will help people, instead of bringing in more draconian powers? When is this craic of bringing in more and more powers going to end? This country is not a dictatorship and it is not run by communists. We believe in democracy and the Government working with people. I ask the Minister to rethink the whole Bill.

Fortunately, we are getting to where we want to be. As more opens, the country is coming back. I spoke to a couple today. Yes, the EWSS was and is important, but why did the Government not do something constructive and go to a bank and tell it not to refuse people on the EWSS or their employers their mortgages? I know several people who have been approved for a mortgage but who, because they are on the EWSS, will not get the mortgage now. Their lives are on hold. They do not know where they are going. They have been in that position for a year or 15, 16 or 17 months. Just for good measure, while that has gone on, their costs have gone up by probably €40,000 each for the same house, so there is more money to borrow and maybe they will have to go back to the bank to be refused for the lot.

For God's sake, we need to listen to the people on the ground. They will learn us more than anyone what we need to do. No one is reckless. I am not talking about recklessness. I am talking about people who have common sense and who have adhered to a lot of stuff over the past 15 months.

Think of our youth as well. It is not natural for youngsters of 16, 17 and 18 to be in under your feet of a Saturday night. You are gone early every Saturday night or Sunday night when you are young, wild and free. We have to start helping out those people. If we do not, there will be a revolt against us.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Seven Deputies are indicating to speak separately from the proposers of the amendment. I will leave it up to the Deputies. The next speaker is Deputy Mattie McGrath. If each speaker takes the same amount of time other speakers have taken, other Deputies will not be reached.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I am truly shocked that the Minister persists with these draconian measures. He sees the rising opposition, thankfully in the House as well. People have woken up to see what is going on: the power grab. The Government has consistently and deliberately stoked fear over the coronavirus while behaving like an authoritarian regime, relying on police state tactics. The Government's handling of Covid has resulted in the State's exercising coercive powers over its citizens on a scale never previously attempted. The ease with which people could be terrorised into surrendering basic freedoms which are fundamental to our existence is truly shocking. Now the Government wants to hold on to these powers for potentially up to another eight months.

"Liberty" is a word much hawked around in recent years by both bullies and liberals, but personal liberty is a fundamental right. We agree to let governments walk over this threshold as a temporary measure - a wartime measure, really. Once the war is over, let us make sure this is removed. However, the Government does not want to remove it. Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. This power has gone to the Minister's head. The Bill and the associated powers it allows for clearly indicate how the Government values our hard-won democracy, especially on this 100th anniversary of our freedom fighters and the people who paid the ultimate sacrifice. The extension of these powers does nothing to enhance our democracy.

Rather, they are an attack on our democratic values and freedoms. Power, as I said, is addictive.

What if one of the legacies of this pandemic turns out to be profound economic hardship, sparking unease? Other Deputies have referred to the fact that most of the fines have been given out in poorer areas. Might future politicians be tempted to use similar powers? I think they will be. The Government has the patent designed now and it is a very dangerous patent. In a crisis of this kind, where so much is unknown, you may well need a strong government. We all backed the Minister at the start. He was in opposition at that time. We were all frightened, but when we saw the reality and woke up to what was really going on we said "No". The Minister and the Taoiseach have not briefed the oppositional leaders since last October. The Government got so punch-drunk with its powers it thought it would just walk in here with a nod and a wink and be on its way. It has not had respect for the Opposition leaders or any other Members of this House to engage with or talk to them.

As I said, we have supported drastic action to prevent our health service from being overrun, but it has been overrun for nearly 20 years and there was not a word about it. I salute the front-line workers and what they have tried to do in the past 15 months. I think we will look back on this period as an inspiring time when citizens made huge sacrifices for one another as well as a time which saw the supposedly democratic Government set some worrying precedents. There has been a serious impact on health services, with a lack of diagnoses or delayed diagnoses for cancer patients, mental ill health and many other areas. The figures are there but the Government will not release them.

By using propaganda, the Government has to some extent been able to create its own public opinion - that is a fact, and it is a shocking way to treat people - with fear being deliberately stoked up by the Government, national broadcasters and whoever else joined the gang. The public has not even begun to understand the seriousness of what the Government has done but they are all educated and will make up their own minds. The Government has discovered the power of public fear and we have let it get away with it.

Since the onset of Covid, we have seen a loss of effective parliamentary scrutiny of emergency Covid powers as many are granted via stroke-of-the-pen statutory instrument. The Minister stood up here and told us he had read the regulations the previous night and told us point-blank that no priest or cleric of any order could be arrested, let alone fined or imprisoned. The Government's barristers and legal team told the courts below that was the position. We saw Fr. P.J. Hughes, a brave man, have to deal with six gardaí in his church on Sunday morning. Has the Minister any respect for the House that he will not correct the record and say he was wrong on that? He is not wrong on anything. He is infallible. The Pope was only trotting after him.

Cumulatively, these emergency measures are the most significant interference with personal freedoms since the independence of this country. I believe that 100%. As I said, we will look back on the measures taken to contain the pandemic as a monument of collective hysteria and Government stupidity. Governments in Ireland hold power on the sufferance of the elected Chamber of the Legislature. Without that we are not a democracy. The present Government has given the State the authority in the past 14 months to enforce public measures. I could read them out.

I understand that many other Deputies want to talk, but this is a step way too far. We were supposed to come back to the House on 9 June to debate a sunset clause. That is what we expected. Instead we have four pieces of legislation in this kind of omnibus Bill just fired together

with no accountability, no pre-legislative scrutiny and, above all, no debate here. The Minister has come here just to guillotine the debate, and that is what he has done, with all Stages to be taken in two and a half hours, a vote and off you go. The Government needs a rain check.

I am alarmed this evening. I have no truck with any protester anywhere who is aggressive or violent or who causes damage, intimidation or fear. In fairness to the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, she is getting unduly harassed over a decision I reject totally, namely, the closure of a hospital in Carrick-on-Suir, but there is no place for an elected person to be intimidated. However, when I heard one Sinn Féin Deputy say this evening that the protests were dangerous, I was shocked. Sinn Féin has really gone full circle now and we are in a strange place when we think of recent history, with the water protests and everything else.

The Minister will not take any amendment, it is quite clear. I thank Brian Ó Domhnaill and our team for putting forward our amendments. We have many tabled. They will not even be debated or reached. By condensing the whole debate into two and a half hours, it was the Government's abject desire to crush democracy and stymie any debate. The Minister would not answer the question when he was asked whether he would take any amendment. He has no notion of taking any of the amendments. This power, as I said, has become a little dangerous to him and his accountability to us or to this House. He will not meet us. We fully oppose the Bill. We will call votes on any amendments and a vote at the end. I suppose it will be passed, but it is interesting to see backbenchers say one thing to their people and come in here and do the opposite. The genie is out of the bottle. The people have found out the trickery that is going on and the damage to our democratic society.

I will not say much more, a Leas-Cheann Comhairle, because I get no answers. I have got no answers to any questions. I have stood here week in and week out asking questions. I was never afforded the dignity of one written answer from the Minister. He thinks he is above the people of this House and the people of the country with his nice, plush area in Greystones and his nice big fence around it to keep him safe. It is shocking.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We will avoid personal comments.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: It is shocking, though. I have asked the Leas-Cheann Comhairle, the Ceann Comhairle, the Whip, Deputy Chambers, and everybody else for answers, which we are entitled to get. We cannot get them. That is a dangerous place to go in a democracy. I am fully opposed to this. I will not take any more time from anybody else.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: I will do my best to get to the points fast.

Today, we see the Government guillotining this Bill. The act of guillotining a Bill is in itself a phenomenally undemocratic act. It cuts out the Opposition's ability to push and challenge the Government to make sure that the laws it is introducing are actually correct. It is a guarantee that the law will not be tested properly before it is implemented. Accordingly, it is very likely the law will be significantly poorer as a result.

This guillotining is being done by one of the most undemocratic Governments that I have seen in the history of the State. On most occasions throughout the past 15 months, the Government has bypassed the Opposition and Oireachtas. It has treated Opposition Members simply like a decoration. It is an incredible thing that has happened over the past while.

All of this is facilitated by legislation which, in itself, is grossly undemocratic. It radically

gives undemocratic, and at times unconstitutional, powers to the Government. If one has a Government unchecked, naturally it will make mistakes and push its power to the limit. Over the past several months, we have seen incredible things happen. There was a Donegal helpline to encourage people to tell on each other. We had pregnant mothers having to watch their partners in hospital car parks because they were not allowed in with them. We had gardaí going into churches. We had Protestant pastors arrested and families sent away from funerals by priests from the door of a church with family members lying in coffins inside. When students gathered in Galway, the Fianna Fáil Senator in the area stated the Army needed to be brought in.

The Government has closed down practically every public venue that exists in the country. It then tells young people it will be an outside summer. When young people gathered in several streets recently, the political establishment hammered down on them at an unmerciful rate. It is an incredible situation. The Government, by its actions, created the situation in South William Street last week. If people had been allowed gather in outdoor settings in pubs and restaurants, then this would not have happened. The Government is now going a step further on this occasion. There are photographs on social media of the bandstand in St. Stephen's Green being fenced off. I am hearing that in other parts of the country, the Government is also fencing off the public realm from young people. Only 0.1% of the transmission of this illness happens outside, yet now the Government is actively fencing off the outside from people.

These restrictions do not delete human activity but simply displace it. If we reduce the spaces in which human activity can exist, then people will be corralled in bigger numbers. The whole action is self-defeating in the long run. The Taoiseach is reported as saying the July re-opening might be reviewed. He said if people do not follow the rules, he is going to catch them. This is an unbelievable response from the Taoiseach, basically saying that if they are not good children, he will punish them with further restrictions in the future.

One issue which has frustrated me over the last while is that there is a virulent variant which I call the Dáil variant. It is a serious and deadly threat to common sense. All the things that we have seen in the past while have shown that common sense has been heavily attacked by this particular variant. The sad point is that the Opposition is not immune to this variant. In fact, most of the Opposition want to go further than the Government, even up to a number of weeks ago. Even Sinn Féin was sitting on the fence when it abstained in the Seanad on this Bill and flip-flopped on a "No" vote here today. Opposition needs to hold the Government to account. The Government will not be able to do its job properly unless it is pushed to the limit by the Opposition. The Opposition has not done its job in this State over the past while.

We are in a situation today where there are 93 people with Covid in hospitals. All of these people could fit into Navan hospital with 20 beds left over. Thankfully, the number is extremely low. It amazes me how insular this country still is. We are so inward looking. I talk to people internationally and they still cannot believe the pubs and restaurants are closed in this country. Denmark and Finland had similar levels of Covid morbidity and mortality to this country. Denmark opened its pubs and restaurants in mid-April while Finland opened up on 12 May. However, the Government is not considering this for a number of months. We have the illogical situation that hotels can open for indoor dining and drinking from today. That, however, is not going to happen for a number of weeks in the rest of the hospitality industry.

Aontú is calling for the Government to open up all hospitality under the same science and the same regulations. The Tánaiste was on the radio earlier this week saying it is not a scientific reason that they are not opening up together. He said it was a practical reason. It is an abso-

lutely incredible situation. The Government needs to get practical. If the Government needs particular restrictions in the future, it can come knocking on the door of the elected representatives of the people of Ireland to ask us for those. If we consider it logical at that point in time, due to the evidence on hand, that is when the decision will be made.

Writing the Government a blank cheque in this situation is absolutely illogical. It has already spent those given to it in a manner which is completely over the top, unfair and undemocratic. I urge all Opposition Members not just to vote against the Government amendment but to vote against any extension of these restrictions. I heard Opposition leaders today say that the time has passed for these restrictions. Their amendments, however, seek to continue those restrictions for another six weeks potentially. They spoke about not giving the Government a blank cheque for another six months but are happy to write one until the end of July or September or whatever arbitrary date has been chosen. The truth of the matter is we need to make sure that we protect the most vulnerable, that we roll out vaccines to those who need them and that we make sure we socially distance and protect people. We need, however, to start to live again.

Deputy Michael Collins: I will be brief. I will not be supporting the extension of these powers. The Minister will say he expected that anyway. The biggest reason is because hundreds of my constituents have contacted me by email and in writing. I said last week I pity my postman because my post box is full every week back in Lowertown, Schull. They have also been ringing the office. I have not met anyone yet who has asked me to support this legislation. That is an incredible situation. They have outlined many reasons as to why they do not want these powers to be extended.

They have given and done their best. There is always a rogue person but the majority of people have worked hard to work within the rules and safe guidelines. People need to be praised and given an opportunity to reap some reward for that careful behaviour. They are willing to do that.

I thank Máirín McGrath and Brian Ó Domhnaill who put together our amendments but we will not get an opportunity to discuss them. We have given ourselves very little time here for discussion of the matter. These amendments are genuine, progressive and honest. We should have got enough time to debate them but we seem to be rushing through this serious legislation.

I am aware of the seriousness of the pandemic and what it has done. Our energies now need to be used on progressing a safe reopening. We do not want to be in a situation where, at weekends, we push young people into large gatherings in small areas instead of considering opening things up. People need to get out to enjoy themselves in a safe manner. The owners of public houses and restaurants are very annoyed and frustrated as they do not know whether their businesses will survive. They have mortgages and so on. I worry about many of these businesses given the regulations that have been put to them, even before they reopen, requiring them to keep a distance of 1 m between customers who can only stay for a certain time. It is impossible to staff that type of a system. Businesses would need to double their staff. Genuine customers will be kept more than 1 m apart and could be told to leave the premises where they may be eating or having a drink. That is very unfair and I will not support it.

It will also be difficult for An Garda Síochána to administer these extended powers if they are used again. The Garda in west Cork worked hard during the pandemic. Gardaí were always present in Ballinascorthy, Drimoleague and Innishannon. They were very fair in most cases and it was difficult for them to figure out what was and was not genuine. People who were travel-

ling were held up and had to answer questions, which many felt was unfair. In one rare case, in Ballinascorthy, a person buying farm machinery ended up being fined, which was totally wrong. People interpret the law differently. Farming was meant to be a genuine, allowable activity.

I saw so much hardship with funerals and weddings. Many people are still pinning their hopes on being allowed to have more than 50 people at a wedding held in an open setting. A wedding is a once-in-a-lifetime event and they want to have a little enjoyment and at least have all their family attend, even if they cannot invite neighbours and friends.

Funerals have been hugely stressful for everybody. People were streaming on to roadways to show respect because Irish people have always been great at showing respect for their neighbours at funerals. It is a sad state of affairs when people, including family members, cannot attend funerals or get into a church when it is pouring rain outside.

These measures have left a great deal of hurt, which will not go away or be forgotten for a long time. Some people love to go to Mass. Plenty of churches in west Cork can hold 500 people but their doors are shut. People are not allowed to attend a prayer service. Priests and pastors were arrested because they wanted to serve their people, as they have always done. We have not seen scenes like this since we were under British rule many decades ago. It is not right that people were literally not allowed to pray. This was a hurtful time for many and made them feel very lonely and isolated. It caused an increase in mental health problems among the 99% of people who wanted to attend church to socialise in a nice and careful way.

The Government should be concentrating its efforts on addressing standards in hospitals, community hospitals and nursing homes. Unfortunately, there were many cases where Health Information and Quality Authority, HIQA, standards were not met for people. In Clonakilty Community Hospital staff could not have done more but the bottom line is the hospital was not up to standard, as various reports have repeatedly stated. Clonakilty has a large hinterland area. I pay tribute to the staff of the hospital and extend my deepest condolences to those who lost family members during the pandemic in that type of a setting. That was so unfair and could have been avoided. We seem to be concentrating our efforts on extending powers rather than focusing on ensuring the rule or guideline that we achieve an 80% single-bed occupancy rate is observed. It is not being met in some of the community hospitals under the control of the HSE. That is where we should be concentrating our efforts. It is the kind of conversation we should be having today, rather than giving the Minister a blank cheque to impose further restrictions.

I am very disappointed that we cannot discuss the amendments. Other Members want to contribute. I will not support this Bill and the Rural Independent Group will press for a vote. There are many Government backbenchers here. I listening to them every day on the radio and I am somewhat annoyed with the media because these Deputies are never questioned. They come in here today to vote for this Bill but they are out there on the radio saying they are against it. That is incredible. A person who votes for something supports it. We need a system where they can understand that because they do not seem to understand it. They go on radio and television condemning these measures and then come in here and vote for them. It is a strange way to be and it seems to be the case with every other issue as well. We are at a new juncture in Irish politics where politicians say one thing on their local radio station or in a local newspaper and then come in here and do another thing. I cannot understand for the life of me what is going on.

Deputy Thomas Pringle: I was wondering if we would have an opportunity to speak on this matter. I want to mark my opposition to what the Government is doing in its proposals. My

reasons for doing so differ from those that other Members have set out. The Government has been too quick to reopen. It is doing so to get publicity and a pat on the back. We should have waited for another month or so before reopening.

We have to put measures in place that will make the Government row back a bit and require it to consult the Dáil, as it should. That is why I am supporting these amendments and others that we will propose later to require the Government to submit reports on what it will do before extending any of these measures. The whole of last year was lost because the Government did not learn or put anything in place on this issue. We have spent a whole year with these measures in place, which is just wrong. I am not go on any longer because everybody else went on for too long and other Deputies are waiting to make their contribution. I oppose the Bill.

Deputy Joan Collins: How much time is left?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: There are 15 minutes left in total.

Deputy Joan Collins: I will be brief unlike some of my colleagues. I was going to make a point about why we have arrived at this point and why I supported the emergency draconian legislation in March and October 2020. The key point is that we did not have vaccines then. We now have them and we know they are working. The fact that there are only 93 people in hospitals with Covid is a vindication of that and of NPHET. The Government is saying the vaccines are working, which is good.

Most of those aged in their 60s have only received one dose of the vaccine. I urge the Minister to clarify if they will have a second dose in their arms sooner than the 12-week interval. That should be done where people are vulnerable. In Britain, the second dose has been brought forward from 12 to eight weeks as a precautionary measure. We have been told to be very cautious with the Delta or Indian variant. Why has the Government not been proactive in doing that?

Many people in the very high-risk category have only had one dose of the AstraZeneca vaccine and must also wait for 12 weeks for the second dose. I know 63-year-olds who received the first dose a month ago and will not be fully vaccinated until July. The Minister has to be proactive and act with urgency on this.

We have reached the stage where the Government is opening up and cutting back on payments. It will also review the mandatory hotel quarantine in July and travel will potentially open up on 19 July. We have told people they can have an outdoor summer. The Government's responsibility is to provide the facilities to allow people to have an outdoor summer.

9 o'clock

There is no point telling young people or anyone else that they should have an outdoor summer and then closing areas and not providing public toilets, bins or places where people can congregate safely. That is the Government's responsibility and it cannot keep pointing the finger at people. It must be proactive, put the money in and direct the local authorities to provide the facilities. Councillors have raised this at local authority meetings but we hear from the local authorities that if these facilities are provided, it will lead to more people wanting to come out. We have to manage this and that is the responsibility of the Government.

I will support the three amendments in this grouping.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: In the house where I was brought up in Kilgarvan, I was taught that when a person gave their word on something, they stood by it. Regardless of whatever else you had in life, if you did not have your word you had nothing. The Minister and the Government told us when they extended these powers the previous time that they would not look to extend them further. When they got these draconian, extreme, exceptional powers, it was for an exceptional reason at the time, but there is not an exceptional reason now because we have the vaccine and the vaccine is dealing with the matter. To give credit where it is due, the Government is rolling out the vaccine, but it does not have the science or, at least, has given no concrete reason the powers should be extended or that it should be given control to continue to oppress the people and lock them down.

This lockdown has caused severe stress to people with cancer because their treatment has been delayed. This is causing mental illness and isolation. People are gone mad and it has hurt young people and tied them down. It has also affected elderly people, who do not have time on their side. They missed visits from their daughters and sons throughout the lockdowns. They did not see their grandchildren in all that time. One month or one year to a man or woman of 80 years of age is an awful long time when they consider that the clock is against them and they do not have much time left.

Where was the science for keeping people out of churches, as was mentioned, and preventing them from going in when the funeral of their grandmother, father or mother was being held in the church because only ten people were allowed in? In the cathedral in Killarney or the church in Castleisland, the ceilings are four storeys high, there is plenty of space and the doors can be opened. It is as if the Government is against religion. I believe that many members of the Government are against religion of all creeds and description. They think they are gods themselves and they do not believe in any other god.

I cannot see the reason for this extension or for giving the Government control and power to lock down the people any further. Some people could not travel to their local town because it is outside their county. Take the people of Duagh or Moyvane, who could not go to Abbeyfeale. They had to go farther away, to Castleisland or Tralee, because they could not go beyond their county boundary. Those rules did not make sense. What is the Government doing asking Deputies to vote for this again? It is absolutely unfair on people in rural Ireland.

The Government has stated that people can go into an hotel and have a meal and a drink but they cannot go into the restaurant or pub next door. We were told we would have an outdoor summer, and then when the young congregate after their year in college or whatever, having been told to go out, now they are criticised and castigated. Dr. Tony Holohan said he was shocked and the Taoiseach said he was amazed, and now we are hearing that open spaces are going to be cordoned off and the people are going to be blocked out of them. Dr. Holohan will draw me and the people, even though they are quiet people, to outside the doors of the convention centre.

I appeal to the Government to listen to Deputies who deal with the people. Like other Deputies, I have received hundreds of emails and phone calls asking me not to vote to extend the Government's powers to lock down the country for another three months. After that, they might be extended again to February. It could be a further six or seven months, therefore, of the Government wanting to keep control. The Minister should direct his efforts to the people on the waiting lists for cancer treatment, and the Government at large should do something about the young people who want to get on the road, get their provisional licences or be allowed to drive

a tractor to help their fathers and mothers in rural Kerry. It should do something about that and look after the young people because it is not doing that. It just wants to keep control and keep a rein on the young and the elderly. It has frightened the country and many people are in trouble with their mental health because they have been isolated for so long.

It could take an awful long time to get the country back to where it was, but if the Government extends the powers further and keeps the people under lockdown for another six or seven months, the country may never recover. I ask the Government to be sensible and to have some common sense because nobody can tell me how it makes sense, because of science or anything else, to tell people they can have a pint and a meal in an hotel but they cannot do so in a pub or a restaurant. What is wrong with the Government? Whom does it think it is coddling or trying to cod? All of us will have to face people at their doors at the next election, but I would not face them if I was going on with the carry-on the Government is going on with.

I apologise for going on but I am very cross. I will not support any further lockdown, but if the need arises, the Government can come back to the House any day and we will support it, even though I did not support the Bill's passage on Second Stage. Even if it is during our summer holidays, I will not mind coming back to the House. I am here to represent the people who elected me and those who did not vote for me. The doors will not be locked. We can come back here any time and debate the matter further if there is a need for a lockdown, but right now there is not and we have vaccines to deal with the virus. The Government is wrong, wrong, wrong, and it is worse it is getting.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: I agree with all the previous speakers. I, too, will not vote with the Government on this grouping of amendments. If the Minister looks up at the convention centre stage, he will see the Irish flag. More than 100 years ago, people in Ireland fought for their freedom. The number of emails, phone calls and letters we have received about this issue is unbelievable. As my colleagues said, if there are exceptional circumstances, this can be revisited.

I was driving through Dublin last night and I passed a canal where people were sitting. While I was waiting at the traffic lights, people walked in front of my car, went behind a dustbin and urinated on the side of somebody's house. That was all because the Government closed the facilities. I have seen people who have been locked up for the last two years nearly. Enough is enough. One must realise that people are responsible.

Regarding young people, I stood in this House a number of weeks ago when the Minister of State turned to us and said that a theory test was not essential. We have heard from people working on the harvest that their children could not help them at home to bring in the silage or to do other such farming necessities. However, the Minister of State said that a theory test was not essential. This goes back to what I have been saying, the Cabinet is too city based. Cabinet members are too used to having transport available to them when they walk outside their front door. I have invited Deputy Eamon Ryan to Limerick for one week. I can give him a place to stay and a bicycle. I will tell him to do his work from there and we will see whether he has an Internet connection. He can do his shopping. He can do my daily work in the way he wants to live, with the wolves running around the countryside. These are the thoughts he has. I have asked him, but he has not taken up my offer yet. I spoke to Deputy Leddin today and asked him to come out of Limerick city and go out to the countryside. I can give him the same things as the Minister and let them off. They have no concept of what it is like to live in a rural area.

One thing we have in rural areas is social distancing. We can see how responsible and respectful the people in the areas around our towns and villages are, but now they need to get out because of their mental health. We have heard about the churches. All of us here are sitting 2 m. apart and yet there are churches in Ireland bigger than this Chamber. The Government closed all the churches. My grandchild had to wait 11 months until he could be christened. It took 11 months. If it took any longer, he would have been able to walk up the church aisle and probably say the blessing himself. This is what we are coming to. There are people who cannot get out of their houses to go to mass because the Government is stopping them. In rural areas, one would be lucky to even have 50 people going to mass, but at least give them the choice. We are able to congregate here.

The media is not portraying anything outside of Dublin. Has the Government bought the media? Is it that media outlets do not want Covid-19 to go away because they will have nothing else to report on? I grew up with RTÉ in my house, Gay Byrne, Mike Murphy and Gerry Ryan, all of them.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I am afraid it falls to me to bring down the guillotine. I am sorry.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: I will finish with that. Common sense must prevail.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The time permitted for this debate having expired, I am required to put the following question in accordance with an Order of the Dáil of 1 June: "That the amendments set down by the Minister for Health, and not disposed of, are hereby made to the Bill; in respect of each of the sections undisposed of, that the section or, as appropriate, the section, as amended, is hereby agreed to in committee; the Preamble and the Title are hereby agreed to in committee; the Bill, as amended, is accordingly reported to the House; Fourth Stage is hereby completed; and the Bill is hereby passed."

Question put:

<i>The Dáil divided: Tá, 73; Níl, 68; Staon, 0.</i>		
<i>Tá</i>	<i>Níl</i>	<i>Staon</i>
<i>Brophy, Colm.</i>	<i>Barry, Mick.</i>	
<i>Browne, James.</i>	<i>Berry, Cathal.</i>	
<i>Bruton, Richard.</i>	<i>Boyd Barrett, Richard.</i>	
<i>Burke, Colm.</i>	<i>Brady, John.</i>	
<i>Burke, Peter.</i>	<i>Browne, Martin.</i>	
<i>Butler, Mary.</i>	<i>Buckley, Pat.</i>	
<i>Byrne, Thomas.</i>	<i>Canney, Seán.</i>	
<i>Cahill, Jackie.</i>	<i>Carthy, Matt.</i>	
<i>Calleary, Dara.</i>	<i>Clarke, Sorca.</i>	
<i>Cannon, Ciarán.</i>	<i>Collins, Joan.</i>	
<i>Carey, Joe.</i>	<i>Collins, Michael.</i>	
<i>Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.</i>	<i>Conway-Walsh, Rose.</i>	
<i>Chambers, Jack.</i>	<i>Cronin, Réada.</i>	
<i>Collins, Niall.</i>	<i>Crowe, Seán.</i>	
<i>Costello, Patrick.</i>	<i>Cullinane, David.</i>	

<i>Crowe, Cathal.</i>	<i>Daly, Pa.</i>	
<i>Devlin, Cormac.</i>	<i>Doherty, Pearse.</i>	
<i>Dillon, Alan.</i>	<i>Donnelly, Paul.</i>	
<i>Donnelly, Stephen.</i>	<i>Ellis, Dessie.</i>	
<i>Donohoe, Paschal.</i>	<i>Fitzmaurice, Michael.</i>	
<i>Duffy, Francis Noel.</i>	<i>Fitzpatrick, Peter.</i>	
<i>Durkan, Bernard J.</i>	<i>Funchion, Kathleen.</i>	
<i>Farrell, Alan.</i>	<i>Gannon, Gary.</i>	
<i>Feighan, Frankie.</i>	<i>Gould, Thomas.</i>	
<i>Flaherty, Joe.</i>	<i>Grealish, Noel.</i>	
<i>Flanagan, Charles.</i>	<i>Guirke, Johnny.</i>	
<i>Fleming, Sean.</i>	<i>Harkin, Marian.</i>	
<i>Foley, Norma.</i>	<i>Healy-Rae, Danny.</i>	
<i>Griffin, Brendan.</i>	<i>Healy-Rae, Michael.</i>	
<i>Harris, Simon.</i>	<i>Howlin, Brendan.</i>	
<i>Haughey, Seán.</i>	<i>Kelly, Alan.</i>	
<i>Heydon, Martin.</i>	<i>Kenny, Gino.</i>	
<i>Higgins, Emer.</i>	<i>Kenny, Martin.</i>	
<i>Hourigan, Neasa.</i>	<i>Lowry, Michael.</i>	
<i>Humphreys, Heather.</i>	<i>Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.</i>	
<i>Kehoe, Paul.</i>	<i>McGrath, Mattie.</i>	
<i>Lahart, John.</i>	<i>McNamara, Michael.</i>	
<i>Lawless, James.</i>	<i>Mitchell, Denise.</i>	
<i>Leddin, Brian.</i>	<i>Munster, Imelda.</i>	
<i>MacSharry, Marc.</i>	<i>Murphy, Catherine.</i>	
<i>Madigan, Josepha.</i>	<i>Murphy, Paul.</i>	
<i>Martin, Catherine.</i>	<i>Murphy, Verona.</i>	
<i>Matthews, Steven.</i>	<i>Mythen, Johnny.</i>	
<i>McAuliffe, Paul.</i>	<i>Nash, Ged.</i>	
<i>McConalogue, Charlie.</i>	<i>Naughten, Denis.</i>	
<i>McGrath, Michael.</i>	<i>Nolan, Carol.</i>	
<i>Moynihan, Aindrias.</i>	<i>O'Callaghan, Cian.</i>	
<i>Moynihan, Michael.</i>	<i>O'Donoghue, Richard.</i>	
<i>Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.</i>	<i>O'Reilly, Louise.</i>	
<i>Naughton, Hildegard.</i>	<i>O'Rourke, Darren.</i>	
<i>Noonan, Malcolm.</i>	<i>Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.</i>	
<i>O'Brien, Darragh.</i>	<i>Ó Murchú, Ruairí.</i>	
<i>O'Brien, Joe.</i>	<i>Ó Ríordáin, Aodhán.</i>	
<i>O'Callaghan, Jim.</i>	<i>Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.</i>	
<i>O'Connor, James.</i>	<i>Pringle, Thomas.</i>	
<i>O'Dea, Willie.</i>	<i>Quinlivan, Maurice.</i>	
<i>O'Donnell, Kieran.</i>	<i>Ryan, Patricia.</i>	

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<i>O'Donovan, Patrick.</i>	<i>Shanahan, Matt.</i>	
<i>O'Dowd, Fergus.</i>	<i>Sherlock, Sean.</i>	
<i>O'Gorman, Roderic.</i>	<i>Shortall, Róisín.</i>	
<i>O'Sullivan, Christopher.</i>	<i>Smith, Bríd.</i>	
<i>O'Sullivan, Pádraig.</i>	<i>Smith, Duncan.</i>	
<i>Ó Cathasaigh, Marc.</i>	<i>Stanley, Brian.</i>	
<i>Ó Cuív, Éamon.</i>	<i>Tóibín, Peadar.</i>	
<i>Rabbitte, Anne.</i>	<i>Tully, Pauline.</i>	
<i>Richmond, Neale.</i>	<i>Ward, Mark.</i>	
<i>Ring, Michael.</i>	<i>Whitmore, Jennifer.</i>	
<i>Ryan, Eamon.</i>	<i>Wynne, Violet-Anne.</i>	
<i>Smith, Brendan.</i>		
<i>Smyth, Niamh.</i>		
<i>Stanton, David.</i>		
<i>Troy, Robert.</i>		
<i>Varadkar, Leo.</i>		

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Brendan Griffin and Jack Chambers; Níl, Deputies David Cullinane and Mattie McGrath.

Deputy Holly Cairns did not vote in this division due to an agreed pairing arrangement with Minister Helen McEntee for the duration of the Minister's maternity leave.

Question declared carried.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Bill, which is considered to be a Dáil Bill under Article 20.2.2° of the Constitution, will be sent to the Seanad.

Ministerial Rota for Parliamentary Questions: Motion

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

That, notwithstanding anything in the Order of the Dáil of 30th July, 2020, setting out the rota in which Questions to members of the Government are to be asked, Questions for oral answer, following those next set down to the Minister for Justice, shall be set down to Ministers in the following temporary sequence:

Minister for Finance

Minister for Transport

whereupon the sequence established by the Order of 30th July, 2020, shall continue with Questions to the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform.

Question put and agreed to.

Health (Amendment) Act 2021: Motion (Resumed)

Debate resumed on the following motion:

That Dáil Éireann resolves that the relevant period, within the meaning of section 9 of the Health (Amendment) Act 2021 (No. 1 of 2021), shall stand extended for the period beginning on the 8th day of June, 2021 and ending on the 31st day of July, 2021.

-(Minister for Health)

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I must now deal with a postponed division relating to the motion regarding section 9 of the Health (Amendment) Act 2021. On Thursday, 27 May 2021, on the question, “That the motion be agreed to”, a division was claimed and in accordance with Standing Order 80(2), that division must be taken now.

Question put:

<i>The Dáil divided: Tá, 90; Níl, 50; Staon, 0.</i>		
<i>Tá</i>	<i>Níl</i>	<i>Staon</i>
<i>Berry, Cathal.</i>	<i>Barry, Mick.</i>	
<i>Brophy, Colm.</i>	<i>Boyd Barrett, Richard.</i>	
<i>Browne, James.</i>	<i>Brady, John.</i>	
<i>Bruton, Richard.</i>	<i>Browne, Martin.</i>	
<i>Burke, Colm.</i>	<i>Buckley, Pat.</i>	
<i>Burke, Peter.</i>	<i>Canney, Seán.</i>	
<i>Butler, Mary.</i>	<i>Carthy, Matt.</i>	
<i>Byrne, Thomas.</i>	<i>Clarke, Sorca.</i>	
<i>Cahill, Jackie.</i>	<i>Collins, Michael.</i>	
<i>Calleary, Dara.</i>	<i>Conway-Walsh, Rose.</i>	
<i>Cannon, Ciarán.</i>	<i>Cronin, Réada.</i>	
<i>Carey, Joe.</i>	<i>Crowe, Seán.</i>	
<i>Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.</i>	<i>Cullinane, David.</i>	
<i>Chambers, Jack.</i>	<i>Daly, Pa.</i>	
<i>Collins, Niall.</i>	<i>Doherty, Pearse.</i>	
<i>Costello, Patrick.</i>	<i>Donnelly, Paul.</i>	
<i>Crowe, Cathal.</i>	<i>Ellis, Dessie.</i>	
<i>Devlin, Cormac.</i>	<i>Fitzmaurice, Michael.</i>	
<i>Dillon, Alan.</i>	<i>Funchion, Kathleen.</i>	
<i>Donnelly, Stephen.</i>	<i>Gould, Thomas.</i>	
<i>Donohoe, Paschal.</i>	<i>Grealish, Noel.</i>	
<i>Duffy, Francis Noel.</i>	<i>Guirke, Johnny.</i>	

<i>Durkan, Bernard J.</i>	<i>Healy-Rae, Danny.</i>	
<i>Farrell, Alan.</i>	<i>Healy-Rae, Michael.</i>	
<i>Feighan, Frankie.</i>	<i>Kenny, Gino.</i>	
<i>Fitzpatrick, Peter.</i>	<i>Kenny, Martin.</i>	
<i>Flaherty, Joe.</i>	<i>Lowry, Michael.</i>	
<i>Flanagan, Charles.</i>	<i>Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.</i>	
<i>Fleming, Sean.</i>	<i>McGrath, Mattie.</i>	
<i>Foley, Norma.</i>	<i>McNamara, Michael.</i>	
<i>Gannon, Gary.</i>	<i>Mitchell, Denise.</i>	
<i>Griffin, Brendan.</i>	<i>Munster, Imelda.</i>	
<i>Harkin, Marian.</i>	<i>Murphy, Paul.</i>	
<i>Harris, Simon.</i>	<i>Mythen, Johnny.</i>	
<i>Haughey, Seán.</i>	<i>Nolan, Carol.</i>	
<i>Heydon, Martin.</i>	<i>O'Donoghue, Richard.</i>	
<i>Higgins, Emer.</i>	<i>O'Reilly, Louise.</i>	
<i>Hourigan, Neasa.</i>	<i>O'Rourke, Darren.</i>	
<i>Howlin, Brendan.</i>	<i>Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.</i>	
<i>Humphreys, Heather.</i>	<i>Ó Murchú, Ruairí.</i>	
<i>Kehoe, Paul.</i>	<i>Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.</i>	
<i>Kelly, Alan.</i>	<i>Pringle, Thomas.</i>	
<i>Lahart, John.</i>	<i>Quinlivan, Maurice.</i>	
<i>Lawless, James.</i>	<i>Ryan, Patricia.</i>	
<i>Leddin, Brian.</i>	<i>Smith, Bríd.</i>	
<i>MacSharry, Marc.</i>	<i>Stanley, Brian.</i>	
<i>Madigan, Josepha.</i>	<i>Tóibín, Peadar.</i>	
<i>Martin, Catherine.</i>	<i>Tully, Pauline.</i>	
<i>Matthews, Steven.</i>	<i>Ward, Mark.</i>	
<i>McAuliffe, Paul.</i>	<i>Wynne, Violet-Anne.</i>	
<i>McConalogue, Charlie.</i>		
<i>McGrath, Michael.</i>		
<i>Moynihan, Aindrias.</i>		
<i>Moynihan, Michael.</i>		
<i>Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.</i>		
<i>Murphy, Catherine.</i>		
<i>Murphy, Verona.</i>		
<i>Nash, Ged.</i>		
<i>Naughten, Denis.</i>		
<i>Naughton, Hildegard.</i>		
<i>Noonan, Malcolm.</i>		
<i>O'Brien, Darragh.</i>		
<i>O'Brien, Joe.</i>		
<i>O'Callaghan, Cian.</i>		

<i>O'Callaghan, Jim.</i>		
<i>O'Connor, James.</i>		
<i>O'Dea, Willie.</i>		
<i>O'Donnell, Kieran.</i>		
<i>O'Donovan, Patrick.</i>		
<i>O'Dowd, Fergus.</i>		
<i>O'Gorman, Roderic.</i>		
<i>O'Sullivan, Christopher.</i>		
<i>O'Sullivan, Pádraig.</i>		
<i>Ó Cathasaigh, Marc.</i>		
<i>Ó Cuív, Éamon.</i>		
<i>Ó Riordáin, Aodhán.</i>		
<i>Rabbitte, Anne.</i>		
<i>Richmond, Neale.</i>		
<i>Ring, Michael.</i>		
<i>Ryan, Eamon.</i>		
<i>Shanahan, Matt.</i>		
<i>Sherlock, Sean.</i>		
<i>Shortall, Róisín.</i>		
<i>Smith, Brendan.</i>		
<i>Smith, Duncan.</i>		
<i>Smyth, Niamh.</i>		
<i>Stanton, David.</i>		
<i>Troy, Robert.</i>		
<i>Varadkar, Leo.</i>		
<i>Whitmore, Jennifer.</i>		

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Brendan Griffin and Jack Chambers; Níl, Deputies Mattie McGrath and Michael McNamara.

Deputy Holly Cairns did not vote in this division due to an agreed pairing arrangement with Minister Helen McEntee for the duration of the Minister's maternity leave.

Question declared carried.

Judicial Council (Amendment) Bill 2021: Second Stage (Resumed) [Private Members]

The following motion was moved by Deputy Pearse Doherty on Tuesday, 1 June 2021: “That the Bill be now read a Second Time.”

Debate resumed on amendment No. 1:

To delete all words after “That” and substitute the following:

“Dáil Éireann resolves that the Judicial Council (Amendment) Bill 2021 be deemed to be read a second time this day nine months, to allow for further consideration and analysis of how the Bill interacts with existing insurance data already collected by the Central Bank within the National Claims Information Database (NCID); and for such considerations to be taken into account in further scrutiny of the Bill.”.

-(Minister of State at the Department of Finance)

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I must now deal with a postponed division relating to Second Stage of the Judicial Council (Amendment) Bill 2021, which took place on Tuesday, 1 June 2021. On the question, “That the amendment to the motion be made”, a division was claimed, and in accordance with Standing Order 80(2), that division must be taken now.

Amendment put:

<i>The Dáil divided: Tá, 77; Níl, 62; Staon, 0.</i>		
<i>Tá</i>	<i>Níl</i>	<i>Staon</i>
<i>Berry, Cathal.</i>	<i>Barry, Mick.</i>	
<i>Brophy, Colm.</i>	<i>Boyd Barrett, Richard.</i>	
<i>Browne, James.</i>	<i>Brady, John.</i>	
<i>Bruton, Richard.</i>	<i>Browne, Martin.</i>	
<i>Burke, Colm.</i>	<i>Buckley, Pat.</i>	
<i>Burke, Peter.</i>	<i>Canney, Seán.</i>	
<i>Butler, Mary.</i>	<i>Carthy, Matt.</i>	
<i>Byrne, Thomas.</i>	<i>Clarke, Sorca.</i>	
<i>Cahill, Jackie.</i>	<i>Collins, Michael.</i>	
<i>Calleary, Dara.</i>	<i>Conway-Walsh, Rose.</i>	
<i>Cannon, Ciarán.</i>	<i>Cronin, Réada.</i>	
<i>Carey, Joe.</i>	<i>Crowe, Seán.</i>	
<i>Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.</i>	<i>Cullinane, David.</i>	
<i>Chambers, Jack.</i>	<i>Daly, Pa.</i>	
<i>Collins, Niall.</i>	<i>Doherty, Pearse.</i>	
<i>Costello, Patrick.</i>	<i>Donnelly, Paul.</i>	
<i>Crowe, Cathal.</i>	<i>Ellis, Dessie.</i>	
<i>Devlin, Cormac.</i>	<i>Fitzmaurice, Michael.</i>	
<i>Dillon, Alan.</i>	<i>Funchion, Kathleen.</i>	
<i>Donnelly, Stephen.</i>	<i>Gannon, Gary.</i>	
<i>Donohoe, Paschal.</i>	<i>Gould, Thomas.</i>	

<i>Duffy, Francis Noel.</i>	<i>Guirke, Johnny.</i>	
<i>Durkan, Bernard J.</i>	<i>Harkin, Marian.</i>	
<i>Farrell, Alan.</i>	<i>Healy-Rae, Danny.</i>	
<i>Feighan, Frankie.</i>	<i>Howlin, Brendan.</i>	
<i>Fitzpatrick, Peter.</i>	<i>Kelly, Alan.</i>	
<i>Flaherty, Joe.</i>	<i>Kenny, Gino.</i>	
<i>Flanagan, Charles.</i>	<i>Kenny, Martin.</i>	
<i>Fleming, Sean.</i>	<i>Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.</i>	
<i>Foley, Norma.</i>	<i>McGrath, Mattie.</i>	
<i>Grealish, Noel.</i>	<i>McNamara, Michael.</i>	
<i>Griffin, Brendan.</i>	<i>Mitchell, Denise.</i>	
<i>Harris, Simon.</i>	<i>Munster, Imelda.</i>	
<i>Haughey, Seán.</i>	<i>Murphy, Catherine.</i>	
<i>Heydon, Martin.</i>	<i>Murphy, Paul.</i>	
<i>Higgins, Emer.</i>	<i>Murphy, Verona.</i>	
<i>Hourigan, Neasa.</i>	<i>Mythen, Johnny.</i>	
<i>Humphreys, Heather.</i>	<i>Nash, Ged.</i>	
<i>Kehoe, Paul.</i>	<i>Naughten, Denis.</i>	
<i>Lahart, John.</i>	<i>Nolan, Carol.</i>	
<i>Lawless, James.</i>	<i>O'Callaghan, Cian.</i>	
<i>Leddin, Brian.</i>	<i>O'Donoghue, Richard.</i>	
<i>Lowry, Michael.</i>	<i>O'Reilly, Louise.</i>	
<i>MacSharry, Marc.</i>	<i>O'Rourke, Darren.</i>	
<i>Madigan, Josepha.</i>	<i>Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.</i>	
<i>Martin, Catherine.</i>	<i>Ó Murchú, Ruairí.</i>	
<i>Matthews, Steven.</i>	<i>Ó Ríordáin, Aodhán.</i>	
<i>McAuliffe, Paul.</i>	<i>Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.</i>	
<i>McConalogue, Charlie.</i>	<i>Pringle, Thomas.</i>	
<i>McGrath, Michael.</i>	<i>Quinlivan, Maurice.</i>	
<i>Moynihan, Aindrias.</i>	<i>Ryan, Patricia.</i>	
<i>Moynihan, Michael.</i>	<i>Shanahan, Matt.</i>	
<i>Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.</i>	<i>Sherlock, Sean.</i>	
<i>Naughton, Hildegard.</i>	<i>Shortall, Róisín.</i>	
<i>Noonan, Malcolm.</i>	<i>Smith, Bríd.</i>	
<i>O'Brien, Darragh.</i>	<i>Smith, Duncan.</i>	
<i>O'Brien, Joe.</i>	<i>Stanley, Brian.</i>	
<i>O'Callaghan, Jim.</i>	<i>Tóibín, Peadar.</i>	
<i>O'Connor, James.</i>	<i>Tully, Pauline.</i>	
<i>O'Dea, Willie.</i>	<i>Ward, Mark.</i>	
<i>O'Donnell, Kieran.</i>	<i>Whitmore, Jennifer.</i>	
<i>O'Donovan, Patrick.</i>	<i>Wynne, Violet-Anne.</i>	
<i>O'Dowd, Fergus.</i>		

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<i>O’Gorman, Roderic.</i>		
<i>O’Sullivan, Christopher.</i>		
<i>O’Sullivan, Pádraig.</i>		
<i>Ó Cathasaigh, Marc.</i>		
<i>Ó Cuív, Éamon.</i>		
<i>Rabbitte, Anne.</i>		
<i>Richmond, Neale.</i>		
<i>Ring, Michael.</i>		
<i>Ryan, Eamon.</i>		
<i>Smith, Brendan.</i>		
<i>Smyth, Niamh.</i>		
<i>Stanton, David.</i>		
<i>Troy, Robert.</i>		
<i>Varadkar, Leo.</i>		

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Brendan Griffin and Jack Chambers; Níl, Deputies Denise Mitchell and Pádraig Mac Lochlainn.

Deputy Holly Cairns did not vote in this division due to an agreed pairing arrangement with Minister Helen McEntee for the duration of the Minister’s maternity leave.

Amendment declared carried.

Motion, as amended, agreed to.

An Bille um an gCeathrú Leasú is Tríocha ar an mBunreacht (Athchóiriú Cuimsitheach Buiséid) 2014: An Dara Céim (Atógáil) [Comhaltaí Príobháideacha]

Thirty-fourth Amendment of the Constitution (Inclusive Budget Reform) Bill 2014: Second Stage (Resumed) [Private Members]

Atairgeadh an cheist: “Go léifear an Bille don Dara hUair anois.”

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

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Rinneadh vótáil a lorg Déardaoin seo caite, an 27 Bealtaine 2021, ar an gceist go ndéanfaí an Bille um an gCeathrú Leasú is Tríocha ar an mBunreacht

(Athchóiriú Cuimsitheach Buiséid) 2014 a léamh an Dara hUair. De réir Bhuan-Ordaithe 80(2) ní foláir an vótáil sin a thógáil anois.

A division was challenged last Thursday, 27 May 2021, on the question that the Thirty-fourth Amendment of the Constitution (Inclusive Budget Reform) Bill 2014 be read a Second Time. In accordance with Standing Order 80(2), that division must be taken now.

Cuireadh an cheist.

Question put:

<i>The Dáil divided: Tá, 59; Níl, 80; Staon, 0.</i>		
<i>Tá</i>	<i>Níl</i>	<i>Stاون</i>
<i>Barry, Mick.</i>	<i>Berry, Cathal.</i>	
<i>Boyd Barrett, Richard.</i>	<i>Brophy, Colm.</i>	
<i>Brady, John.</i>	<i>Browne, James.</i>	
<i>Browne, Martin.</i>	<i>Bruton, Richard.</i>	
<i>Buckley, Pat.</i>	<i>Burke, Colm.</i>	
<i>Canney, Seán.</i>	<i>Burke, Peter.</i>	
<i>Carthy, Matt.</i>	<i>Butler, Mary.</i>	
<i>Clarke, Sorca.</i>	<i>Byrne, Thomas.</i>	
<i>Collins, Michael.</i>	<i>Cahill, Jackie.</i>	
<i>Conway-Walsh, Rose.</i>	<i>Calleary, Dara.</i>	
<i>Cronin, Réada.</i>	<i>Cannon, Ciarán.</i>	
<i>Crowe, Seán.</i>	<i>Carey, Joe.</i>	
<i>Cullinane, David.</i>	<i>Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.</i>	
<i>Daly, Pa.</i>	<i>Chambers, Jack.</i>	
<i>Doherty, Pearse.</i>	<i>Collins, Niall.</i>	
<i>Donnelly, Paul.</i>	<i>Costello, Patrick.</i>	
<i>Ellis, Dessie.</i>	<i>Crowe, Cathal.</i>	
<i>Fitzmaurice, Michael.</i>	<i>Devlin, Cormac.</i>	
<i>Funchion, Kathleen.</i>	<i>Dillon, Alan.</i>	
<i>Gannon, Gary.</i>	<i>Donnelly, Stephen.</i>	
<i>Gould, Thomas.</i>	<i>Donohoe, Paschal.</i>	
<i>Guirke, Johnny.</i>	<i>Duffy, Francis Noel.</i>	
<i>Harkin, Marian.</i>	<i>Durkan, Bernard J.</i>	
<i>Healy-Rae, Danny.</i>	<i>Farrell, Alan.</i>	
<i>Howlin, Brendan.</i>	<i>Feighan, Frankie.</i>	
<i>Kelly, Alan.</i>	<i>Fitzpatrick, Peter.</i>	
<i>Kenny, Gino.</i>	<i>Flaherty, Joe.</i>	
<i>Kenny, Martin.</i>	<i>Flanagan, Charles.</i>	
<i>Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.</i>	<i>Fleming, Sean.</i>	
<i>McGrath, Mattie.</i>	<i>Foley, Norma.</i>	
<i>McNamara, Michael.</i>	<i>Grealish, Noel.</i>	
<i>Mitchell, Denise.</i>	<i>Griffin, Brendan.</i>	

<i>Munster, Imelda.</i>	<i>Harris, Simon.</i>	
<i>Murphy, Catherine.</i>	<i>Haughey, Seán.</i>	
<i>Murphy, Paul.</i>	<i>Heydon, Martin.</i>	
<i>Mythen, Johnny.</i>	<i>Higgins, Emer.</i>	
<i>Nash, Ged.</i>	<i>Hourigan, Neasa.</i>	
<i>Nolan, Carol.</i>	<i>Humphreys, Heather.</i>	
<i>O'Callaghan, Cian.</i>	<i>Kehoe, Paul.</i>	
<i>O'Donoghue, Richard.</i>	<i>Lahart, John.</i>	
<i>O'Reilly, Louise.</i>	<i>Lawless, James.</i>	
<i>O'Rourke, Darren.</i>	<i>Leddin, Brian.</i>	
<i>Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.</i>	<i>Lowry, Michael.</i>	
<i>Ó Murchú, Ruairí.</i>	<i>MacSharry, Marc.</i>	
<i>Ó Ríordáin, Aodhán.</i>	<i>Madigan, Josepha.</i>	
<i>Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.</i>	<i>Martin, Catherine.</i>	
<i>Pringle, Thomas.</i>	<i>Matthews, Steven.</i>	
<i>Quinlivan, Maurice.</i>	<i>McAuliffe, Paul.</i>	
<i>Ryan, Patricia.</i>	<i>McConalogue, Charlie.</i>	
<i>Sherlock, Sean.</i>	<i>McGrath, Michael.</i>	
<i>Shortall, Róisín.</i>	<i>Moynihan, Aindrias.</i>	
<i>Smith, Bríd.</i>	<i>Moynihan, Michael.</i>	
<i>Smith, Duncan.</i>	<i>Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.</i>	
<i>Stanley, Brian.</i>	<i>Murphy, Verona.</i>	
<i>Tóibín, Peadar.</i>	<i>Naughten, Denis.</i>	
<i>Tully, Pauline.</i>	<i>Naughton, Hildegard.</i>	
<i>Ward, Mark.</i>	<i>Noonan, Malcolm.</i>	
<i>Whitmore, Jennifer.</i>	<i>O'Brien, Darragh.</i>	
<i>Wynne, Violet-Anne.</i>	<i>O'Brien, Joe.</i>	
	<i>O'Callaghan, Jim.</i>	
	<i>O'Connor, James.</i>	
	<i>O'Dea, Willie.</i>	
	<i>O'Donnell, Kieran.</i>	
	<i>O'Donovan, Patrick.</i>	
	<i>O'Dowd, Fergus.</i>	
	<i>O'Gorman, Roderic.</i>	
	<i>O'Sullivan, Christopher.</i>	
	<i>O'Sullivan, Pádraig.</i>	
	<i>Ó Cathasaigh, Marc.</i>	
	<i>Ó Cuív, Éamon.</i>	
	<i>Rabbitte, Anne.</i>	
	<i>Richmond, Neale.</i>	
	<i>Ring, Michael.</i>	
	<i>Ryan, Eamon.</i>	

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	<i>Shanahan, Matt.</i>	
	<i>Smith, Brendan.</i>	
	<i>Smyth, Niamh.</i>	
	<i>Stanton, David.</i>	
	<i>Troy, Robert.</i>	
	<i>Varadkar, Leo.</i>	

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Denise Mitchell and Pádraig Mac Lochlainn; Níl, Deputies Brendan Griffin and Jack Chambers.

Deputy Holly Cairns did not vote in this division due to an agreed pairing arrangement with Minister Helen McEntee for the duration of the Minister's maternity leave.

Question declared lost.

Faisnéiseadh go rabhthas tar éis diúltú don cheist.

The Dáil adjourned at 10.05 p.m. until 9 a.m. on Thursday, 3 June 2021.