



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

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(OFFICIAL REPORT—*Unrevised*)

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Dé Máirt, 29 Meitheamh 2021

Tuesday, 29 June 2021

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

Paidir.

Prayer.

Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: Dublin City Council's strategic development zone, SDZ, master plan for the Poolbeg lands was approved in 2019. The SDZ will provide a much-needed 3,500 new homes on the site, as well as economic opportunity and social amenities. Thanks to a very determined campaign by the Irish Glass Bottle Housing Action Group, the SDZ plan includes a commitment to deliver 15% of these homes at affordable prices. As I am sure the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, knows, that is in addition to the 10% social housing required under Part V of the Planning and Development Act 2000, as amended.

It is absolutely vital that these affordable homes are delivered if the working people of Ringsend, Irishtown and the wider surrounding area are to have any hope of remaining living in their community. Property prices in this part of Dublin city have spiralled well beyond the reach of even well-paid local people. In fact, a quick scan of *daft.ie* for new and second-hand homes in Ringsend and Irishtown will reveal prices from €500,000 to €1 million. In order to ensure the homes built on this portion of the SDZ land are genuinely affordable, Dublin City Council wanted to buy the Irish Glass Bottle site from the National Asset Management Agency, NAMA, at a discount. In 2019, NAMA agreed and, in turn, Dublin City Council officials approached the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage to approve the finance. NAMA offered land at a discount of between 40% and 60% of the full market value. This would have allowed the council to dramatically reduce the development cost and, in turn, the price for the affordable purchaser.

After a month of talks between Dublin City Council and the Department and a number of very detailed submissions from the council to it, the Department rejected the proposal and refused to fund the land purchase. In fact, I understand a last-minute intervention by a member of the NAMA board to the then Minister, Eoghan Murphy, failed to break the deadlock. Unfortunately, due to inaction by the then Minister, the Irish Glass Bottle site was rolled up with the larger Poolbeg lands and put on the open market. Ronan Group Real Estate, along with its financial backers, bought an 80% stake in those lands in 2020, at a significant increase on the

guide price. Now Dublin City Council has to negotiate a deal with Ronan Group Real Estate for the delivery of the hundreds of homes the SDZ plan says must be affordable. Dublin City Council's director of housing, Mr. Brendan Kenny, last week publically expressed concern at the prices Ronan Group Real Estate is likely to charge for those properties. There is now a genuine fear, not only in the city council and among councillors from all parties who supported the SDZ, but also in the wider community in Ringsend and Irishtown, that these affordable homes could well be lost.

Was the Minister aware that NAMA offered these lands at a discount to Dublin City Council? Does he agree it was a huge mistake for the then Minister with responsibility for housing and Deputy for the constituency, Eoghan Murphy, not to sanction the purchase of the Irish Glass Bottle site by Dublin City Council? Will he now support the local community which is urging his Government to ensure NAMA transfers its 20% land holdings in the Poolbeg SDZ to Dublin City Council to ensure the 600 to 650 affordable homes earmarked for the site will be delivered and sold at prices working people can genuinely afford?

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I was made aware by both the city council and NAMA of the history, as the Deputy outlined, of the development of the affordable element of housing on that site. To my mind, it was not the correct decision. I would have made a different one but the decision is made. The critical issue now is that we deliver the affordable housing and the social housing which will be delivered under Part V. I absolutely agree with the Deputy that in this area of the city in particular local communities face the real risk of being excluded from being able to have their children or relatives live in the community they grew up in because it happens to be an area of such rapid development. With the very welcome arrival of large companies in the docklands and their workers being in the same market and area, there is a real risk local communities will be frozen out. We must do everything to avoid that possibility. This includes using the serviced sites fund, which is provided for situations just like this. It will be able to help to reduce costs, although perhaps not as much as we would have liked or as much as might have been possible had a different land deal arrangement been done. However, that should not stop us doing it.

We should not stop there. There are other lands and approaches we can take involving the Land Development Agency, the State and a variety of State bodies. Dublin Port is adjacent to this land and has a very large land bank. I will be talking to the Dublin Port Company to see what it could possibly do to help us in this regard. This applies to other sites as well. Across my constituency, this problem of house price and rental cost inflation is most acute. Consequently, we must do our utmost to reverse this or provide alternatives, and we will do that.

What we cannot and do not want to do is delay is the delivery of the houses on the Irish Glass Bottle site. It has full planning permission and will be able to get serviced sites funding. We will be able to get that social housing as part of the Part V procedure. We have been waiting too long for this to be built. It is now ready to go, subject, as the Deputy said, to agreement between the developer and the council. The State will do whatever we can to help deliver the housing but we must deliver it quickly because we have a housing crisis in that part of the city that we must address. We can and will address it.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: Both Dublin City Council and the local community need the Government to get more directly involved to resolve this dispute. There is approximately €80 million of public funds earmarked for infrastructure in the strategic development zone. Of that, €15 million is from the Minister's own Department, which is co-funding the bridge to complete

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the south docks. There is up to €20 million in funding from the Urban Regeneration and Development Fund, URDF, allocated to the Seán Moore bridge and roundabout. The Minister is absolutely right that we could use the serviced sites fund. We recently had news that the unit cost of that could be increased so that could be €30 to €60 million. That gives the Minister's Government a lot of leverage to sit down with Dublin City Council and the local community to ensure the offer made by Ronan Group Real Estate is a genuine one. That is a significant discount that could be got on those homes. Equally, NAMA's 20% land holdings could be transferred to Dublin City Council as, for example, an advance payment on the dividend it will eventually provide for the State, cutting out the land cost completely. If the Minister, along with his ministerial colleagues, Deputies Paschal Donohoe and Darragh O'Brien, put their shoulders to the wheel alongside Dublin City Council officials, councillors and the local community, we could ensure that not only would those homes be delivered speedily but we would also have affordable homes at prices local people can afford.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: The Deputy is right to focus on the fact that transport and housing solutions go together and this is a really good example. We now have plans for this new bridge across the Dodder. It will not be a bridge for cars but for public transport and active mobility. It is critical not just for the development for the Irish Glass Bottle site but the wider area. It is due to go for planning permission as part of the BusConnects project, which I hope will go to An Bord Pleanála this autumn. Subject to that being agreed, it does not have to wait for a decision from An Bord Pleanála and we should not tie it up with a decision around the land in Poolbeg because we need it anyway for the local community.

It is the same with the development of the upgrade of the Seán Moore Road. In a wider context - I know it is a contentious issue and I have to be careful because it will be before the courts this week - there is the question of the development on the Strand Road and elsewhere of bay and coastal infrastructure. This includes walking and cycling routes and it could bring profound improvement to the area. It is a very special place because it is on the Dublin Bay biosphere. It is an amazing location with beautiful beaches beside the wildlife reserve. We need transport infrastructure not just for the Irish Glass Bottle Site but the other sites developed in the area and the existing community. I do not want to make that contingent on what any developer does.

Deputy Alan Kelly: The Taoiseach should be here today instead of at a press conference, given the decisions being made and the impact on our country. The Cabinet decision announced earlier on reopening businesses is absolutely bananas. It is discriminatory and it is unenforceable. It is shocking stuff. It is amateur hour. When did Government discrimination become the norm in Ireland? I would like the Minister to answer that.

The Government is saying to young people today that we are all in this together except when it gets to a stage where those of us who have been vaccinated want to get out and enjoy ourselves this summer. That is what we are really saying and that, by the way, we also want younger people to continue working to serve us in bars, restaurants, pubs and everywhere else because we need them to do so even though they are not vaccinated, and that public health covers this. It is shocking stuff.

The Government is saying I can get a meal down the street in a restaurant or go for a pint but my colleague, Deputy Duncan Smith, cannot do it. I would have to leave him outside the door. That is discrimination and it is wrong. In Ireland we do not practice discrimination and the Government should certainly not push it. That is effectively what it is doing. The Govern-

ment will learn a big political lesson over the coming days and weeks. I will rephrase that: it will be over the coming seconds, minutes and hours regarding this decision. It will have to be rescinded because it is not practical, it is unenforceable and it is discriminatory.

The Government's plans will break social cohesion and divide the people of this country, including communities, families, employees and employers. It will put them into positions we never wanted. The Government will really have to look at this again. It is saying to young people it would be illegal for them to go down the road for a pint if they are not vaccinated and they cannot go for a meal in a restaurant. However, it is not illegal because of European law to go to Northern Ireland or get a flight to Spain and have as many meals or drinks as they want. Again, it is not practical but most of all, it is discriminatory.

The Government will have to look at this again immediately. Another Cabinet meeting should be called and it should consider another proposal. What is being proposed now is the following. The Government is saying to young people that we will go out and enjoy ourselves if we are vaccinated but we will not allow them to. We are essentially saying to the young people of Ireland that their summer will consist of sitting at home and watching "Love Island" because that is what we think of them. We are no longer in this together.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I am sure that I do not need to tell the House that the only reason an Taoiseach is not here is because he is addressing the UN Security Council. It was a prearranged appointment on the issue of cybersecurity, which is of absolute critical importance to our health system and the hundreds of thousands of health workers who have been through a crisis they have had to manage. This is why the Taoiseach is not here.

Deputy Alan Kelly: He is accountable to this Dáil first and foremost, according to the Constitution.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: He is, and we as a Government will be fully accountable to this Dáil. Included in that, we will make sure there is full access to NPHE, not just to the analysis but also to the individuals behind the analysis that was presented to us last night, so that Members can have an opportunity to ask the questions or test out what is a very worrying development and situation around this new Delta variant.

Let us be very clear. Let us not pre-empt the approach that is going to be taken. The Government is not responding to the modelling information presented last night by immediately jumping to a particular solution. We are saying that we want sit down with our stakeholders, with the unions and with the industry to look at options to provide better protection and to reopen the hospitality sector and other sectors that may be affected.

For young people, the decisions yesterday in terms of changing the vaccination rules was an important element in the mix. It was not all negative in terms of what was presented and what it may provide, subject to international vaccine supply coming in.

The Deputy depicts it all as having been decided. This latest modelling information was presented to us only last night. The appropriate approach was not to jump to a conclusion or to offer a solution immediately. It was to say that we now need to establish a plan that gives us a further, certain path to a reopening that will not see reopening and then closing again. This is what we as a people have done successfully in recent months: we have managed to reopen sections of our society, stage by stage, in a way that did not have to be reversed. That is the first thing our young people want, whether they are working in an establishment, are patrons of an

establishment, are part of a family business, or are part of cultural, sporting or other events that could also be affected.

There is no discrimination behind the Government's intent, but we did have to listen to the analysis presented by the health officials. I could go back a number of months right through this crisis where Deputy Kelly's party was saying, in the most categorical terms, that we had to heed the public information advice. In Government, one does have to heed this. A range of modelling scenarios was presented to us. It is not all potentially unmanageable. It will be manageable. As a country we are good at managing this and we will do this. The way to do it is not to close your eyes, block your ears and say that none of the modelling exists. The way to do it is to consider the options, which we will do in the coming days.

Deputy Alan Kelly: That is not what the Taoiseach said in his press conference. I live in Portroe, where there is a little village called Garrykenny. Roy Breen and Maura Boyle run the two hospitality establishments there. If the Minister thinks that what the Government is putting forward is enforceable in any of these types of hospitality premises, it is not. It is just not enforceable. It is discrimination. It is complete discrimination. I am telling the Minister right now that the reaction from people who are under the age of 30 is something I have never seen before. They are shocked that the Government has now decided to just jettison them while telling them they must continue working, even if they are not vaccinated.

The Government often challenges the Opposition to have other solutions. I am asking that this is revisited, to reverse that part of the decision. We have the Janssen vaccine that can be administered by pharmacists tomorrow morning. We have AstraZeneca vaccine that can go into the various centres around the State. In two weeks' time 50% of the population will have had the double vaccination and 70% will have had at least one shot. If we also use those other vaccines immediately we can get those figures to above 55% and above 75%. In two weeks' time, before 19 July, the Government could then look at the modelling again to reassess. That is what I believe is a compromise and what we should do, while also bearing in mind the public health advice. What the Government is proposing is not possible. It is unenforceable, it is discriminatory and it is breaking social cohesion.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I wish for such certainty. I wish for it in the first instance in terms of vaccine supply. We are following the advice from NIAC and we have changed the rules to allow our young people get access to vaccines much more quickly.

Deputy Alan Kelly: I am not making these figures up.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: It is not certain yet. We will have to test in the coming days in the context of how we seek to set out the solutions and involve the industry and the unions. Deputy Kelly says that this will not work when the plan itself is what we have to devise and develop. We have to do that in a way that recognises our young people have suffered most during this crisis and are in need of greater support. The most urgent issue is getting them vaccinated and giving them a social life and opportunities to get back to normal, get back to work and get back to college. What we do not want are false promises whereby we say everything is fine and that the Delta variant does not exist, that is not a problem-----

Deputy Alan Kelly: I did not say that.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: -----that we can ignore what NPHEA says and that we are not worried about the modelling. If we did that, we would find ourselves in greater difficulties later in

the summer.

Deputy Alan Kelly: I did not say that.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: That is one of the possibilities if we were to ignore the advice that has been given. This is not what we are going to do.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I am also of the view that the Taoiseach should be here. He gave a press conference less than an hour ago. What is going on? Last summer we were able to have indoor dining without major incident and without vaccines. Now, 12 or 13 months later, and we are in a situation where more than 4 million vaccines have been administered and, despite already being an outlier in the context of Europe and the rest of the world, the Government is going to delay the reopening of the hospitality industry. That is pure madness. The Government is also planning a system of apartheid whereby it will introduce a two-tier society and create a situation in which families will be able to dine together indoors while young people are left outside. We expect those young people to serve in restaurants - and we know why - and work in other parts of the hospitality sector, in tourism outlets, in coach hire businesses and as tour guides.

NPHET advice is completely bonkers. It lacks both balance and an understanding of reality. Delaying the reopening of indoor entertainment, pubs and restaurants is like taking another wrecking ball to the economy. The lives of tens of thousands of individuals and families will be destroyed. People are holding on by their fingernails. A total of 200,000 jobs are on the line as the Government delays the return of indoor dining. There is a chance that the jobs in question could be lost permanently. It is not only indoor dining that will be affected but all indoor activities that we know of and the hospitality sector in general, including buses, taxis, you name it.

The discrepancy in the NPHET advice is so disproportionate it reminds me of the figures that were tossed around on the night before the bank guarantee was put in place. Its advice to the Government last evening was that the worst-case scenario would potentially see 700,000 cases of the virus in July, August and September, with as many as 2,170 deaths - God help us, that is a frightening figure - if the variant becomes dominant. The most optimistic projection is for 81,000 cases and 161 deaths. Which is it? The discrepancy between the two is a multiple of ten. This group of experts is advising the Government there might be 7,600 cases a day or there might be 800. Which is it? I ask the Minister to bring in an outside, independent - and probably from abroad - panel of experts. We have many scientists and doctors but they have all been silenced and banished. I also call out the media, which has run with this as if it were gospel. What is happening is outrageous.

We need an independent analysis of the NPHET advice. We have none. Has the Government sought independent advice? It was told this last night at a pre-Cabinet meeting. Did Ministers ask the questions? They are the people responsible to the House and, by extension, to the people. Will they send in Dr. Holohan to answer questions? He will not answer them and does not even meet us any more. Opposition leaders have not been briefed. This is outrageous. It is nonsense that is being dressed up as modelling. It is outrageous and is aimed at dividing our country and ruining it. It is dividing people. It is not going to run and it will not be accepted. I tell the Minister that.

NPHET modelling over the past 12 months has been wrong on almost every occasion. It has been wrong, wrong, wrong. It has been stupid and illogical. This is the most illogical idea

I have ever seen. For the Taoiseach to wait until last night and earlier today to tell those people who have been expecting and anticipating for months that they would be reopening their businesses next Monday is shocking and disgraceful. They have spent money on stock, deep cleaning their premises and retraining staff. They have made all these efforts and they have been thrown under the bus again. It is outrageous.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: Throughout this crisis - I said this in opposition and I say it now as a member of the Government - we have done it correctly in the context of sharing information. The letter from NPHET, modelling information and access to public health officials to be able to answer whatever questions on modelling or any other aspect of its advice are critical and will happen. That is needed.

It is complex. Modelling is based on assumptions. It is not a certain science. As the Deputy said, the modelling possibilities range from there being no Delta variant by the end of September resulting in 55 possible cases ICU to the most pessimistic scenario. In that instance, the modelling is pessimistic in terms of the transmissibility of the Delta virus. It examines how similar we would be to last summer in terms of modelling what happened when we reopened hospitality and taking the most negative prognosis on that. As the Deputy said, the analysis in that most pessimistic scenario foresees 1,685 people in ICU.

The approach on this is not, on this occasion, to look at the case numbers. The circumstances have changed between this year and last. The number of people who will get into severe health difficulties or, God help us, die because of Covid will be a tiny fraction of what it would have been previously because most of our older people have been vaccinated. NPHET said - it could be right but it is not certain - that if we had the sort of case numbers its modelling tells it is possible, we would have those sorts of numbers in ICU. In those circumstances, our hospital system would be in trouble again. That is what we need to prevent. I believe we can prevent it.

The key way of preventing that is to get the 370,000 AstraZeneca vaccines which are arriving today to people aged in their 60s and those who have acute medical or other conditions who received a first AstraZeneca dose and are waiting for a second. We will have all of them done by 19 July, and that is of critical importance. Not only that, the rules will be changed to allow younger people to use the 100,000 surplus AstraZeneca vaccines that will be available after those aged 60 years and older have been vaccinated. We will also shorten the gap to four weeks between the first and second such AstraZeneca dose.

There were not just decisions around hospitality made yesterday. A number of decisions were made and advice was given which allows us to address the health crisis aspect of this. I believe we will not see another wave. Rather, we will have learned from last summer and will have more of an outer summer and open hospitality and other sectors this summer. I fully understand the critical importance of that for our communities and small family businesses and social life. We will do it in a safe way, which is thought through. We are thinking today about health advice so that we put a proper plan in place to be able to do that without creating a health risk.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I have heard it all now from a Cabinet Minister: NPHET could be right and might be right. The Minister went on to say that he personally does not believe there will be 7,600 cases and there might be instead 800 cases. What is going on in the Cabinet room? Are the ears completely dúnta? Is the Cabinet going to consult industry 15 months on, having demoralised and destroyed it? Will the Government dispense with the services of Dr.

Holohan and NPHE? A cabal, I call them. Will it dispense with NIAC? We have all these unelected experts.

The Taoiseach is accountable to the House and so is the Minister. The Green Party has ten Deputies in this coalition Government and has major sway when it wants to. If the Minister believes NPHE is wrong in its advice, act on that and protect our families and support our people. Ní neart go cur le chéile. Give the young a chance. We have all made sacrifices, including many with their lives and many who became sick. People have put their shoulders to the wheel. We are all in this together. My God, the Government left that a long time ago.

The Government cannot have it both ways. The Minister has said he does not believe it will be as bad as NPHE said. It is playing scaring games. RTÉ and all the media have been paid off handsomely to sell the message of fear to our people. The Government should have respect for our people and not dose them with fear, threats and everything else. Old people are afraid to come out of their houses and go back to mass or shopping. All of the rest of the world has opened up for indoor dining except for us in Ireland. No one believes the Government. It has lost the public, and it has lost them badly.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I believe we will be able to follow the less pessimistic and more optimistic modelling scenarios because I believe in the capabilities, strength, solidarity and good common sense of the Irish people to steer a safer course.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Will it be Christmas?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: That will also see us open up our country - every aspect of life. I also believe in our public service. We all make mistakes, the political system, the public service system and others, but-----

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Fifteen months of mistakes.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: The Government is making them.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: -----we will not say that we should get rid of all our advisers and our health system. Our health system-----

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: We should get rid of the Government, too.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: -----has stood up and shown real capability, including our advisers, in this crisis. It is right that we in the political system question them-----

Deputy Mattie McGrath: They are not accountable to the Dáil.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: -----and we do not just accept the advice and immediately adopt whatever solution is suggested.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: You did.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: No, we did not.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Last night you did.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: What we decided was to hear the evidence. We listened to it, we realised it was serious-----

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Deputy Mattie McGrath: *A fait accompli.*

Deputy Eamon Ryan: Rather than making an immediate decision late at night, we decided to take our time to talk to the various Departments involved, the industry and-----

Deputy Alan Kelly: They will not talk to the Government.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: -----the unions and come up with an approach that gives us health protection while keeping us on a path towards reopening that will not close again. Not going backwards is the key and what the Irish people want.

(Interruptions).

Deputy Eamon Ryan: That is what we are committing to trying to provide.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: On a point of order, please.

An Ceann Comhairle: There can be no points of order on Leaders' Questions.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: Can I ask the Minister-----

An Ceann Comhairle: No, you cannot.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: What has his Government got against publicans in rural Ireland?

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy, please respect-----

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: What have you got against them? Come out and tell us. What has Dr. Holohan got against them? Come out and tell us, please. They have been blackguarded right, left and centre.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy, you are out of order. Please, resume your seat.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: Ba mhaith liom aird an Aire a dhíriú ar fhoréigean baile agus inscne, agus ar an easpa gnímh go dtí seo ó thaobh na ngealltanais a thug an Rialtas dúinne maidir le tuarascálacha éagsúla. I dtús báire, aontaím go hiomlán leis an Teachta Alan Kelly maidir leis an méid atá ráite aige. Tá na pleananna atá foilsithe ag an Rialtas maidir leis na mbialanna seafóideach. Rud atá i bhfad níos tromchúisí ná go mbeidh siad deighilteach agus go gcothóidh siad scrios i measc an phobail. Tá sé i bhfad siar an bóthar anois ón teachtaireacht go bhfuilimid go léir le chéile.

I will zone in on the absence of action on domestic violence. I will use my time to agree with Deputy Kelly. The Government's plans are not only seafóideach, but they have serious implications by creating a division among our people, who have helped us to cope with Covid-19 and helped each Government as it learned from its mistakes. Proceeding down this divisive road is unacceptable.

The Government promised two reports on domestic violence. One was on the segmentation of services across Departments and was undertaken by two independent external consultants. It is sitting on a desk somewhere in the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth or the Department of Justice. There was also a basic report from Tusla examining emergency accommodation on the ground, but it has not been published. Where does it stand?

According to the Council of Europe and depending on the measurement used, we are short between 45 and 350 refuges.

We have worked with this Government and the previous Government. I am sick and tired of making statements on domestic violence. I imagine my colleagues are as well. I believed we had moved on through the promise of two reports, but they have never appeared. The background to this has been the increase in the number of phone calls relating to the horrific rise in domestic violence and the cancellation of phone calls to the Garda's 999 line. The Garda failed to alert the Policing Authority to that until last December and then told the authority that it was only a technical breach. Nine months later, we are now awaiting the results of an internal audit of that.

When will the two reports be published? I do not want any waffle or to be told the background. I am more than familiar with the background. I have read all the reports. When will the two specific reports I mentioned be published and why have they been delayed?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I can commit to Deputy Connolly that the programme for Government and the Government fully recognises the need for additional refuge spaces and the Government has committed to an action plan on this issue. As the Deputy said, Tusla has responsibility for care and protection of victims of domestic, sexual and gender-based violence. Tusla's accommodation review, which currently is being finalised, has examined the current level of refuge provision, the evidence of demand for services and unmet need and has undertaken an analysis of proximity to refuge by local communities. The review will present recommendations on future configuration of accommodation and services which may be required to holistically meet the needs of victims of such domestic violence.

The third national strategy on domestic violence is to be published by the end of this year and will include actions around future investment in refuges. Tusla has been allocated €28 million in funding for domestic violence services this year, which is an increase of €2.7 million on the last year, along with an additional €2 million to specifically address challenges arriving during the pandemic. It is a real concern. The ongoing continuation of this pandemic and the effect it has on mental health, domestic situations and people who are vulnerable to abuse is a chronic concern and a real issue.

There will be no delay within the Government on the part of either the Minister for Justice or the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth in publishing the findings of those reports and then acting on it. It has to be part of that wider approach to this health crisis, as we come out of it, to learn lessons and make sure we provide the refuges.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I appreciate the Minister might not know what I was raising today but he has read from a very good briefing document. I asked the Minister not to do that. I asked him not to give me the background. I asked him when the two specific reports would be published. What is the delay with them? I am very familiar with the strategy that is to be published. We have an internal Garda review into the cancellation of phone calls from distressed women, children and men. Is the Minister satisfied with an internal report six months after the Policing Authority was told and longer in terms of when it was discovered?

Can the Minister please tune in to the cost of domestic violence on every level? Perhaps for the men and that mentality about driving the economy, the cost to the economy alone is €2.2 billion at a conservative estimate. The cost psychologically and intergenerationally is far beyond

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that. The reason I am standing here, as previous colleagues have done, is to get away from the word “chronic”, as used by the Minister.

The only time I would use the word “chronic” is in respect of the lack of action. There is a chronic lack of action by this Government and previous Governments with regard to domestic and gender-based violence. I do not want any more words. I want action. The most basic action concerns the two reports that were commissioned. When will they be published?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I wanted to give Deputy Connolly, with respect, the Government position. I wanted to get that accurate because it is a hugely important issue. My understanding is the two reports the Deputy refers to will come to Government within a short number of weeks, that is, within the next two to three weeks. If and when they are agreed by the Government, they will be published and acted upon.

I am glad the Garda Commissioner has apologised for what happened with regard to the cancelled calls. That was not up to the standards we expect from An Garda Síochána. My understanding is the new system for cancelling calls has shown a huge reduction in the number of calls being cancelled. However, that does not excuse or allow us forget what had happened in the analysis which was shown.

I mean no disrespect by not having a specific answer on having the report but I can commit to the Deputy it will be before Government in the next couple of weeks and will then be published and shared with Deputies here and will be acted upon.

An tOrd Gnó - Order of Business

An Ceann Comhairle: As Members are aware, we have agreed that for the period of the emergency only, the rapporteur’s report will not be read out. We also have agreed new arrangements for the taking of objections. Are the proposed arrangements for dealing with this week’s business agreed to?

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Not agreed.

An Ceann Comhairle: Not agreed. Many people are offering. I call on Deputy Mattie McGrath. One member from each group I am afraid.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I got a call from the Business Committee today saying the debate on Covid-19 was being moved from Wednesday to Thursday to allow for new legislation to be introduced here to deal with outdoor drinking - it seems the indoor drinking will not be allowed anyway - and the appointment of judges. That is a plethora of issues in one legislative measure. This is downright blackguarding. We need a proper, full and meaningful debate in the House to deal with the massive implications of today’s decision. Last night, the Government was told by NPHEAT and today it says: “Yes, we will do it. How high do you want us to jump?”. The Taoiseach went off on a Zoom call or something else. He is in Zoom-land anyway. Those in government will all be zoomed off. They are all zoned out because they are not listening to the people. Now, hey presto, the Government is going to engage in a social dialogue with the industry, 15 months later. It is coddling nobody. We need a full, meaningful, long and detailed debate on the implications of this. Are we going to have an international investigation of the behaviour of NPHEAT and its bonkers advice?

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: I also wish to express my concern about the proposal to push the statements on the vaccine roll-out to Friday. The reports today are very concerning and we need to deal with them as soon as possible. While we all want to facilitate legislation that clarifies the position regarding outdoor dining, to include another issue relating to High Court judges in the same legislative measure is not helpful at all. Those issues should be dealt with separately. We have real concerns about this.

The other point is that the Common Agricultural Policy has finally been negotiated. This is a matter of serious concern to rural Ireland and we need time to debate it this week as well. We need clarification on those issues before we can agree to the schedule for this week.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I agree that the debate on the Covid-19 vaccination programme should happen when it was scheduled to take place, particularly in view of the important announcements that have been made.

I also object in the strongest possible terms to the guillotine being imposed on Report Stage of the Land Development Agency Bill 2021. This legislation deals with the entire public land bank and, in the view of some of us, is essentially opening that land bank to private speculators and investors. Our group has tabled approximately 60 amendments that seek to protect the public land bank from privatisation and the vast majority of those amendments will not even be reached because of the guillotine. That is absolutely unacceptable. I ask the Government to lift the guillotine so we can properly debate all the amendments on this critical issue, which relates to the provision of public and genuinely affordable housing on public land.

Deputy Duncan Smith: The Wednesday evening slot is fast becoming the guillotine slot. That is something the Business Committee has to do more work on because it is absolutely unsatisfactory. The moving of the debate on the vaccine roll-out to Friday's ghost sitting is totally unsatisfactory given everything that is happening daily and, in particular, what has been announced this afternoon. We dissent in the strongest possible terms.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: The decision that has been made today on hospitality is absolutely disastrous. It will push tens of thousands of people in the State further into poverty. It is completely wrong that this decision has not yet been the subject of democratic discussion in the Chamber. Either Irish restaurants and pubs are more dangerous than their counterparts in the rest of Europe or our Government is alone in Europe in not being able to make a decision in this regard. There must be a debate on the matter this week.

Deputy Michael McNamara: I hope this is the last week we will sit in this Chamber wasting taxpayers' money. We are told it is on public health advice, yet we will sit in Leinster House on Friday. Whoever is providing the health advice is providing health advice that is as riddled with inconsistencies as the NPHEA advice is on how to deal with Covid-19. I hope the Ceann Comhairle, as the Speaker and as a constitutional officer, will give a commitment that we are not going to waste any more taxpayers' money by sitting in this obscene building.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: A Cheann Comhairle-----

An Ceann Comhairle: We can only have one speaker from each group.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I call on the Government to ensure there is a debate to discuss why it is keeping the pubs in rural Ireland and rural Kerry closed indefinitely.

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An Ceann Comhairle: Please, Deputy-----

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: Why is it doing that? What is it hiding? What has it against them?

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Healy-Rae, you are out of order.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: Come out and tell us. We want an open and honest debate about this.

An Ceann Comhairle: Resume your seat, please. You are out of order.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: What the Government is doing is out of order; a Cheann Comhairle, totally out of order.

An Ceann Comhairle: It might be, but you are out of order.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: There is no rhyme or reason. I want to know the reason.

An Ceann Comhairle: Please resume your seat. I call Deputy Cian O'Callaghan.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: I also do not agree with moving the debate on the Covid-19 vaccination programme to later in the week. I also object in the strongest possible terms to the use of the guillotine on the Land Development Agency Bill 2021. Considerable time has already been devoted to that Bill on Committee Stage, so it really is very disappointing that the Government is seeking to guillotine it now. With some more time allocated, we could do the Bill proper justice. It is significant legislation and it deserves proper scrutiny and adequate time. The use of the guillotine on such important legislation is not acceptable at all.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy. Does the Minister wish to reply?

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): Yes, I will address various issues raised. First, the debate on Covid-19 is on Friday, and that will be timely because we are not making final decisions on this. As I said, we must consider, listen and engage and Friday will allow for that debate here, as well as for the briefing in advance. The outdoor legislation that comes before the House on Wednesday regarding our Covid-19 crisis is critical.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Is that true?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: We also have a crisis in there being an insufficient number of High Court judges, so that aspect is being included there because we have an urgent need to get judges in place.

Deputy Michael McNamara: Jobs for cronies.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Jobs for the boys.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: Deputy Mac Lochlainn raised the Common Agricultural Policy, CAP, but that was debated two weeks ago. I am sure that there will be no shortage of opportunities in committees to allow us to go into the real detail of the CAP agreement, which does need to be examined and questioned. Regarding Deputies Boyd Barrett and Cian O'Callaghan and the Land Development Agency Bill 2021, I am glad there was extensive discussion on

Committee Stage. Returning to Leader's Questions earlier, we were talking about the fact that we have a housing crisis. One of the key solutions to it, to my mind, is going to be the Land Development Agency, and that does drive the need for that agency to be legislated for before the summer recess to enable us to start getting that body to build houses. There is a housing crisis that necessitates the need for such urgency.

Turning to Deputy Duncan Smith and the timing of business on Wednesday, the Deputy will know that we have to do that to consolidate votes on that day. It is the ordering and it is in keeping with our measures in respect of Covid-19, which require us to order our business in an unusual way but one that is for our own health and safety. Similarly, Deputy McNamara will, I am sure, know that it has been the services department making the assessment in this regard, and, by and large, it has done a very good job. We have not had significant incidents of transmission within the Oireachtas. That is an important symbol of how as a country we have-----

Deputy Michael McNamara: We have wasted €17 million.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I do not believe we have wasted it. It was important that we set an example in ensuring-----

Deputy Michael McNamara: Is it over?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: -----that our Parliament shows by example that we can do our business-----

Deputy Michael McNamara: Then why are we in Leinster House on Friday?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I understand that it is because the services department has made an assessment that the absence of committees sitting on Friday means that there are fewer people in the building. The Ceann Comhairle will be able to give much more clarity on this point.

Deputy Carol Nolan: It is because taxpayers' money is being wasted.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: That judgment call has been made on a scientific basis, and, just as we listen to other scientific advice, we should not ignore the scientific advice coming from our own officials within the Oireachtas.

(Interruptions).

Deputy Mattie McGrath: On a point of clarification, either the Minister is confused or the whole country is confused. He is telling us that what was announced today by the now absent Taoiseach, who has gone missing, is not true and is not really a fact at all but a figment of our imagination. The restaurants will be open.

An Ceann Comhairle: That is not a point of order.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: No, we need absolute clarity. We cannot have a senior Minister coming in and saying that what the Taoiseach announced only an hour ago is not true.

An Ceann Comhairle: No, that is a political debate and not a point of order. The Deputy is out of order.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: No, I want clarification, please.

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An Ceann Comhairle: I am sorry, but the Deputy is not going to get it. My apologies, but the Minister has responded and we must move on now. I will correct Deputy McNamara. I do not know where he got the figure of €17 million from or to what that is referring. Our presence here has not incurred any cost above €1.8 million, which I think is the figure, and most of that is related to broadcasting. Of that €1.8 million, much of that expenditure would have been incurred anyway if we were in Leinster House. It is not an addition and we are not going to have a debate.

Deputy Michael McNamara: The Ceann Comhairle trots that out persistently.

An Ceann Comhairle: We are not going to have a debate.

Deputy Michael McNamara: Leinster House is still open. All the costs involved are still being met.

An Ceann Comhairle: We are not going to have a debate, Deputy. Let me also make it clear that I do not make any unilateral decisions on these matters. The decision-making body was the Business Committee, acting on the basis of advice regarding public health from health and safety consultants, our own staff and the Houses of the Oireachtas Service.

Question put:

<i>The Dáil divided: Tá, 25; Níl, 20; Staon, 0.</i>		
<i>Tá</i>	<i>Níl</i>	<i>Stاون</i>
<i>Browne, James.</i>	<i>Boyd Barrett, Richard.</i>	
<i>Burke, Colm.</i>	<i>Browne, Martin.</i>	
<i>Canney, Seán.</i>	<i>Crowe, Seán.</i>	
<i>Cannon, Ciarán.</i>	<i>Kelly, Alan.</i>	
<i>Chambers, Jack.</i>	<i>Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.</i>	
<i>Devlin, Cormac.</i>	<i>McGrath, Mattie.</i>	
<i>Dillon, Alan.</i>	<i>McNamara, Michael.</i>	
<i>Duffy, Francis Noel.</i>	<i>Murphy, Catherine.</i>	
<i>Durkan, Bernard J.</i>	<i>Nolan, Carol.</i>	
<i>Flaherty, Joe.</i>	<i>O'Callaghan, Cian.</i>	
<i>Grealish, Noel.</i>	<i>O'Reilly, Louise.</i>	
<i>Griffin, Brendan.</i>	<i>O'Rourke, Darren.</i>	
<i>Higgins, Emer.</i>	<i>Ó Broin, Eoin.</i>	
<i>Lahart, John.</i>	<i>Ó Murchú, Ruairí.</i>	
<i>MacSharry, Marc.</i>	<i>Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.</i>	
<i>McAuliffe, Paul.</i>	<i>Pringle, Thomas.</i>	
<i>McHugh, Joe.</i>	<i>Ryan, Patricia.</i>	
<i>Naughton, Hildegard.</i>	<i>Smith, Duncan.</i>	
<i>O'Brien, Darragh.</i>	<i>Tóibín, Peadar.</i>	
<i>O'Donovan, Patrick.</i>	<i>Ward, Mark.</i>	
<i>O'Sullivan, Christopher.</i>		
<i>Ó Cathasaigh, Marc.</i>		
<i>Phelan, John Paul.</i>		

<i>Ryan, Eamon.</i>		
<i>Smyth, Niamh.</i>		

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Brendan Griffin and Jack Chambers; Níl, Deputies Mattie McGrath and Pádraig Mac Lochlainn.

Question declared carried.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: The programme for Government promised an examination of the issue of defective housing in the first 12 months. The programme states that the examination will have “regard to the recommendations of the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Housing report, ‘Safe as Houses’.” As the Minister knows, that report called for the introduction of a latent defects redress scheme for affected homeowners. The working group on defective buildings was announced by the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Deputy Darragh O’Brien, in September. It has been meeting monthly since March but it appears that its work is greatly delayed. Can the Minister confirm that the group will finish its work in time to meet the programme for Government commitment to have its report within 12 months? Can he also confirm that provision will be made in budget 2022 for a redress scheme for the affected homeowners?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: My colleague, the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media, Deputy Catherine Martin, was instrumental in putting that commitment in the programme for Government because she saw in her constituency, as I am sure we have all seen in our constituencies, the effects of defective building. It is seen not just counties Donegal and Mayo but right across the country. I will contact the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage and try to get a specific timeline. I do not have it to hand but I will contact the Minister and ask him to forward it to the Deputy. It has to be part of a much wider approach to improve building standards and protect those affected by defects over recent years.

Deputy Alan Kelly: Given the Minister’s responses to other questions on the decisions the Cabinet has just made, I think he is honestly making it up as he goes along. The fact that he came into the Dáil and said he did not believe there will be a fourth wave is absolutely extraordinary.

What parameters were set down for the National Public Health Emergency Team, NPHE? Generally speaking, the Government would have to advise NPHE that we are part of Europe and have EU law, we know the vaccine passport will be in place on 19 July and we do not believe in discrimination. Those would be two fairly large pillars the Government would put in front of NPHE and say that any advice should be between those two pillars. Was that done?

When was the mechanism commenced for a discriminatory process to be put in place whereby vaccinated people will have a passport to get into hospitality? I have tabled parliamentary questions in this regard. In fact, I asked the Taoiseach on the floor of this House in December what plans were in place for that and it did not seem like there was an iota. How far advanced is that?

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An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy. His time is up.

Deputy Alan Kelly: Do not tell me the Government is only starting now. Presumably-----

An Ceann Comhairle: The time is up.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: Deputy Kelly should be careful in terms of putting words in people's mouths. I did not say that I did not think there would be a fourth wave. I said that I had faith in our ability as a country to avoid the more-----

Deputy Alan Kelly: You said you did not believe in it.

An Ceann Comhairle: Please, allow the Minister to answer without interruption.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I said I did not believe we would end up in the most pessimistic scenario, with something in the order of 1,685 people in ICU.

(Interruptions).

Deputy Eamon Ryan: On the second issue, I will explain to Deputy McGrath and others why I said to be careful in saying it is decided and that we know exactly the response to the NPHEH advice yesterday. To answer Deputy Kelly's question, in truth, Government made a policy decision in May that it would not operate a discriminatory system with regard to vaccines. That was a policy decision based on much detailed analysis. NPHEH raised concern with the Government last night because of the Delta variant and recommended that we follow such an approach. What the Government has said in response-----

Deputy Michael McNamara: It is a discriminatory approach.

Deputy Alan Kelly: It is complete discrimination against young people.

An Ceann Comhairle: The time is up.

Deputy Alan Kelly: This is complete discrimination.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: If I can finish the point, the Government said in response that we will not ignore what NPHEH is saying. We will heed the information and come up with a plan, which will make sure we avoid getting into that most pessimistic scenario.

(Interruptions).

An Ceann Comhairle: The time is up.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I ask the Ceann Comhairle to allow me to conclude. We said that, rather than making a decision late at night on how exactly this would be implemented, because it is a change of policy and approach, it would be far better to talk to other Oireachtas Members and relevant sectors to see how we can implement the sorts of recommendations they are making in a way that is not discriminatory against younger people and will provide a range of different alternatives. That will be done before 19 July.

Deputy Alan Kelly: That is impossible.

An Ceann Comhairle: We cannot have a detailed conversation about this. We have procedures to follow.

Deputy Cian O’Callaghan: Yesterday, Professor John FitzGerald said the Government’s plan to inflate house prices through the shared equity scheme was a bad idea for Ireland and a case of politicians doing stupid things. He pointed out that property owners and landowners would benefit from the scheme, not potential buyers. In the UK, a similar scheme led to a boom in profits for large developers. The Central Bank, the Economic and Social Research Institute, ESRI, and officials from the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage and the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform have all warned against the scheme. Given that Ireland already has some of the highest house prices in Europe and in view of the large increases in prices over the past year, will the Government scrap this scheme to inflate house prices?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: The Government will look at all approaches and will not rely on any one scheme. We will introduce a series of measures that will have an effect in damping down prices. The variety of those measures will be set out in a housing for all strategy, which will be produced shortly, ahead of the national development plan, NDP, review, in recognition of the importance and priority we are putting on housing. It will not be any one solution. Yes, we have to look at the impact of individual solutions in terms of housing demand but when that is combined with other measures and done as part of a collective approach, which has a whole range of different solutions, then I believe it can be managed in a way that does not add to inflationary prices. The other measures are going to be key and they are not yet fully set out. They will be in the housing for all strategy.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Regarding the announcement on indoor dining, the idea that only people who are vaccinated will be allowed to avail of indoor dining and hospitality, but we will have young workers who are not vaccinated serving them, is absolutely nonsensical. The Government needs to address that issue. Under no circumstances should workers who are not vaccinated be told they must work in an environment we are told is unsafe for people who are not vaccinated and also told they cannot have a drink or a meal in the very same sorts of places. That makes no sense whatsoever. While the whole issue needs to be debated properly in the Dáil early this week, and should have been debated already, one thing the Government really needs to address is the question of the vaccination of workers who will be going into these environments-----

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy’s time is up.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: -----and what we can do to ramp up the vaccination programme for them.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: Through long stages of this crisis, the Deputy’s party has had a consistent position in asking us to heed the public health advice and make sure we apply it. As I said earlier, the Deputy will have a chance to put such questions to our health officials. They recommended that we follow an approach that uses a whole range of different measures, not just vaccination but also use of personal protective equipment, PPE, distancing and other mechanisms. They argued that what we are proposing is safe and can be done properly, in a way that protects workers and customers. That advice is something we will have to put into action in the plan that will be devised to manage this. It is being done on the basis of that proper health advice. The Deputy and others will have a chance to question the health authorities on how it will work before any plan is put into place.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Ireland is alone now in Europe in the banning of indoor dining and drinking. Pubs and restaurants here have been closed longer than in any other European coun-

try. Tens of thousands of hospitality workers are out of work at the moment and being pushed into poverty. Many businesses are operating in a zombie state, surviving on Government supports. Young people are now being threatened with a two-tier citizenship, whereby civil rights will be for some but not for others. Then we have the ongoing problem with regards antigen testing. It looks to many people that the Government has outsourced these decisions to a third party. Who knew that the idea of a revolving Taoiseach would one day include the chief medical officer, CMO, of this State? What analysis has the Government done on the figures given by the NPHET? Finally, if the Government is alone in Europe in banning indoor dining, why is such activity more dangerous in Irish pubs and restaurants than it is in every other European country?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: This is a changing situation and, as I said earlier, it is not certain. No one knows exactly what course the virus will take but it is likely, based on the evidence we were shown last night, that there will be a similar concern in other European countries about a rise in the Delta variant. How they manage that will vary from country to country. I understand the Lisbon Government has, in response to the recent increase in Delta variant numbers in Portugal, reintroduced restrictions. That is what we do not want to do. We do not want to give to businesses or young people, particularly those going to work in any business, false promise that they should come off the pandemic unemployment payment, PUP, and go into a job and then it is gone the following week as the numbers rise.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Is it better to stay indoors and be afraid it may rain or walk outside because it may not rain in the future?

An Ceann Comhairle: The Minister must be allowed to answer without interruption.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: It is better for us to manage this in the way we have been successfully doing, whereby we have opened up our schools, personal services, sports events and a whole range of different workplaces, and we have kept them open.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Minister's time is up.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: That is what we are going to continue to do, including the opening of hospitality this summer. We just want to do it in a way that does not see it going backwards afterwards.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: The Minister is a man with deep Tipperary roots and I know he is looking favourably at trying to get Tipperary town bypassed. I compliment Patrick O'Callaghan, a home-grown Tipperary man, on the 75 jobs announced this week, half of them in Tipperary. I ask the Minister to look at the bypass plan prior to the review of the national development plan. Spending €2 billion to €3 billion on the M20 from Cork to Limerick is a waste of money and damages the environment. We should carry on and bypass Charleville and Buttevant, have an alignment with that road and upgrade the N24 from Limerick to Waterford to motorway status. At less than €800 million, that would cost a fraction of the price, provide connectivity with the ports of Foynes and Waterford and bypass Tipperary town. Will the Minister please ensure this project happens? I am sure he does not want the big projects that are doing damage to the environment and ecology. A simple bypass would relieve congestion and allow Tipperary town to flourish and its people to have the stamina, energy and enthusiasm to live, like Patrick O'Callaghan has shown this week.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: My understanding is that all the options are being looked at, includ-

ing the building of rail connectivity between Cork and Limerick as a way of improving connectivity to the cities. This is not a formal position but I understand it is now less likely that the option that seemed like the best one, which colleagues of mine were promoting, of using a connection via Tipperary to the Cork-Dublin motorway to provide such connectivity is not being favoured. Whatever option is agreed, it must fit within the new NDP. One of the constraints in that regard is a financial constraint because we will have to invest massively in housing, climate, farming and forestry. We will also have to invest massively in public transport and active travel, as well as in roads. The national development plan review, as I see it, is providing us with an opportunity to consider how that money is best spent. Like the Deputy, I think it is best spent on a large number of small bypasses to see our towns restored. That will deliver the national planning framework requirement for balanced regional development and compact development.

Deputy Michael McNamara: I begin by correcting what I said earlier about the amount of money that has been wasted on sittings in the national convention centre. As the Ceann Comhairle proudly pointed out, it is indeed €1.8 million of taxpayers' money that has been spent on this place.

The Minister brought a Bill through the House dealing with the climate action plan that will, in effect, remove the ability of this House to question the priorities and the plan put in place. That is fundamentally undemocratic and how it fits with the constitutional imperative for the Government to be answerable to the Dáil remains to be seen. Last week, a new Common Agricultural Policy, CAP, budget was agreed that will see 25% of provision being moved to Pillar 2 environmental measures. I expect the Minister will agree with me that this is a positive development. However, given that we will have no control over the climate action plan, will he commit now to maximum co-funding for those environmental measures? In particular, will he give a commitment that farmers already engaged in sustainable farming will not have to reduce their herd numbers by the same percentage as less sustainable ones, such that there will not be an across-the-board cut?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I was glad there was agreement on the revised CAP arrangements. There is good and bad in it. From an environmental perspective, many of my colleagues in Brussels are deeply disappointed it did not go further. In truth, much of the detail on how it is going to be applied is yet to be finalised and teased out. CAP and all our policy measures must fit in with out climate action plan and the legislation the Deputy referred to, which will be brought back to this House on an ongoing basis. We will be consulting in each sectoral area to get the views, opinions and the Oireachtas support for what is being done. It must be done in a way that increases incomes in agriculture and brings new, young farmers into farming and forestry and into restoring our wetlands and managing our wildlife and that also reduces emissions. I believe that can be done. There will be multiple sources of funding. Much of it has to come from the retailers and large processors, which have been taking a disproportionate share of the price. That, together with CAP, should help.

Deputy Niamh Smyth: Following on from the Government's announcements today I want to make a few observations. As Chair of the Oireachtas committee which deals with tourism I am mindful this will come as devastating news to the hospitality sector. Will the Minister talk us through some of the supports the Government intends to put in place for the hospitality sector? We cannot expect people to effectively police whether customers for indoor dining are vaccinated or not. I live in a Border county and I see people leaving, understandably, to go a couple of miles up the road where there is indoor dining. We cannot have that inconsistency on

this one island. I really fear we are driving people out of our own island to other jurisdictions for indoor dining and for the staycation we have been advocating for.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I share Deputy Smyth's concerns and her belief we can manage hospitality in a way that works for public health and to restore our tourism and hospitality sectors. As an interim measure, while we are devising the plans and working out the approach and the reopening plans, there will be further supports and extensions. The PUP is due to be closed to new applicants but that will be extended for a further week into early July. The Minister for Finance, Deputy Donohoe, will set out the details but as I recall, there will be a two-week double Covid restrictions support scheme, CRSS, payment to particularly affected businesses. We need to get them back working and open, however. The Government's real, key focus is that those measures are very temporary and that they are not the answer. The answer is to get our pubs and restaurants open and we commit to making that happen.

Deputy Francis Noel Duffy: The programme for Government commits to the development of the town centre first policy. Revitalising our towns through the town centre first model will make them more livable and viable. It will create employment and bring people back to living in the heart of our towns in line with the 15-minute city concept. The Green Party supports a sustainable and progressive vision for rural Ireland. The town centre first model is at the core of this vision. I understand the town centre first interdepartmental advisory group is due to publish its recommendations for the Government to consider this month. Will the Minister give an update on the work the interdepartmental advisory group is doing? Can he provide a timeline for when we might see the recommendations being implemented?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I absolutely agree with the Deputy on the potential benefits of the town centre first strategy. Following on from the earlier discussion, building bypasses and bringing life back into the centre of towns is such an attractive prospect because it is a wonderful way of addressing our housing crisis. Getting families and young people back living in towns means they can access services. The 15-minute city concept is also a 15-minute town concept. Refurbishing beautiful historic buildings and bringing them back in a variety of different ways is going to be a much more economical, low-carbon and socially progressive way for the State to bring back communities. That sense of living within the centre of that community, of that town, is something we can turn around. I understand the working group is due to complete at the end of July or in that time period. There are four working groups which are close to completing their work. I look forward to delivering it.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: Stobart Air has let 480 workers go. It is absolutely devastating news for them and their families; the worst possible news for them at the worst possible time. The Minister does not have a plan for our aviation sector and we are starting to see the impact of it now. I have asked the Minister specifically about the former Stobart Air workers before but I do so again. Will he please liaise with his colleague in the Department of Social Protection and put in place one person who can help to guide these workers through the process? They were working away, then they could not work for public health reasons. They want to be back in work but they now have to deal with the social welfare system. They are applying for redundancies. Some of these workers are not unionised and are represented by a staff association. They need some additional help. It has been done for other workers. This is my second time asking the Minister to please put something in place for them.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I will absolutely work directly with the Minister for Social Protection to ensure that every sort of support is made from the State for the workers in Stobart. The

other support that could come is the restoration of services, particularly on the two public service routes where we have a direct influence and possible control, namely, the routes to counties Donegal and Kerry. We are in the process of getting those public services back in place. Hopefully it will provide some opportunities for some of the workers from Stobart to find employment again and, with the rest of the industry, see the return of aviation from 19 July as a path through to recovery.

Report on Service by the Defence Forces: Referral to Select Committee

Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Jack Chambers): I move:

That the proposal that Dáil Éireann approves the report by the Minister for Defence regarding service by the Defence Forces with the United Nations in 2020, a copy of which was laid before Dáil Éireann on 21st June, 2021, in accordance with section 13 of the Defence (Amendment) Act, 2006, be referred to the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence, in accordance with Standing Order 95(1)(a), which, not later than 20th October, 2021, shall send a message to the Dáil in the manner prescribed in Standing Order 101, and Standing Order 100(2) shall accordingly apply.”

Question put and agreed to.

Pre-legislative Scrutiny Waiver Requests: Motion

Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Jack Chambers): I move:

It is proposed, notwithstanding anything in Standing Orders, that until further notice in the 33rd Dáil, the following procedure shall apply to requests for waivers in relation to pre-legislative scrutiny of Government Bills:

(a) where a member of the Government or a Minister of State wishes to initiate a Bill pursuant to Standing Order 174 without pre-legislative scrutiny, he or she shall request a waiver in that regard from the Committee empowered under Standing Order 95 to consider Bills published by the member of the Government or Minister of State (in this Resolution, referred to as the ‘relevant Committee’);

(b) where a relevant Committee declines a waiver request made under paragraph (a), the member of the Government or Minister of State may request the Business Committee to make a determination on the matter; and

(c) where following consideration pursuant to paragraph (b), the Business Committee determines that pre-legislative scrutiny should not be waived, the member of the Government or Minister of State may table a motion on notice in the following terms:

‘That initiation of the [insert short title of Bill] may proceed pursuant to Standing Order 174 notwithstanding that pre-legislative consideration of the Bill pursuant to Standing Order 173 has not been waived.’”

Question put and agreed to.

Ceisteanna - Questions

Central Statistics Office

An Ceann Comhairle: Questions to the Taoiseach are being taken by the Government Chief Whip.

1. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his engagements with the Central Statistics Office regarding the rescheduling of Census 2021. [32051/21]

2. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on any engagements with the Central Statistics Office with regard to the rescheduling of Census 2021. [33041/21]

3. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his engagements with the Central Statistics Office regarding the rescheduling of Census 2021. [34512/21]

4. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on any engagements with the Central Statistics Office with regard to the rescheduling of Census 2021. [34841/21]

5. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on any engagements with the Central Statistics Office with regard to the rescheduling of Census 2021. [34844/21]

6. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Taoiseach the consultation he has had with the Central Statistics Office in relation to Census 2021. [34995/21]

Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Jack Chambers): I propose to take Questions Nos. 1 to 6, inclusive, together.

On the advice of the Central Statistics Office, CSO, the Government decided on 15 September, to postpone the 2021 census to 3 April 2022. The decision to postpone the census scheduled for 18 April 2021 until 3 April 2022 was not taken lightly and was based on a number of factors. Foremost in the decision making, was the need to ensure the safety of the general public and CSO field staff, coupled with the need to deliver a census that achieves the highest possible response rate, across all facets of Irish society. Furthermore, the census of population is a major logistical operation and Covid-19 restrictions have prevented or delayed many key planning activities from taking place over recent months. On consideration of these challenges the Government decided to postpone the 2021 census until April 2022 to enable the CSO to undertake a comprehensive, inclusive and safe census in 2022 which will provide valuable and accurate data for our country in the years ahead.

Between censuses, the Central Statistics Office produces annual population estimates rolled forward from the previous census, which was in 2016. Consequently, the CSO will roll these estimates forward for an additional year until they can be recalibrated with the new detailed census data, preliminary results of which will be available in mid-2022 and definitive results on a phased basis from April to December 2023. Under framework Regulation (EC) No. 763/2008 of the European Parliament and of the Council and implementing Regulation (EU) No. 2017/712, Ireland is required to transmit census data to EUROSTAT with a reference date in 2021. This transmission must be made by March 2024. The Central Statistics Office, CSO,

will work closely with EUROSTAT to mitigate the impact on the changed census date and consider the introduction of the additional methodologies and data sources in order to satisfy EUROSTAT's requirements.

The planning for census 2022 involves revising project timelines and the introduction of new approaches to reduce further potential disruption with the likes of online interviewing and training is now taking place.

Deputy Alan Kelly: The census was correctly postponed because of the pandemic but we cannot hold off on it any longer because the data are central to all our decision-making. The date is now fixed for April 2022, as the Minister of State indicated, and I presume that is an absolute decision. If that is the case, when will recruitment for enumerators and extra staff that will clearly be needed this time around begin? Is there a plan to do this much quicker and will the process be paper-based?

The census will contain eight new questions on matters ranging from renewable energy to smoke alarms, childcare, working from home, commuting and a range of other matters. Is that definite? In light of the pandemic and the major changes made to our society, will there be other new questions based on the changes we experienced in Ireland? The question on religion is still unclear, asking what is a person's religion before listing a number of faiths, having a space in which a person can write in a religion or the option of stating "no religion". Would it be more accurate to ask if a person is just religious?

I have a question I would like the Minister of State to answer directly. Finally, and very important for all of us here, given the fact that the census will now be April 2022 and under legislation there is a requirement for a constituency commission to set the constituency boundaries in the country - I know from my time as Minister that this is fixed in time - will this commence on time? This is particularly relevant for the preliminary census. It would be totally unfair and unbalanced to have the next election with current constituency boundaries if we did not take on board the new census data.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: It was understandable and appropriate that the census was deferred but it is really important for it to go ahead next year. What opportunities are there for additional questions? Is there a limit on the number of questions that can be put? The question on religion is quite useful as we can measure, for example, the requirements of schools with regard to particular religions. We have been trying to change the ethos governing schools and the process is particularly slow, so it is an important measurement.

The Minister of State indicates the data are important with respect to European institutions and our obligations. It is also important if we are to provide public services like schools in proportion to population centres. I have certainly heard people talking about emigrating and, unfortunately, that is likely to be a feature in future.

Has work commenced on digitising the data from the 1926 census? There is the question of the 100-year rule but this is quite an important census.

What measurements are applied to ensure the census of population is actually used? We can look at what is often a chaotic process in providing schools. Sometimes I wonder if the very valuable information collected is used appropriately. Is there a function at all in ensuring the data collected can be used as it should be?

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: I specifically ask about the collation of data relating to domestic and gender-based violence. As the Minister of State knows, it has been almost two decades since a landmark sexual abuse and violence in Ireland report. Following a very lengthy campaign by advocates and front-line service providers, agreement was reached between the Department of Justice and the Central Statistics Office by way of a memorandum of understanding in 2019 on the undertaking of a comprehensive State-wide survey on the prevalence of sexual violence here, as well as looking at the under-reporting of such crimes. The survey is to be done in five stages and was to be completed by the end of 2023. Phase 2 of the survey was due to be completed at the end of this year.

Will the Government Chief Whip confirm the CSO will conclude the survey design, preparation and pilot by the end of this year and that the methodology the CSO intends to use to conduct this survey has been decided? Will the data collection phase of the survey begin in January as planned, with data processing and analysis in October? Finally, will the survey include vulnerable cohorts of men and women, such as those with disabilities or in direct provision, migrant women, LGBTQI and the Traveller and Roma communities?

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: It is welcome that the census is rescheduled but I must ask whether the Government plays a blind bit of notice to the critical data it gathers, which allows us to plan, particularly in the area of school provision. Judging from my constituency, the Department of Education and the Government does not use the data.

I could name some of the patron school bodies and recite the numbers they have to deal with but none of them has a site. Sallynoggin Educate Together is on a temporary site that is too small and we have no idea when it will get a permanent site. We are not quite sure if the temporary site it has been given will be able to accommodate its numbers. Gaelscoil Laighean had to fight for years in order to get a permanent site but it is still on a temporary site. Dún Laoghaire Educate Together finally got a site, after years of campaigning, but it is still at an unsatisfactory temporary site. Booterstown National School is seeking to acquire a parish hall for an autism spectrum disorder class that is needed in the area but it cannot get any kind of decision from the Department of Education. At Clonkeen school in Deansgrange, the Government is allowing the Christian Brothers to sell all its playing fields to the detriment of the facilities needed in the school when there is a clear shortage of sites for schools in the area.

It appears we have all this data but they do not inform planning in school provision. That is certainly the case in my constituency and I suspect the same is true right across the country.

Deputy Cormac Devlin: I thank the Minister of State for his reply. The right decision was taken last September to postpone the census until 3 April next year. It is important to proceed and gather that information from the census so policymakers can make the right decision over the next ten years. Perhaps the Minister of State could detail the contingencies in place to ensure the census will happen next April.

A colleague has raised the question of the 1926 census, data from which is due to be published in 2026. Will the Minister of State consider doing that earlier? That census was taken at a tumultuous time for the State and the previous census was taken in 1911. It would be important to look at publishing it a bit earlier. There would be some great tourism and heritage benefits in this, especially for those who live abroad and who might come to the State to trace their roots. It is important that we look to try to publish that information as soon as possible.

Deputy Jack Chambers: I hope I have a few minutes as there have been plenty of questions from everyone. There was a query on how census questions are selected. The census forms for use next year have been finalised and preparation of the census questions is a multi-year project involving public consultation, commencing in 2017. There was a broad census advisory group, comprising 21 persons from Departments, social partners, the Economic and Social Research Institute, the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission, academia, local government and a range of other people. The holding of a census pilot survey took place in 2018. Following the completion of the pilot, the census advisory group convened to consider the findings and finalise the questions to be concluded in census 2021.

Questions were asked about the potential inclusion of additional questions in the survey. As I said, the Central Statistics Office convened the group in 2017. It included a broad range of partners from across society and dictated the questions set. Any feedback on the current questions can be taken into account for the following census.

Questions were also asked about when the census results will be available. Preliminary results will be available in mid-2022 and definitive results will be made available on a phased basis from April to December 2023.

Deputy Kelly asked about the constituency boundary report. It is expected that the delay of one year will result in a similar delay to the report of the next constituency commission. The establishment of a commission is, however, a matter for the Oireachtas. The most recent constituency commission was established on 14 July 2016 following the publication of preliminary results of the census of population. The commission is required to present its report not later than three months after the publication by the CSO of the final result of the 2016 census.

With regard to how the postponement will affect next year, Covid-19 has impacted the CSO statistical work programme during the last year. More than 900 CSO staff moved from CSO offices to work from their homes. The single largest casualty by scale was the postponement of the census of population from 2021 to 2022.

Deputy Ó Broin asked about the progress being made on the development of the sexual violence survey. The Central Statistics Office agreed to a request by the Minister for Justice at the end of 2018 to oversee the development and delivery of a significant new national survey on the prevalence of sexual violence in Ireland. Given the complexity and sensitivity of the survey, it was envisaged that the entire process of scoping, planning, executing and reporting the survey would take in the region of five years, with exact timings only emerging as the scoping progresses. The survey involves the collection of extremely sensitive personal data from householders in a manner that is confidential and ethical, and which is designed to support accurate and reliable survey results. The protection of privacy and support for the needs of all householders and CSO staff involved is a priority. Strong project governance and oversight mechanisms have been established, internally within the CSO and externally with the Department of Justice and the stakeholder community, and this supports the project. Expertise is being built by engaging with the international experts in the field and other national statistical institutes. Expertise continues to be built through working with national experts, including in academia, policy development, personnel and service provision.

There has been excellent engagement from the stakeholder community, including NGOs such as Rape Crisis Network Ireland and Government agencies. Agreement was reached on the various areas to be tested on the pilot stage. These areas were translated into the questionnaire

for the pilot. The pilot objectives and design have been outlined. Given the complexities and particular sensitivities in this survey, a pilot survey is important to learn lessons for the eventual main study. The pilot was scheduled to go into the field in July 2020, which was earlier than first estimated in 2019. However, the CSO household survey operations changed with the impact of Covid-19, with all face-to-face interviews cancelled. How the survey is delivered is important, not only for data quality but also for respondent and interviewer safety. Consequently, the pilot was postponed to April 2021. After a redesign, a pilot was agreed and fieldwork has now been completed. Findings from the pilot, including implications for the main survey, should be available in the third quarter of 2021. Pending the findings, it is still intended at this stage that the survey results will be available as per the original timeframe in 2023.

Deputy Devlin and others raised the issue of the 1926 forms. The censuses of population held between 1926 and 1991, inclusive, were carried out under the Statistics Act 1926, which does not permit release of any census records at any time. The Statistics Act 1993, however, repealed the 1926 and 1946 Acts and provided for the release of sensitive forms for these censuses 100 years after the date of the relevant census. The retrospective introduction of the 100 years' exemption was seen by some as undermining the original guarantee of confidentiality given to householders. It was generally accepted, however, that 100 years was a reasonable compromise in all the circumstances, including having regard to increased life expectancy.

I have tried to respond to most of the questions. I thank Members for their contributions.

Planning and Development (Amendment) (No. 3) Bill 2021: Second Stage

An Ceann Comhairle: I welcome the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Deputy Darragh O'Brien. He is certainly very busy on the legislative front.

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): I move: "That the Bill be now read a Second Time."

I am grateful for the opportunity to introduce the Planning and Development (Amendment) (No. 3) Bill 2021 and I thank all colleagues for facilitating the urgent passage of this important legislation through the Houses of the Oireachtas. I am bringing forward the Bill as a matter of urgency in order to address the delays and disruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic on the completion of construction projects, including housing projects, and for the completion of development plan programmes, in particular, having regard to arrangements for consultation with elected members and the public. The Bill will also bring forward urgently needed amendments to the ministerial order procedure of the planning Act to ensure such orders will apply to development by or on behalf of statutory undertakers, and amendments to the Fifth Schedule to the Planning and Development Act 2000, which I will go into a little more detail shortly.

Due to the urgent need for this legislation, I made a request to the Business Committee of the Houses of the Oireachtas to waive the requirement for pre-legislative scrutiny of this general scheme by the Joint Committee on Housing, Local Government and Heritage. The waiver was granted earlier this month following a briefing session by my officials with the members of the joint committee.

With regard to the purpose of the Bill, the first two provisions I will discuss are proposed in the context of delays and disruption to certain elements of the planning system as a result of

Covid-19 restrictions. The first provision proposes, at sections 2, 6 and 8, to allow a planning authority, should it so decide, to take an additional period of up to one year over and above the statutory period set out in the Planning and Development Act 2000 to prepare a new development plan for its area. Some local authorities have indicated that, while they have remained open for business despite Covid-19 restrictions and have facilitated public participation in the plan-making process, the restrictions have resulted in unavoidable disruption to the development plan programme, in particular, the arrangements relating to consultation with elected members and the public.

Colleagues will agree that public participation is a core principle of the planning and development system. It requires that people have the opportunity to participate in decisions at the strategic plan-making level and the individual planning application level. The public participation elements of the planning system were previously recognised as an essential service in SI 448 of 2020 and were not, therefore, subject to travel restrictions. The mandatory requirement to hold public meetings in relation to a proposed development plan has been replaced with the obligation for planning authorities to consult members of the public in such manner as they consider appropriate and to invite submissions in writing from members of the public in relation to a proposed development plan, which may include the holding of a public meeting.

Notwithstanding this, some planning authorities have indicated that it has been necessary to delay certain stages of the plan-making process to ensure the appropriate level of engagement with the planning system can be facilitated with elected members and members of the public and the other practical matters that have arisen from this can be addressed. As a result, they may not be able to finalise the new development plan within the statutory time periods set out in the Act. I propose, therefore, that where a planning authority requires additional time to prepare a new development plan, it would need to consider and set out the reasons for doing so, and it would need to extend the duration of the existing development plan accordingly, taking appropriate account of any potential environmental effect or any effect on a designated European site which might result, in line with the requirements of the strategic environmental assessment and habitats directives.

The Bill was passed by the Seanad without opposition. Following engagement with Senators, I have amended the original Bill to reduce the threshold of a 75% majority of elected members to a simple majority to initiate such an extension of duration. As colleagues know, a development plan is a reserve function of our county and city councillors. It is wholly appropriate that it is they who decide by simple majority as to whether a local authority wishes to extend its development plan process because of difficulties that have arisen due to logistical difficulties, in particular with regard to public consultation due to Covid. It is not an obligation. Many local authorities that have been in contact have proceeded further along the line with their development plans and there will be no need for this. However, more than 15 authorities have directly contacted the Department to express that they have had difficulties with certain aspects, particularly with regard to public consultation. We will leave it to the locally elected members who represent their communities to make this decision as to whether a local authority wishes to extend its development plan process by one year.

The second key provision, in section 7, is grounded in the need to ensure the timely delivery of housing and the completion of construction projects, in the context of delays and disruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. This amendment to the Planning Act will allow, on a temporary basis, for further extensions of planning permission previously extended where those developments were commenced with substantial works carried out by a period of up to two

years or until 31 December 2023, whichever first occurs.

The general scheme of the Bill, as approved by Cabinet this month, had originally provided for a single year of further extension. However, following further consultation and on reflection, noting that this provision would only be available where the extension is required to enable the completion of a development where substantial works have been carried out, an extension of up to two years, subject to a sunset clause of 31 December 2023, was considered appropriate. This was considered to be a reasonable period to respond not only to the direct delays to construction work caused by the Covid-19 pandemic over the past year but also to reflect the possible additional disruption to logistics, supply chains, and availability of personnel when trying to get construction work restarted after the shutdown and finished after the mandatory and unplanned second closure of building sites over the past year.

This provision will also allow for the further extension of permission that has expired or is due to expire during the period from 8 January 2021, when the most recent construction restrictions were introduced, to the day before section 7 comes into operation. Such applications must be lodged within six months after the commencement of this provision. Any further extensions will be subject to a condition that environmental assessment is not required in relation to the proposed extension of time. If an environmental impact assessment or appropriate assessment is required then a fresh planning application will need to be made in order to continue the development, as this allows for updated environmental assessments and public participation in the process.

Separate to these Covid-19 related amendments, section 9 contains a proposal to amend the ministerial order provisions in section 181 of the 2000 Act, for the avoidance of doubt, to include development by or on behalf of statutory undertakers. This amendment is being made at the request of the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications and on the advice of the Office of the Attorney General. Section 181 enables a Minister, by order, to disapply the 2000 Act to development to be carried out by or on behalf of that Minister or the OPW. The relevant Minister must be satisfied that the carrying out of the development is required by reason of an accident or emergency and the development may be subject to an environmental assessment procedure carried out by An Bord Pleanála before any order is made where such assessments are determined to be required.

The final provision, at section 10, involves a proposal to amend the Fifth Schedule to the Planning and Development Act 2000, which sets out conditions that may be imposed as part of a planning permission without attracting compensation. The new provision relates to a very important condition which restricts the persons of a particular class or description who may use a dwelling which has been approved as part of the planning permission.

I thank colleagues for their time and for allowing the Bill to be brought forward at relatively short notice. I look forward to the debate on the Bill's provisions. I will seek to respond to any questions raised on Second Stage and as we move through the other Stages.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: I thank the Minister for his outline of what the Bill involves. By way of a general comment, rushed planning legislation, unfortunately, often leads to bad planning outcomes. Too often in previous years we have seen very complex and technical changes introduced at the last minute to already very complex planning and development legislation, the outcome of which has been to make our planning system more complex and cumbersome and less participative than it should be. I have to say, and I will explain why in a moment, that

I have some concerns with the information before us today. Having said that, I fully understand the need for these provisions. As a result, my concern is not with the principle but with the fact that, unfortunately, we have very little time to tease out these measures. While I, along with the rest of the members of the Oireachtas housing committee, agreed to waive pre-legislative scrutiny because we understand the urgency involved, we had hoped to get some written independent views from planning organisations which, unfortunately, we have not got as yet. This is not the fault of the Minister or the people we wrote to, as they are all busy. However, it puts us in a very difficult position. We want to be constructive. We want to help. We want to make sure nobody is disadvantaged by Covid in the county development plans or in the delivery of homes but we are left grappling, nonetheless, in an imperfect timeframe.

I do not have an enormous concern about the county development plans but perhaps in his reply the Minister can give us some more information. I would be interested to know how many local authorities have been in touch with the Department requesting a possible extension and which local authorities these are. I know my local authority is quite advanced. South Dublin County Council and Dublin City Council have found, surprisingly, that there has been a far greater level of input in the pre-draft consultation phase, in part facilitated by greater online engagement. I would like to know who is asking for it. I also wonder why there are not more defined criteria in terms of the grounds on which local authority elected members can request it. It does seem quite general. Will the Minister outline his thinking with respect to this? Will he also outline why there is the fixed date of 1 January 2024? Is this the final cut-off point or could there, indeed, be a further extension?

Do I have ten minutes with additional time for my colleagues or are we all within the remaining seven minutes?

An Ceann Comhairle: There are 20 minutes in total in the slot.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: That is perfect. I would like more information from the Minister on what could be the maximum extension. This would be helpful.

On the extension of planning permission, I do not think there is a Deputy in the House who wants disadvantage in any way building sites, particularly those involving residential construction, that have been forced to close because of public health guidelines. I am concerned, however, about the two-year extension and a blanket extension. I thought it would have been much more effective for potentially affected developers to make the case for how much time they needed and to try to justify this, either in terms of the length of time they were closed because of public health restrictions or, for example, difficulties getting materials and workforce in between public health restrictions.

What none of us wants, and I know this is not the Minister's intention, is anybody using this extension to hoard planning permission and slow down the development or release of units. We raised this with the officials and I am raising it with the Minister. During the course of the debate, I would like to hear what the Minister will do and what he expects the planning authorities to do to ensure nobody does this and that the only people who avail of this are those who legitimately need it. I am concerned, however, as with all of the previous extensions of planning permission, that there can be no new consideration of requirements for environmental impact assessments or appropriate assessments where they had not been required when the very first planning permission grant was issued.

4 o'clock

We need to keep in mind that this could add two years onto what could now become a 17-year planning process involving an initial planning application, an extension under the 2010 Act, a further extension under the 2018 Act and now these two additional years. While that may not have been required 15 years ago for an environmental impact or other appropriate assessment, things could have changed in terms of the quantum of development in an area or the nature of the natural environment surrounding it. Therefore, it is a mistake that could not only cause some poor planning outcomes but could potentially be in breach of our obligations under EU law as well as the Aarhus Convention.

I made it clear that I was concerned when the Minister's predecessor, Eoghan Murphy, introduced the second five-year extension to planning permissions with no facility for public consultation. That was a mistake. I can think of a number of developments in my constituency where, given the length of time between the original grant and the extension application, there is a strong case for the planning authority to be able to consider third-party opinions. They may not be objections. Rather, they may be considered opinions to try to improve or address concerns within local communities. That is not in the Bill. It is a weakness that the Minister should consider.

With respect to the changes to section 181, I would like more information. I presume the Department and Minister have very particular projects in mind. Could the Minister share them with us on the floor of the Dáil? We got some of that information in the private briefings, but it would be valuable to have that. The Minister stated that they may be subject to environmental impact assessments. Why is the word "may" used rather than "shall"? What would be the determining factor in distinguishing between the two?

One of my concerns with recent changes to the Planning and Development Acts and the planning process in general has been an increasing conflict with our international obligations under the Aarhus Convention and the specific provisions that the previous Government introduced and that, unfortunately, I fear this Government is introducing. We already know that section 42 of the Planning and Development Act, introduced by way of amending legislation a number of years ago, is in direct contravention of the Aarhus Convention and our obligations under it. That is yet to be rectified and causes a problem throughout our entire planning system, including some aspects that the Minister is changing today.

I want to express a broader concern. I read regularly in newspapers about concerns that third-party opinions and interactions, appeals and judicial reviews are delaying the delivery of housing. I do not believe that is the case. In fact, the significant increase in judicial reviews of housing matters is a direct consequence of the flawed strategic housing development, SHD, planning process. The Minister and I share a desire to see the SHD process withdrawn from our planning system as quickly as possible, but I do not accept that the dramatic increase in judicial reviews was caused by a flawed fast-track planning system. It has not, of course, fast-tracked the delivery of homes at all because many of the people who availed of it have sat on those permissions rather than build developments. The view that somehow the denial of communities and organisations the right to appeal through a two-stage process, which is what we had before, can somehow be blamed for the delay in the delivery of housing is fundamentally flawed. I am a firm believer in a two-stage process.

Under our planning process, our local authorities should be the first stage. I would like

to see statutory timelines for preplanning and additional information and a very strict statutory timeline for the board. People have a right to an appeal mechanism through the board. The sooner we return to that kind of mechanism, the sooner there will be a dramatic reduction with respect to judicial reviews of residential housing developments.

The greater the involvement of communities at the earliest possible stage, whether that is for housing, offshore wind or other strategic infrastructural developments, the greater the scope to ensure that the final shape of that development meets all of the legitimate needs within our community. The constant attempt to present reasonable third-party opinions and interactions with our planning system as automatically not-in-my-backyard kinds of objections is unfair.

Very good organisations like the Dublin Democratic Planning Alliance, comprising people who want increased density in residential developments in our city and good quality urban planning in place-making, are concerned about some of the poor quality decisions emerging from the board, and I agree with them, in particular through the SHD process. Such organisations have a right to be involved in the process, and the sooner we bring them in, along with the communities they represent as well as elected members and others, the better.

I hope the Minister brings forward his amendments to the Planning and Development Acts to replace the SHD process. It would be great if we do not wait until February for that to be implemented and could do it before the end of this year. He will certainly have the support of many of us in opposition. Let us increase participation in planning and community involvement, and move towards high-quality place-making as the underpinning of good urban and rural development so that we do get just good quality homes but the infrastructure, amenities and economic opportunities that everybody deserves. Notwithstanding the significant concerns I have with parts of the Bill, we will not oppose it but will continue to work with the Minister to try to improve it in the time ahead.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the Bill. The preparation of development plans are important and shape the development of a county for the life of the plan. At their heart has to be the principal of participation and a commitment by local and central government that the vision set out in the written statements and maps comes to fruition. Meath County Council's plan is at an advanced stage. Today is the deadline for submissions on the material amendments. The final amended plan is expected to be completed in October or November of this year. In many respects, Meath County Council has been a guinea pig in all of this. From the council's perspective, officials have worked very hard to work through the review of the plan in the midst of Covid. They have been innovative. New online portals have been successfully developed, for example, and meetings have happened in person, online and in hybrid formats.

It has not been without issue. There are ongoing legal issues regarding access to taped recordings of the meetings. That would not happen ordinarily, but because of the new Covid restricted format we have them. How that information should be used is a bone of some considerable contention. Is it an official record of the meeting and its interactions and votes, etc., or is it an aid for preparing the official minutes?

More fundamentally, in Meath there is a question of the impact of the plan on the future social and economic development of the county. I refer in particular to the issue of dezoning. A couple of weeks ago, the *Business Post* carried a headline stating, "Meath dezones a third of housing lands to mitigate climate change". In the middle of a housing crisis in a county that,

relative to others, has shown some capacity to deliver houses we are proposing to significantly constrain residential development in urban settings with the rezoning of 319 ha. That is enough land for 9,500 new homes. There are the most outrageous of constraints on people in rural communities. The bar will be so high it will mean it is nigh on impossible to build a one-off house.

At the root of the county development plan is the ambition of local people, through their representatives, to deliver the best for their communities. They do not ask for much. Communities like Ashbourne, Ratoath, Dunshaughlin, Dunboyne, Stamullen and many others in my constituency of Meath East have lived through and with the consequences of the Celtic tiger, including developer-led rampant development, with light or no touch regulation. Houses have been built, but when it came to community infrastructure, including community centres, crèches, playgrounds, public green spaces and parks it could not and cannot be done. In Ashbourne, the community is united in its call for a public park of regional scale. Before the deadline this afternoon, close to 2,500 submissions in support of a proposal to zone lands for an 80-acre park will have been submitted. That is incredible. I want to commend everyone from the community and across the political spectrum who had a role in getting us to this point. I want to commend, in particular, the Ashbourne Playspace Network and, more recently, the Ashbourne Public Greenspaces Community Group for their tireless work over many years.

The community in Ashbourne is a perfect example of a community that is organised and playing its part. Members of the community engaged, lobbied, argued, petitioned, fundraised, protested and campaigned. Men and women – mostly women - have fought for the best for their community and children. It is not much that they ask for - a playground, public park and safe place to bring their children, go for a walk or run, play or kick a ball. It is incredible that they have to do that at all. At every turn, they meet resistance. The council is either reluctant or dealing with its own funding and other constraints. The Government, be it led by Fine Gael or Fianna Fáil, has added nothing. Communities are doing all the right things but are being failed. This needs to change now.

I invite the Minister to Ashbourne. He has a role to play, as does his Department. He should meet the local councillors and community groups. The county development plan and zoning issues will run their course. Regardless of their outcome, though, the community wants and deserves a public park. I implore the Minister and his Department to work with Meath County Council to make that happen. A meeting with stakeholders would be a help. The Minister has been to Ashbourne and I have met him there many times. There is an opportunity now. There is considerable popular support for this proposal across the political divide. It can happen and I would welcome the Minister's support in making it happen.

Deputy Mark Ward: As has been stated, Sinn Féin will not oppose the Bill. However, we tabled a number of amendments in the Seanad that would have strengthened it. They would have limited the extension for county development plans, as there is no realistic justification for allowing the operation of multiple extensions to happen all the way out to 1 Jan 2024. Joined-up thinking needs joined-up planning and these extensions could create a disconnect with other county development plans and the national planning framework. An extension could also compromise the regional guidelines as well as the spatial and core strategies of development plans.

In my local authority of South Dublin County Council, councillors and officials have just gone through the first part of their county development plan process. It is an arduous process, one that I went through during my time on the council. There was much debate on the plan's core strategies before any sort of consensus was reached. Core strategies are the foundations of,

and set out a vision for, the development of the area to which the plan relates. They give spatial expression to the population in addition to providing the economic, social, environmental and cultural aims of the county development plan. They must be grounded in public and political consensus around the plan's strategic framework.

The county development plan covers everything from population growth and the projected amount of land needed to house that growth to employment and economic development, parks and playgrounds, transport, tourism, natural resources, community development, telecommunications, culture and the environment. Everything of note that happens in the county is covered by the county development plan, framed in the context of climate change and ensuring proper planning and sustainable development. Any extension to these plans will not only allow for potential disconnects with other county development plans, but also mean that the core strategies in the plans and settlement strategies could be compromised. This will maintain the *status quo* for developers and serve to delay the development of new county development plans.

As someone who went through the county development plan process, I commend the councillors of all parties and none the length and breadth of the State who have gone through this process during these challenging times. Meetings that are held remotely are not the ideal setting for difficult planning meetings. As with much of what happened during the pandemic, though, our councillors knuckled down and adapted to the changing situation. I commend South Dublin County Council's Sinn Féin team, in particular my two Dublin Mid-West colleagues, Councillors Derren Ó Brádaigh and William Carey, for their hard work during the process. I appreciate the work that local authority officials have done in trying to put together a county development plan process in the midst of a pandemic. It has been a challenge for them.

Regarding the extension of planning permissions, I recognise that time was lost due to Covid-19 and public health restrictions, but the Bill's *carte blanche* approach to the granting of blanket extensions in respect of existing planning permissions causes me concern. It would be better to grant these exemptions on a case-by-case basis. The blanket extensions to existing planning permissions, some of which have been in place for 15 years, could lead to land hoarding or planning hoarding. I would like to see what the Minister will put in place to stop that from happening.

Deputy Duncan Smith: I will not take anywhere near 20 minutes, but I have a couple of points to make. Since I am not a member of the joint committee, I was not present for any of the discussions on the Bill. I offer my apologies for that.

Regarding what the Minister said about the extension of development plans, the intent is welcome. As a former member of Fingal County Council, where I was honoured to serve for five and a half years, he knows that reserved functions must be protected and valued. The work of a councillor is important and needs to be valued. Perhaps I am being naive or optimistic, but I believe that there is a shift among the political class in the House towards recognising the need to value our councillors and local government more. A heap of work needs to be done to ensure that more reserved functions and powers are devolved to our wonderful, hard-working councillors of all shades and of all parties and none up and down the country. They do incredible work.

The most strategic and important work they do - when the dots are joined up, it also has the largest impact on people's day-to-day lives - is on county and city development plans. It is a significant undertaking by council officials and councillors who, after doing a great deal of research, sit, engage and debate in long meetings over a number of stages and do their best to

ensure that the development plans they produce work for their respective areas. It is through these meetings and other processes that one can see which councillors and council groups care about their counties and put in the time and effort. I am sitting close to a Deputy whom I sat with during the previous Fingal County Council development plan, namely, Deputy Cian O'Callaghan. As a councillor, he put his heart and soul into the development plan, as did I. I was not a member of Fingal County Council while the Minister was, but I am sure he worked as hard on its development plans as his colleagues did. We are on opposing sides where many planning issues are concerned, but this is about being committed to one's county and doing what one feels is best.

The Minister stated that 15 councils had asked him directly for an extension. An extension is good if they use it to ensure that their county development plan processes are robust and the public are engaged as much as possible. Our county council has started its development plan. That is welcome. Speaking as someone who has run 15 webinars trying to engage citizens in Fingal in the early strategic process though, I know that some council officials are disappointed with the level of engagement and the number of submissions compared with the previous county development plan. With the previous plan, they were able to go to hotels and community centres, set up tables for many hours, have working groups and breakout groups and talk in great detail. They have not been able to do so this time. In Fingal's case, people's distance from the process has posed a difficulty. We need to be cognisant of that and make every effort across the country to ensure that the communities, clubs and individuals who care about how their areas are developed are engaged in their county development plan processes as much as possible.

Engagement must be rewarded. People are aware that their submissions will almost never be taken on board wholeheartedly, but after putting effort into make a submission, they need to feel it has been acknowledged and, where possible, they need to get answers to the issues they have raised. Doing that is a significant amount of work, but almost everyone who makes a submission on behalf of himself or herself, a residents' group or a sports club is doing it voluntarily. The majority of people cannot afford planning consultants to help them make submissions on development plans. They do their own research and work on submissions after putting their kids to bed or by getting up early before going to their jobs to ensure that those submissions are as robust as possible. Some never hear from the council again, be it councillors or council officials. That is a problem because it erodes people's faith in local government and the process.

I am digressing a little, but I feel passionately about this issue. I hope the extension contained in the provisions of the Bill will be used in the right spirit, which I believe is the spirit in which it is being granted by the Minister. I have a question on the second provision with regard to the extension of the planning permissions when substantial works have commenced. I would like a definition of substantial works. We have an issue. The previous Deputy mentioned rushed planning law can lead to bad planning and bad outcomes. I always have a concern about how planning law may be used or manipulated by those who will profit from the development of land, for whatever purpose that may be, but mainly housing. Does substantial works mean the clearing of ground, for example, or does it mean foundations? Do bricks have to be up? I note the Minister has indicated bricks have to be up. I have got some more detail on that.

However, we could have a scenario in which there is planning permission for 800 or 1,000 houses, of which 100 are built. Then there is a pause for the next 100 units and then a pause for the next 100 houses after which a change of planning permission may go in to the effect that the houses may become a little narrower, smaller or higher and the gardens may become a little smaller. We all know the story there. Can the Minister speak to that in his response, in terms

of these provisions? Does he have any concerns they may be manipulated. He is shaking his head. I will be back in the room listening to his response.

My one concern is the definition of what constitutes substantial work and, in his eyes, how open to manipulation these provisions could be by those who seek to profit from the development of land and these planning permissions.

Debate adjourned.

Message from Business Committee

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The standing Business Committee has completed its consideration under Standing Order 30 of the request by the Minister for Justice to waive the requirement for pre-legislative scrutiny under Standing Order 173 on the general scheme and draft heads of the Civil Law (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2021 and has agreed thereto.

Teachtairacht ón Seanad - Message from Seanad

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Seanad Éireann has passed the Public Service Pay Bill 2020 without amendment and the Counterfeiting Bill 2020 without amendment.

Planning and Development (Amendment) (No. 3) Bill 2021: Second Stage (Resumed)

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

Deputy Dara Calleary: I am sharing time with Deputy James O’Connor. I am not sure if he is up in the balcony; I hear he is. I welcome this Bill and commend the Minister and his officials on what are practical approaches to some of the other challenges presented by Covid-19. Before Deputy Duncan Smith leaves, I was interested in his outlining of the Fingal process in terms of the relative lack of engagement, even online. That is reflective of our own position. The Mayo process is not as far advanced as Fingal but our councillors, who worked incredibly hard on it, feel there was not the same level of engagement. Certainly they could not feel it. Online is not the same as the ability to go to your local community hall or hotel to see it.

As everybody has said, the development plan is the crucial document. Councillors give a huge amount to it. Even in the best of times, they do not have the best resources available to them compared to what officials and other people have. In this process, it has been much more difficult. They deserve commendation and if there is more time needed for a public buy-in to the development plan, I welcome this.

However, the biggest threat to development plans and the freedom of councillors to express the will of those who elect them is not contained within this legislation. It is contained within the national planning framework in terms of the restrictions that puts on development plans and the ability of councillors to represent those of their communities and to develop communities in the way people who live in them would like to see them developed but that is for a different day.

I have lobbied the Minister hard on planning extensions and I welcome them. There has

been concern from some Deputies that it is wide but it is not. There is quite a detailed part in section 7 of the Bill. It is a process. It is not a blanket exemption, to quote one Deputy. There is a process. I saw the Minister giving hand signals in terms of the level of qualification or what defines completed works and he kept going higher and higher. It is quite a detailed process and I have no doubt that can be tightened up. It involves an application to the local authority. It is not a blanket exemption.

I am intrigued as to how the figure of two years was landed at. Can some discretion be given there? Some projects have been compromised by Covid-19, not only in terms of the stalling of construction, but international supply chains and logistics and the ability of international experts to get to Ireland to look at sites with regard to the installation of specialised equipment which cannot be got here. Those are the reasons the Minister has put in this change and I would like to see that.

The environmental screening is important as well. It is incredibly important that is brought up to date to build confidence in this measure. We need to do much more - the Minister of State, Deputy Noonan, has made a timely entrance - especially in terms of how parks and wildlife engages around environmental screening. I am involved in a community-led development at home around a walking trail where the full extent of what the National Parks and Wildlife Service, NPWS, demanded of them was only recently given, after two years of trying to engage with it. We are lucky to have a super NPWS team in County Mayo, but something fell through the cracks. Community organisations are a long way down in a community-led project which would enhance the community but this one suddenly came to a shuddering halt in the past few weeks, because of a lack of communication. That is something we can all work on together.

I acknowledge there are concerns about the hoarding of sites. The controls under section 7 will prevent against that. If that needs to be even further enhanced and if other Ministers need to get involved in terms of taxation, that should be allowed. I welcome this Bill and commend the Minister and his officials on the work they put into it.

Deputy Patricia Ryan: While I understand the aim of this legislation, I have concerns about such important legislation being rushed through the Houses. I am aware members of the housing committee received a briefing on the general scheme. It was agreed at the committee that it would write to organisations such as the Irish Planning Institute to seek expert advice on the measures proposed in the Bill. I would like to know if this has happened and what the results were.

This is not a good way to legislate. We in Sinn Féin like to discuss upcoming legislation with those who are affected by it. The short turnaround has made this difficult. The Bill's purpose is to mitigate the disruption caused by Covid-19-related delays. Sections 2 to 6 provide additional time for the preparation of county development plans. I was not aware of any local authorities having asked for extra time to prepare their development plan but the Minister said some have done so.

Kildare County Council had a meeting this morning to progress its own plan and it seems it is business as usual. I am especially concerned about the extension of planning permissions or more specifically about the blanket extension. I have sympathy with regard to the time lost due to Covid-19 and the associated public health restrictions but blanket extensions are not the way to go. We will have planning permissions extended for developments which may be found to be out of kilter with new country development plans and the national planning framework.

I would much prefer to see extensions granted on a case-by-case basis, having regard to the number of months lost due to the shutdown of construction. I have a concern that blanket extensions to existing planning permissions, some of which will have been in place for more than ten years, will lead to planning hoarding. Councillors in County Kildare were yesterday told that between 2014 and 2020, permission was granted for almost 18,000 housing units. In the same period, just over 7,000 housing units were completed.

While there may be a large number in construction, when one looks at the detail, there is compelling evidence planning hoarding is going on. This Bill will contribute to that and it needs to be addressed, as a matter of urgency.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: If Members are watching the screen, the debate is moving a little quicker.

Deputy Cian O’Callaghan: If they are watching and listening, I do not intend to use the full 20 minutes. I intend to be significantly short of that but we will see how that goes. Someone in this Chamber saying he or she will be quicker than he or she thinks are famous last words. I have issues with any planning legislation being rushed. I understand the rationale for it in this situation but you can have unintended consequences and unforeseen flaws in planning legislation when it is rushed through like this.

The lack of scrutiny and independent expert analysis of this Bill is a concern. I am a member of the Joint Committee on Housing, Local Government and Heritage and today it had very good pre-legislative scrutiny of the Bill providing for a directly elected mayor for Limerick. As a result of the expertise of the witnesses who appeared before the committee, many issues with that legislation were raised and aired which I and the committee had not heard heretofore in the process. The lack of that input and scrutiny is problematic. It means, to a certain degree, some of the discussion we are having now could have been ironed out beforehand, for example, with regard to section 7. Other Deputies have mentioned it. I do not read section 7 quite as a blanket extension, although in practice it is likely to end up being an extension of two years. The Bill allows for a period of up to two years. In practice, however, one will see local authorities probably granting two years.

I had a number of concerns about why it was two years. Obviously, the shutdown periods in construction have been much less than that. Indeed, we have to factor in time for getting the workforce back, the recovery and so forth. Deputy Calleary made some good points on why, in some circumstances, it is going to be well beyond the periods of the shutdowns because of wanting international expertise and delays which sometimes the larger sites need. They will be quite limited circumstances. I have concerns that, in some planning applications, one is potentially talking about a window of extensions of up to 17 years, which is a very long period, especially given that the current Minister was very strong about introducing use-it-or-lose-it legislation. In effect, this is the opposite, albeit due to the unforeseen circumstances of the Covid pandemic. It is right that there is a certain level of extension possible there.

As a public representative, I have seen very serious issues caused by extensions of planning permissions in terms of planning enforcement and houses being built in larger developments where promised infrastructure and amenities were part of the planning permission, but with extensions continuing year after year the infrastructure that was promised and had to be delivered is not delivered. The developer simply applies for more extensions. The developer is not required to complete the planning permission and deliver that infrastructure, especially if

the phasing and tying in of it has not been done as tightly as it should, which is often the case, until the planning permission expires. One sees people who move into a new estate that needs amenities and infrastructure in year one, two or three of the planning permission and 15 years later they can be living in a large estate without that infrastructure because the planning permission has not yet expired. The developer has received the extensions and the council cannot take planning enforcement action with respect to that builder or developer.

I do not see safeguards in that regard in this legislation. I do not see those types of criteria or those concerns written into the legislation as something the local authority should give consideration to with regard to any extensions that are sought. I do not know why there are no such safeguards or considerations or at least a provision that a planning authority could have regard to that and could potentially refuse an extension or potentially not give the full two years if it has legitimate concerns about non-delivery of infrastructure which is part of the planning permission. That issue should be addressed before the legislation is finalised. We have to look at this legislation from the point of view of developers who have a genuine need and who have genuinely been hit for up to a period of two years, but we also must safeguard against a scenario where developers would, perhaps, exploit this for an additional length of time which is not entirely necessary or justified, and certainly to that length.

Section 3(b) refers to publishing a notice in a newspaper. This is a relatively small point but, at this stage, in terms of publishing notices and notifications regarding development plans, online advertising should be required as well as in the traditional print media. It is important that these notices and information are available to a cross-section of society, different age groups and so forth, rather than simply restricting ourselves to newsprint for these notifications. While it is important that they go there both in terms of advertising revenue for local newspapers and reaching segments of the population, it is also important to reach people online who may not necessarily read those newspapers.

I wish to strike a cautionary note about the recent history of changes in planning that have been lobbied for by the development industry. There is a cautionary tale about that which we should be cognisant of when looking at planning legislation. A number of years ago, when Deputy Kelly was Minister, we saw the industry lobby for lower apartment standards and succeeding in getting them. When Deputy Coveney was the Minister with responsibility for housing, the lobbyists pushed for the SHD planning legislation, and we have seen the consequences of that. When the former Deputy, Eoghan Murphy, was Minister, we saw them push for co-living and build-to-rent. To give credit to Mr. Murphy, when he resigned from this House he admitted that he made a major mistake on co-living, that he should not have listened to those lobbyists and that he regretted that. The strategic housing developments were lobbied for extensively. I make this point because the same voices who lobbied for these are lobbying now for changes in planning. What worries me is that they are getting the same reaction from the Government, a type of unquestioning attitude to the lobbying.

It is worth pointing out that an academic study was carried out on the property industry lobbyists, entitled “De-democratising the Irish planning system”, by Dr. Mick Lennon and Dr. Richard Waldron of University College Dublin and Queen’s University Belfast, respectively. In that study they conducted interviews with lobbyists and politicians. I will quote from one of the lobbyists with regard to the lobbyists’ influence on our planning law and system. The interviewee said:

The Fast Track planning system, the 100 unit plus thing, was a thing that [Property

Industry Ireland colleague] and I had discussed. And [PII colleague] went on the Marian Finucane programme and discussed it. And Simon Coveney [the then Minister]... heard it on the Marian Finucane programme, rang him up, wanted to meet us. We went in and met him. And we met him four times over about six or seven weeks for, amazing actually, from eight o'clock at night until midnight. And he went through what his vision was for the Irish planning property system. And we gave him our recommendations and they took it lock, stock and barrel and stuck it into the new housing bill.

That does not inspire confidence in how planning legislation is made by the Irish political system. I have no issue with suggestions from the industry being listened to, but I have a major issue with them not being subject to rigorous independent analysis, and they should never be accepted lock, stock and barrel. That is the issue we have with this legislation being rushed through - it does not give us time to get independent and rigorous analysis of it. It could be the case that there are flaws in it that we do not spot at this point.

Indeed, when we consider the SHD planning legislation that was passed, not only has it been a disaster from a community perspective in terms of the county development plans, which are part of this Bill, being disregarded, certainly in part, but also local authority planners have been very critical of it. It has not reduced their workload as promised. It has removed the planning framework that gave a level of certainty to applicants and it has hampered their ability to get development plan objectives delivered, including infrastructure. This is an important part of it. From the point of view of the public and those seeking to buy a new home, it has been a disaster in the lack of delivery of homes. Indeed, most homes granted permission have not been built, and schemes being built in large numbers have been sold to investment funds, including virtually all apartments. There are consequences to rushing planning legislation through or to not giving it proper analysis. For the people who lobbied for that legislation, it has been a total disaster, a real case of "be careful what you wish for". Of 28 schemes approved by An Bord Pleanála this year under that process, 16, totalling more than 4,500 homes, have been held up by judicial reviews. Of the larger schemes since it was introduced, 23 out of 24 have been quashed by the High Court. Not a single home has been built in Dublin city under that process. It has been a disaster in delivery as well as in planning. The answer regarding planning is not to look to undermine the process, to look for shortcuts or to listen exclusively to people who are frustrated by the time limit. The answer is to provide resources and statutory timeframes to speed up the process, with resources, to get more delivery of housing, as well as sustainable communities and the required associated infrastructure. Those are my concerns regarding rushing through planning legislation. It is worrying that those lessons have not been learned. It is also worrying to watch the commentary on planning from the Government in the media. It does not seem to have learned from its mistakes. Indeed, the Government seems absolutely intent on repeating those mistakes. We must deliver housing but at the same time we must build sustainable communities and places where people will thrive and not just survive.

Like many Deputies, I have been out campaigning in the Dublin Bay South by-election. What has struck me from the parts of that constituency I have in which were built years ago is that it is possible to see how well planned and designed some of those communities are. It is good quality housing designed around good open public spaces. Those parts of Dublin Bay South remind me of areas in my constituency, like Marino, which were also very well planned. The value of getting planning right is that the kind of problems which can emerge from poor planning are circumvented at the start. We do not then have to spend years and decades campaigning to retrofit infrastructure and amenities into communities. All the positives from such

infrastructure and amenities, namely, cohesive communities, people feeling more safe and secure, neighbours getting to know each other, children having a safe place to play and all the community relationships which result, come from good planning.

I am concerned, therefore, with the current narrative about planning, as if there is no value to it. We must ensure that people with expertise in planning are central to any reforms of the planning process, including in this Bill. We must speak to and listen to such people regarding how we can make things more efficient and faster, but also more effective. If we lose sight of the latter aspect, then we are going to spend decades trying to recover from it.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: There is some confusion regarding the speakers in this Government slot, not on my part. I am going to allow in Deputy O'Connor, and Deputy Higgins is sharing this slot as well.

Deputy Emer Higgins: Deputy MacSharry is also sharing time in this slot.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: That is fine. There are three and a half minutes, and if that time is being shared with Deputy MacSharry, I do not mind. I call Deputy O'Connor.

Deputy James O'Connor: Ní fheicim an Teachta MacSharry. Tá brón orm for the confusion, and I thank the Leas-Cheann Comhairle. Leanfaidh mé ar aghaidh. I am happy to be here today to discuss many of the aspects in this Bill. It is important legislation regarding planning and development in response to disruption caused by restrictions introduced because of the Covid-19 pandemic. It provides for an additional period for the preparation of development plans required by planning authorities and gives planning authorities the option to extend the duration of existing development plans pending the preparation and making of new development plans. Development plans form the blueprints for the social and economic development of counties and cities across Ireland. It is, therefore, vital where planning authorities have encountered disruptions that additional time can be allowed to them to ensure that their development plans can reach the highest possible standards.

I will use my time to discuss the requirements for the rezoning of land in east Cork for educational purposes. There is a strong demand for additional land for educational purposes in the east Cork area, which was the municipal area that I served when I was a member of Cork County Council. The east Cork local electoral area, LEA, has since 2006 experienced significant population growth that has been far beyond the national average. The 2016 population of 42,399 represents growth of 25.3% in the east Cork LEA since 2006, which is substantially higher than the State's average of 12.3%. This increase in population has put pressure on services in the area, mainly post-primary schools, where there is an ever-increasing demand for places. According to the latest Department of Education figures for primary schools for 2019-20, there has been an increase of 26.7% in enrolments since 2011-12, which again is far greater than the national average of 14.2%.

The electoral districts with the most significant population growth are in east Cork. There has been a notable concentration of increased population between Midleton, Cobh, Carrigtohill and Youghal. This significant population increase can be attributed to the construction of new housing developments over the last 20 years, and proximity and accessibility to Cork city. Therefore, it will continue to be necessary to increase the level of zoning in the east Cork area for educational purposes. Cork County Council, in conjunction with the Departments of Education and Housing, Local Government and Heritage, must give serious consideration to

examining the issue of rezoning lands for educational purposes to meet the population growth dynamics in east Cork. I call on the Department of Education to work with the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage and Cork County Council on this matter. I also acknowledge the work of the east Cork Educate Together secondary school group, which provided many of the statistics through its hard work and research on this issue. It would be wrong and remiss of me to not mention the group in that context.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Are Deputies Higgins and MacSharry sharing the remainder of this slot?

Deputy Emer Higgins: That is correct, we will take two minutes each. I agree with the Minister that it is urgent for this Bill to be passed without delay, and I welcome the motion for early signature. Construction and planning were areas which took a major hit during the pandemic and this Bill will help to address the disruption and delays that Covid-19 has caused to the completion of housing projects and on the complexity of local authority development plans. Agreeing a development plan is an essential process for every local authority. However, the impact of Covid-19 has made complex processes even more complex. We must acknowledge the huge efforts that local authorities and county councillors have made in the past year. They have worked tirelessly on behalf of local businesses, communities and residents to ensure that their best interests were represented throughout this pandemic and I fully support a move to allow them flexibility in the development plan process.

Last week, councillors on South Dublin County Council completed weeks of lengthy development plan meetings and discussed more than 700 motions. Meetings ran from 3.30 p.m. until midnight on some occasions. While those circumstances would have been tough even in the normal life situation of a pre-Covid-19 world, holding these meetings remotely online now, especially when such big decisions are being made, is hugely challenging. Communication is more difficult and there is less clarity. On some occasions, councillors, particularly those who have not sat through discussions of development plans before, were voting to support a given motion without it having been made clear to them that were the motion to be successful, it would mean other related motions would automatically fall. Making such important decisions online is a major expectation, especially when we consider that Members of this House all come into this Chamber to cast our votes. Online meetings for such decisions place a great level of responsibility and additional pressures on councillors.

On my local council, almost half of county councillors have never sat through discussions concerning a development plan. Extending the time for drafting development plans to allow councillors the breathing space and to not rush these major decisions during social restrictions is reasonable, practical and in the interests of democracy.

Deputy Marc MacSharry: I thank the Minister and I am glad to have a few brief moments to make a few points. I welcome the Bill to give an additional two years, but I believe it should have been three years. Deputy Calleary made good points on this subject earlier and I support them. I also support the year for the development plans. I have grave concerns, however, about us meeting our housing targets and I have bigger concerns regarding the misalignment of policy across all Departments. It does not facilitate us in meeting the challenges of what is a housing emergency.

One such example of this is the rezoning which followed the crash. We all felt it was appropriate at the time and that we had too much zoned land. These are called strategic land reserves

in most areas. Let us use my county of Sligo as an example. I contacted five developers today regarding the strategic land reserve there in respect of those areas contiguous to developed areas and serviced lands. They could provide 1,000 houses over the next two years. Theoretically, Sligo County Council can materially contravene the plan to ensure that those builders could get planning permission and we would then have 1,000 houses. In reality, the situation is much different because of the prescribed process in the planning Acts. It involves public consultation, the elected members and so on. We would go around the administrative merry-go-round forever. We need to amend the planning Acts to give local authorities the discretion to grant planning permission in circumstances where there are 1,000 houses effectively ready to go. We must facilitate the building of those houses where we know there is a housing need.

Another issue that must be addressed in terms of the alignment of policy is the rising cost of materials at the same time as we have an inexcusable backlog in the felling of trees. The price of timber has increased by up to 60%. Development finance is another issue of concern. The banks are talking the talk but are not walking the walk. They will not lend to developers in places like Sligo or Tipperary. They only want to lend in the five major cities and nowhere else. We need to find ways to address these issues too.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I would have called for this legislation at an earlier stage, particularly in relation to Louth County Council which is a considerable way through the process of completing its development plan at this point in time. Sinn Féin councillors and other councillors in Louth have done spectacular work through a large number of online meetings. I accept, as others said, that it is far from ideal to be trying to carry out consultation by way of a hybrid mix of online meetings and meetings in the open. I believe the latter were used by Meath County Council. Given the period that we have been through, there were some difficult logistical issues. Nobody wants to see significant extensions for large numbers of development plans to such an extent that they fall out of kilter with each other and cause problems *vis-à-vis* the national planning framework. We must make sure that does not happen and we must provide the local authorities with the tools to enable them to achieve best practice.

We all accept that there is a need to review the planning mechanisms in this State and examine their impact on the ability of local authorities to carry out building of their own. There is still a considerable amount of red tape that needs to be addressed. We need to streamline processes and get to the point where local authorities take the lead in building the houses that we need, which is affordable by way of affordable mortgages, affordable cost rental and council housing.

It would be remiss of me not to mention a major infrastructure project in my constituency, the Narrow Water bridge, on which Louth County Council will be the lead partner. I welcome the Government's announcement of funding of €3 million through the shared island unit which will be used to deliver the tender process. However, there is a worry with regard to the significant resources that are required to actually deliver this project. Just over five years ago, a proposal was in place and €17.9 million was drawn down from indirect funding and added to moneys provided north and south of the Border. The total funding available was approximately €29 million but that was insufficient to deliver the Narrow Water bridge at that time and the project fell apart. We have had a number of false dawns on this project and we need to ensure that does not happen again. I commend the work that has been carried out on this project by Mr. Gerry Adams, Mr. Arthur Morgan and Mr. Jim Loughran and continued by Ms Sinéad Ennis and Councillor Antóin Waters. We need to make sure that local authorities, combined with every element of government and the Northern Ireland Executive, are in the right place in terms

of delivering.

Deputy Seán Canney: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this Bill and also that we are providing additional time for the completion of county development plans. These plans are the basis for the planning and development of local authority areas for the next five years so we need to provide local authorities with adequate time to get them right.

We are now in a situation where housing supply is at crisis point. In that context, I have a number of concerns about county development plans and the way land is zoned. As others have said, cities like Cork, Waterford, Galway, Limerick and Dublin cannot be planned or developed in the same way as rural towns and villages or the larger regional towns. My experience in recent years, particularly with regard to the most recent county development plan for Galway, is that the zoning of land is very restrictive. There is not an adequate supply of zoned land for residential development in our towns and villages. This is because zoning decisions must be based on projected population growth. I have found that land is zoned for residential development and is called R1, which is the preference for building on, but for one reason or another that land never becomes available for development. It can be that the owner does not want to sell it or that there are legal issues with the ownership of the land. We are then creating pent-up demand for zoned residential land when we should not be doing so. We should be making sure that we have an ample supply of land available in each town and village so that we can build and not be overly confined. I have come across cases where land has been zoned within a town and on a map it looks perfect for residential development. The only problem is that the site is landlocked, with no safe access into it off a major road. In such situations, that land should not be zoned. When local authorities are working on their county development plans they cannot account for all eventualities and the proportion of land that is zoned for residential use is too low. We need a better supply of such land.

I have a concern about the proposed Land Development Agency, LDA. I do not know why it is being brought into being because it will not be providing the land. I know from my experience in the construction industry that land that is zoned will be built on where it can be built on, if it is viable. The local authorities can deal with that but they need the time to look at this in more detail and to make sure that whatever lands they are zoning can be built on over the next five years.

I welcome the proposal to extend existing planning permission. A lot of projects were held up over the last 18 months because the construction sector was in lockdown. Now we have an opportunity to give the sector the breathing space it needs to carry out its work. The extension of the duration of existing planning permission is to be welcomed. However, I note that this will only apply if work has commenced and “substantial” works have been carried out. What is the proposed definition of substantial works? That might create confusion and if left open to interpretation, it will make it difficult for people when they are trying to get work done. Given the way we have dealt with the construction industry over the last 18 months, we should consider extending the duration of all existing planning permission, whether work has commenced or not. In some cases where people were planning to build a one-off house, for example, they could not get the funding because they could not start the work and they had to reapply for a loan. We must do something to make sure that those who went to a lot of trouble and expense to get planning permission are given ample time to build, regardless of whether the work has started. We are here today talking about housing and about the fact that this is what it is all about. If our policies are right, then everything should fall into place in time.

5 o'clock

One other issue that concerns me with regard to county development plans and the way we plan is that there may be an agenda to stop people building in rural areas. In particular, members of farm families are not being allowed to build on their family land. That is wrong. We need to clean that up once and for all and make a clear statement on it. People are concerned about what will emerge from the Minister's review of rural housing.

People should be allowed to build on family land and near their parents. Family support, whether by older or younger people, is what makes many communities. A house built in a rural area adds to the local school, football or hurling club and keeps the community young and vibrant. In saying that, I am not seeking ribbon development or anything like that but we are beginning to rule out the possibility that people can build a house on their family lands, which is wrong. It is wrong because I know from my constituency that our towns and villages cannot accommodate housing as they do not have the necessary infrastructure. They do not have sewerage schemes and, in some cases, they do not have water schemes.

I heard a spokesperson for Irish Water on radio this morning discussing an issue of huge importance, namely, the need to ensure Irish Water is in sync with local authorities in the development of our towns and villages. The spokesman stated Irish Water may not have sufficient services in the peripheries of these towns and villages. I can tell the Minister of State that Craughwell, Corofin, Abbeyknockmoy and other towns and villages in east Galway that I could spend all evening naming do not have municipal wastewater treatment plants. It is not possible to get planning permission to build a house or housing development within these town and village centres. An Bord Pleanála will refuse them on the basis that any development of these centres is premature until there is a municipal wastewater treatment plant in place. We have to tackle that straight away.

We talk a great deal about housing and what is wrong but if we do not arrest the problems in the supply chain that are bedeviling construction, we will have another crisis on our hands. Building contractors cannot build because they cannot get materials or materials are rationed. Prices for building materials have gone sky-high and resources are scarce. When we have people building houses on a fixed price contract for the local authorities and they cannot get a price for materials that will last more than seven days, we have a serious problem on our hands with regard to the viability of the construction sector.

This is not a temporary issue. We must recognise the need to change it. One of the typical examples is timber. Why do we have a shortage and why are prices going up? It is because we made a mess of planning and licensing for the forestry industry. We have created a shortage, which continues because the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine does not have the necessary resources to deal with the licensing applications coming into it.

Deputy Verona Murphy: I am pleased to be here speaking on the legislation and that it has been brought forward. It is well known that there needs to be a step back and that deep breaths need to be taken in forming county development plans, particularly as the national planning framework takes no account of the Covid pandemic or a post-Covid era. We saw a headline in *The Irish Times* yesterday stating "House prices surge 13% as 'red hot' demand outstrips supply". People are moving to the post-Covid era themselves. They are buying houses that will allow them to work from home, that can accommodate family living and office facilities and for which our current guidelines do not provide.

Planning policy is driving the restriction in supply. Should proposals in the current draft plans be adopted, the supply problem will deteriorate even further. The administration of planning policy and inconsistencies in its application have seen judicial reviews spiral in recent years. This year alone, legal fees at An Bord Pleanála spiralled by 300% to €8.4 million. The inappropriate application of guidelines by the main organs of the State is the primary cause of the problem. Local authority officials regularly misrepresent and misinterpret guidelines, apply them incorrectly and cause situations where certainty does not exist in the planning process. This creates a breeding ground for judicial review proceedings and, ultimately, circumstances in which housing supply is strangled.

Last week, I called for continuous professional development for directors of services for planning and senior planners. I did so as a result of what can only be described as a clear lack of understanding of planning law demonstrated by a director of planning on South East Radio concerning the Wexford county development plan. This morning, I received a call from the chief executive of Wexford County Council. Instead of acknowledging mistakes by the director, he defended the indefensible. It is time that CEOs of local authorities realised that their obligations are to their counties and not the Custom House. The blind application of central government policy without consideration of that policy in a local context is unacceptable.

The refusal of local authorities to respond to correspondence to a Deputy is unacceptable, particularly where such correspondence relates to legislation that is relevant to the work of local authorities. The executives in each county are the expert advisers to their members, yet they refuse to provide a comprehensive range of advice around planning issues to discuss.

The strong-arming of members of local authorities who are blindly led by officials to approve plans that are incomprehensible must stop. This type of behaviour flies in the face of the spirit of this legislation. These issues need to be addressed immediately if further judicial reviews are to be avoided. Development plans informed by misinformation, misinterpretations and guidance from officials that is intended to mislead should be judicially reviewed and those judicial reviews should succeed. For example, this morning in my county, the CEO of Wexford County Council fed me the following lines on our development plan. He advised that the circular of the Minister, dated 21 April, had no impact on the current draft development plan. He said this is only to be considered in the context of an individual planning application. The dogs in the street know that if minimum densities are provided for in the development plan, an individual planning cannot be at odds with that minimum. He also advised that the county council would not have high densities in the development plan for the towns, yet the county development plan provides for such densities. He said he is bound by decision precedents of An Bord Pleanála, yet there is no legal authority for such an assertion. An Bord Pleanála cannot impose a precedent on the will of county councillors in the formation of a development plan. None of the above points holds any muster in justifying provisions for minimum densities in county development plans.

It is our responsibility as elected representatives to call out this practice. The CEO of Wexford County Council advised me this morning that I had no function in contacting the county council about its development plan. I remind him that I am the third elected Deputy in Wexford to represent the people of Wexford. I stand here to act in their best interests. I debate daily in this House the legislation that underpins the basis of the operation of his local authority and the formation of the development plans. The notion that Deputies should not be entitled to provide oversight regarding the interpretation of legislation or ministerial guidelines when the local authority is patently wrong in its interpretation is bizarre. Furthermore, the idea that county

managers refuse to respond to correspondence from Deputies on such matters is an absolute disgrace. Officials need to be held to account. I will be revisiting this issue.

We are spending billions of euro to roll out broadband services to every corner of Ireland. What is the point if we are not going to allow homes to be built? It is incomprehensible. There are many inconsistencies in planning policy and the national planning framework. The 12-month extension will allow for some of those to be remedied. Much of what has happened in the past 18 months means that the national planning framework must be revisited or we will continue to see mistakes being made and no meaningful housing supply in the market. On that basis, I believe I have played my part in ensuring this legislation is now before the House. It is only providing a basis for the county councils to breathe after a difficult year of Zoom-only meetings. People must be allowed to apply for an extension and start the process again or we will continue to raise this matter daily on the floor of the House on a daily basis for some time to come, possibly years.

I will be tabling an amendment to the Bill to allow more flexibility on the extension of existing permissions because what is currently proposed in the teeth of a housing crisis is too restrictive. We cannot let a situation arise where permissions will expire for the want of minor amendments to this proposed legislation.

Deputy Brian Stanley: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this legislation. While Sinn Féin supports the Bill, we also think it fails to address many of the larger problems and issues that plague our planning process and slow down housing developments. Local authority county development plans must be the primary documents, as councils are democratically elected and accountable to the local community. It is infuriating to see their authority being diminished and their powers bypassed over time as key decisions continue to be transferred to An Bord Pleanála. From my work with the Committee of Public Accounts, we have evidence that An Bord Pleanála is inundated with planning applications, particularly around strategic housing development zones. Judicial reviews are causing substantial delays and costing a fortune. We must ask why applications containing proposals for more than 100 units are being diverted to An Bord Pleanála when an application can take more than a year to get approval. That slows down the process when local authorities can sign off on applications, in theory, in eight weeks. It is not unusual for that to be done in 12, 13 or 14 weeks. Local authorities can sign off on developments within two months.

The evidence shows that there are major backlogs in the planning process at a time when we desperately need to free up more land for housing. The simple reality is that we need more land and more houses available as private, social and affordable housing for people to purchase and rent. The current rate of progress is too slow. Sinn Féin wants to see it accelerated.

Local authorities need to implement the vacant site levy more vigorously. Serious pressure needs to be put on developers and others to free up land they are holding for housing. Last year, councils in Ireland were owed €21.5 million in vacant site levies and collected just €21,000. I received a reply to a parliamentary question from the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage in February that confirmed Laois and Offaly county councils had not collected anything. Many other councils throughout the country, the vast majority of them, had not collected anything. The levy is clearly not working and does not serve as a deterrent to free up land that is badly needed for housing. Developers are holding land, waiting for prices to increase, while families wait for homes. That is the stark reality. We also need to ask whether the 7% maximum annual levy is high enough to act as a deterrent.

Sinn Féin wants to see power returned to local authority members and not the executive to drive planning development in their own areas. Councillors will do that if they are allowed to. We need to speed up the planning process through decentralisation and good, sustainable planning. We must impose serious levies on developers who are holding onto vacant sites, sitting on them and waiting for their value to increase.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: I welcome the two-year extension for existing planning permissions. However, I have concerns about other parts of the Bill because many people were unable to build houses during the pandemic. There is now a lack of materials and the prices of them are excessive. Everything is on the rise.

There is also an issue relating to people who were employed before the pandemic and had mortgage approval. Some of those people are unemployed at the moment and are now going back to the banks and asking for mortgages. They are now starting the process again and that is delaying matters. Some of those people are already two, three or four years into their five-year planning permissions. Historically, if someone could not complete the building of a house, he or she could extend planning permission for five years and roll it over. In light of the 2040 plan, people are panicking and trying to get planning permissions in rural areas, including towns and villages. Some people are not yet ready to build but, because they have partners and want to get married, they may be waiting and saving money. The clock is against those people and the two-year extension does not go far enough. On the other hand, other people who are in development are waiting on sites. People looking for local authority or private residential houses are sitting on their sites. We must have a case-by-case approach and let the county council decide who can get the extension to planning permission and who cannot, depending on the particulars before the council.

People are saving for mortgages. They must have one year of savings, after the pandemic. They must prove they have those savings before they can apply for a mortgage. They must then go through the process of trying to get a mortgage and then go through the process of building a house. I have been self-employed all my life. I have been working in the building sector since I was 15 years of age. I am now an employer. I have seen the changes that occurred in housing from the early 1990s onwards. One aspect that is changing almost annually is the cost of building in a rural area for people who are no burden on the local authorities or Irish Water. The sites I am talking about have their own water source and sewerage tanks, yet the people who are building are being charged between €5,000 and 8,000 to build houses on their own lands. What do they get in return? Nothing. They are contributing to the local library, footpaths and infrastructure in their areas. What if one is living in an area where there are no footpaths or libraries? Some people are lucky if there is a shop in their local area. Nothing is being put into the infrastructure of rural areas, yet people in these areas are paying the most.

We see now that a carbon tax will be added. The people who will pay the most in this country will be the 37% of the population living in towns, villages and rural areas. That is the case because they have no infrastructure, must drive everywhere, and will, therefore, be paying the most for carbon emissions. Should we not have some incentive whereby people who are living in towns, villages and rural areas, and have had no investment in infrastructure, get a tax break? The people living in the cities, who take all the funding, should have to pay more. The people in rural areas, towns and villages should be reimbursed through taxes as an incentive so they might get proper infrastructure in their areas. They are no burden on the State but we are being charged hand over fist for everything we do. There are charges for the local bus to get our kids to school because there is no infrastructure. Now, we are being charged by the local authorities,

set out under environmental laws that exist in this country for putting in septic tanks and building sites. We now have to pay in excess of €5,000 and get nothing in return.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: I am grateful for this opportunity to speak. First of all, I commend, congratulate and welcome the work that is being done by local authority members, obviously starting off in County Kerry. I appreciate, however, the good work that is done by county councillors in formulating county development plans and local area plans. An lot of the work is unheard of but it is very important work in their localities. Regardless of whatever political breed or party or whatever they are, I do not care about that, I thank them for their work and their efforts.

I want to speak to some of what is contained in this Bill but also what is not contained in it. Section 7 of the Bill regarding extensions, for example, is, of course, welcome. If there are genuine cases because of Covid-19 and Covid-related issues whereby planning needs to be extended, of course, that should be supported, which is why I support the Bill. In doing that, however, there are questions, for example, regarding quarries that have been affected and issues they had because of a need for extensions to their times. Where is the provision in this Bill for them? In saying that, as I always do in matters such as this, I wish to declare that I may be considered to have an interest in this because of family interests with machinery and such.

Material is not in this Bill that should be. I want to talk about An Bord Pleanála, for example. An Bord Pleanála can send out an inspector to look at a development, which could be anything. It could be somewhere housing is badly needed in a built-up area or it could be a one-off house. That inspector, in his or her wisdom, for instance, might write up a positive report. That inspector may be the only person to have looked at the development. That person might then go to a meeting with An Bord Pleanála. I want to dispel this in case people think An Bord Pleanála is a very organised group; it most certainly is not. These are *ad hoc* meetings, which are held at its members' own convenience, at some time in the evening when their other jobs are finished. They sit down in some gathering where three people might be at the meeting, for instance, the inspector who wrote a positive report and maybe two others, who would never have gone to see the development. They might have only barely scratched or glimpsed the inspector's report. They come along and vote against the development and the person is refused and denied his or her planning.

How many projects has An Bord Pleanála held up in this country over the years? How much hurt and harm has it done? How much longer are we going to stand idly by and watch people with vested interests in trying to stop, hold up and get at people? How long are we going to allow that type of activity to continue? By God, I know one thing; it will have to stop.

As for family members who want to build on family farms, I do not see anything in this Bill about protecting those people. When we speak about changing planning rules and guidelines, we should be enhancing and protecting the rights of people to live in the countryside. Of course, it is important to see our villages being built up and strengthened. I welcome Government policy that enhances and supports this. I welcome the fact that local authorities are promoting and encouraging people. In many cases, however, we do not have sewerage schemes. In places like Kenmare, we need an extension to our scheme and we are allowing no development there until that happens. In Caherdaniel, raw sewage is flowing into the river. The same is true in many other villages. How can we encourage people to live in places like that when we do not have sewerage schemes to take the sewage that will be created by the extra growth?

I thank and compliment the people who did great work back over the years, such as James Connolly of the Irish Rural Dwellers Association and our own James Doyle from Beaufort, who was a backbone of the Irish Rural Dwellers Association. That group was set up to encourage and promote living in rural areas, which is something I would always encourage and try to support.

Where is the attack on the serial objectors, who do nothing good with their lives except to sit at home playing with computers and throwing out their miserable €20 to object to people's hopes, dreams and aspirations? Where are they when it comes? People in County Kerry have died and gone to their graves without seeing their family members build on their family farms, all because of horrible objectors.

An Ceann Comhairle: We have three more Deputies to try to get in, namely, Deputies Danny Healy-Rae, Michael Collins and Mattie McGrath.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I am glad to get the opportunity to speak to this very important Bill, which provides for an extension of two or more years for developments that may not have been completed and where coronavirus caused buildings to be held up. Certainly, we must ensure that there is an extension of at least two years.

We have many problems in County Kerry with regard to planning and building houses. While Dublin has its problems, we have our own different problems in Kerry. We have designations such as urban-generated pressure, which is to prevent people from a town or village building outside the town or village. On top of that, it hurts the people who have lived in those areas all their lives. Only family members can get permission in these urban-generated pressure zones. Someone could have lived next door all their life and been brought up there. That person will not be considered for permission at all, even if he or she gets a site from his or her neighbour, friend or whoever at a reasonable price. That person is condemned to building or buying in a town or village where the prices are exorbitant. That is the truth in Killarney, Tralee, Dingle and other places. People cannot go outside the town or village where they could get a site. This is hurting ordinary couples who just want to put a roof over their heads.

Another core group of people are also being denied. Villages such as Brosna, Asdee, Scar-taglin, Castleisland and Currow have no sewerage scheme. It is a pity for Deputies to break up or change guard in the middle of one's presentation. Many villages and towns do not have a sewerage scheme. Yet, the regulator is saying people cannot build one-off houses in the country but must build them in the town. Places such as Beaufort have no sewerage plant. As I said, we also have places like Currow. None of those villages can expand or develop because they do not even have a sewerage scheme.

The regulator is telling people and the local authority that it cannot allow one-off houses here or there, and puts in special designations. That is very unfair and hard on people because they have no options. The Minister must realise that. Perhaps the Minister does not realise that because he is a Dublin Deputy, and that is fine. He does not, however, understand what is happening in County Kerry when the regulator comes down. Why even have councillors in the Killorglin municipal area? They zoned two or three acres for Mick O'Connell - the most famous footballer of all time. They granted him zoning to build three houses. The regular came down and did not even send a message. It does not even know where Valentia Island is and it stopped him building and zoning the land, for which the councillors voted. That is very wrong. I say, either zone plenty of land or do not zone any land. Let every planning application stand

on its own two feet.

Deputy Michael Collins: I thank my colleagues for giving me time to speak to this Bill. I have been vocal over recent weeks in the Dáil with regard to planning. The Minister's extension is something I support. Planning in my constituency now is an absolute no-go area, however. It is an outrageous attack on the young people who are trying to get planning permission in different areas in west Cork. They are trying to get on with their life and, as I said to the Minister of State, Deputy Noonan, last week, they do not want to be any burden on the State. They want to apply for planning permission, get a mortgage, build their home and live happily in rural Ireland. Instead, due to Government policy, they are continually being refused planning permission for whatever farcical reason. There is no genuine reason for refusing permission, certainly not an architectural or environmental one. It is a scenic landscape and, as I said to the Minister of State last week, some of the houses people want to build cannot even be seen.

I wish the new county mayor, who is from west Cork, and the Cork city mayor, who were elected last week, the very best of luck. I ask both of them to sit down with the planning authority and elected representatives, start working for the people and give them the opportunity they deserve to start the rest of their lives. They do not want to be a burden, as I said, but they are being shoved into cities, where there is no issue with building skyscrapers. We see the scandalous construction that went on at the back of the convention centre. There is no question of a doubt that people can build as many apartments as they want. I do not know where the environmental or architectural aspect comes into it. It is a nightmare and I do not know what An Taisce is doing.

I will keep fighting the case for the people of rural Ireland and west Cork. They deserve the opportunity to get planning permission, whether they are from Ballinadee or Ballydehob. I plead with the Minister of State to work with us instead of against us. We need to look at what was done before, when village nuclei provisions gave people in small communities an opportunity of building. The time should be invested in considering that type of provision under the Cork county development plan, but it is not happening at the moment. We will have to fight for it. We need enough public representatives to stand up and deal with this issue as we go on.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I thank the Ceann Comhairle for allowing my colleagues and me to switch around. We thought there was a second round of speaking slots. These Bills are being rushed through. It is always near the end of the term that they come into the House. The Wednesday night guillotine, with all Stages being taken, is not good enough. This Bill has serious implications for every man, woman and child in the country who wants a house, including the many noble people who need a house from their local authority. They are entitled to that, but those houses are not being built either.

The establishment of rural planning commissions is very important. The role of An Bord Pleanála is hugely important. However, the role of An Taisce as a prescribed body under the planning Acts should be removed. There are concerns around the Office of the Planning Regulator. We never had such a role until quite recently. The CEO must be very fond of me because he has written to me approximately six times asking me to meet him. Deputy Verona Murphy and her group met with people from his office and had many issues with them. We did not need an Office of the Planning Regulator. It is another quango with a brass plate beside the front door and a nice set-up of staff. The CEO is diminishing the role of the county councils.

I am shocked and aghast at what is happening in Cahir. My daughter, Máirín, is a represen-

tative of the town on Tipperary County Council and, week in and week out, the development plan is being reviewed. There is workshop after workshop. You would think they were building houses inside in the workshops. Nothing is held out in the open. When I was on the county council, fortunately, all our meetings, other than one annual meeting for a financial workshop, were held in public and open to the press. Why the secrecy and the cloak and dagger?

The Cahir town plan was finished a couple of months ago. Many residents in the Mountain View Drive and Mountain Road area made submissions on that plan. It was decided to dezone 50 ha out of the 60 ha that were to be zoned, leaving only 10 ha. I was involved with many landowners there who have wanted to develop community-type voluntary housing and everything else for the past 15 years. They could not do so because of the poor standard of the Mountain Road, which is too narrow and has no access road. There is still no access road. It was included in a previous plan but has been taken out under the new Cahir plan.

Hey presto, the council came along last week, after four weeks, and made a new announcement about the Cahir development plan. There is a public meeting in the town this coming Thursday evening, which means I will not be in the House, to discuss the council's proposal to build 43 houses on the green area in Mountain View Drive. It wants to build on the green playing fields, while 50 ha elsewhere were dezoned. This is madness and it flies in the face of all the refusals and rebuttals the council gave to people wanting to build private houses. No development was allowed to come down Mountain Road and it still cannot. An ambulance got stuck there last week. I salute Niamh Killeen and the others who organised the meeting for this Thursday. They all made submissions on the Cahir town plan but were ignored. Where is the democracy in that process? It is not fit for purpose.

Cormack Drive in Nenagh underwent development some years ago under the provisions of Part V of the Planning and Development Act 2000, as amended, but it was never properly finished. In fact, as I recall, that development was done under Part 8 of the Planning and Development Regulations 2001, as amended. The residents were forced to take a court case in the past year because it was not concluded. A silence has since descended because the court case has ended and there was a vow of secrecy by the people who took it. The council messed around and did not complete the Part 8 process properly. Now, without admitting liability, it is saying, "Come on, lads, we will pay the expenses if you go away." This is no way to treat people and communities. Good people live in those housing estates and they want to have them kept right, not see building happening on every bit of green land, especially at a time when so much land is being dezoned. I do not know what is going on.

I know the Green Party and others have a big issue about rezoning but, as Deputy Danny Healy-Rae said, why is some land not being left rezoned, instead of pushing everything in together? The Office of the Planning Regulator is insisting on massive-density developments, which have proved disastrous in the past. I am aghast to hear Deputy Verona Murphy say that the county manager in Wexford told her she had no authority to make any submission on, or have any input into, the county development plan. Under the abolition of the dual mandate, we, as Oireachtas Members, are allowed to have full access. We cannot go to meetings but we can attend them and speak at them. The county managers do not want us there because we might take too much information back to the councillors.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy. On behalf of the Minister of State, Deputy Noonan, I would like to say he is not a Dublin man but a proud Kilkenny man. He has fairly sound rural credentials as well.

Deputy Steven Matthews: I am sharing time with Deputy Leddin. I thank the Minister of State, Deputy Noonan, and his officials for the time they took to brief us on the Bill and for the briefing notes they supplied. If it gives colleagues comfort, the joint Oireachtas committee agreed unanimously to waive pre-legislative scrutiny on the Bill. We also wrote to the Irish Planning Institute and the Royal Town Planning Institute Ireland seeking their views on the Bill. We will supply Members with those responses when we receive them.

I support the provisions in the Bill. Where local authorities have difficulty in completing their development plans, it makes sense to allow them some further time to do so. I ask that a clear briefing be provided to locally elected members on the grounds under which such extensions will be permitted. On the question of extending planning permissions that have already been extended, I understand there are only a few permissions that could avail of that provision. There should be an upper limit and each case should be carefully judged. The continual extension of planning permissions does not generally serve the planning process well. Nevertheless, the Bill broadly displays that the planning system can be flexible when required in addressing pressing issues.

There has been much discussion in recent times about a review of the planning system and the need for a planning and environment court. Such a forum may be required to ensure legal matters are addressed in a timely manner. However, planning decisions should be made by professional planners, not, as we are increasingly seeing, by judges. It is my view that the strategic housing development, SHD, planning process has really undermined the planning process. We need to restore faith in the planning system among communities. The system is very democratic. We elect councillors who craft local area plans and members of the community are able to make submissions on those plans. Planning applications are assessed based on the plan and it is open to anybody to make an observation on an application, whether positive or negative. If people do not like the decision that is made, or a condition in it, they have the opportunity to appeal it to An Bord Pleanála. The process is open, democratic and clearly provided for in legislation.

However, as I said, we have damaged the trust in the system by attempts to bypass the local level of consultation by way of strategic housing developments. The development plan is a contract between the people, their councillors and the local authority that sets out how a community will develop. When large-scale, high-density developments are proposed that far exceed what was agreed in the development plan, it is only to be expected that residents will be concerned. When they feel the contract has been broken and their only recourse is judicial review, then it can only be expected that we will see an increase in such reviews. It must be said that some SHDs are at densities that are needed and are located in the right places. Some are not, however, and they amount purely to developer speculation. I understand the concerns of locals when faced with such proposals because, often, the large-scale delivery of houses is not matched with other services. We prioritise the necessary services such as water, waste, power and roads but we often see no increase in public transport or school places and only token green spaces provided.

The planning process must be about building homes, communities and nice places to live, not just achieving targets on housing numbers. If we are serious about building 33,000 houses a year, we need to restore faith in the planning system and ensure adequate resources for our local authority planners. It is about the creation of living cities and strong communities. We must provide for ownership of urban apartments, not just investor-owned blocks. We must provide support and encouragement to renovate and refurbish town centres and place greater emphasis

on infill and brownfield development. We must focus on Town Centre First, living over the shops and have all that accompanied by investment in the public realm, social amenities easily accessible by safe active travel and high frequency, reliable and comfortable public transport. The Green Party will bring forward further measures and legislation to achieve those objectives to complement and improve on the thousands of houses we will deliver through the LDA Bill and the affordable housing Bill. I look forward to working with the Minister and his officials to deliver on those objectives.

Deputy Brian Leddin: The Ceann Comhairle got there before me to defend the honour of the Minister of State, Deputy Noonan, as a proud Kilkenny man. I echo Deputy Michael Healy-Rae in commending councillors up and down the country for the work they have been doing in the last year around development plans. My own colleagues in Limerick, Councillors Sasha Novak and Sean Hartigan, have done really quite extraordinary work in the last few months, poring over thousands of pages of documents. I commend also the officials in Limerick City and County Council who have done really stellar work to get us to this point.

Proper planning is important. It impacts on how our society is shaped and our quality of life in our local communities, while also ensuring our environment and natural and built heritage is protected. Development plans are important. We must celebrate the fact that, although the pandemic caused delays, we managed to continue our development planning processes and effectively gave voice to so many citizens who wanted to have a say about what their vision for their local communities was and how it could be realised. We have learned a lot about the potential of online communications over the last year and a half. It has quite simply transformed and in some ways sustained our lives. It will never replace face to face encounters but for the public sector, it has sped up the transition to a digital-first approach to public consultation. There is a strength in diversity and we must hear all voices in our communities. Our efforts to make it easier for people to make submissions electronically expands the level of community engagement that can be achieved. We must take care that people of all ages, genders and abilities are included in the process and ensure those who cannot or do not want to engage electronically are facilitated through more traditional processes like written submissions and face to face meetings. Our public libraries, which have continued to play an invaluable public service role in local communities during the pandemic, have an opportunity to facilitate this.

I welcome this planning and development Bill. It offers an appropriate time extension to both the development plan process and to planning permissions while requiring that screening and environmental assessment takes place where a delay would result in impact on the environment. The limited provision for extensions to those processes are prudent given the challenges posed by this pandemic and the vital importance of our development plans and the process involved in their drafting. I welcome the emphasis on environmental assessment in this Bill and that delays to development plans and planning permissions are only granted after appropriate environmental screening and assessment. In my county of Limerick, the draft development plan was published this week. There was a very encouraging and enthusiastic level of community engagement with the issues paper in the pre-draft stage of the public consultation and this engagement is invaluable. People understand the need for proper planning for the future. We are getting better at enforcing our obligations to future generations and we must continue to improve. Indeed, the onus is very much on us.

Finally, I welcome the significant legislative efforts of the Minister and his Department in this term. My colleague, Deputy Matthews, who has just spoken, has been working diligently with his colleagues on the housing committee dealing with a significant volume of legislation

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coming from the Minister's Department. I look forward to further engagement with the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, and the Ministers of State, Deputies Noonan and Peter Burke, in the months ahead on the ambitious programme of work they have set out for themselves.

Deputy Martin Browne: We are all aware Covid has had an impact on every part of our lives and the issue of planning is no exception. Throughout the pandemic we have seen a delay in construction. At a time when our housing crisis is reaching peak levels, this delay has made an already terrible situation as far as housing availability is concerned even worse. Covid has definitely shone a light on the shortcomings of our housing system. Lessons must be learned from this. This Government must learn fine words are not enough. Making grand promises on housing provision when the record of this Government does not back up those promises is disingenuous at best. Despite this we see this Government take the issue of housing as something to play games with the Opposition about. I say this because this is a significant piece of legislation. It is important legislation that deserves more time for consideration and more time for public debate. While time is of the essence, the Government had the chance to introduce this Bill earlier but chose instead to rush it through.

I must acknowledge that Covid has presented us with a situation in which the needs of people have been impacted by either delays or cancellations. That is why extensions to existing planning permissions is a measure that is needed. However, this must be done carefully. Sinn Féin proposed amendments that would prevent the possibility of planning hoarding by some who may seek to take advantage of these measures. Covid has changed the way we work, communicate and conduct domestic and business affairs. Aspects of those changes may stay with us. This is where extensions to county development plans may be needed by certain local authorities to deal with the new and emerging situation. Tipperary County Council is a case in point. There is a general feeling among members of the council that more time is needed to deal with the needs of people whose way of life and way of doing business will be left out of the plan. Working from home is a matter people particularly want reflected in the development plan for County Tipperary. The world has changed and we must change with it. Sinn Féin went to pains in the Seanad and in amendments to point out that when extensions of this nature are being given we must recognise the potential impacts with other county development plans, the national planning framework, regional guidelines and spatial strategies. That is why Sinn Féin queried the basis of the date up until which the provisions on extending existing county development plans would have effect. We also submitted amendments to ensure the extensions comply with climate change demands, so while I welcome more time being made available to get the county development plan process right, it would have been more appropriate to give Members of this House more time to debate the finer points.

I also point out we continue to have an underfunded local authority system. We have housing lists that shame the political system here. We have estates like Rocksprings in Kilross, County Tipperary, which Tipperary County Council cannot take in charge because the national agreement between Irish Water and the local authorities does not allow the council to do so. Tipperary County Council applied to the Department for funding to resolve the issue but its bid was unsuccessful. These are just some of the many issues that must be addressed. They are issues which remain and which are consistently not being resolved. We will support this Bill but the Government really needs to be more open about its intention towards legislation such as this. Leaving it so late and expecting it to be rushed through unquestioned is not the right approach to take.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Ó Cuív is not with us. Deputy Pringle is next.

Deputy Thomas Pringle: Here we are with yet another piece of rushed legislation, this time the Planning and Development (Amendment) (No. 3) Bill 2021. The Bill has not undergone pre-legislative scrutiny and was rushed through the Seanad last week and yesterday. While I completely understand that it is necessary to work around the situation Covid-19 created, the reality is that shortcuts are being taken and we do not yet know what impact they will have on our planning laws. The Bill before us was aimed at amending the Planning and Development Act 2000 because of the disruptions caused by the pandemic. Covid-19 lockdowns closed businesses, construction and offices with many industries and services moving to working remotely where possible. Apparently because of the pandemic local authorities and planning authorities will now require more time for the completion of existing development plans or the making of new ones. The new section 9A of the Bill will provide for one year for local authorities' development plans to be reviewed, prepared and made and this provision will apply until 1 January 2024.

While the Minister is introducing legislation on the development plans of local authorities and planning authorities, I plead with him once again to direct that protection and surveying of possible burial sites be undertaken by local authorities across the country. The Minister is aware I have been raising the matter with him directly and also with his colleague, the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, Deputy O’Gorman. The Minister’s most recent reply to my parliamentary question on how possible burial sites and sites of historical significance will be protected in county development plans was inadequate. His response from last week states:

I refer to my previous response...which sets out the statutory position in relation to the matter raised.

Subsequent to that, on 8 June 2021, I received correspondence from my colleague the Minister for Children and Equality drawing my attention to particular actions as set out in the Commission of Investigation’s report. Implementation of the actions identified is a matter for the relevant local authorities.

With specific reference to county and city development plans, the preparation of these plans is a core function of each planning authority and must be undertaken in accordance with the provisions of the Planning and Development Act 2000. I am satisfied that there are provisions in the Planning and Development Act which enable local authorities in their role as planning authorities, to take a precautionary approach where there is any evidence of burial sites and to properly safeguard any such sites from potentially harmful development and am currently considering how best to give effect to this.

On 27 May, during Priority Questions, the Minister, Deputy O’Gorman, stated the following in response to my question:

... the Government has committed to a strategic action plan encompassing a wide-ranging suite of 22 actions. These actions include advancing legislation to support the excavation, exhumation and dignified reburial of remains where interments are manifestly inappropriate and where their preservation in their current location would not be the right policy response. It has also committed to engaging with former residents and their advocacy groups on the question of appropriate, dignified local memorialisation of burial sites. These actions reflect the complexity of the issue and the need to respond carefully according to the specific circumstances of each case. My officials consulted with the Department of Housing, Local

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Government and Heritage when we were preparing the action plan in response to the final report of the commission and will continue to engage with the Department in respect of the development and implementation of the strategic action plan.

In our back and forth, the Minister, Deputy O’Gorman also stated:

I made a submission in respect of two planning applications on the lands of the Bessborough mother and baby institution. These applications were rejected by Cork City Council and An Bord Pleanála respectively. I will continue to engage with all relevant Departments with regard to this question. I was not aware that the Deputy’s question specifically related to the issue of development plans but that is absolutely appropriate and I will engage further with the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage.

Does the Minister for Housing, Local Government Heritage agree that it should not be up to elected representatives, survivors, family members and concerned citizens to watch over burial sites and alert relevant authorities when planning permission is sought or a building is demolished? A developer sought to build apartments at the Bessborough site in Cork and at the beginning of June I wrote to both Ministers, Deputies O’Gorman and Darragh O’Brien, about my concerns that the orphanage at Fahan in Donegal was being demolished as well. It seems works are ongoing and the building was demolished over the first weekend in June. I asked both Ministers, given the importance of preserving possible burial sites, to intervene immediately in order to have an archaeological survey undertaken. My office contacted the relevant officials in Donegal, the company and anybody else who could be contacted and we had significant correspondence on the matter. The demolition of the orphanage had been brought to my attention by a representative of a survivors’ group who was himself a survivor of the home.

Why would the Government and local authorities compound the pain of survivors and those who lost family members because of these homes and institutions? It is the question. We should proactively examine sites and undertake the necessary surveys, preservation and studies. The State cannot continue to bury the truth, waiting for spokespersons and survivors to become too tired and jaded to fight for justice. That is what appears to be happening, although it may not be exactly the attention. The Irish people are behind survivors and I am behind them. I call on the Minister to issue a very simple direction that these sites must be protected and preserved. It is the least we can do as a State and Government.

If the Minister is already working with the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth on other legislation, why would he not take this opportunity to put the protection of these sites on a statutory footing? It is very important. The Minister could bring forward emergency legislation to grant extensions due to Covid-19 disruptions but it seems he cannot do something small and important to make a tangible difference for survivors. That is what it looks like. With sites where planning permission has already been granted that may be on or near grounds of historical significance, this extension should be used to ensure proper archaeological surveys are taken. This is an opportunity to stand for the truth and with survivors. This is not just for photo opportunities for social media accounts and there is a responsibility on us and the Government to act.

Everybody understands that planning is devolved to local authorities and that each authority has a role in this respect. Local authorities are cognisant of the fact that if a Department wants an authority to pay attention to the matter in a county development plan, it would carry much weight. Unfortunately, it seems to carry much more weight than local people getting on

to authorities to raise such matters. The Minister could play an important role in this regard. It would not cost the Government or the State anything to do it but it would send a signal to those local authorities. I cannot remember the exact number of local authorities but there are so many different county development plans. It is not fair to expect survivors and others to ensure every county development plan reflects such concerns. The State and the Government can do it. This is a very important matter and I hope the Minister will address it.

Those are my comments. We were supposed to have another couple of speakers from my group but as they have not appeared, I will leave it at that.

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): I appreciate Deputy Pringle raising those matters. It is not specifically referenced in this Bill but I have contacted Cork County Council over a number of months and been working with the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, Deputy O'Gorman, on the question of historical burial sites. Everybody wants to be able to help and do what we can in helping survivors, bearing in mind the awful time they and their families have had, as well as those who have been bereaved. I corresponded with Cork authorities quite some time ago. Taking the Deputy's point on board, we are working in conjunction with the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth. I am not being evasive in any way, shape or form in saying we need a co-ordinated approach. It is a very important matter. I am doing and certainly will continue to do everything I can to help in that regard. I will do what I can legally and appropriately under my remit. In light of his contribution, I will revert to the Deputy formally on that matter.

I thank Deputies for their contributions. I know the Business Committee agreed to waive pre-legislative scrutiny on the Bill and I do not intend to make a habit of asking it to do that. I note the points made by Deputy Ó Broin and other colleagues in that regard.

I will reference some of the points made. It is not, as some Members have argued, a blanket extension of planning processes. One must apply for an extension for planning permission granted and the planning authority in the area would decide whether it is appropriate on the basis of a permission being substantially completed. We allow that discretion at each local authority level. There is no question of a blanket approach.

A couple of Members raised the question of potential hoarding of permissions but I genuinely do not see that occurring. There is a clear stipulation that works must be substantially complete. In such a case, I do not see a position where one could continue rolling on the permission process. This is very much in response to Covid-19 and there have been genuine delays in the completion of works. We will come back to a number of these points on Committee Stage, which I expect will happen next week.

The county development plans are a reserved function of the county and city councillors, who are elected members, and I will leave it to each of them the question of extension and the criteria that they will use to decide if their development plan has been affected. We have been dealing with 14 different local authorities about various different matters in the development plan process. Some may choose not to take up the extension, and they can do that, but others have found it particularly problematic for members.

I recognise the work done by all councillors across all parties and none not just on development plans over the period of the pandemic but in all the other work they do. Sometimes, it is

thankless work and they are really the tip of the spear for local government in their areas, towns and villages all over the country. The measures around development plans are really to give them choice and the process is for the local authority. Should a simple majority of councillors decide that a plan is to be extended for one year, it can be done.

I have taken some detailed notes on the contributions. Deputy Ó Broin asked specifically about section 181. That came from a request from the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications, Deputy Eamon Ryan, and his officials. It relates to strategically important energy infrastructure and the potential to ensure we have energy security, particularly into the winter. I can provide a specific note from him on that but it particularly concerns power generation. There are two major gas-fired power stations that are currently not operating at capacity and we just need to ensure that if there are any issues in winter, we have the potential to bring in temporary energy generation facilities.

6 o'clock

That is what the section 181 exemption is there for, and the ministerial order, in case of accident and emergency. We obviously hope that we do not have to exercise this exemption, but it is prudent that it is there. I will provide the Deputy with a specific note on that tomorrow.

I thank Members for their contributions and for their support for the provisions of the Bill. I have taken note of the matters raised and I will come back on some of those issues when the Bill is on Committee and Remaining Stages.

Question put and agreed to.

Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters

An Ceann Comhairle: I wish to advise the House of the following in respect of which notice has been given under Standing Order 37 were received by the Ceann Comhairle, and this is a list of the name of the member in each case: (1) Deputy John Lahart - to discuss the relocation of Firhouse Educate Together Secondary School to the grounds of Firhouse College; (2) Deputies Catherine Connolly and Éamon Ó Cuív - to discuss the need for an ambulance base located centrally in Connemara to ensure all of Connemara is covered all of the time; (3) Deputy Brian Stanley - to discuss the national broadband plan and its expected connection targets for 2021; (4) Deputy Paul McAuliffe - to discuss the issue of supports for taxi drivers; (5) Deputy Jennifer Whitmore - to discuss unresolved water quality issues at Barndarrig, County Wicklow; (6) Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan - to discuss if a review into the boundary expansion between Cork City and Cork County can be undertaken; (7) Deputy Gary Gannon - to discuss the urgent need for an independent inquiry into the death of Terence Wheelock; (8) Deputy Dessie Ellis - to discuss plans to address the issue of lead pipes in both private and council housing estates; (9) Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor - to discuss why some local businesses cannot feature in the Carlow tourism brochure; (10) Deputy Colm Burke - to discuss changing the employment classification of home tutors under the home tuition grant scheme from self-employed to employee; (11) Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire - to discuss Government supports to ensure that workers are kept on by companies during runway works at Cork Airport; (12) Deputies Holly Cairns, Christopher O'Sullivan - to discuss an additional rural recreation officer for the management of the national walks scheme by West Cork Development Partnership; (13) Deputy Martin Browne - to discuss the future of the post office network; (14) Deputy Chris

Andrews - to discuss the regeneration of social housing and flat complexes in inner-city Dublin; (15) Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú - to discuss the funding crisis at the Family Addiction Support Network, which covers Louth, Meath, Monaghan and Cavan; (16) Deputy Thomas Gould - to discuss the loss of addiction detox and rehabilitations beds during Covid-19 and the need to establish State-run secular facilities; (17) Deputy Kieran O'Donnell - to discuss the application by Rehab Group under the activation and family support programme, AFSP, for former workers in Rehab Enterprises, Limerick; (18) Deputy Verona Murphy - to discuss if the Barrow railway bridge in County Wexford will remain in a working position for the duration of the national strategic rail review; and (19) Deputy Darren O'Rourke - to discuss theory test delays.

The matters raised by Deputies John Lahart, Colm Burke, Holly Cairns and Christopher O'Sullivan, and Dessie Ellis have been selected for discussion.

Affordable Homes in the Poolbeg Strategic Development Zone: Motion

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: I move:

That Dáil Éireann:

notes that:

— on 9th April, 2019, An Board Pleanála approved Dublin City Council's (DCC) Strategic Development Zone (SDZ) Planning Scheme for Poolbeg West;

— following years of campaigning by the Irish Glass Bottle Housing Action Group and communities in Ringsend and Irishtown, Dublin City Councillors ensured the SDZ plan included 15 per cent affordable housing, above the 10 per cent social housing required under Part V of the Planning and Development Act 2000;

— the SDZ provides for between 3,000 and 3,500 new homes;

— up to 350 of these will be social housing and up to 570 are to be affordable housing;

— over €30 million of funding from the Department of Transport and the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage will be provided as part of the SDZ for a bridge connecting Britain Quay to York Street on the Poolbeg Peninsula;

— up to €28.6 million may be provided by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage under the Serviced Sites Fund for the provision of affordable housing;

— up to €20 million in funding has been provided through the Urban Regeneration and Development Fund for the upgrade of Sean Moore Road;

— in order to ensure that affordable homes are genuinely affordable, DCC negotiated with the National Asset Management Agency (NAMA) to purchase the land at the Irish Glass Bottle site, at a significant discount on its market value;

— in 2019, DCC and NAMA reached an agreement that would have secured the land for the affordable homes at a discount of up to 60 per cent of market value;

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— following protracted discussions between DCC and the then Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government, the Department refused to fund DCC's purchase of the land;

— a last-minute intervention by a senior NAMA board member to the then Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government, Eoghan Murphy, failed to secure departmental funding for the land purchase;

— as a consequence, the land was sold at a price significantly above the guide price, to Ronan Group Real Estate (RGRE) and Oaktree Capital Management;

— the consequence of this transaction will be to push up development costs, making the delivery of genuinely affordable homes more difficult;

— NAMA have retained a 20 per cent interest in the entire Poolbeg lands;

— the 2021 report of the Society of Chartered Surveyors Ireland entitled 'The Real Costs of New Apartment Delivery Report 2020' highlighted that the all-in development costs of new apartments in Dublin City ranged from €493,000 to €618,000;

— no agreement has been reached to date between DCC, NAMA and RGRE, on how to deliver the affordable homes in the SDZ;

— there is now real concern in the local community that the delivery of genuinely affordable homes on the Irish Glass Bottle site will not be possible; and

— the failure of the Government to avail of the opportunity to build affordable public homes on public land at the Irish Glass Bottle site is emblematic of their failing approach to housing across the State;

and agrees that:

— genuinely affordable homes on the Irish Glass Bottle site in the Poolbeg West SDZ must be delivered;

— the Ministers for Finance, Housing, Local Government and Heritage, and Transport must, as a matter of urgency, meet with both the Irish Glass Bottle Housing Action Group and DCC to agree a plan to guarantee the delivery of genuinely affordable homes on the Irish Glass Bottle site;

— the Government should seek to have NAMA's 20 per cent interest in the Poolbeg lands transferred to DCC; and

— the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage and the Minister for Transport must make clear that no infrastructural funding will be made available to the developers within the SDZ until a satisfactory plan for the delivery of affordable homes is secured.

As we are all aware, the Poolbeg strategic development zone, SDZ, was approved unanimously by Dublin city councillors in 2018-2019, and was approved with some amendments by An Board Pleanála in 2019. It is probably the last major, strategic, residential development site in our city centre. It is hugely important, not only for Dublin Bay South, but also for the city overall. The Minister, Deputy O'Brien, will be aware that following a very successful

campaign by the Irish Glass Bottle Housing Action Group and residents from Ringsend, Irish-town and the surrounding area, in addition to the 10% social housing that would ordinarily be provided, an extra 15% affordable housing has been included in the SDZ. The Minister was canvassing in the new houses in Ringsend last night and he spoke with some members of the campaign. I would be interested to hear his comments on that.

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage Deputy Darragh O'Brien: The intelligence unit is working very well. Impressive.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: One of the reasons it is so important to get that extra 15% is because house prices in this part of the city have increased more dramatically than in many other places, as the Minister is aware. There are families who have lived in that part of the city for three or four generations and whose children simply cannot afford to rent or buy there, and who do not have any prospect of renting or buying in or close to the communities in which they live, work, play and socialise. The delivery of these homes, therefore, is absolutely paramount.

Dublin City Council, in order to try to ensure the affordability of the homes in question, approached the National Asset Management Agency, NAMA, in 2019 with a view to acquiring the portion of the SDZ known as the Irish Glass Bottle site. Unusually, NAMA agreed to sell that site to Dublin City Council at a discount. Despite valiant efforts by Dublin City Council, ably assisted by the National Development Finance Agency, the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage refused to provide the finance for the council to proceed with the purchase. I understand, from good sources, that a last-minute intervention by a member of the NAMA board to the then Minister, Eoghan Murphy, who was also a Deputy representing the constituency, did not unblock the logjam, and Dublin City Council was unable to purchase the site.

The site was then rolled into the overall Poolbeg lands and put on the open market. As we know from media reports, the Ronan Group Real Estate bought the site, reputedly for a significant amount above the guide price. It beggars belief that any Minister would refuse to support the financing of such a key and strategic site, which would have been central to lowering the delivery costs and affordability of those units. I simply cannot understand that decision. The challenge is, however, that this is where we are today. Responsibility falls on this Government, with constructive opposition from this side of the House, to try to identify how best we can fix the problem we face.

It is very clear that everybody wants the affordable housing. I do not believe that any Member who will speak in this debate tonight does not want those 500 to 600-plus homes not delivered affordably. There is a difficulty however. Mr. Brendan Kenny, the director of housing with Dublin City Council, made public comments only a couple of weeks ago on his genuine concerns that the nature of the development as planned by Lioncor - the vehicle leading out the development for Ronan Group Real Estate - would be so expensive that even with the standard serviced sites fund, or even with the higher serviced sites fund the Minister is moving towards approving, one would not get those units at anything close to an affordable price for people on good incomes, let alone for those on modest incomes.

How can we fix this particular problem? The first thing is that NAMA continues to control a 20% interest in the land. There is an option here for the Government to seriously consider, which would be to see the landholding transfer from NAMA to Dublin City Council. Some people suggest that this should be done by way of a gift, but I am not sure if that is possible

under the NAMA Act. It certainly would be possible for that land to be transferred by way of an advance on the ultimate dividend that NAMA would pass to the State when it concludes its work. We know this dividend is considerable.

The second issue is the very considerable infrastructural funding from the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, through the local infrastructure housing activation fund, LIHAF, and the urban regeneration development fund, URDF, and the Department of Transport going into the overall SDZ. There will be somewhere in the region of €80 million, depending on how the ERDF funding is allocated, €50 million in LIHAF funding for the bridge will be matched by €15 million from the Department of Transport and the National Transport Authority, NTA, there will be between €12 million and €20 million for the Seán Moore Road and the roundabout there and whatever is allocated in the eventual serviced sites fund, which could be anything from €30 million to €60 million, depending on what eventually happens. That gives Dublin City Council and the Government very strong bargaining leverage. Nobody wants to delay this development. We want to see all of this happen quickly. In order for the Ronan group to make a reasonable offer for the purchase of those affordable units, fully discounted to the €80 million-plus, and preferably with the land values extracted completely following a transfer from NAMA to Dublin City Council, it would transform the ability of Dublin City Council to deliver affordable homes on that site.

I am aware that, clearly, the Minister cannot say “Yes” to any of that here today. That is not what we are asking. We are saying that we need central government to become more directly involved in working with Dublin City Council and the local community to put all of those levers on the table, and to come up with a plan to ensure that homes on that site can be purchased, just as homes in the Minister’s constituency would be purchased, for example at prices of €250,000, with the serviced sites fund - or the affordable housing fund I believe it is now called - equity portion to be repaid to the local authority at a later stage.

We also need to be careful that the shared equity portion is not too big or too onerous on the homeowner, and therefore the maximum level of discount on the purchase price and the lowest level of shared equity repayable is where we need to go.

We tabled this motion in the spirit of being constructive. We tabled it because we believe that the ideas we propose would have widespread support in Ringsend, Irishtown and the surrounding area, and would also have widespread support among Dublin city councillors of all parties and none, and officials who would lead this project. My strong appeal to the Minister is this: I do not believe that his predecessor was particularly active in this dilemma, and this is why we have ended up in a situation where NAMA offered to sell land at a discount of up to 60% of the market value but was unable to do so because the Department and then Minister, Eoghan Murphy, refused to fund it. I urge the Government now to roll up its sleeves with the Minister, the Minister for Transport, Deputy Eamon Ryan, and the Minister for Finance, Deputy Donohoe, working jointly and directly with Dublin City Council. I understand that the Irish Glass Bottle Housing Action Group has approached the Ministers for Housing, Local Government and Heritage and Transport. I would like to see this meeting happen as urgently as possible. I know that last night the Minister gave some commitments to the residents on a timeline for this. He can confirm this for us shortly. Let us work together on this. Let us ensure that on this site we have the maximum number of social and, crucially, affordable homes at prices working people can afford. If we all row in behind the community and the Irish Glass Bottle Housing Action Group we can produce a result that is in the interests of the community and the city. It is a result we all want to see.

Deputy Chris Andrews: I acknowledge Deputy Ó Broin for tabling the motion. It has been reported that a row between Dublin City Council and the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government in 2019 scuppered plans to purchase lands at Poolbeg for affordable housing. Documents released under freedom of information to the *Business Post* showed the deal fell apart after the council and the Department disagreed over who should pay to purchase part of the former Irish Glass Bottle site. As a result of this row, Dublin City Council believes the failure to purchase land will make the delivery of affordable homes on the site problematic.

The inability to purchase new homes is nothing new for residents in Dublin Bay South. Young working families have not been able to purchase affordable homes for a long time. Facebook, Google, LinkedIn, Amazon and now TikTok have all moved into the Ringsend and Pearse Street area and throughout south Dublin. As they have moved in, the price of buying and renting even modest homes has gone through the roof. Even if so-called affordable apartments are built, the reality is they will not be affordable to ordinary working families. Prices of €450,000, €500,000 and €600,000 are not affordable and this is what the affordable homes will cost.

Of course, the Government's decision to allow vulture funds to buy up apartments will make ownership for ordinary working people a distant memory. They may be affordable to the high-paid executives working in the tech companies but not to young working families. They will have to continue to live with their parents or pay huge rents that prevent them from saving for a home. Capital Dock, which throws a shadow over Ringsend and Pearse Street, has massive rents and is of no benefit to the ordinary working people living in its shadow. No public housing was delivered in the Ringsend and Pearse Street area as a result of the Capital Dock development. Many of the apartments are empty in an effort to keep rents high and manipulate the market.

In June of last year on Newstalk, the Minister said he would look at house prices in the region of €160,000 to €250,000 on a shared equity basis. Now it seems the affordable homes, if delivered in Ringsend, Harold's Cross or anywhere in Dublin Bay South, will be €450,000, which cannot possibly be classed as affordable. How can ordinary workers ever hope to buy a house in the community in which they went to school? Recently, I met the Irish Glass Bottle Housing Action Group with my colleagues, Senator Boylan, and Councillor Daniel Céitinn. The action group has campaigned tirelessly for affordable homes on the Irish Glass Bottle site and is extremely concerned there will be no public or affordable housing on the site. It is also concerned that if there is affordable housing it will not be affordable to ordinary working families. Will the Minister state there will be affordable homes on the Irish Glass Bottle site and that they will not cost more than €450,000?

Homes need to be building blocks for stronger communities and not just assets from which to make profits. Fine Gael represents the vulture funds, and it was ably assisted by the Labour Party and Deputy Howlin when he was a Minister in partnership with Fine Gael. Like most Deputies in Dublin Bay South, I am regularly contacted by residents in Ringsend, Sandymount and Pearse Street desperate for secure and decent accommodation. They are not looking to get it for free. One family recently contacted me because their council flat has three teenagers in one bedroom. The girl has the single bunk and shares with her two teenage brothers. Both parents work hard and pay €150 a week for a flat that is barely habitable despite their best efforts to keep it well, which they do given the circumstances. Their children are afraid to leave the flat because of the drug dealing and random violence around their home. They pay €600 a month to Dublin City Council and they feel trapped and worried, not for themselves but for their children.

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Yesterday, I met another couple who have one child. They both have jobs with two relatively good incomes. They do not qualify for public housing because of their income. They do not qualify for a mortgage because of their income. They are trapped in uncertain rental and they are weary. As they said, they feel broken. This is what the Government policy is doing. It is breaking people and it is breaking society. The Irish Glass Bottle site should be a real opportunity for people to be housed in decent, safe and secure accommodation. However, this will not happen with the plans the Government has for affordable housing.

On 8 July there will be a by-election, as the Minister knows as he was canvassing yesterday. Residents will have an opportunity to tell the Government they are fed up with its housing policy and they want public homes on public land. They want affordable homes and affordable rental that ordinary people can afford. This needs to be our town and not “Googletown”.

Deputy Mark Ward: We are in a housing crisis because the Government’s plan is not working. We are in a housing crisis because the previous Government’s plan did not work. The legacy left by Fine Gael’s disastrous former housing Minister, Eoghan Murphy, from the by-election area of Dublin Bay South, is something our children and children’s children will be the victims of for decades. This is unless real change happens. This is the change that Sinn Féin will deliver. This is not just some ideology. It is a fact and a simple strategy. Our housing policies put people before developers. They put workers and families before vultures and cuckoos. Our housing policies will allow families and workers to have a safe, secure and affordable roof over their heads.

I have seen some of the recent commentary by Fianna Fáil Deputies trying to distance themselves from the failed Fine Gael policies. Fianna Fáil likes to forget it was in a confidence and supply agreement with Fine Gael. What did Fianna Fáil have confidence in? Was it confidence in the supply of homes? Let me remind the Minister of what Fianna Fáil had so much confidence in. Not a single affordable home to buy or rent has been delivered by central government under Fine Gael. During Fine Gael’s time in office, house prices have spiralled out of control throughout the State. In 2011, the average rent in the State was €781 per month. It is now €1,256. In Dublin it is €1,745, which is an increase of €10,000 a year. In my area of Clondalkin and Lucan, the average rent is more than €2,000 a month and rising. What exactly did Fianna Fáil have so much confidence in Fine Gael for?

The Government is just another form of confidence and supply. Fianna Fáil has taken the baton from Fine Gael. Ordinary workers and families are still struggling with the lack of affordability in housing. The Government keeps making the same mistakes. It continues to prop up developers and investment funds. It is ignoring the advice of experts. Sinn Féin has a plan to build homes and cut rents and will implement this when in government.

People need to get a secure roof over their heads so they can put down roots. The right to a home should be one of the pillars of our society. The motion calls for genuinely affordable homes on the Irish Glass Bottle site in the Poolbeg strategic development zone to be delivered. I commend everyone who has campaigned for public housing on the site. One thing the Government can do is seek to have NAMA’s 20% interest in the Poolbeg lands transferred to South Dublin County Council. If real affordable homes are not delivered on this site it will be another example of Fine Gael’s dismal housing record that has been supported fully by Fianna Fáil.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: The sale of the Irish Glass Bottle site at Poolbeg to the Ronan group and its consortium will prove to be a profitable cash cow for these private developers. There is

a proposal to build 3,500 new homes on this important site, which has been in State hands for more than a decade. However, the motivation of private developers is to maximise their profits and sell off the houses at the highest possible price. House prices have increased by 13% in the past year, with people now paying an average of €34,000 more for a home than last year. In Dublin, the average house price now ranges from between €350,000 and €600,000. Even the lowest price range of €350,000 cannot be in any way regarded as affordable for a vast majority of people.

The money invested in the former Irish Glass Bottle site would suggest that prices on homes in this development will be out of the reach of most people. If this is the case that arises, it will be nothing short of scandalous at a time when people are struggling to get on the property ladder or even rent a home. The previous housing Minister was offered a site by NAMA at a 50% reduction. If he had followed through and bought the site, it could have been given over to a local authority which could have enhanced the number of social and affordable houses being delivered. Instead, he refused the offer and, true to form for a Fine Gael Minister imposing Fine Gael policies, not a single affordable home to buy or rent has been delivered centrally by the Government.

NAMA and the Minister for Finance have conceded that they are clueless as to what the rent or sale price for affordable homes on the site will be. It was a condition of the planning for the 3,500 homes that 15% of the units would be affordable and 10% would be social housing. The Minister has, to date, indicated that as regards apartments, a price of up to €450,000 is affordable. What price would the Minister envisage for new homes in this development? I can see a situation whereby those who were born and raised in the area, in particular around the Ringsend and Irishtown area, will not be able to afford these homes and will have to move out of the area.

At the moment, there is nothing to stop vulture funds buying up large numbers of these homes and renting them out at exorbitant prices. What guarantees can the Minister give that vulture funds will not once again take from a diminishing housing stock? Is the Minister concerned that the developer could possibly offer to give 15% affordable and 10% social housing on another site other than this one to fulfil his obligations? In the interests of social inclusion and integration, there should be a proper mix throughout the development of social, affordable and private homes. We should not have a situation, as has often been the case in the past, where social and affordable housing is lumped into one corner of a development. There are serious concerns in the community about this development that have not been addressed. Many of these concerns have been raised by local organisations such as the Irish Glass Bottle Housing Action Group. It feels that the community is being ignored. These communities deserve better and they deserve to be heard.

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): I thank Deputy Ó Broin and his colleagues for tabling the motion. It is timely and useful. I will not oppose it. I will not engage in a political back-and-forth with the three previous speakers because this is a very serious issue.

I agree with Deputy Ó Broin that this is a very important strategic site. It is not the only important strategic site in Dublin but is probably the most significant. I want to see it developed. I remind Deputies Ward, Andrews and Ellis that one of the reasons we talk about affordable housing is because I have prioritised the provision of affordable housing. The most comprehensive affordable housing legislation ever published was brought to the House by me and will conclude before 14 July. I am pleased to remind the Deputies that they are all supporting that

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Bill. I welcome that support. The Bill has not been opposed. In the interests of working together to deliver homes to people, that needs to happen.

I cannot answer for 2019 because I was not Minister at the time. I know the site well. I was there yesterday evening. The intelligence unit in the party opposite is working well. I met residents there and discussed the site with them. It is not the first time I have met them. I met the Irish Glass Bottle Housing Action Group and residents group in March with the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, and my colleague, Deputy Jim O'Callaghan. I met them yesterday with Councillor Deirdre Conroy. It is a significant site and we need to deliver sociable and affordable homes at scale. I want sites like this and other sites, such as the Oscar Traynor site, moved on. We need to get on with it at this stage.

There are a couple of elements we can help with in order to do that. One is the Affordable Housing Bill, part of which changes the serviced site fund into the affordable housing fund. We will be able to increase the subvention for affordable housing to address some of the affordability issues. I am looking at areas where affordability is far more acute, such as Dublin and Cork. I signalled in the debate on the Land Development Agency Bill that I hoped some Deputies opposite might change their position and see their way to supporting it. In Dublin and Cork I propose that we provide 100% affordable and social housing on State-owned land through the Land Development Agency as well, and we need to do that.

How do we move the Poolbeg site on? When I, together with the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, and Deputy Jim O'Callaghan, met residents in March, I said to them that I believe it is important that we get stakeholders around the table. The Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage has a role in this, as does DCC has a role in this, the developer and the builder. As I said to residents yesterday when I met them, we will convene that round-table group. We need to work through the financials. We need progress in this area. While I know it is not coincidental that the motion has been tabled in advance of a by-election in Dublin Bay South, nevertheless it is useful because this could be an exemplar for how we deliver affordable, social and private homes at scale in an area where Deputy Ellis has rightly said we need to have a mix of tenure and different types of families.

Deputy Andrews said the Government's affordable housing approach is breaking our people. If anything, there are three things that I stand by and have made an absolute priority in the year since I have been Minister. One is tackling homelessness. That has to be the number one priority, and we are seeing a continued reduction in it. The second relates to providing social homes at a scale never seen before in the history of the State. That is why it is backed with the biggest single budget in the history of the State, comprising €3.2 billion for housing. We need to do more and see that delivery. I remind the Deputies opposite that they opposed that budget. The third is the delivery of affordable housing for working people. I believe in homeownership and that it is an honest and just aspiration for people to have. We should support it. The State should be part of doing that and right now, the State is the biggest builder.

Post pandemic, we need to start to deliver these schemes at scale. There is vast potential in Poolbeg. I understand from talking to residents there is a further plan that will be brought forward, which I want to see. I want to get their views on that. I want to get Dublin City Council and other stakeholders, including NAMA, around the table, which I will do. If this is done properly at Poolbeg it could be an exemplar for sites all around the country.

The Leas-Cheann Comhairle is from Galway. We can provide housing on State-owned

lands in the docklands area of Galway city, as well as in the north docks in Cork, in Waterford and other areas where the State is involved through the affordable housing fund. That is the legislation we will pass in the House which I have worked on since last July to ensure that we have the legislative foundations to be able to provide State subventions for affordable housing for purchase. Not only that, we also want to provide cost rental housing. There are massive opportunities there.

In the Affordable Housing Bill, we will establish on a primary legislative footing, for the first time ever, a national cost rental scheme, a national scheme for affordable purchase for delivery of direct build affordable homes by our local authorities and a new and innovative shared equity scheme for first-time buyers, homeowners and people who are stuck in rip-off rental situations at the moment. They will be able to buy a home and pay less than half of the amount they are currently paying in rent in a mortgage. That is what want to do.

I welcome the motion, debate and contributions. I look forward to working with Deputies across the House to deliver on Poolbeg because it is incumbent on us and the Government – I say this as Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage – that we see progress on this site. We want progress not just on Poolbeg and the Irish Glass Bottle site but in areas like Oscar Traynor on the other side of the city and sites all over this country. That is what I intend to do.

We need to deliver at least 33,000 public and private homes per annum. This year, because of Covid, we will be short by 20,000 units. In the meantime, we need to provide hope for working people that they will have a scheme whereby they will be able to buy homes at an affordable rate or rent their homes at affordable rates through State-backed secure rents, as well as increasing the provision of social housing, which I very much intend to do, backed by real financing.

In short, and in conclusion, I intend to meet the residents again. I will do that within a short space of time, along with public representatives, but first with stakeholders. I said to residents yesterday that I did not want to do so in advance of the Dublin Bay South by-election for fear that it might be seen or the charge might be made that it was for some party political reason that I was doing so. I met them in March. I have been progressing the Department's position. There is a way forward.

I look forward to working with Members like Deputy Andrews, who represent that constituency and spokespersons from other parties on delivering homes not just on this site, but thousands of other homes on hundreds of other sites across the country. Individuals and parties need to be aware of their responsibility and that of their local authority members to support housing developments in their communities. We are in the midst of a housing crisis that is fixable. We have the expertise, know-how and resources to make significant strides in that regard, but we cannot put up with continued delays and objections from certain local authority members across the country. We need to get on with delivering homes for our people. I hope that a consensus can be agreed with residents and stakeholders on delivering at scale in Poolbeg.

Deputy Réada Cronin: I thank the Leas-Cheann Comhairle for the opportunity to speak on this Private Members' motion. I thank the Minister for his speech.

“Affordable” and “housing” are two words that do not often seem to go together in the State. Nor will they while we have a government ideology that leaves housing, which is one of our most basic human needs, at the mercy of the markets. What a mercy the market is. According to *The Irish Times* yesterday, house prices in Dublin have been surging by €1,500 per week

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since March. The bank of mammy and daddy, so beloved by the Minister's colleagues, would have to be a mega-bank to afford to keep up with those prices. For those who do not have the bank of mammy and daddy, the news is especially worrying, as it is for those who cannot manage to save anything and are barely hanging on after a year and a half of the Covid-19 pandemic. When people live from week to week or month to month and their salaries go straight out the door to pay for the rent or mortgage, food, the other basics of living and perhaps a take-away on a Friday night, there is not a whole lot left for trips, socialising, shopping or entertainment. They are at the pin of their collar. They are the pillars of our State, running to stand still and just about keeping going.

It is for these hard-working people that we need the 900 affordable homes in Poolbeg, which is what necessitated this motion. When it comes to their housing needs, they are ignored by Fine Gael, under whose tenure house prices increased by 88% nationally and 95% in Dublin. All of this was according to the plan of the former Minister, Mr. Michael Noonan. It was just what he had intended.

This is a Government that wants to shoo our young people, our best and brightest, into co-living - the new tenements, with bargain basement living standards at top dollar prices. Our hard-working adult children are shrinking their housing dreams to fit the profit need and greed of the favoured few. This is a Government that has given us tent cities cheek by jowl with pent-house living, believes in making housing a privilege and has not provided a single affordable home to buy or rent thus far. In 2011, the average rent across the State was €781 per month. In 2021, I know a woman in north Kildare who is paying €780 per month for a single room in a house, the bank having taken away the home on which she had spent a small fortune down the years in a mortgage. I am dealing with a stream of mortgage-approved young couples who cannot buy a home because they are being outbid at every turn. The cuckoos come and throw them out of their potential nests. Other couples in good jobs cannot even get mortgage approval.

All of this ruinous expense and ruinous experience is on the backs of our workers. It is cheap and vulgar. It degrades us as a society and diminishes us as a people. When people see their most basic need - the need for a home - left to the tyranny of the market, it tells them that they are less than, that they and their needs do not matter in the important business of the State. If housing its people, either through rent or purchase, is not important business for any state, then what is?

In north Kildare, I know many people who are hanging on by a thread because of housing. They are of all ages, from babies to the elderly, and they are all in crisis. The Minister should be in no doubt that there is a crisis. I am glad that he said that. For these people and the State, it is a humanitarian crisis of your making which we have to solve.

In your unguarded and unmanaged moments, the Minister's Government talks about public housing as free housing when it is no such thing. This demeaning and totally incorrect talk shows that you do not have a clue what you are talking about on public housing. You do not even know how it works. In public housing, everyone pays rent according to his or her means, but that you persist, and that your colleagues persist, in the myth of free housing shows your dislike and distrust of people who cannot afford to buy a home of their own. None of us knows how our own lives will turn out----

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I have been listening to the Member. She has made charges against me concerning things that I did not say, nor have I ever.

Deputy Réada Cronin: I said “your colleague” Minister.

Deputy Darragh O’Brien: She should withdraw them because they are just wrong and she knows it.

Deputy Réada Cronin: Minister, I said “your colleagues in Government”.

Deputy Darragh O’Brien: The Deputy will not be let away with her propaganda this evening.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Let the Deputy complete-----

Deputy Réada Cronin: Maybe the Minister should check out the comments of his colleagues in government.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy, please.

Deputy Darragh O’Brien: Go away out of that. You referred to me. I never said that.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Minister, please.

Deputy Réada Cronin: They called it free housing. The Minister interrupted me and was so glib and dismissive.

The only people getting free housing in this country are the cuckoos, vultures and developers with their cash cow leases. I suggest the Minister educates himself about who he is in bed with. He seems unable to grasp that.

Put social and affordable housing back on the Poolbeg site. A price of €450,000 is not affordable. Do not pretend that Sinn Féin has caused this housing crisis. Do not bottle it.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Teachta Ó Broin as an deis a thabhairt dúinn an ghné seo a phlé tríd an rún seo a chur os comhair na Dála. Tá sé ríthábhachtach go dtarlaíonn sé sin agus go dtarlaíonn sé ag an am a bhfuil an pobal i ngéarchéim thithíochta agus ag am a bhfuil an deis ag an bpobal, i bhfothoghchán nó aon toghchán eile, marc a dhéanamh ar pháipéar i gcoinne iad siúd atá tar éis suí ar cheist agus géarchéim thithíochta le blianta.

This motion highlights a scandal. It is a scandal that the State was offered land at a discount but did not take up that offer. In fact, the exact opposite happened, in that the State seemed to do everything in its power to avoid taking land that could have been used for people who were crying out for housing, be it for rental or purchase, including private purchase. That possibility was not afforded to them by this Government, the previous Government or the one before that. The housing crisis did not appear out of nowhere. It has been caused by years of inaction and a lack of investment.

Every time I have spoken about housing recently, the criers on the Government backbenches have said that we object to this, that and the other, but I do not object willy-nilly. My record stands for itself in supporting proper housing throughout the country. I support social and affordable housing on public land. I support private housing on private land. I do not support dog boxes, which the previous housing Minister wanted to build on many of the estates and other areas that had been designated for residential use.

It is time to act. The Minister has at long last started to move towards affordable purchase

and affordable rental, but this problem was highlighted to this and recent Governments. Take St. Michael's estate as an example. For how many years has it been demolished? A house, be it affordable or social, has still not been built there. It is public land. I could list a range of public lands in my area. There are also lands in respect of which the State has not even bothered speaking to its State partners, for example, CIÉ, which has 30 acres in my constituency that are unused. I would support housing being built on that land, as promised way back in 2008 to 2009. There are Office of Public Works, OPW, lands next door to it, on which there was planning for 300 houses. The OPW stores desks and tables on it. We have been to the fore with regard to Cherry Orchard in trying to ensure the same type of housing we are talking about here; private, for-purchase, affordable housing and affordable rental and social housing on the public section. That is what is needed. It is not just needed on the Irish Glass Bottle site, which I know well from my youth, but on every single piece of land.

However, it is not good enough to be talking about it. The councils need to be invested in to make sure they can deliver. The scandal the Minister is trying to create by building up the Land Development Agency, which will interfere with the democratic rights of citizens and councillors across this city, also needs to be ended. I can list off a range of areas which need to be developed and developed quickly. It is not just a matter of saying "we want to do this". It needs to be done as quickly as possible and that has not been seen by this Government or the previous four governments.

People will start emigrating in droves again, as they did in the past when there were no opportunities for them. In this case, they do not have the opportunity to have houses.

Deputy Duncan Smith: I thank the proposers of the motion and Deputy Ó Broin for bringing it to the House today for discussion. The motion does not go for the jugular, as some motions would in this area. That is not a criticism of the motion, it is more a reflection of the complexity of the issue in terms of the lack of development of the Irish Glass Bottle site. That is understood by any group, politician, public representative or activist who has been involved in this issue over the past number of years.

Anyone who was unfamiliar with the area, in terms of canvassing door-to-door, but who has become familiar with it in the past number of weeks, as I have when canvassing for Ivana Bacik, knows how important the development of this area is to the people of Ringsend, Irish-town, Pearse Street, Sandymount and the surrounding areas. It is totemic in that area, in terms of how broken our housing policy has been for many years. With regard to the need to get this right and deliver on this site, the Minister used language in terms of having many important sites, but perhaps none more so than this, given its location and industrial history and how it was sustained by the workers of Dublin for so many years. It is the workers of Dublin who need to benefit from this, as it is developed.

At present, there is massive uncertainty as to whether that will happen. A considerable amount of legislation is coming through. We are having many debates. Only a couple of hours ago, we were in here debating planning legislation. I discussed the important role county and city councillors play in the planning and development process. I am proud of the role Labour councillors have played on this site in the past number of years.

I am not someone who comes in with fake bravado or history, in terms of what my party has done, but here it is credit where credit is due. When it came to the provision of social and affordable housing, a previous Minister, Deputy Coveney, said we would do no more than 10%

and 300 houses was all that would be provided and there was no way more than that would be provided. This was backed up on the council by the Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil councillors at the time but the Labour group and the mayor at the time, Brendan Carr, and councillors such as Dermot Lacey who were local to the area, led and fought to ensure we had 350 social houses and more than 500 affordable houses included in this plan.

That is almost as much as the councillors can do, but that is a bigger argument which relates to the powers of councillors and we will come back to that in another debate. Now, it is up to this House, the Minister, the senior officials in Dublin City Council and, as this motion stated, the role of NAMA and how it can assist. The big players have to deliver on this site. There is concern and the reason I say this motion does not go for the jugular is it understands the complexity of the issue. It wants to deliver for the people of the community. It wants to deliver truly affordable housing.

We want the Bill the Government is bringing through on affordable housing to work. We have concerns it will not and it is in places such as the Poolbeg strategic housing development where the rubber will meet the road in terms of that affordable housing Bill. We are concerned because the developer and owners of the site, who will have huge control, have no track record in developing affordable housing or sustainable communities. They have a track record in developing prestigious buildings such as the one we are in now. That is their meat and drink. That is what they do.

However, they do not develop sustainable communities and that is what is needed down here. The eye-watering figures for rent and house prices in traditional working class areas, such as Ringsend and Irishtown, are an absolute scandal. The real worry is what will be developed in Poolbeg will be some prestigious community on a peninsula into the bay, which will be separated or almost gated - for want of a better term - and that it will not be integrated or part of the evolution of the communities down there and will be a place only very, very rich people can live and near which people of modest incomes will not be able to get.

People of modest incomes will not be able to get near it and people on modest incomes will not be able to afford it. This will be a community for the rich linked into the tech centre, the International Financial Services Centre, IFSC, and the centre of Dublin, but not the communities around it, communities which, through generations of work on that site, have invested their toil, sweat and tears in the hope that one day, the generations following them can continue to live there and develop their rich tradition. It is one of the many villages which exist in our city, among these great communities which are so vibrant and vital and of whose history we, as Dubliners, say we are so proud to share.

We are talking about 3,500 units. There could be 10,000 people living there. That is a big-sized town. This is not the development of a housing estate or a block of flats, this is the development of a new village, town and community. If that is not linked in properly with truly affordable public housing linked to the communities which exist down there, we, as a party, will be unable to support it.

The Minister is not opposing this. Everyone here wants the same goal, but will we get there? There are huge doubts at this time. There is a complex history to it. The action group down there has been consistent and worked with any public representative or any other community activist who wants the same thing down there, which is affordable, sustainable communities. We still seem as far away from that now as we were a number of years ago.

We know when polling day closes and a new Deputy is elected, this issue will not go away. This cannot just be a by-election issue. We know why this is brought here today and, fair enough, that is politics, but this is a day in day out issue for the people of Ringsend, Irishtown and the surrounding communities. This is their hope and that cannot be extinguished. It must be supported and delivered for those communities.

Deputy Cian O’Callaghan: I thank Deputy Ó Broin for bringing this motion and it is positive the Minister is not opposing it. That is welcome. Unfortunately, the failure to acquire the Irish Glass Bottle site is a scandal and an example of a massive missed opportunity to ensure all the homes which would be built would be genuinely affordable or social and it is short-sighted. Reading through some of the correspondence from the Freedom of Information Act, FOI, which was reported on earlier this year, the Secretary General of the Department of housing at the time wrote we have a duty to ensure we are party to an agreement designed to deliver affordable housing and that we are clear the agreement can deliver that. The Secretary General went on to say the Department is being asked to provide very significant capital funding to buy a site with no clear pathway, thereafter, to the delivery of affordable housing. I quote that correspondence because I do not believe this is an issue about officials and what they were doing. They were trying to do their jobs. The scandal here is a political scandal, that they did not know, if the site was bought, how the capital funding to deliver affordable homes would be secured for that. That is a failure of politics.

It is an absolute failure that what is happening now in the debate on housing and on what needs to happen in Ireland is that some of the strongest arguments being made, and arguments have been made in this House, on how we are going to finance it are being left to people such as those in the ESRI. They have to clearly say to the Government, repeatedly: “This is how you finance housing, this is how it can be done, this is how it is prudent to do it and, when you look at what Ireland can borrow and its economic growth, this is what can be achieved”. We should not be in that situation. We should not be in a situation where that site was not acquired. It should have been acquired. It should be obvious to anyone who is passionate about this how the Government and the State could be availing of sufficient capital funding to acquire these types of sites to deliver affordable housing.

The Oscar Traynor Road site is related to this. A plan has been agreed by councillors on Dublin City Council to deliver affordable and social homes there. They are disappointed with the delays in the Department and by the Minister with regard to their wishes to advance that. They are disappointed at the lack of urgency. They want to advance it as quickly as possible and the ball is very much in the court of the Department and the Government to respond to that as fast as possible.

We have the resources in this country and we certainly have the know-how and technical expertise for affordable housing. There is no question about that. However, I question if there is the know-how and expertise at government level when it comes to affordable housing. Yesterday, on national radio, Professor John FitzGerald, speaking about the Government’s Affordable Housing Bill and the shared equity scheme, in particular, said that it is a very bad idea for Ireland. He cited it as an example of politicians doing stupid things. He pointed out that property owners and landowners would benefit from it, not potential buyers. He was unequivocal about this. We know that a similar scheme in the UK led to a boom in profits for large developers.

The Central Bank, the ESRI, officials in the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage and the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform have all issued warnings on

this. Indeed, a senior official wrote that the property industry wants an equity scheme because it will increase prices. Despite all this, there does not appear to be the know-how at government level to listen to expert advice when it comes to housing. The expert advice on this is incredibly clear as to what it will do, yet there does not appear to be the ability at senior political level in the Government to listen to that expert advice, take it on board and scrap a scheme that everybody knows will inflate house prices. The people lobbying for that scheme started lobbying for it at a time when we did not have the house price inflation that we currently have. In fact, the people lobbying for that scheme are the same people who lobbied for the strategic housing development legislation and told the Government at the time that it would lead to more housing delivery and a faster planning process. What has happened is a complete and utter shambles - a lack of delivery because of judicial reviews and everything else. That could have been pointed out by anybody familiar with the planning system. We must stand up to the corrosive influence of lobbyists on housing, and particularly stand up against what everyone knows will affect housing affordability. It is fine to talk about housing affordability, but to continue to advance a scheme that everyone knows will increase house prices further makes no sense.

The method of delivery in the Poolbeg site and similar sites is very important for achieving affordability. There is no question about that. We will not achieve the level of affordability that is necessary for people on average incomes if we continue to rely on private sector delivery. We need only look at the details of proposals submitted by developers under Part V in any of the developments they are advancing to see how they are more expensive than other methods of delivery by not-for-profit or local authority led delivery. That is because they are paying higher finance costs. We know from schemes such as the Ó Cualann Cohousing Alliance scheme in Dun Emer, Lusk, in the Minister's constituency, and there are density reasons for it as well which we must acknowledge, that delivery at much more affordable prices can be done and is done, with prices from €166,000 to €258,000 in Dun Emer, yet we hear reports of potential prices for affordable homes in Poolbeg at as much as €600,000. Who delivers matters, if we are going to address this properly.

In conclusion, there have been clear warnings in the last few weeks from the Central Bank, for example, about significant house price growth in the near to medium term. The Irish housing market report from the Bank of America has warned about rising construction costs and how this will hinder the supply of new homes here and fuel a further increase in house prices. The real estate firm, JLL Ireland, has predicted potential price increases of 7% in Dublin this year. There have been warnings from various housing experts, including Lorcan Sirr, Karl Dieter and Jim Power, that house prices could soon hit Celtic tiger levels. Indeed, the report for the Cabinet housing committee has warned against demand side policies and how that could create house price inflation. Despite all those warnings, the Government is advancing a proposal to increase house prices further, and it continues to support the sale of land and failure to acquire land for affordable and social housing, as in this instance. It is time for a different approach on this.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I thank Deputy Ó Broin for bringing forward this important motion relating to Poolbeg and the Irish Glass Bottle site. I am also glad that the Government has decided not to oppose the motion. I pay tribute to the Irish Glass Bottle Housing Action Group. I was an invited speaker at its launch meeting many years ago. I cannot remember how many years ago and that, in itself, tells a story because we still do not have any public and affordable housing on that site. The reason I was invited is that I face a similar situation in my constituency with Cherrywood, another massive development site where there is the same

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scandal. Not only is there the scandal with this site that there was a possible arrangement for NAMA to sell it to Dublin City Council, which did not happen for unexplained reasons, but the big scandal, as I have repeated many times here, is the fact that we had the biggest real estate company in the world in the form of NAMA, we had vast amounts of land and property with which we could have solved the housing crisis and we did precisely the wrong thing with it by handing it back to private developers and reinforcing the dynamics that had created the housing and homelessness crisis we are dealing with now. For me, that is the biggest scandal.

We had it in Cherrywood as well. Just as in Poolbeg and the Irish Glass Bottle Site, we have no clue, more than a decade later and with building taking place in Cherrywood, what price the affordable housing will be, and we have no clue how much affordable housing we will get on that site. Incidentally, the Minister's intervention to increase the 10% to 10% social and affordable will make no difference to Cherrywood.

7 o'clock

Tens of millions of euro have gone into Cherrywood to build the roads, parks and the rest of the infrastructure. That was supposed to be conditional on the delivery of affordable housing. It is a telling indictment that after all that time and investment, we still have no clue what the price of the so-called affordable housing will be or how much affordable housing we will get on the site, which had previously been entirely in public ownership under NAMA. That is an absolute scandal.

As has been said, the timing of this motion is linked to a by-election. There is nothing wrong with that when an election should precisely be an opportunity to champion the issues and causes that will make a difference to the areas involved. I commend Deputy Ó Broin on doing this. Our candidate in that by-election is someone who will directly benefit if we can deliver some public and affordable housing, as she lives in Ringsend and her family are from Ringsend. She is a young worker in her early 20s on a modest income in an ordinary job. As she repeats endlessly on the campaign canvas, and she means it because it is the truth, she has no chance of ever being able to own her own house and very little chance, as is the case with most social housing applicants, of getting a council house this side of the next decade or more, as things stand.

It is urgent that we get housing development right at locations like those at Poolbeg and the Irish Glass Bottle site. It is also urgent that we try to rescue the situation in Cherrywood, one of the biggest residential developments in the country. Ronan Group Real Estate is also involved with that development. This should be a warning to the people of Ringsend and Irishtown because the guide prices being boasted about are in the region of €500,000 for three and four-bedroom houses. If those are going to be the sort of prices charged, it will be of no use to the ordinary working people of my area and will be of no use to people in Irishtown, Ringsend and surrounding areas.

I will put this really bluntly. I see no point in building houses of any description at that price. The only thing we should be doing with the land we can get hold of is delivering public and genuinely affordable housing. We should also be stating clearly what "affordable" actually means. We have put forward an amendment to this motion to state that affordability should be linked to income. Affordability is not a movable feast depending on which part of the city or country people live in. As I have said many times, gardaí, teachers and workers in retail on minimum wages are not paid higher wages because they live in Irishtown, Ringsend, Dún

Laoghaire, Galway or Cork People but the costs of rent and house prices are far higher in those areas.

When the State refers to “affordable” housing, which we must deliver at scale, affordable must be affordable for everybody. There should be no discrimination based on what part of the country people are living in. This is the problem with the Government’s notions about affordability. It is not clearly set out in the Affordable Housing Bill 2021 how exactly the resulting housing provision will be affordable. The Land Development Agency Bill 2021 and the Affordable Housing Bill 2021 contain references to the market, market prices and discounts on market prices. That is no good. It is just no good and there should be no reference to those matters. The market is the problem and it is not able to deliver stuff that ordinary working people can afford.

Let us be absolutely clear. I do not know if the Minister will agree with this point and references to lobbyists, but the big property developers have no interest in the State being able to deliver affordable housing that is genuinely affordable for working people. The reason is that if the State builds and sells housing at €200,000 or €250,000 on any type of scale while a property developer is also trying to build similar houses and sell them for €400,000 or €500,000 a few hundred yards down the road, that private property developer, from his point of view, has a problem. He wants to profit and to be able to sell at those very high prices. Why on earth, then, would he want to see housing that is similar being built at scale and sold at half the price?

The lobbying from these people is about their self-interest and they must be written out of the picture when it comes to the State delivering public and affordable housing. I do not care about developers. Let them look after themselves on private land. Frankly, when they are sitting on private land or private property that they are hoarding, speculating on and manipulating the market with, I would take it from them. The problem is that they own too much of the land and they are dictating market prices and rents and now they are trying to move in on the public land bank via the Land Development Agency.

I support the motion and I am glad the Minister of State is not going to oppose it. I have been campaigning and supporting the campaign to get public and affordable housing on the site since it started. It is a sad indictment that we still do not know whether the housing will be affordable. It is a scandal that people like Mr. Ronan ever got hold of such large portions of that land. We need affordability to be based on people’s incomes. To my mind, as our amendment suggests, that should mean that people should not have to spend more than 25% of their income on putting a roof over their head. Do we work to live or do we live to work? People paying 40%, 50%, 60% or 70% of their income on just putting a roof over their heads - if they are even able to get a roof over their heads - are living to work and not working to live. They are slaves to extortionate house prices and rents. We must end that scandalous situation by delivering genuinely affordable housing for working people.

Deputy Seán Canney: I welcome this opportunity to speak about the issue of housing. In the few minutes I have, I will concentrate on the serious lack of funding afforded to Irish Water to ensure we have suitable land serviced for development. People are telling me that this lack of resources means Irish Water is becoming an impediment to the delivery of construction and the built environment. Applications for planning permission for significant areas of zoned land in different locations are being deemed premature because inadequate water or wastewater services are available. This problem is compounded by the lack of a programme of work to indicate when these zoned lands will be serviced by Irish Water.

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I will give the small example of Athenry, County Galway, which is at the crossroads of motorways. A developer submitting an application in respect of a strategic housing development, SHD, was told by Irish Water two years ago that it would support him. However, when he went to the company to get the letter to bring to An Bord Pleanála he was told it was premature and to come back in 2023 or 2024 when Irish Water would see if it had the network in place at that stage. The last words used were “pending funding”.

We must grapple with this issue and address the time it takes to get quotations and subsequent water and wastewater connections from Irish Water. The cost of Irish Water connections is excessive. People trying to build tell me that Irish Water is being strangled by insufficient funding being made available to carry out the duties we imposed on the company when we set it up. Many projects which were on the agenda before Irish Water came into being have disappeared in areas overseen by Galway County Council and every other local authority around the country. We must significantly increase Irish Water’s capital budget so that it has the financial resources to plan and deliver projects. The utility must prepare a programme of what will be delivered over the next five years and have the money to back it up. Irish Water has the potential to help us to get out of this crisis but the way we are funding it or, rather, holding back on funding it means we are pulling against ourselves.

During the debate earlier today on the Planning and Development (Amendment) Bill, we heard about many of the issues that are arising but one particular problem is the lack of services on sites, especially water and wastewater services. We are not putting the investment in where it is needed. If we want serviced land that is ready to build houses on, and if we want to provide a supply chain, we must start with the sites and make sure they are serviced. At the moment, we do not have that.

We are introducing a lot of legislation and new initiatives and I welcome the fact that we are bringing affordability into housing. I also welcome the shared equity scheme but I cannot figure out how we are going to deliver a sufficient volume of houses over the next five to ten years to meet the demand that exists. Deputies spoke about developers making a killing because the supply is being squeezed and that is what it is all about. Supply is being squeezed and we are squeezing it ourselves with the policies we have laid out and by not providing the resources where they are needed. Supply must be delivered right across this country, in the regions as well as in the major cities, because every town and village has a housing crisis.

Deputy Denis Naughten: I endorse everything Deputy Canney has just said. All across the country, including in many of our provincial towns, the rapidly increasing price of property is the direct result of the lack of availability of property and serviced land.

I want to take a step back and focus on the low-hanging fruit. While there is no doubt that we have a huge challenge in servicing land, opening it up for development and building new houses, we also have a substantial number of derelict buildings across the country. This is housing stock that could be put back onto the market relatively quickly and we cannot continue to ignore it. I am like a broken record, consistently raising this issue in the House and there are a number of aspects to it. I have been highlighting that for a serviced site being developed in Dublin, the State is paying an average of €30,714 but is not providing any assistance to refurbish derelict buildings in our towns and villages. I hope we will see that rectified in an announcement by the Minister next month but we need to go further on this.

Another issue that I have been highlighting consistently is that of older people in housing

that is totally unsuited to their needs. Many are in two or three-storey houses which are too large to heat and they would love to move to smaller accommodation but there are two challenges in that regard. The first is the lack of availability of such accommodation and the second is the lack of security of tenure if they do move into such accommodation. There is a lack of one-bedroom and two-bedroom bungalows in the private housing market for older people to either purchase or rent. The only such accommodation is generally local authority housing and any older person with an existing property is not eligible for it. We need to take a proactive step, working in partnership with the private sector, to develop one-bedroom and two-bedroom bungalows in cluster-type settings close to town centres so that older people have the option to downsize.

In many cases, accommodation will be leased to older people. In that context, we need to introduce special legislation to provide security of tenure. I have raised this issue at the Cabinet table previously. We must provide security of tenure to older people. We have seen tax incentives provided in some retirement villages associated with nursing homes across the country to encourage older people to downsize while allowing them to continue to live independently beside amenities that meet their needs.

I draw attention to a case that I brought to the attention of the Minister's predecessor. Mary sold her home and moved to an unfurnished apartment in one of the aforementioned retirement villages back in 2011. There was an issue regarding ownership and the rent was not index-linked. Suddenly Mary was faced with an increase in her rent of 86%, from €430 to €800 per month. People on fixed incomes cannot be faced with such situations. If we are going to encourage older people to downsize, we must address this issue. I have raised this with the Minister directly but nothing is being done about it. We can pay lip service to the concept of downsizing but older people need security. Such security is not being provided to them in law at the moment and that needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Before we move on to the next speaker, I must ask Deputy Boyd-Barrett to formally move his amendment.

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

To insert the following after "until a satisfactory plan for the delivery of affordable homes is secured":

— affordable shall be defined as a price that ensures the tenant or owner is not paying more than 25 per cent of their earnings on either mortgage or rent; and

— where the NAMA lands are transferred to DCC, the homes on this portion of the land will all be social or affordable."

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I am glad to get the opportunity to talk about affordable housing because it is a very serious problem. There are many young couples watching us this evening who are wondering if they will ever be able to put a roof over their heads. It is a natural desire for any couple or young person to put a roof over their heads and to own their home but it is becoming increasingly difficult because of the cost of materials and the difficulties with securing planning permission in rural areas, especially in rural parts of Kerry.

I spoke earlier about difficulties with designations that are applied on the insistence of the regulator and the planning authorities which must be adhered to by the local authorities. One

problem is the urban generated pressure clause which was designed, wrongly, to stop people coming out from towns and villages and building in rural areas. It is also wrong because it stops a local person in the area from getting planning permission because such permission will only be granted to the landowner's son or daughter. That clause is wrong because people should be entitled to get planning permission to build where they want to build their permanent residence. I would not mind a clause being put on them if they got the permission and they would not mind it either. That is one of the issues.

The regulator is blocking people from getting planning permission in other rural areas and insisting that permission not be granted in different places. Then, when planning is granted by Kerry County Council some nasty individual appeals the decision to An Bord Pleanála, as An Taisce has done many times, making life miserable for many families. Kerry County Council grants the permission, someone appeals it to An Bord Pleanála and even though the inspector who comes down agrees with the local authority, lo and behold, when the decision goes back to An Bord Pleanála it is refused for some reason and the couple or young person are denied the planning permission they should have got.

I agree with previous speakers on sewerage and water facilities. In Kerry, we have 32 villages without a sewerage facility. Places like Scartaglin, Curragh, Asdee, Caherdaniel and Balinskelligs cannot expand or grow because they do not have a sewerage facility. As has been said, the Government and the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications will have to step in and assist Irish Water because it does not have the funds to put all these schemes in place. All that Irish Water is compelled and liable to do is maintain the facilities that are there already and it is put to the pin of its collar doing that. In places like Kenmare or Castleisland, people can get planning permission for a development but they cannot build the houses until the sewerage schemes are put in place, extended and expanded. Some 17 towns and villages are waiting on plans to rejuvenate and bring their sewerage schemes up to standard.

The regulator is continuously interfering with zoning and it is dezoning lands. We have Ministers saying they want to build affordable houses. How can housing and affordable housing be built if most of the land in any one settlement is being dezoned? In most cases, the regulator will only allow one plot of land in each settlement to be zoned. That is wrong because it gives the individual in question or the side of the village or town where the plot a monopoly and the owner can charge what he or she likes. We are talking about affordability but that is out the window when there is no competition for prices.

As I have said previously, we should zone plenty of land and let the market decide where the houses will be built. Alternatively, we should not zone any land and let every planning application be decided either by the local authority or An Bord Pleanála, depending on its size. If we forgot about zoning, it would be way fairer as it would allow single applicants to buy a site close to the village or town and build on it because the land would not have to be zoned, as it must be at present. I had a case recently involving a young couple in a small village who applied for planning permission outside of the village and they were refused because the land was not zoned. They could not buy a site in the little village or town because it was not available. The Ministers have to wake up to these facts.

I heard Deputy Naughten talking about building social housing or two-bedroom bungalows for older people. I would like to take him down to Rathmore in Kerry where Jerh O'Donoghue and the Rathmore Social Action Group have been successfully housing elderly couples and even single people for years. The group should be complimented, especially Mr. O'Donoghue

on the foresight and vision he had in what he has done and what he is continuing to do with his team around him. I also compliment Michael Cronin of Thermohouse Ireland on the great work it is doing in building voluntary social housing in Killarney, Milltown and different towns and villages. I also compliment KPH Construction, which is doing much the same in Barraduff. It deserves credit for the high standard of houses it is building.

On felling licences, we hear about the increased cost of materials and timber, which is going up and up. Anyone who wants timber to build a house in Kerry must wait for six weeks for delivery and suppliers will not know or cannot tell people what the price will be until they land with the timber because it is going up and up in price and is being imported. At the same time, in Germany and other countries, no felling licence is required because when someone plants forestry it is recognised that it will have to be cut down at some stage. If people were granted permission to plant forestry, they should not need a felling licence, either to thin or clearfell it at any time. The quicker we realise that, the better because our forestry industry has gone down the swanny. Job after job is being lost and contractors that had specialised gear and equipment for cutting and drawing out timber, including forwarders and all those kind of things, have either gone to Scotland or they have gone bust. The Government will have to wake up to the fact that this is happening. I hope it is listening because it is a serious matter. More things are being lost during the reign of this Government than during any previous Government, and this is one of the most serious of them.

On the tenant purchase scheme, a number of years ago, people could rent out a council house and after a year or two or a number of years, they were entitled to purchase it under a scheme. Some 80% of the applicants to the scheme are being refused. The Government needs to look at that scheme because it was an important and valuable one. People got on their feet after renting for a certain number of years and they were able to purchase their house. They are being denied that option that was in place all the years past. That money was used to do up voids. We have 162 voids in Kerry because the county council has no funds to bring them up to the standard that is required. That is a very serious matter and if the Government is talking about affordable houses and all of that, it has to look at all of those things.

Deputy Thomas Pringle: I am supposed to be joined by colleagues but if they do not come in, I will ramble on. I welcome the opportunity to speak on this Private Members' motion. There is no doubt that the glass bottle site is important for Dublin housing. It needs to be discussed with the by-election that is even more important, particularly when there is a possible seat to be won. I am not going to speak about the site. I am sure many more speakers more eloquent than I am will talk about it but they might actually know about it as well. The site is symbolic of the malaise that has affected housing in this State and of the Government's faith in the private sector to deliver when it clearly cannot and will not.

There is a need to discuss housing in every part of the country so I will confine my comments to Donegal. You would think that it should not need to be stated again but there is a need for a massive housebuilding programme in every county and town. Last year, 34 houses were allocated in Donegal town. That might seem like a lot for a town but there were over 1,600 people on the waiting list for those houses. By my reckoning, it would take about 40 such developments to deal with the list. At this rate, it will probably take 100 years, and that is if nobody else is added to it. That shows the extent of the problem we are dealing with.

Given that the housing list is artificially low due to the manipulation of the figures on the waiting list by the Department, this is significant. The Department only allows people with

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incomes below €25,000 a year onto the list in Donegal, with an increase for children which means that anyone with an income above €28,000 a year will not get on the list at all. This means thousands of people will never get to buy a home in Donegal and will not have a hope of getting a council house either. That is a sad failing of our Government. We must have a Government that is committed to local authorities providing the solution to the housing issue if we are going to deal with it. It is amazing how reluctant local authorities are to try anything new or innovative to deal with the problems they have. It must be that they are afraid of offending the Government, perhaps because they will be looking for work in the future or do not want to rock the boat when funding comes around. This all gives the Department considerable influence over what happens across our local authorities.

The Department also oversees the delivery of housing down to the smallest development, so it is no wonder we have a housing crisis. The Department should be providing overall direction to local authorities and not micromanaging the delivery of houses. Every stage of a housing development must be approved by the Department in order to make progress. Local authorities are not allowed to progress development, and that is the reality. What knowledge would somebody in the Custom House have about a site in Glencolmcille, Burtonport or any number of towns in Donegal? If you want to control the spending of money and ensure it is not spent or is only spent on particular developers or types of development, that is the way to do it. That is, sadly, what this situation is about. That is what is happening.

If the Minister wanted to make sure that local authorities would develop housing in a way that would meet the needs of a county, he would give the authority the means and head to do it. We should give a county an allocation and audit it to make sure it develops the proper types and locations of houses. Let the county council deliver the housing itself. The Minister should eventually make councillors responsible for the delivery because we would then have real local development and not the sham we have at the moment whereby councillors pretend they are in control of the council and then wring their hands when the council does not deliver. Overall, that would be better for the community, local authorities and the Government because the Government and the Dáil could then start to focus on other priorities and responsibility for decision-making and delivery would lie where they should, that is, at local level. That is vital. That is how housing could be delivered across the board. It is possible. It would take a change of mindset and of Government, but it could happen. We do not need the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications going to Donegal, cutting the tape on a 30-house development and declaring the job done. We need Donegal County Council to deliver those houses and for the Minister to ask whether the council is doing it right and in the way we want it done. That is all the Department needs to do. The Department is about the control of money, not the delivery of houses, and that is the reality of the situation. That is the problem impeding everything that has to happen.

If the Minister wants to deal properly with the issues, he should make the local authorities deal with them and make the councillors responsible. We must avoid the fiasco of councillors wringing their hands, saying they cannot deliver, and running and hiding when the local authority will not do it either. That is the problem across the board.

There are also issues relating to voluntary housing bodies. People in Ardagh, County Donegal, want to get a project off the ground. The voluntary housing body is there and already has a scheme that provides sheltered housing for all people who need it, including, for example, people who require a level of care that is below nursing home requirements. Those people can live and be looked after in their local communities. There is a desire to expand and deliver

further on that project but, of course, there is no funding available. The Department cannot allocate any funding because the people who would be targeted are people with houses but who are incapable of staying in them on their own and, therefore, do not come under the responsibility of the council in terms of housing because they have a property. Those people could be facilitated to stay in their local communities rather than going into nursing homes but in that case they would not be giving bundles of money to the private sector. They would be giving money to the community. It would be a way to maintain the vitality of communities, which is crucial. That is the kind of thing local authorities should be allowed and encouraged to do. The Department can make sure the local authorities are spending the money properly rather than suggesting authorities should buy this site or that site. The Department should not control local authorities in that way. The Department controls the purchase of a site and the way in which a project goes to tender. The Department is micromanaging housing across the country.

I am grateful for the opportunity to speak. Perhaps I have not spoken to the motion but I have spoken about housing, which is a vital issue. I hope the Government might take on board what I have said but I doubt it.

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke): I thank all the Deputies for their contributions. The Government firmly believes that home ownership and more affordable rental is essential for our society. We have put delivery, affordability and the chance to own your own home at the heart of our housing policy. In not opposing this motion, the Government points towards our shared goal to deliver affordable housing and makes clear, as is laid out in the programme for Government, that its actions will be guided by the core principle that everybody should have access to good quality housing to purchase or rent.

The programme for Government lays out the many actions the Government is taking to improve affordability for the rental and purchase of homes. The measures in the Affordable Housing Bill 2021 will, in the near term, improve market access for first-time buyers, stimulate an increase in the number of new homes being developed and provide State-supported rental housing at more affordable prices. The Bill provides the statutory underpinning for affordable housing going forward. This includes both affordable homes for purchase and cost rental and the increase in Part V requirements to 20% to include an affordability yield. In addition to the measures in the Affordable Housing Bill 2020, using €1.25 billion in funding from the Ireland Strategic Investment Fund and further funds this can leverage, the Land Development Agency is tasked to work with Departments, local authorities, State agencies and other stakeholders to assemble strategic sites in urban areas and ensure the sustainable development of social and affordable homes to rent and purchase.

The development of the lands at Poolbeg SDZ has the potential to provide significant additional housing in a strategically important part of our capital city. It is clear it will not be possible to develop the area without significant infrastructural support that clearly adds capacity and value to the site and the homes within it. As highlighted by the Minister, a range of Exchequer-funded facilitating supports have already been ring-fenced or will be available to support the development of the Poolbeg SDZ. This includes funding under LIHAF, the URDF, the serviced sites fund and social housing. It includes the provision of high-capacity, effective public transport for the area in the form of Government-funded construction of Dodder Bridge. An Bord Pleanála has already considered the suitability of land in the proposed strategic development zone area for large-scale development and has made it clear that the Dodder Bridge is a necessary condition for such development.

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Let me repeat what the Minister confirmed earlier. As plans for Poolbeg are developed, the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage and other Departments will work with Dublin City Council, the receiver and our developers of the strategic development zone area to progress this site. This will be done to achieve the best outcome for the taxpayer and will be subject to agreement on all normal and relevant terms, including value for money aspects. To this end, the Department are already engaging with Dublin City Council with a view to supporting the council in progressing its discussions with the developer.

The review of the national development plan and the upcoming housing for all plan will be published this summer and will set out the Government's ambitious range of affordable housing targets, not just in the Poolbeg strategic development zone but across the country over the coming years. I reiterate our core approach. We are in the middle of a national housing crisis. Confronted with such an emergency, we must use all the tools at our disposal to address this challenge, across both private and public sectors. We must not tie one hand behind our backs. I am committed to boosting the supply of affordable housing and to opening up home ownership, which is crucial for our society.

I will briefly touch on one or two of the contributions that have been made. Deputies Denis Naughten and Canney quite rightly highlighted the role Irish Water has in unlocking potential development in many areas across the country. We are keen to address that in the context of the ongoing review of our national development plan. Members will be aware that Irish Water is key to unlocking much development. We need the infrastructure to ensure it supports that development.

One Deputy stated that we should zone as much land as we want and let the market decide. That is exactly the lesson we should have learned about what we should not do. A little more than a decade ago, we had enough land zoned in this country for 10 million people, with no unnecessary infrastructure underwriting it. The key point is that as we unlock sustainable communities and build proper communities in the future, which are future-proofed for schools, water and wastewater infrastructure, we need to ensure we zone land that is key to unlocking that potential. We need to ensure we are not reinventing the wheel and committing significant State resources to sites that have no infrastructure. We heard many other Deputies articulate that zoned land has not been unlocked by that key infrastructure. I acknowledge that we have a major body of work to do to ensure we unlock these potential zoned areas. We need to be strategic about that.

I often hear rural Deputies say there is not enough zoned land in their local authority area to accommodate the housing they are required to build. However, when one looks at demand for housing in each of the 31 local authorities over the next five or six years and the amount by which the land they have already zoned exceeds capacity, in many cases the figure is more than 250% and in ten it is more than 100%. I believe the figure for County Kerry is 145%.

We need perspective in the debate when we speak about being constrained from zoning additional lands. We should always have an obligation to ensure the lands we zone are underwritten by key infrastructure that is sensible. The most important thing we must learn from the past is that we should not go down the road of building thousands of ghost estates, which require remedial funding from Departments to try to get necessary infrastructure. We need to learn from the mistakes of the past in that regard.

A large number of county development plans are being drawn up. The Office of the Plan-

ning Regulator has a key ambition to ensure all the works done are of the highest quality and stack up with our national planning framework and other strategies. We have a shared vision, right across government, to try to ensure the very best possible outcome for all our citizens.

Deputy Paul Donnelly: I have been down at the site of the former Irish Glass Bottle Company in recent weeks while canvassing for Senator Boylan. I was struck by the potential the site holds for the future of our city. The key question for everyone involved in delivering the plan for this site is how we want to see our city grow in the next decade. Everything else will follow from that question. Is the vision an extension of what is known as Googletown, one that creates circumstances in which homes are out of reach for most of our citizens, as is currently the case?

I come from just across the river from Ringsend and only a couple of hundred metres from Sheriff Street. I was reared in East Wall. If I was born in either of those areas today, I would never be able to afford to live here. I see my old friends and neighbours and their children who are unable to afford their current rent, let alone have any chance of buying one of the multitude of apartments lying empty close to this building.

A site in my constituency in Mulhuddart in Dublin 15, Churchfields, has been ready to go for more than four years. The site is shovel-ready yet fewer than 100 social houses have been built around the periphery. There is huge potential for it to integrate with the surrounding communities.

During my time as a councillor on Fingal County Council, I supported the council with regard to every site on every single occasion. Every step of the way, the council received 100% support. Despite this, not one affordable house has been built on that site or any other site since it came before councillors in 2017. Fingal County Council management kept telling us that it could not proceed as it did not have the funding or the figures for an affordable housing scheme from the Government.

I note that Sinn Féin's opposition to housing has been mentioned a couple of times. I challenge any Minister to visit the estates that have been built in Fingal in recent years, from Hollystown and Hansfield right down to Ongar and all the way to Pelletstown. Sinn Féin has opposed only two developments, one of which is a co-living development and the other a build-to-rent development. Both of those developments were also opposed by sitting Government Ministers.

A recent *Journal.ie* poll has shown how out of touch the Government is with what the vast majority of citizens believe is an affordable home. Only 4% of those polled believe that anything near €400,000 would be deemed affordable. Close to 50% of those polled believe that an affordable home should cost in the region of between €200,000 and €300,000. This is not far off what it cost Ó Cualann Cohousing Alliance to provide affordable housing in Ballymun. In fact, the first scheme put to market several years ago by Ó Cualann Cohousing Alliance, which we met, had a starting price of €144,000 for a two-bedroom house, while a four-bedroom house was sold for €244,000. It has shown that this can be replicated across the State. The Government can do it but chooses not to.

The motion calls for genuinely affordable homes to be delivered on the former Irish Glass Bottle Company site in the Poolbeg West SDZ. It would also set the tone for all other affordable housing schemes throughout the State, including Churchfields in my area in Mulhuddart, which I mentioned. Unfortunately, I believe that overall, despite some crumbs from the table for workers, this Government is wedded to the private market, developers, vulture funds and

cuckoo groups.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: I thank the Minister of State for his remarks. The Irish Glass Bottle Housing Action Group was formed in 2016. It has been campaigning vigorously and has secured cross-party and widespread community support during that time. For the five years of that campaign, Fine Gael has been in government and in charge of housing for most of that time.

What really galls many people in the affected communities is that the State had an opportunity to buy this land at a discount. This would have guaranteed greater affordability but the Fine Gael Minister with responsibility for housing at the time chose not to take that option. We are now faced with the genuine fear that the price the developer will set for affordable homes on the site will be between €500,000 and €600,000. That is the view of Dublin City Council. The key issue here for the people in that part of our city, and others who would like to live there, is price. An affordable home means an average home purchased for a price of approximately €250,000. There may or may not be a serviced sites fund clawback charge on top of that.

The Minister of State is absolutely correct. The developer is benefiting from significant and much-needed infrastructural grants, to which I have no objection. It is €50 million, in fact, of infrastructural grants between the Department of Transport and the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage. With an affordable housing fund, that figure increases to up to €60 million, depending on where that application eventually goes. NAMA also continues to have an interest in the land and while we do not know the price, that value could be anything up to €90 million.

A lot of taxpayers' money is, therefore, sitting in that site, from which ultimately the developer will benefit because that infrastructure and that serviced sites fund will unlock many aspects of the development. All that needs to be factored into the price that Ronan Group Real Estate and Lioncor eventually offer Dublin City Council for the purchase of the affordable homes. That would actually average out at a unit discount of approximately €250,000 per affordable home, assuming the affordable homes will cost in the region of €600,000.

The purpose of this motion is to communicate to the Government not only the need for it to get more involved in supporting Dublin City Council and the local community, but also to send a very clear signal to the developer. If the developer wants the Government to be a partner in this hugely important strategic development zone master plan and its delivery, it has to offer units for affordable purchase at a significantly lower price than €500,000 or €600,000. That means the developer has to absorb a large volume of the discount. It cannot all be placed on the shoulders of the affordable housing fund and the clawback for the affordable purchaser.

I strongly welcome the commitment by the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, to bring the various players together. Doing so after the by-election is certainly the right time but it must be a real engagement. It must involve the Departments of Transport, Housing, Local Government and Heritage, and Finance weighing in behind Dublin City Council, its councillors and the communities of Ringsend, Irishtown and the surrounding areas to get the best deal possible. I agree entirely with the Minister of State, Deputy Peter Burke, that it must be the best deal for the taxpayer and the city but, crucially, it must also be the best deal for affordable purchasers. That means delivering homes at a price working families can genuinely afford. The key test of success will not be what anyone of us says today but whether those affordable homes become a reality for the working families who are being priced out of that part of our city at this time.

I welcome the amendment from People Before Profit. I am more than happy to accept it as it is completely within the spirit of our motion.

I will conclude by responding to two of the Minister's broader points. He is absolutely right that the time for delay must end. That includes, for example, the delay in the Oscar Traynor Road development. The Minister must decide whether he is going to step up to the plate and work with Dublin city councillors and officials to deliver those 800-plus social, affordable rental and affordable purchase homes. So far, he has been very reluctant to state his intentions in that regard. The Minister also needs to explain why other developments are logjammed. The St. Michael's Estate development, for instance, will comprise 100% public homes. In fairness to the Minister of State, Deputy English, when he was in the Department, he worked very well with many of us in this Chamber and with the local community. However, that development was approved in principle in 2018 and not a brick has been laid.

Both the dead hand of the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform and aspects of the four-stage approval process of the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage must change if we are to get these projects up and running. In Kishoge in my constituency, where more than 250 social and affordable homes are to be built, South Dublin County Council is being made to jump through hoop after hoop by both Departments to do all sorts of appraisals, even though this scheme to provide between 8,000 and 11,000 homes was already agreed in principle as part of the strategic development zone that was voted on by elected council members, albeit opposed by Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil in the single largest opposition of any group of councillors to a residential development anywhere in the State. In fact, the Fine Gael group leader appealed it to An Bord Pleanála, delaying it by a year. Now we have got it through, thanks to Sinn Féin and others, we need it to progress.

In regard to the Affordable Housing Bill 2021 and the legislation that is before the Dáil today, it is important to note that Bills do not build homes. Direct investment does so. We will judge the Government's commitment to affordable housing not by what it says but by what is in the housing for all action plan when it is published and, crucially, what element of increased investment we see in budget 2022. Only increased investment and the direct delivery of affordable homes for working people will bring this crisis to an end.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Does the Deputy propose to incorporate the amendment that was tabled into the motion?

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: Yes.

Amendment No. 1 agreed to.

Motion, as amended, agreed to.

Ceisteanna - Questions (Resumed)

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Defence Forces

7. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Defence the measures currently in place to assist in preparing serving members of the Defence Forces for re-entry into civilian life; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34831/21]

Deputy John Brady: The obvious priority for the Defence Forces is to create the conditions that make members want to continue serving for as long as possible. However, the reality is that large numbers are leaving, many of them ahead of schedule and many others due to retirement. What plans or measures are in place to assist people leaving the Defence Forces in preparing for civilian life?

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): I thank the Deputy. Our preference is, of course, to keep people in the Defence Forces for as long as possible. As a serving member approaches retirement, either on age grounds or voluntarily, a range of supports is made available to him or her by the Defence Forces. Transition to civilian life courses are conducted by personnel support service teams throughout the year aimed at personnel who are retiring on age grounds or simply considering a change of career. This course was formerly called the pre-retirement training course but the name was changed in acknowledgement that personnel are not always retiring when they leave the military.

Transition to civilian life courses are of two to three days' duration and are conducted across the organisation. All serving members are encouraged to undertake a course at least once during their career and within three years of leaving the Defence Forces. As part of the course, personnel receive advice and guidance on all aspects of retirement. This includes education on what to expect after leaving the Defence Forces, covering change, relationships, financial matters, health and time management. Personnel also receive information about how others have dealt successfully with these life changes. The purpose of the course is to enable personnel to anticipate changes in their lives and ease the transition to civilian life.

In addition, personnel may avail of assistance from the personnel support service and occupational health services, as required. Advice and guidance are available on a confidential one-to-one basis from personnel support service teams on all issues related to leaving the Defence Forces, including pensions and finance, health, psychosocial issues and preparation for career change. My Department has also arranged the provision of a confidential counselling, referral and support service dealing with a wide range of personal and work-related issues, which can be availed of by serving members of the Defence Forces, civilian employees and Civil Defence members.

Deputy John Brady: I thank the Minister. I expect he will acknowledge that due to limitations on the contracts of members of the Defence Forces and given that the majority probably joined in their late teens, many will be exiting the forces in their 30s or 40s, at a time in their lives when they have young families and huge financial commitments. The Minister's response, unfortunately, seems to suggest something of a handwashing exercise, with the bare minimum being done to assist members out the gate. This does not give regard to the huge amount of experience built up members of the Defence Forces and the fact they still have a great deal to offer the State and the economy. I would like to hear about the vocational training and education advice given to personnel. I would also like to know how many members partake in the transition to civilian life courses to which the Minister referred.

Deputy Simon Coveney: Further initiatives arising from the 2015 White Paper on Defence will be developed. I was very much involved in ensuring the White Paper was quite ambitious in this area. Initiatives include the implementation of systems, procedures and scheduled training to ensure preparedness for the transition to civilian life after military service, the development of a career platform or portal for exiting personnel to give them a direct bridge to employers and assist them in making the transition to a career in civilian life, and the creation of a career portfolio for interested exiting members of the Permanent Defence Force, listing their military qualifications alongside the level of the qualification on the national framework of qualifications, NFQ, where relevant. We have been looking at how we can match the significant skill set of personnel leaving the Defence Forces - that skill set being the reason so many people in the forces get headhunted by the private sector - to potential new employment and, in that way, help to make the transition as smooth as possible.

Deputy John Brady: I am not sure whether the Minister has the statistics to hand as to how many members participate in the transition to civilian life courses. That provision is critical but what the Minister has outlined does not go far enough when we consider the supports that, rightly, have been built around employees in other sectors, such as the Bord na Móna workers. We need to look at something like that for members of the Defence Forces, who still have a huge amount to give to the State. My preference, which I am sure is shared by everyone, is to ensure we create the conditions to keep people in the Defence Forces for as long as possible. That must be the primary objective but there will be reasons members want to leave. There are people hitting retirement at 50 years of age and even younger who still have a great deal to offer.

8 o'clock

Deputy Simon Coveney: The first priority is to ensure people get a rewarding return from their career in the Defence Forces. That means constant development of skill sets. It means certainty of income. It means adventure, which is what many people join the Defence Forces for. It means serving their country with pride. Of course, if people want to leave the Defence Forces having served there for a period of time we want to ensure we can help them in the transition back to civilian life. Some of them are tempted out of the Defence Forces because of offers they are given and that is a reflection of how highly thought of our Defence Forces are, as far as training, standards, discipline, work rate, fitness, skill set and so on are concerned. I assure the Deputy it is a priority to ensure that when people make the decision to leave or when they are required to retire but may still want to work in other sectors, they are given all the support needed to do that.

Defence Forces

8. **Deputy Cathal Berry** asked the Minister for Defence if paragraph 12 of Conciliation Council Report No. 451 in respect of medical officer promotions will be implemented as agreed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34708/21]

Deputy Cathal Berry: I wish to focus my question on paragraph 12 of CCR 451. This is a formal agreement between the Department of Defence and the Representative Association of Commissioned Officers, RACO, from 2013, which provides for the advancement of medical officers from captain to commandant after three years' service. I understand there has recently been some resistance to implementing this provision and would be grateful if the Minister could outline his position.

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Deputy Simon Coveney: I thank the Deputy. This is quite a precise question. I assume the Deputy is referring to paragraph 12 of Conditions Governing the Appointment of Medical Officers in the Defence Forces Medical Corps 2013 which is attached to CCR 451. These terms and conditions, specific to the 2013 medical officers recruitment campaign, were agreed with the representative association. They provided that on the recommendation of the Chief of Staff, a medical officer in the Defence Forces who is granted a commission without limitation as to time may be promoted from captain to commandant on completion of three years' service and fulfilling the required criteria as laid down for such a promotion. Exceptionally, these 2013 terms and conditions, which were developed at a time of severe difficulties in recruiting and retaining medical officers in the Defence Forces, removed the requirement of completing nine years' service in accordance with paragraph 8(3)(a) of Defence Forces regulation, DFR, A15. The subsequent 2017 to 2018 medical officers terms and conditions reinstated the requirement to complete nine years' service before any medical officer commissioned on foot of that competition may be promoted from captain to commandant.

It is important to note that the representative association was fully consulted at all stages of the development of the 2017 to 2018 terms and conditions and provided extensive and constructive comments on a whole range of areas within these 2017 to 2018 terms and conditions prior to their finalisation. At no time did the representative association, during those consultations, object to the reinstatement of the nine year requirement in accordance with DFR A15. Accordingly, the provision set out in paragraph 12 of the 2013 terms and conditions was only applicable to those medical officers commissioned on foot of that specific 2013 competition. The exceptional condition was necessary to address recruitment and retention difficulties that pertained at that time. These difficulties no longer applied at the time the subsequent 2017 to 2018 terms and conditions were being developed and agreed with the representative association.

Deputy Cathal Berry: I thank the Minister for outlining his position. It is a useful starting point at least. This administrative matter is actually below the Minister's pay grade. I would like to think it could have been solved at a lower level. I only bring it to his attention because it is a matter of the utmost importance. For instance, a quarter of Defence Forces medical officers are actually on the cusp of leaving the organisation as a result of the non-implementation of this provision. That would have huge consequences on our ability to maintain our overseas contingents, as I am sure the Minister can appreciate. For doctors in the HSE it is very straightforward to progress from intern to senior house officer to registrar and beyond. I know because I was a doctor in the HSE. I see no reason the same cannot apply to doctors in the Defence Forces. It is a really important retention tool. As such, I would be very grateful if the Minister could take a personal interest in this issue and hopefully bring it towards a satisfactory conclusion.

Deputy Simon Coveney: The starting position that must be understood is there was an exception to the normal terms and conditions in 2013 in an effort to deal with the recruitment and retention issues at that time, which were clearly an issue. There was not deemed to be the same difficulty or pressure point in 2017 and 2018 when the terms and conditions were essentially returned to normal. During that process, there was an ongoing consultation and discussion with the representative body. That is my understanding. I accept I have not been involved in the detailed discussions here but this is the briefing I have from my Department. It is not unusual for the terms and conditions around recruitment campaigns and so on to be tailored, essentially, in order to respond to the pressures that are there. Thus if there is a need to look at this again in terms of retaining medical staff in the Defence Forces then of course we will have to do that.

Deputy Cathal Berry: I thank the Minister for the commitment that he might at least re-

view this or perhaps look at it and see if there is any latitude or flexibility that can be applied. My understanding - and it is just that - is that the CCR was open-ended and not specific to 2013 but again I will take the Minister's views on board from that perspective. That is all I have to say. I wished to highlight that this issue is really important. I am not joking in saying a quarter of medical officers are really considering their positions in the organisation as a result. If clarity could be brought to it or at least a bit more latitude provided in the interpretation of paragraph 12 it would certainly make a massive difference. I would be very grateful for any assistance the Minister could provide in that regard.

Deputy Simon Coveney: We will take a look at it now that the Deputy has raised it. As I said before, terms and conditions for any Defence Forces competitions are always individually developed and consulted on. Terms and conditions for such competitions, including for medical officers, can have materially different terms and conditions to what was previously provided for, depending on the recruitment and retention situation that applies at that point in time or any other changes we must respond to. If the Deputy is telling me there is a serious problem developing with keeping medical officers in the Defence Forces then we will have to respond to that as we have had to do with the Naval Service and as we have had to do successfully with the Air Corps. There are specialists that are absolutely essential parts of the functioning of the Defence Forces in terms of contribution, skill set and structure and we must ensure those essential skill sets are there as part of the overall complement. Medical officers are absolutely in that category.

Defence Forces

9. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Defence the status of agreements or discussions that have taken place in relation to post-1994 contracts in the Defence Forces; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34830/21]

Deputy John Brady: This morning at the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence we heard from RACO that the Defence Forces have reached a point where the decline in them is becoming irreversible. One of the many issues affecting members of the Defence Forces and staff retention there is the issue of the 1994 contract. I therefore ask the Minister to give an update on agreements, discussions or negotiations related to the post-1994 contracts.

Deputy Simon Coveney: I did not get a chance to hear that meeting this morning but I will certainly look at the transcripts. I assure the Deputy that from my perspective the challenges we face with recruitment and retention in the Defence Forces are certainly not irreversible. We must apply ourselves to resolve this issue. The overall number in the Defence Forces is 1,000 people short of where we should be. We are setting about resolving that problem. I hope we will have the assistance of the representative bodies in doing that because collectively we all care about the future of the Defence Forces and without the full complement we are limited in the choices we can make.

I advised the Deputy previously in reply to his parliamentary question of 13 May 2021, of the various reviews of the 1994 Defence Forces service contracts, which have taken place since then and the discussions and subsequent agreements with PDFORRA, the representative association for enlisted personnel.

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Due to time constraints, I could not read out in full the comprehensive reply to the question raised by the Deputy. I am pleased to have the opportunity to advise Deputy Brady of the current position in relation to the review of service contracts for personnel enlisted to the Defence Forces after 1 January 1994. A review examining barriers to extended participation in the Permanent Defence Force, as recommended by the Public Service Pay Commission and provided for in the high-level implementation plan, *Strengthening Our Defence Forces*, is currently under way. The review is being conducted by a joint civil-military project team. The review encompasses consideration of the service limits and mandatory retirement ages for privates, corporals and sergeants, as well as senior non-commissioned officers, NCOs. The review will take into consideration the recommendations from an adjudication in 2015, arising from a claim made by PDFORRA through the conciliation and arbitration scheme for members of the Permanent Defence Force.

It was agreed at that time that privates and corporals in receipt of technical pay group 3 or higher may stay in service to the age of 50, subject to meeting certain specified criteria. In addition, the adjudicator recommended a further review of contracts of service for line corporals and privates and corporals in receipt of technical pay group 1 and 2 recruited to the Defence Forces after 1 January 1994. The adjudicator recommended that such personnel be allowed to continue to serve beyond 21 years for a period up to the expiry of the next two promotion panels, subject to them meeting the required criteria and not exceeding the age of 50 years during this period.

I will read the rest of the answer when I come in again because the Deputy would be interested in it.

Deputy John Brady: The Defence Forces have a strength of approximately 8,500, which is a full 1,000 below the established full strength. It is estimated that approximately 10% of personnel exit the Defence Forces annually. This significant turnover rate, combined with the current recruitment rate, will mean the Defence Forces will not be able to attain the minimum recognised strength of 9,500 fully trained personnel.

Over the weekend it was reported that the Minister is considering retaining up to 700 military staff due for retirement. I note the establishment of the review, which is being undertaken. Will the Minister give some timeframes on when the review body is due to give a final report? Has there been an interim report that has led to the comments attributed to the Minister that he is considering retaining up to 700 military personnel due to retire at the end of 2022?

Deputy Simon Coveney: The answer is that there is an ongoing review so we will not determine an outcome until it is concluded. In 2019, agreement was reached with PDFORRA that all privates and corporals recruited post 1994 would be allowed to continue in service to 31 December 2022. I know that is the timeline many people are concerned about now. Alternatively, they could continue until they reach the age of 50, provided these personnel meet relevant criteria, including medical grades and fitness tests during the interim period. This agreement was subsequently extended to include sergeants recruited to the Permanent Defence Force after 1 January 1994 who can also continue in service to the same date, subject to their meeting agreed criteria in the interim period.

This agreement with PDFORRA provides for such personnel to continue in service beyond the timeframe suggested in the adjudication to allow for this review to be completed. The rank of line privates, which had not been specifically recommended for review in the adjudication,

is also encompassed with this measure. These measures are in place to allow the review to take place in the extended timeframe and any revised proposals arising from these deliberations will of course be discussed with PDFORRA on completion of the review, which is ongoing.

Deputy John Brady: It would be useful and helpful for the Minister to give a timeframe on when he anticipates the review will be carried out just to give clarity to the representative bodies and the members of the Defence Forces who have that date hanging over them. Morale in the Defence Forces is at an all-time low, unfortunately, and the matter must be addressed. Giving clarity around the review would certainly be helpful.

I have stated that we live in a changed world, particularly when it comes to fitness levels and nutrition, etc. All of this has changed. The rationale given to changing the contract in 1994 has been altered and I am sure that will feed into the review process being undertaken. The difficulties in the contracts for the Defence Forces cannot be overstated and there is a grave lack of experience. The number of NCOs and officers with lengthy experience is at an all-time low and this is having a negative impact on morale. I would appreciate it if the Minister could give us some clarity on this.

Deputy Simon Coveney: From now on I will start to challenge some of these generalisations, such as the bald statement that morale in the Defence Forces is at an all-time low. We have challenges in the Defence Forces and we also have fantastic people. Morale is not at an all-time low. I spent nearly 24 hours on a naval vessel travelling from Dublin to Cork on patrol the other day and morale was really positive and strong. Let us not talk ourselves down. We have genuine and real problems relating to recruitment and retention and we must get up numbers again. We must continue to increase investment in the defence budget for equipment and supports and we must deal with some pay and conditions matters. We are doing so. We must focus on ensuring that people who commit a career to the Defence Forces and their country understand that the Government and the Department of Defence are working with them to ensure ongoing issues in the Defence Forces are addressed. That is what we are doing.

With this matter we will work in partnership with PDFORRA, which has raised very real issues that we have responded to over the past number of years. Once we conclude the current review, we will be able to give clarity as soon as possible to the impacted people.

Defence Forces

10. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Defence if his attention has been drawn to the recent findings of a survey conducted by an organisation (details supplied) which has found that highly trained personnel from the Defence Forces continue to leave the armed services due to poor pay and conditions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34628/21]

Deputy Carol Nolan: I ask the Minister if he is aware of the findings of a survey carried out by RACO indicating serious issues around pay and conditions and showing that highly trained personnel continue to leave the Defence Forces. We know this has been an ongoing matter and it has come up here a number of times from parties and Deputies across the House. It is a serious matter. It has also been highlighted that highly qualified people, including one in three officers, have stated they would not recommend the Defence Forces as a career for young people. It is very concerning.

Deputy Simon Coveney: We can look at many people joining the Defence Forces whose parents were previously in the service, so there are also many people absolutely recommending a career there. We need to focus on ensuring balance in the discussion.

The survey to which the Deputy refers highlighted that pay in the private sector is one of a number of reasons some personnel leave the Defence Forces. There are, however, many reasons individuals may leave the Defence Forces, ranging from individual personal circumstances, other career opportunities, having fulfilled their contract or retirement on age grounds. A career in the Defence Forces offers personnel significant opportunities, including education and training opportunities.

Pay has been highlighted as an issue but there has been significant progress in recent years. The Defence Forces received pay increases in line with the public service stability agreement, the most recent of which was a 2% increase on annualised salaries from 1 October 2020. The restoration of the 5% cut in allowances imposed under the financial emergency measures in the public interest, FEMPI, legislation, was also restored from 1 October 2020.

In addition to the general round of pay increases awarded to public servants, members of the Permanent Defence Force have also benefited from the implementation of increases in Defence Forces allowances as recommended by the Public Service Pay Commission. These included a 10% increase in military service allowance, the restoration of a 10% cut applied to a number of Defence Forces allowances under the Haddington Road pay agreement, the restoration of premium rates for weekend security duty allowances and the restoration of a service commitment scheme for pilots.

The introduction of a new seagoing service commitment scheme for Naval Service personnel came into effect from 1 January 2021 and is aimed at retaining highly trained and experienced personnel and incentivising seagoing duties. A seagoing naval personnel tax credit of €1,270 was applied in the 2020 tax year for members of the Naval Service who served 80 days or more at sea on board a naval vessel in 2019. This tax credit has been extended for a further year and is increased to €1,500 for the 2021 tax year.

The point I make is that, yes, we have pay and allowance issues, but we are trying to improve income and allowances across the Defence Forces all the time. I have just given many examples of that.

Deputy Carol Nolan: Clearly there is a need for significant improvement. The findings of the survey carried out by the Representative Association of Commissioned Officers, RACO, show us this. The Minister has called out some of these issues. It is concerning that Defence Forces numbers are now at 8,500, which is an all-time low. As reported by Sean O’Riordan, the RACO survey found that almost two thirds of respondents said they left the Defence Forces for better pay in the private sector. Does this not suggest the need for improvement, and quickly, to recruit people in and keep them there?

More than half of those who responded experienced a better work-life balance as a result of leaving to work in the private sector. It also reported that opinions on career management and organisational leadership were generally negative. Again, this is an issue that needs to be addressed if we are to ensure the numbers in the Defence Forces are increased and retained.

From the article by Mr. O’Riordan, I understand the latest survey by RACO mirrors findings in a 2017 survey that highlighted poor pay, lack of expertise caused by an exodus of highly

trained personnel, exhaustion as a result of double and treble-jobbing to fill the gaps, and inadequate barrack accommodation. These are serious issues and are causing a lot of problems. They cause the sector to be quite dysfunctional.

Deputy Simon Coveney: There are issues, but if people are leaving the Defence Forces because they are targeted by a private sector that wants to offer them more money, then this is a choice people will make. We cannot chase the private sector in pay levels all the time. There are many, highly qualified and talented people in the Defence Forces who get job offers to leave the Defence Forces because of the skill sets they have. We must respect those decisions. People also leave other parts of the public sector in the same way. We face turnover. The challenge we face currently in the Defence Forces is that our starting point is significantly below where it should be and we have not been recruiting at the same pace as the turnover of people leaving. We are, of course, looking at that.

The recent pay agreement results in pay increases and looks at a number of other positive issues for the Defence Forces. We have an independent commission on the Defence Forces and on its future which will report before the end of the year. It has been asked to look at pay structures and allowances. We committed in the programme for Government to set up a specific pay body for the Defence Forces to recognise the uniqueness of service in the Defence Forces. We are doing a lot in this space to address the genuine problems that are there.

Deputy Carol Nolan: There are personnel who have served in the Defence Forces and enjoyed their time there, but many of the personnel felt they had no choice but to leave to work in the private sector where they could earn a decent living to support their families. This is the crux of the situation. The general secretary of RACO, Commandant Conor King, has pointed out that 2020 was the year the Defence Forces recruitment and retention crisis should have been resolved. The conditions were perfect: coming into the new year with a healthy economy and a bespoke high-level implementation plan, aptly titled Strengthening our Defence Forces, endorsed by the Government, that was going to implement real change in the Defence Forces organisation and make the Defence Forces once again an employer of choice. Then Covid struck. Now, however, we need firm commitments. We need to maintain whatever momentum is there to have this matter addressed once and for all so that Deputies from all parties and none do not have to keep raising the issue and so the families of Defence Forces members are not subjected to hardship and trying to pay bills and mortgages on poor pay. That is the reality here.

Deputy Simon Coveney: I accept there is a recruitment and retention issue in the Defence Forces. We are doing a lot to address this. We have had some successes, especially in the Air Corps in bringing pilots back in. That was not just a Covid dividend; it was also because of a scheme we put in place to do that. We are setting about addressing recruitment and retention issues in the Naval Service and in the Army too. We are inviting back and bringing back people who have left the Defence Forces who want to return, at officer level and non-officer level. There is a lot happening. The Defence Forces representative organisations know that because we have spoken to them about it. This is not going to happen overnight. We need to be realistic that recruitment does take some time.

The ask of RACO with regard to pay was to set up a separate pay body, which is exactly what we are doing. Every Member in the House should know that the way in which public sector pay negotiations happen is a collective negotiation for everybody. There has not been the capacity to single out one organisation and look at it separately for pay, which is what everybody seems to suggest every time we talk about this issue in the House. Let us be realistic and

let us be ambitious at the same time, to look at structures that can address the retention issues in the Defence Forces, which I believe is what we are trying to do.

Cybersecurity Policy

11. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Defence the level of preparedness in Ireland to deal with the cybersecurity space in future conflict zones, domestically and internationally, given that increased connectivity means cybersecurity will be a key front in any future conflict zones. [34846/21]

Deputy Sorca Clarke: What is the level of preparedness in the State to deal with the cybersecurity space in future conflict zones, be they domestically and internationally, given that increased connectivity means cybersecurity will be a key front in any future conflict zones?

Deputy Simon Coveney: This is a very important question. My colleague the Minister for Environment, Climate and Communications, Deputy Ryan, retains overall responsibility for cybersecurity at a national level but, of course, the response to cyber threats is a whole-of-government challenge with important inputs in the security domain from An Garda Síochána and the Defence Forces.

As we have seen with the cyberattack on the HSE, cybersecurity is an issue about which we all need to be very concerned. For national security reasons, it would not be appropriate for me to comment on the nature of the HSE cyberattack at this time, but it does illustrate how vital it is we take cybersecurity very seriously.

Ireland ranks among the leading EU member states in terms of the uptake and use of digital technologies. These technologies play a central role in supporting our economic and social life. Ireland's geographic position, our open economy and our EU membership mean we now host a large amount of data and economic activity. Covid-19 also means people are relying on technology more than ever to stay connected. The development of the information and communications technology that supports all this activity introduces a new set of complex and evolving risks. Infrastructure of any kind attached to the Internet is vulnerable to threats from anywhere on in the world.

Disruption to our digital assets and critical infrastructure brings significant economic costs and undermines trust and confidence in them. Threats emanate from individuals and from nation states and can have national security implications. It is vital we work closely with our partners in the European Union on cybersecurity issues, and I welcome the proposal made last week by the European Commission to build a new joint cyber unit to tackle the rising number of serious cyber incidents impacting public services, businesses and the lives of citizens across the EU. The proposed joint cyber unit represents an opportunity to bring together cybersecurity communities, including civilian, law enforcement, diplomatic and cyber defence communities. The Government will be examining this proposal in depth since, while Ireland welcomes it, it represents a potentially very substantial requirement for additional resourcing, both in terms of financial resources and skill sets, on behalf of member states.

Deputy Sorca Clarke: I thank the Minister. An ever-increasing amount of activity is being conducted online. Certainly, conflicts and threats will also continue to grow in this arena. As Minister for Defence of a contributing country to UN peacekeeping and peace enforcing mis-

sions, is the Minister confident that training and resources are available in our Defence Forces to adapt to this new reality? I draw the attention, or perhaps the memory, of the Minister to the committee meeting we had on the Estimates. I put it to the Minister that the amount being budgeted for technology was not reflective of modern defence forces. Given that we have one of the lowest, if not the lowest, GDP spend on defence in the EU, how does the Minister see the additional costs of this European fund and our growing need being financed?

Deputy Simon Coveney: While the primary role of the Defence Forces with regard to cybersecurity relates to the defence and security of their own networks and systems, the Department of Defence and the Defence Forces are committed to participating under the leadership of the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications on the delivery of measures to improve the cybersecurity of the State. This is being done in line with the programme for Government commitment to implement the national cybersecurity strategy, recognising the potential and important role of the Defence Forces. This is why officials in the Department and members of the Defence Forces work so closely with the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications and other Departments and agencies to support measures to deal with these challenges. I want to highlight that at present, a member of the Defence Forces is seconded to the Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence in Tallinn in Estonia.

The issues the Deputy raised at the committee and that she has raised again today are very much central to the consideration of the Commission on the Future of the Defence Forces. I have spoken to the chair about this and I expect the commission to come back with some very clear recommendations on cybersecurity because we know this is an evolving, developing and increasing threat all the time and we have to have a response capacity and infrastructure to deal with it.

Deputy Sorca Clarke: I am not sure I have complete confidence in waiting for the Commission on the Future of the Defence Forces to report on something like this before taking more concrete steps. This is a really serious issue. If there has ever been anything of a conflict zone with clearly defined borders it is gone. It has been confined to history, as is conflict between two opposing sides. We now have zones where there are multiple players, whether street gangs or organised gangs controlling food and water distribution in areas of conflict through cyber networks. This is something of which we need to be very mindful because as their capabilities increase we seem to be playing catch up all the time and this is just not good enough. I take what the Minister said earlier about national security. If we could skirt around this issue the Minister will take my question. Given the recent attack on the HSE, will the Minister and his Government partners commit to a full cyber risk assessment of all State infrastructure assets?

Deputy Simon Coveney: There are certain things to which I cannot commit as Minister for Defence. What I can commit to is the role of the Defence Forces in the context of making a contribution to a whole-of-government response to cyber threats as they emerge. We are planning for this and we are investing accordingly. We have asked the Commission on the Future of the Defence Forces to look at the role the Defence Forces need to play to secure their own systems against cyberattacks as well as making a contribution to the national effort.

Today, I spoke at a UN Security Council meeting on cybersecurity and its impact on some of the issues the Deputy recognises, in terms of other parts of the world that are extremely vulnerable to cybersecurity threats that undermine the political stability and functioning of weak states, and how the UN can and should be responding to them as a collective. It is a massive challenge. We have to work on our own systems and protecting them and putting in place fire-

walls and barriers to ensure our systems are as protected as they can be. This is a challenge for every country in the world and the more we can collaborate internationally on this, the better results we will get.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

Defence Forces

12. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Defence if a full report will be provided on the Defence Forces' involvement in missions in Mali; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34614/21]

Deputy Thomas Pringle: I have read the 2020 Department of Defence reports to the Dáil on service by the Defence Forces with the United Nations. Irish troops have taken part in two missions in Mali, namely, MINUSMA, the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali, and the European Union training mission, EUTM Mali. Both reports are very brief and I would like to have a fuller more detailed report from the Minister. Perhaps the Minister will consider having a debate on it in future.

Deputy Simon Coveney: Irish Defence Forces personnel are currently deployed in two separate missions in Mali. The Government has approved the continued provision of up to 20 members of the Permanent Defence Force for service with the EU mission to train the Malian armed forces in Mali, known as EUTM Mali, or the EU training mission, up to 22 March 2022. In addition, the Government has approved the continued provision of up to 14 Defence Forces personnel, drawn primarily from the Army Ranger Wing, to participate in MINUSMA, the United Nations-led operation in Mali, up until 30 September 2022.

With regard to EUTM Mali, Ireland has participated in this training mission since its launch in 2013. I visited it when I was previously Minister for Defence. Defence Forces personnel are primarily deployed at Koulikoro and Bamako, and also deploy as part of combined mobile advisory training teams across Mali. These mobile teams travel to the various regions for defined periods of time to provide additional training to Malian soldiers through specialised courses and tactical training. The roll-out of decentralised training is a key component of enhancing the utility of the Malian armed forces.

Defence Forces personnel first deployed to MINUSMA in September 2019 as part of a joint deployment with German armed forces. Irish personnel continue to be deployed with the German armed forces at Camp Castor in Gao and at MINUSMA headquarters in Bamako, where they carry out assigned tasks in accordance with the mission mandate. The Army Ranger Wing team carries out surveillance and intelligence gathering operations as part of its remit. Irish personnel in Gao are embedded with the larger German intelligence surveillance reconnaissance company and benefit from the security and force protection effort that is in place to protect the full company. The security situation is continually monitored by the Defence Forces on an ongoing basis.

Deputy Thomas Pringle: That is the summary that was more or less given in the document submitted to the Oireachtas Library on the operation. I have several questions on this. What

relationship do the Irish troops have with the French forces operating in Mali at present? They have been involved in a couple of very controversial incidents, including one where more than 20 civilians were killed at a wedding which was bombed by French forces. Is it not the case that Irish troops went there to train Malian troops to free up French soldiers so they could go out and kill civilians? The conflict in Mali is part of a wider conflict that takes place in a number of countries. Do we know whether Irish troops go across borders into other countries neighbouring Mali in pursuit of their remit? Will the Minister comment on this?

Deputy Simon Coveney: I want to put on the record of the House that defence force personnel from EU countries in Mali are there to try to bring stability to save lives. The French are central to these efforts. I want to read into the record from a statement on what happened in recent days and the risks they all face so that we can show a bit of respect to peacekeepers in a part of the world that would be falling apart, in my view, if it were not for the intervention of EU troops, including French troops.

At 6.25 a.m. on Friday morning last, a suicide vehicle-borne improvised explosive device was used to attack the overnight position of a company of mainly German soldiers serving as part of the MINUSMA mission. The purpose of the mission carried out by the German personnel was to provide an accurate assessment of the potential routes and locations that MINUSMA convoys could use if primary main supply routes became blocked. The attack took place 120 km from their main base in Gao, which is where the Irish are. There were 15 casualties in total, including 14 German and one Belgian. Three of them were seriously injured and 13 of the wounded were evacuated to Germany on Saturday last. A number of Defence Forces personnel had participated in the operation since Wednesday, 23 June, and had occupied an overnight position some 25 km from the location of the attack on the main body of the company. As with other similar situations, part of this operation would entail the Irish personnel temporarily operating independently from the main body.

Whether it is Irish, German, French or any other EU peacekeepers, we are in a dangerous and difficult place to operate and we were lucky that nobody was killed last Friday. We should show a little bit more respect than what the Deputy has shown in his comments on French troops.

Deputy Thomas Pringle: Is the Minister saying that nobody should question why they were there and we should just accept it? Are the French troops part of the MINUSMA mission?

Mali is a former French colony. The French are there to pursue their colonial interests. There have been attacks. The attack the Minister mentioned is worrying. That is why I am asking the question. I do not believe that Irish troops should be putting themselves in that position on behalf of French colonial interests. That is what is happening.

What about the French troops that attacked a wedding in Mali and killed more than 20 civilians? What about the French troops who shot a civilian in the desert and then buried him there? What impact do those actions have on the reaction of the local population? That is the issue. Perhaps the Minister could follow up by stating whether Irish troops operate outside of Mali in the wider region. I would like to know whether that happens.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh): The time allotted for this question has been exceeded by the Deputy's last contribution.

Deputy Simon Coveney: They do not operate outside of Mali. I want to put that on the

record.

Naval Service

13. **Deputy Patrick Costello** asked the Minister for Defence the operational usage of the *LÉ Orla* and *LÉ Eithne* since they were docked in 2019. [34691/21]

14. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Defence if he will report on the readiness of the Naval Service fleet and the plans for its future development. [34695/21]

Deputy Cormac Devlin: I thank the Minister for his time. I want to raise the issue of the Irish Naval Service. It has a very proud track record, not only in serving Ireland but within the EU and in Operation Sophia in the Mediterranean. As Cathaoirleach of Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council in 2017, I had the pleasure of awarding the freedom of entry to the *LÉ Eithne* in Dún Laoghaire. Colleagues have raised the issue of contracts, which is important. Improved conditions are required. I welcome the fact that a recruitment campaign is under way. The Naval Service was berthed on the quays the other day. The Minister might articulate for the House when we will see a return to full capacity in the Naval Service.

Deputy Simon Coveney: I propose to take Questions Nos. 13 and 14 together.

As the Deputy will be aware, the Naval Service is the State's principal seagoing agency and is tasked with a variety of defence and other roles. The main day-to-day role of the Naval Service is to provide a fisheries protection service in accordance with the State's obligations as a member of the EU. The service is tasked with patrolling all Irish waters from the shoreline to the outer limits of the exclusive economic zone. These patrols are carried out on a regular and frequent basis and are directed to all areas of Irish waters as necessary. I am advised that the fleet is managed to ensure maximum availability to meet operational requirements. On any given patrol day, the Naval Service can carry out a number of tasks on behalf of other State agencies such as the Sea-Fisheries Protection Authority, An Garda Síochána and the Customs Service of the Revenue Commissioners.

The Naval Service has nine ships. The *LÉ Orla* and *LÉ Eithne* are currently in operational reserve, but can be called upon for surge operations in times of national emergency, as was the case when the *LÉ Eithne* was deployed to Cork city from 20 March to 24 June last year in support of Operation Fortitude and the national response to the Covid-19 pandemic. The *LÉ Eithne* acted as a forward logistics base and training platform in support of the HSE. Of the remaining seven ships, one is in the process of a midlife refit, which is expected to last 18 to 24 months. Six operational ships remain available.

Regarding the future development of the fleet, the replacement of the flagship *LÉ Eithne* with a multi-role vessel, MRV, is the immediate project currently under way. The MRV project is an important development project and indicative of the commitment to ongoing investment in and development of defence capabilities. It is intended to hold a public tender competition in due course to cover the supply of the MRV, subject to availability of funding within the overall defence capital funding envelope. Projects for other vessel replacements will be considered over the lifetime of the White Paper on Defence in the context of overall capability development and funding along with the overall equipment development plan process.

In addition, the independent commission on the Defence Forces established last December will, as part of its work, examine issues relating to the Defence Forces' capabilities, structures and staffing. I expect that issues raised here today in regard to the Naval Service will feature as part of the commission's report, which will be available to me before the end of the year. I assure the Deputy that we are not waiting for the commission's report on investment and recruitment campaigns within the Naval Service. We have a serious issue to address and we are setting about doing that.

Deputy Cormac Devlin: I welcome that and note the comments of the Minister on recruitment. As I said, I have witnessed that myself. The Defence Forces have a wonderful social media presence and have communicated their message about the recruitment campaign, apprenticeships and all sorts of other activities over the years successfully.

I note the comments of the Minister on the flagship *LÉ Eithne*. As he is probably aware, it is twinned with Dún Laoghaire Harbour, something that we are very proud of. I ask that if funding is to be released for a replacement for *LÉ Eithne*, consideration be given to continue to twin a ship with Dún Laoghaire. It is an important connection, given the size of the harbour and its strategic importance.

I also note what the Minister said about the two reserve ships. Effectively, there are eight ships, and one is currently under midlife repair. I ask the Minister to provide a note on the *LÉ Eithne* and the *LÉ Orla*.

Deputy Simon Coveney: We have two ships in reserve and one ship in a midlife refit, which takes a period of time. There are essentially six ships operational in our fleet at the moment. The two ships in reserve can be deployed if there is an emergency. Due to the fact that there are challenges in respect of the numbers in the Naval Service, we are focused on operating six ships safely with full crews. I am not willing to compromise on safety standards by under-crewing ships to try to get more ships out.

The two ships in reserve are ships that are close to 40 years old at this stage. We are now considering how we can get our fleet back up to eight or nine and how we can replace some of the ships that need to be retired from the fleet. That has to happen in parallel with getting the numbers back up again.

Deputy Cormac Devlin: From my perspective, the main issue is the twinning of the ships. I note the great service of the *LÉ Eithne*, along with other ships, and the personnel that have crewed all of the various ships over the years. I ask that consideration be given to twinning between Dún Laoghaire and the replacement for the *LÉ Eithne* whenever that happens in the short term.

As I said, I acknowledge the work that is under way. I support the Minister's call for fully manned ships. Post the recruitment campaign and the encouragement of other personnel to come back to the Naval Service and the wider Defence Forces, that is important. I look forward to further updates from the Minister.

Deputy Simon Coveney: The Deputy will be pleased to hear that I was in Dún Laoghaire using the facilities of the harbour a few days ago when the Naval Service picked me up in a rig and took me to the *LÉ George Bernard Shaw* where we spent nearly 24 hours on patrol down the east coast and along the south coast. It was a good opportunity to spend some time with our naval personnel and to speak to them about the challenges and issues for them in the Defence

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Forces in terms of their career choices and so on. It was time well spent. I also witnessed their training procedures on deck and the skill levels that our Naval Service has reached.

The Deputy would like the replacement of the *LÉ Eithne* to be twinned with Dún Laoghaire. I cannot commit to that now on the floor of the Dáil, but we will bear it in mind when those decisions are made. The Deputy might be able to refer to this conversation if it is successful.

Deputy Cormac Devlin: I will. Do not worry.

Defence Forces

15. **Deputy Cathal Berry** asked the Minister for Defence the status of the nursing review in the Defence Forces; when it commenced; when it is likely to conclude; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34707/21]

Deputy Cathal Berry: I wish to focus this question on the Army Nursing Service, specifically the review that I understand may have been ongoing for a short while. Will the Minister indicate when the review commenced and is likely to finish, and will he make a statement on the matter?

Deputy Simon Coveney: To be fair to him, the Deputy always asks searching questions. For obvious reasons, this is a sector that he understands well.

The civil-military joint standing committee on medical service delivery is tasked with advancing the development of a sustainable, integrated medical service to meet the needs of the Defence Forces. As part of its work, it has committed to reviewing each key medical capability separately. The objective of each review is to evaluate and make recommendations regarding the most appropriate means of delivering each service to the Defence Forces. These reviews are conducted on an ongoing basis as the workload of the committee allows.

On this basis, a review of the Army Nursing Service was commenced in March 2020. A subgroup of the main committee has been established and is currently progressing its work with a view to the review being finalised by the end of 2021. It should be noted that the work of the joint standing committee was impacted by the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The objective of the review is to document and evaluate the current and historical service provided by the Army Nursing Service, examine the recommendations of previous reviews, provide an overview of relevant legislation governing the Army Nursing Service, nursing in Ireland and, where possible, international best practice in military nursing, consider the potential future role of the Army Nursing Service and nurses in the context of the operational capability of the Medical Corps and Defence Forces, and to present options regarding the most appropriate means of delivering nursing services to the Defence Forces, including a consideration of both internal and outsourced service provision.

The Army Nursing Service forms part of a wide range of medical services that are provided to members of the Permanent Defence Force. These include an annual medical examination, sick parades, attendance at GP surgeries outside of sick parade and out-of-hours GP services, prescription services, laboratory services, physiotherapy, radiology, mental health services provided by an in-house psychiatrist and two in-house psychologists, inpatient and outpatient public hospital charges and routine dental treatment.

This is an important service. In fact, it is an essential service that is provided to our Permanent Defence Force. The review should conclude by the end of the year.

Additional information not given on the floor of the House

Commissioned officers and members of the Army Nursing Service can avail of private consultant appointments and diagnostic tests as well as private or semi-private hospital treatment dependent on rank, including private maternity care for female officers. Of course, in the event of emergency situations arising in the course of Defence Forces activities, all personnel regardless of rank receive the appropriate medical care expeditiously. Furthermore, the programme for Government contains a commitment to extend this range of benefits to the enlisted ranks in the Defence Forces and a working group has been established to make proposals on this matter. Its work is ongoing.

The ongoing reviews of the range of medical services provided to the Defence Forces are an important tool in ensuring the provision of quality care to our personnel. I assure the Deputy that this is a priority for my Department and me.

Deputy Cathal Berry: I thank the Minister for that useful and helpful response.

What can I say about the Army Nursing Service? It is a fantastic component of the Defence Forces, but I assume the Minister agrees that it is in decline. In its heyday a number of decades ago, there were approximately 100 nurses. Now, there are only three or four. That is a major pity because, over the past 15 months during the pandemic, nurses would have been useful both within the Defence Forces and in dealing with the public, including from a nursing homeless perspective.

The majority of the nurses employed by the Defence Forces are agency nurses, which are expensive. In one barracks, an agency nurse has been re-employed on a 24-hour basis every day since 2012, which is a suboptimal situation from her perspective as well as the organisation's perspective.

I would be grateful if the Minister could expedite the nursing review. Let us get decisions made and nurses back into the Defence Forces where they belong.

Deputy Simon Coveney: I will follow the progress of this review closely. The Army Nursing Service is essential to our Defence Forces and needs to be available to all serving personnel. We have made a commitment in the programme for Government that the medical facilities available to officers in the Defence Forces should be available to all serving personnel. That commitment will take some time to implement, but I am determined to do that.

I am happy to make the commitment that the review will conclude before the end of the year. We will see if we can complete it at an earlier point. I take on board what the Deputy has said.

Deputy Cathal Berry: The Minister will agree that the nursing component of the Defence Forces is very important, given its scope of practice and the particular skill set and mindset that nurses bring to proceedings, particularly from an overseas point of view. It would be unusual among the EU 27 for a military not to have an army nursing service. Thankfully, we have not had a casualty overseas in 16 or 17 years, but we are on borrowed time. If we recruit nurses, we should be able to deploy them overseas like any normal military does. That is important, as we must de-risk our overseas operations. We must prevent our next casualty from becoming

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our next fatality. Having a functioning, well-resourced and well-staffed Army Nursing Service is crucial in that regard.

Deputy Simon Coveney: I assure the House that, in terms of our overseas deployments, we always ensure that there are appropriate medical supports, medical facilities and nursing staff available to our serving personnel. This normally means that we embed our serving personnel with others. In Mali, we are embedded with the Germans. When I visited the EU training mission, it had a German medical facility that was responsible for looking after the medical requirements of the Irish serving personnel. That said, medical expertise and medical staff, including nursing staff, are an important component of a rounded and functioning defence forces. I hope that is what we can deliver following the review.

Military Honours

16. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Defence further to Question No. 16 of 13 May 2021, if the final report of the independent review group established to examine the events at Jadotville in September 1961 has been completed and received by his Department; if the final report will be published; if so, the timeline for same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34636/21]

51. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Defence the progress to date made by the independent review group set up to investigate and make recommendations on the Battle of Jadotville; when it will be in a position to publish its recommendations; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34619/21]

Deputy Catherine Connolly: Baineann mo cheist le Jadotville. Tá sé ardaithe arís agus arís eile agam agus ag Teachtaí Dála eile. I am raising the issue of Jadotville once again. My question relates specifically to the final report of the independent group that was set up to examine the events at Jadotville, which will have occurred 60 years ago this September. Does the Minister have the report? Will it be published? If he does not have it, when will he?

Deputy Simon Coveney: I propose to take Questions Nos. 16 and 51 together.

In short, I do not have the report yet, but I have been speaking to the Chief of Staff about my wanting to have it soon. I suspect that I will have it soon and I look forward to being able to discuss it in some detail then.

The issue of awarding Military Medals for Gallantry and Distinguished Service Medals to personnel who served in Jadotville in September 1961 has been considered on a number of occasions over the years and a number of actions have been taken to give due recognition to the courage and bravery of all the members of A Company, 35th Infantry Battalion, who were stationed in Jadotville in 1961. Notwithstanding the actions that have been undertaken to date, I have asked the Chief of Staff to consider whether it is possible, as an exceptional measure, to have a retrospective examination of the events at Jadotville in the context of the awarding of medals and the possible implications for the integrity of the award of medals system. In response, the Chief of Staff proposed the establishment of an independent group of external experts to consider the entire case and the available evidence, including new evidence, if any.

The independent review group was established by the Chief of Staff in December. In line

with its terms of reference, it will examine, report and make recommendations in respect of the Battle of Jadotville from 13 to 17 September 1961 and will report its findings to the Chief of Staff as the convening authority.

The independent review group has been actively engaged in the consultation and research process and was originally due to conclude by 31 March. However, given the sheer volume of meetings and the comprehensive nature of the research process, an interim report was submitted and an extension to the timeframe for reporting to the Chief of Staff was requested.

9 o'clock

I agreed to an extension and I am expecting the final report, along with recommendations from the Chief of Staff, shortly.

I have outlined to this House and the Seanad it is important the awarding of military medals such as those for gallantry and a distinguished service medal is a military process and not a political one. It is also important we do not draw conclusions as to the outcome of the independent review process, which is now at an advanced stage, and is close to completion. At this juncture, it would be premature to state if the interim report or the final report, once submitted, will be published or released. I will await the outcome of the work of the independent review group and the recommendation of the Chief of Staff, in due course.

When the final report has been received and any findings have been given full consideration, a decision on the release of the interim and final reports will be made, taking into account any legal or other considerations arising. However, my intention - if I can at all - is to release the report in order that we can have full statements on it.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I thank the Minister for his work. I appreciate he has set up the review and I appreciate it is independent. However, I am a little concerned. The report was due at the end of March and then it was the middle of June. Did the Minister get a request for a further extension? We have passed the middle of June.

I am a little worried by the wording with regard to the integrity of the medal. The awarding of medals has to have integrity, but there is something much more fundamental in question here with regard to integrity and that is how a group of young men who were so courageous were treated as Jadotville Jacks. I hate the expression, but that is what they were subjected to when they came back. There is much more at stake when we talk about integrity.

When will the report be released? Soon or shortly is not good enough. The Minister must have been asked specifically for an extension and it must have been indicated when the report will be complete. Had the Minister received a draft report?

Deputy Simon Coveney: No is the straight answer. However, I have asked that I receive the report shortly. I hope I will receive it within days. One of the things I am determined to do is to make sure we have the opportunity to have statements on this report and its recommendations before we break up for the summer, which means we need to get on with it. I have responded positively to requests for more time - which I think was the right thing to do - because my understanding is this is quite a significant report in terms of the number of pages and amount of detail in it. In fact, I know it is.

I have not received or seen it, but I have indicated to the Chief of Staff that I want this report

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within days and he has indicated he will try to ensure that is done. I do not want to rush this at the last minute. I want it to be concluded and completed properly and I have considerable confidence the skill set of the people on the panel who have done this work represents a broad perspective, in trying to address some of the issues Deputy Connolly has raised in terms of correcting history, as well as addressing the medals process within the Defence Forces.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I am sharing time with Deputy Brady.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh): My apologies. Whichever way they want to go.

Deputy John Brady: I thought the Cathaoirleach had forgotten about me. Similar to Deputy Connolly, I have been following this up and had tabled the previous question as well. It is deeply frustrating, given the different times which have been given - 31 March and then mid-June. I understand a short extension has been given, but it is about rectifying the wrongs done by the heroes. I do not use that term lightly, but these men were heroes and it is about rectifying the wrongs, injustice and wrong history which has been written, for far too long, about them.

Has the Chief of Staff, Mark Mellett, received the final copy? Has he got the final recommendations - I know the Minister is waiting on recommendations coming from him - or is he waiting for the review body to conclude its work? Do we have a final report which the Minister is waiting to be handed over?

There is significant hope the right thing will be done and the 60th anniversary in September will be used as a date and occasion to, I hope, award these medals. Can the Minister outline any plans which may be in place?

Deputy Simon Coveney: We should not presuppose the outcome of the report. This report was not completed weeks ago and is sitting on someone's desk. I spoke to the Chief of Staff about this a few days ago. The report is in the final stages of being completed. Of course, it then needs to be printed up and so on and the Chief of Staff needs some time to be able to consider it. However, I am looking to have the report and the response of the Chief of Staff to that report as soon as possible, as I said, within days. I hope that can be facilitated.

From what I understand, the people who have been involved in this process and report have put an enormous amount of time and work into it. When they took on the job, perhaps nobody realised the number of submissions they would receive and the workload involved in that. Let us allow this process to conclude appropriately and not rush it, but at the same time, I would like to have the report and an opportunity to consider it, before we break up for the summer.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I welcome the Minister's precise answer and the fact he has said he would like to have it discussed. I hope he will ensure it will be discussed before the term closes. That just leaves us two weeks. I also acknowledge there was a tremendous amount of work involved, but there was also a tremendous amount of work behind the scenes, from the families of those who were there, the son of the officer in charge and the community school in Portmarnock and Malahide and in Moneenageisha community school in County Galway.

I said on the last occasion I spoke, on 13 May, one of the few stories which has given me hope and the will to push on in the Dáil is what I have seen from the way the men acted in Jadotville, the schools following that and the push on the ground. It is the right decision to have it fully discussed in the Dáil. It should be published to restore integrity. Whatever about

integrity in the awarding of medals, which is also important, there is a much more basic integrity involved.

Deputy Simon Coveney: I agree with that. We did have a full debate on this issue in the Seanad and I did give a commitment once the report was concluded, we would have statements in the Seanad on that and I would like to follow through on that commitment. Let us see if we can schedule a debate here also.

In many ways, Jadotville is a reminder of the service overseas of Irish Defence Forces personnel over many many years. Believe me, the more you learn about and talk to people who are involved in peacekeeping, the more you realise there are many heroes in the Irish Defence Forces, who have been involved in managing extraordinary risk abroad. I met John O'Mahony and the Barrett family, who had to endure extraordinary loss in 1980, in the last few days.

Serving overseas as peacekeepers sometimes involves extraordinary sacrifice and I hope the recognition due to families and the men who were involved in Jadotville will be recognised in the report we will get within the next few days.

Deputy John Brady: I appreciate the Minister does not want the issuing or awarding of medals to be a political thing but, unfortunately, it was politics which interfered in this over the past 60 years and has delayed - and I hope only delayed - the awarding of medals and rectifying of history. I appreciate we have a narrow window of two weeks. I heard the Minister say that he hoped to have it before the House. Hopefully, time will be provided in both Houses of the Oireachtas to facilitate that debate. It would be helpful, although I know the Minister cannot commit to it here, if the full report could be issued in advance of that. I hope that will be the case and it can be facilitated. We have two weeks, and it would be good to have it. The most important date, however, is September. I hope everyone is working towards that and that the right thing will be done.

Deputy Simon Coveney: I certainly hope the right thing will be done, as the Deputy said. I have put some faith in the Chief of Staff to undertake an appropriate review of these issues and, hopefully, we will find out the result of that process in the next few days and certainly in the next couple of weeks. The Deputy is correct that September is a significant anniversary. It coincides with our presidency of the UN Security Council in New York. During the month of our presidency, one of the events we will focus on is peacekeeping and peacekeeping mandates, so there is obvious synergy there in terms of the role of Irish Defence Forces personnel through the example of Jadotville in the context of the 60th anniversary. We will try to plan an event that is appropriate for the recognition of those events and the 60th anniversary in September.

Defence Forces

17. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Defence if he will report on the level of day-to-day spending in the Defence Forces annualised as a percentage of GDP in each of the years 2016 to 2020; and the estimate for 2021. [34696/21]

Deputy Cormac Devlin: Will the Minister report on the level of day-to-day spending in the Defence Forces annualised as a percentage of GDP in each of the years from 2016 to 2020, including an estimate for the current year?

Deputy Simon Coveney: It sounds as if I have an ally in trying to increase defence spending. I will remember that at budget time.

Each year, the defence budget is determined within the overarching budgetary framework and approved by Dáil Eireann, having regard to the level of resources available and defence policy requirements. Capital funding allocations are also framed by the multi-annual national development plan. Expenditure on the Defence Forces is managed through the defence Vote 36, with all operational outputs delivered from a single set of forces encompassing the Army, Air Corps and Naval Service. Defence Vote 36 provides funding for the pay and allowances of members of the Defence Forces, civilian employees and departmental staff, ongoing Defence Forces operational and standing costs, the acquisition of military equipment along with the development of the Defence Forces built infrastructure. It also provides funding for Civil Defence and the Irish Red Cross Society. Separately, Vote 35 provides for military pensions.

Overall gross defence Vote 36 expenditure of €781 million in 2020 was some €110 million or 16% greater than the 2016 figure of €671 million. Capital expenditure on equipment and infrastructure has increased by €58 million over the same period. The allocation of €810 million provided for the defence Vote 36 in 2021 represents an increase of €29 million, or 4%, on the corresponding allocation provided in 2020 and an increase of €139 million or 21% on 2016 expenditure.

Percentage of GDP comparisons of defence expenditure include military pensions expenditure when calculating such percentages. Between 2016 and 2020, while the defence expenditure in Vote 35 and Vote 36 increased from €905 million to €1,032 million, the defence expenditure in Vote 35 and Vote 36 as a percentage of GDP decreased marginally from 0.33% to 0.28%. This was against the backdrop of a very significant increase of some €96 billion or 35% in Ireland's GDP figure between 2016 and 2020.

Deputy Cormac Devlin: I thank the Minister for those figures and I welcome the various increases the Minister referred to from 2016 to the present. Given the pandemic, there will undoubtedly be further increases.

I wish to focus on the cyberattack. Obviously, great work is done by the Defence Forces across the board, but given the recent impact of the attack on our health service and the Minister's comments earlier about the European element and co-operation, which is interesting and we will focus on that in the next week or so in our questions, is the Minister aware of the Norwegian Cyber Defence Force, which was established in 2012? I understand it has a complement of approximately 1,500 personnel. In view of Ireland's key pillar of fintech, pharmaceutical and other important industries, it is important that the country and Government would focus on funding and having a resilient anti-cyberattack strategy. Perhaps the Minister will comment on that.

Deputy Simon Coveney: This brings me back to an earlier question relating to cybersecurity and the considerations of the Commission on the Defence Forces for the future in terms of the cybersecurity elements of the threats we face in the security domain. It is important to point out that the budget the Government spends on cybersecurity is not just confined to the defence budget. It also goes to the Department of Environment, Climate and Communications. In fact, the Minister for Environment, Climate and Communications has the primary responsibility for cybersecurity in the State. He is the sponsoring Minister for the National Cyber Security Centre. That does not mean the Department of Defence and the Defence Forces do not contribute to

that. We do. There is an important skills set in the Defence Forces with regard to cybersecurity capacity. That is why somebody from the Defence Forces is seconded to the European centre of excellence for cybersecurity in Tallinn. We work closely with other EU member states, but I expect we will see increased spending in future budgets on cybersecurity for the reasons the Deputy outlined.

Deputy Cormac Devlin: Absolutely, and I welcome the Minister's comments in that regard. I know it is not just the Minister's portfolio. I raised this issue last week with the Tánaiste and the need to ensure there is funding and, indeed, a review of all the various strategies from the Government and industry. It is important that we have a robust system and that we invest in it, given the unfortunate and decimating experience in the last few weeks. That said, it would be important to have a structural and technological change as well as a mindset from the Government to ensure we can thwart, as much as possible, any future cyberattacks. I welcome the Minister's comments about the potential co-operation at European level. That makes absolute sense. As the Minister said about our peacekeepers, if we can use resources adequately and smartly, it will be a benefit not only to Ireland but across Europe.

Deputy Simon Coveney: Cybersecurity is going to be one of the key challenges for the State in the context of a post-Covid recovery and how we protect data and our telecommunications systems and infrastructure as more people work from home and more people require and rely on high-speed broadband connectivity, both internationally and in the State. We will have to ensure that these systems are protected and safe. In my view, Ireland will continue to be a magnet for foreign direct investment, as a gateway into the European Union, and will continue to host enormous volumes of global data in data centres. We have our own systems for health-care, education, foreign affairs, defence and so forth that need to be protected from cyberattacks and the type of malware attack we saw in our health system, but we must protect a private sector investment here as well. We will see more consideration of, and more investment in, cybersecurity responses, given the issues that have been outlined.

Defence Forces

18. **Deputy Cathal Berry** asked the Minister for Defence his plans to reintroduce the specialised instructors' allowance for Defence Forces officers in view of the Public Sector Pay Commission's report, the ever-increasing intensity of Defence Forces induction training, the associated long hours and onerous responsibility taken on by Defence Forces officers and the previous Doyle report recommendations which were accepted by the State; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34705/21]

Deputy Cathal Berry: I wish to focus on the high-level implementation plan which is two years old next weekend and specifically on the specialised instructors allowance for commissioned officers. This allowance was payable up to 2012, when it was discontinued as a result of the financial emergency measures in the public interest, FEMPI, cutbacks. The high-level implementation plan left open the possibility of reinstating this allowance and I would be grateful to hear the Minister's thoughts on the current position with that and if he will make a statement on the matter.

Deputy Simon Coveney: The Deputy will be aware that with the agreement of the representative association, the specialised instructors allowance was bought out for officers under the defence sector collective agreement of the Public Service Agreement 2013-2016, also known as

the Haddington Road agreement. When the allowance was abolished, 54 affected officers were fully compensated for their loss. While the May 2019 report of the Public Service Pay Commission on recruitment and retention in the Permanent Defence Force made a recommendation regarding allowances in the Defence Forces, it did not make any recommendation on the re-establishment of allowances abolished under the Haddington Road agreement. The commission instead recommended that Defence Forces allowances, which were retained under Haddington Road agreement but reduced above and beyond any reductions made under the financial emergency measures in the public interest, FEMPI, have their reductions restored. Given that the specialised instructors allowance was abolished rather than reduced, it was not encompassed by any recommendation of the commission, which did not make any recommendations regarding reinstatement of allowances.

In 2017, the Representative Association of Commissioned Officers, RACO, submitted a claim to the conciliation and arbitration council of the conciliation and arbitration scheme, seeking the reinstatement of the specialised instructors allowance for officers. As the claim was a cost increasing measure under the terms of the pay agreement of the day, the Public Services Stability Agreement 2018-2020, the claim could not be considered at that juncture. The representative association has since reinstated this claim and the matter is currently being processed through the conciliation and arbitration scheme for members of the Permanent Defence Force. As discussions regarding the scheme are confidential between the parties concerned, I am somewhat constrained on commenting further.

Deputy Cathal Berry: I thank the Minister again for that very useful update. Nobody knows better than the Minister the amount of induction training going on now in the Defence Forces at the recruit, apprentice, direct entry and cadet levels. The commissioned officers involved in those training institutions are working flat out. They are working day and night, night and day and on weekends. Unlike other professions, they get no overtime whatsoever. This specialised instructors allowance is an opportunity to give those officers some financial recognition. It is a small amount in the grand scheme of things, but it would make a big difference for the individual officers concerned. Therefore, if the Minister could exercise any flexibility, latitude or discretion in that regard, it would be greatly appreciated. Staff retention is an issue in respect of commissioned officers in the Defence Forces, so if the Minister is looking for a tool to push back against all those premature exits, he should look no further than the specialised instructors allowance.

Deputy Simon Coveney: I hear what the Deputy is saying. This is an issue under consideration and we will continue to talk to RACO about it. As the Deputy knows, the new agreement provides two means whereby any party to the new pay agreement can pursue matters such as this one, namely, through sectoral bargaining or a submission to an independent body established under the new pay agreement. It is possible by those means to assess issues arising for consideration in this regard, including the context for pay and productivity measures within the Haddington Road agreement. However, this is a confidential process and I am somewhat limited regarding what I can say. I certainly take on board, though, the sentiment of the Deputy's question.

Deputy Cathal Berry: I appreciate that response from the Minister. I am conscious of the clock, but my final point is that the specialised instructors allowance was introduced as a result of the work of an independent commission, the Doyle commission, and subsequent reports in the late 2000s. It was brought in for the good reason of addressing issues of burn-out and exhaustion in the training institutions of the Defence Forces. If it was good enough in the late

2000s, then it is good enough now. Given there is a staff retention crisis now, a specialised instructors allowance is even more important than ever. I reiterate that if the Minister, or the Secretaries General of the Departments of Defence or Public Expenditure and Reform, can do anything, that would be hugely appreciated and would have a disproportionately positive effect on the ground in respect of staff retention.

Deputy Simon Coveney: The point is taken. I have already put it on record that the May 2019 report and the Public Service Pay Commission on recruitment and retention for the Permanent Defence Force made a recommendation regarding Defence Forces allowances, but it did not make any recommendation on the re-establishment of this specific allowance. Having said that, time moves on and I do not want to rule anything out. I do not, however, want to commit to something here on the floor of the Dáil when a confidential process is under way.

Written Answers are published on the Oireachtas website.

Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

School Accommodation

Deputy John Lahart: I thank my colleague, the Minister for Education, Deputy Foley, for designating the Minister of State, Deputy Fleming, to answer this question. I am grateful for that. Firhouse Educate Together post-primary school is to cater for 1,000 pupils, and it may be the only such school planned for my constituency. I welcome the efforts made by officials, management, staff and all the stakeholders in securing a site for a much-needed permanent home for this school, which will house 1,000 pupils when it is complete. A formal planning application has been submitted to South Dublin County Council for temporary accommodation at a site adjacent to Ballycullen Green, which is off the Old Court Road in Ballycullen–Firhouse. It is a site which will not be without its challenges, particularly regarding access, traffic movement, etc.

However, the reason I chose this subject for a Topical Issue debate centres on my concerns regarding the manner in which the Department of Education took a decision, pending the outcome of the planning application by the Department for a temporary site for the school, to relocate Firhouse Educate Together secondary school to the grounds of the existing Firhouse Community College, which has been in that community for many years. I understand the decision was made to ensure Firhouse Educate Together secondary school opens in September, which I welcome. My concern, though, relates to the manner in which that decision was communicated to Firhouse Community College and to the Dublin and Dún Laoghaire Education and Training Board, DDLETB, was truly poor. It caused a great deal of genuine and deep hurt and upset to the management, students, parents association and staff of Firhouse Community College.

I think the principal just heard about the decision the night before the news was made public. Until that stage, I do not think Firhouse Community College had considered that it was really a live option being considered by the Department of Education. It was a shock to hear the news that Firhouse Educate Together secondary school will be temporarily located on the grounds of Firhouse Community College from September, and the college will have no say in that. Equally, people who live in neighbouring estates, residents associations and parents coun-

cils will have no input into this decision. The decision had been made.

Therefore, there are several pieces to pick up and several questions to pose regarding this matter. First, I ask that the Minister of State communicate to the Minister for Education that this process was handled in a disrespectful manner when it comes to Firhouse Community College. I put that on the record tonight. In organising the temporary relocation of Firhouse Educate Together post-primary school to the grounds of Firhouse Community College, a commitment was given that it will be for a maximum of a year. I want a commitment and a guarantee from the Minister for Education that that is the case.

If the separate ongoing planning application is successful, then that will ensure the relocation to the grounds of Firhouse Community College will be temporary. An appeal or prolonged process regarding the planning application for temporary accommodation on another site, however, will cause real concern to the parents, staff and management of Firhouse Community College. Can it be guaranteed and committed to that the temporary relocation will be for an absolute maximum of one academic year?

Minister of State at the Department of Finance (Deputy Sean Fleming): I thank the Deputy for raising this matter as it allows me to provide an update to the House on behalf of the Minister for Education, Deputy Foley, who is unavailable, on the current position in relation to the provision of interim and permanent accommodation for Firhouse Educate Together Secondary School, ETSS. The school will have approximately 1,000 pupils, illustrating the very strong demand in the area for this project to be completed.

Firhouse ETSS opened in September 2018 in vacant classrooms in the permanent school building of Firhouse Educate Together Primary School on an education campus shared with the permanent 16-classroom school for Gaelscoil na Giúise. In September 2019, the Department put in place arrangements with Gaelscoil na Giúise and its patron body, An Foras Pátrúnachta, to use some vacant classrooms in the Gaelscoil for Firhouse ETSS. However, it is not possible for the secondary school to continue to operate in its current location for the coming school year as the space is not available and the agreement with Gaelscoil na Giúise and An Foras Pátrúnachta was that the arrangement would be for the 2020-21 school year only. Consequently, alternative arrangements are being progressed.

A planning application for interim accommodation for the school on its permanent site was lodged on 26 May 2021 and instructions have issued to the project manager overseeing the delivery of the interim accommodation to proceed with the procurement arrangements under the Department's new modular buildings framework. That is progressing as we speak, in parallel with the planning application process and hopefully both will move forward together. There was a delay in obtaining a necessary legal consent from an adjacent landowner in order to lodge the planning application and as a result, the Department is putting in place contingency arrangements for the school to be located in suitable interim accommodation at the Firhouse Community College site from August 2021 for a maximum of one academic year. The interim accommodation, which includes specialist classrooms, special educational needs, SEN, provision and ancillary accommodation, will be installed on the community college site for the beginning of the 2021-22 school year using the planning exemption secured in March 2021. Details of the accommodation were recently issued to the patrons of the schools concerned.

It is the Department's intention that the school will move into the interim accommodation on its permanent site as early as possible in the 2021-22 academic year and that the vacated

interim accommodation on the community college site will remain on site and will be available for use by Firhouse Community College as provided for under the exemption.

I accept the point that the Deputy made with regard to departmental communication with Firhouse Community College at the very last minute and can understand the upset and disquiet this caused. However, based on the information laid out by Deputy Lahart, it has been a difficult situation. The planning application was delayed because legal consent from an adjoining landowner had to be secured and that took some time. The plan is as I have clearly outlined and I hope my reply is of assistance. It is important that the Department communicates clearly with the patron and the board of management and that they communicate immediately with staff, parents and all involved in the school. I hope my reply provides some assurance and if the Deputy has any further comments or questions, I will happily relay them to the Minister tomorrow morning on his behalf.

Deputy John Lahart: I am very grateful for that empathetic response which grasps the hurt and upset that has been caused. I ask the Minister of State to relay to the Minister my belief that steps need to be taken quickly to begin communications between both schools. Both have been left in the lurch to some degree and the communications deficits have hurt them. If Firhouse ETSS is to be accommodated on site in Firhouse Community College for one academic year, it is important that channels of communication between management and between parents' associations are opened up as quickly as possible.

I welcome what the Minister of State said in his reply in terms of the arrangement being for a maximum of one year. I acknowledge the fact that the Department of Education's planning application for temporary accommodation in Ballycullen closed today. A number of objections and submissions were lodged so it remains to be seen whether South Dublin County Council approves the application. If it grants permission, then obviously the temporary accommodation at Firhouse Community College can be vacated by Firhouse ETSS sooner rather than later. I also welcome the fact that the Department honoured the commitment given to the patron body of the Gaelscoil that Firhouse ETSS would only be housed there for a year. Obviously, that did not benefit Firhouse ETSS but the Department said that arrangement would be for a maximum of one year and it stuck to that. In that context, there are lots of positives to be taken from the answer that the Minister of State has given today.

I am grateful to the Minister of State for his understanding of the fact that the manner in which the whole thing was communicated was unacceptable. It treated the management, staff, students, parents and all other ancillary staff of Firhouse Community College in quite a tawdry manner. It has caused deep hurt which will take some time to undo. There must be some pay-back in the future for Firhouse Community College for accommodating a neighbouring school.

Deputy Sean Fleming: I thank the Deputy who makes an important point with regard to communication between the two schools. Every school is independent and has its own structure and this coming together, albeit temporary in nature, may cause some difficulties. It is important that there is proper communication between the two schools. I will raise this with the Minister directly tomorrow morning.

The Department is committed to delivering an interim accommodation solution for Firhouse ETSS for September 2021. Department officials continue to provide regular updates to the school's patron body, Educate Together and the patron body keeps the school community updated. The project to deliver the permanent school accommodation is to be delivered under the

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Department's design and build programme and is currently at the architectural planning stage. A pre-planning meeting with the local authority has taken place and the design work is ongoing. When planning permission has been secured it will be possible to provide a timeline for the progression of the project to tender and construction stage. Everything depends on securing planning permission. I note Deputy Lahart's comment that some objections were lodged but hopefully that will be resolved satisfactorily.

On the question of guaranteeing that the school will move off the site of Firhouse Community College by September 2022, a planning application for interim accommodation on the Firhouse ETSS permanent site was lodged and it is intended to relocate the school to its permanent site in advance of the 2022-23 school year. The indicative date for the commencement of construction is early 2024 although this is dependent on planning permission being granted.

The Deputy has highlighted the fact that there is a growing population in Firhouse and this school, with the potential for the enrolment of 1,000 pupils, must be given priority.

Employment Rights

Deputy Colm Burke: I ask the Minister to give serious consideration to changing the employment status or classification of home tutors governed by the home tuition grant scheme from self-employed to employee. These tutors are essentially employees of the Department of Education but their current PRSI status puts them at a serious disadvantage because of their lack of eligibility for pensionable PRSI contributions. I ask the Minister to give serious consideration to this proposal.

This issue is quite serious because those who are providing home tuition on a full-time basis cannot make class A contributions because they are in PRSI class S. They cannot claim expenses and yet they are regarded as self-employed. They are also restricted from paying into a private pension fund. They are at a huge disadvantage. They are employed to provide home tuition and the vast majority are working full time providing this service. The Department of Education is paying them but they are not regarded as employees. We had this debate in recent weeks where people from RTÉ, for instance, who were regarded as having individual contracts have now been brought in as employees. Home tuition is another matter the Department has to give serious consideration to. On the one hand, home tutors are treated as self-employed but they do not have the same advantages of being self-employed because they cannot pay claim expenses or pay into a pension fund. On the other hand, they are not entitled to sick pay or holiday pay and, therefore, they are working at a huge disadvantage. At the same time, they are providing a good service to young people who are not able to fit into the school structure or who are finding it difficult to work within it.

Deputy Sean Fleming: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue in the House because it is one that affects a number of people who are involved in home tuition. It is probably a subtle issue that many people would not have been aware of and I can understand that it is a bit confusing. Nevertheless, there are clear procedures and rules in place but I understand people will find them a little bit more complicated than the normal situation.

I am advised by the Revenue Commissioners that, from a Revenue perspective, the home tutors referred to by the Deputy are engaged under a contract of service. This means they are employees but the point is that they are not employees of the Department. They are engaged

by the parents subject to satisfying criteria specified by the Department of Education. Prior to September 2015, the home tutors were paid by the parents from grants paid to them by the Department of Education.

As a consequence of a Revenue audit, the Department of Education agreed to operate the PAYE system on payments to the home tutors. This facilitates ease of administration as the payments originate from the Department. It also avoids placing an obligation to register as an employer and administer the PAYE system on each individual parent. It was done on an administrative basis for convenience and to assist everybody involved but it did not change the employment status of home tutors.

It should be borne in mind that PAYE is not a tax in its own right. PAYE is a withholding mechanism. Employers are obliged to deduct income tax from emoluments they pay to employees. Employees remain liable to income tax and the universal social charge, USC, on those emoluments. Application of PAYE does not confer an employment right on a worker. However, I understand that when many people get a pay slip and see who the money is coming from they would believe they are employed by them. However, even though the application of PAYE is made by the Department, it does not confer employment rights.

Matters of PRSI status and employment classification are determined by the scope section in the Department of Social Protection and the Workplace Relations Commission, WRC. I am advised that the scope section in the Department of Social Protection has examined the status of home tutors on a number of occasions and has determined that they are engaged under a contract for services, or self-employed, and that the appropriate PRSI class is class S. The Deputy can appreciate that in my earlier comment I stated that they are deemed to be employees from the Revenue point of view but the Department of Social Protection considers them to be self-employed. There is an unresolved issue here.

On eligibility for PRSI contributions, I am advised by the Department of Social Protection that self-employed workers who earn more than €5,000 in a contribution year are liable to pay social insurance contributions at a class S rate of 4%, subject to a minimum payment of €500. Such contributors, once they satisfy the scheme-specific criteria, in addition to having the required number of social insurance contributions, are covered for a wide range of social insurance benefits. This includes: the State contributory pension; widow's, widower's or surviving civil partner's contributory pension; guardian's contributory payment; maternity, adoptive and paternity benefits; treatment benefits; invalidity pension; partial capacity benefit if in receipt of invalidity pension; jobseeker's benefit for self-employed persons; and parent's benefit.

The following point is important. The Revenue advises that it is available to engage with officials in the Department of Social Protection and the WRC to discuss any determination that might arise under social welfare and employment legislation. The Department of Social Protection is probably the key Department dealing with this issue. The Revenue's involvement is straightforward from an administrative point of view. The Department and the Revenue Commissioners are available to discuss this with the Department of Social Protection and the WRC to try to resolve this matter.

Deputy Colm Burke: It does not resolve the issue. The Department is paying for this service. I know it is not regarded as the employer on paper but in real terms it is. This is the same debate that has gone on in respect of many organisations in recent months, in that people who are deemed to be self-employed under contracts are, in fact, technically employees. It is time

this issue was resolved.

The Minister of State talked about numbers. My understanding is that there are up to 500 people in Cork alone providing this service. I am not sure what the number for the entire country is but we should try to find out as it would be interesting. We should also make sure they get the same recognition as teachers in our primary and secondary schools because they are providing that same level of education, but in a different setting. Why should they be regarded differently just because they are providing the same education but in a different setting? In many cases it is far more challenging so there has to be a huge and genuine commitment by them to make sure the pupils they are dealing with get the best quality education at all times.

I ask that the Department work with the Department of Social Protection and any other Department to make sure we do not have people who are technically employees of a Department who are being treated as self-employed. We criticise that in the private sector but this is the public sector adopting the exact same position. It is time that was reviewed.

Deputy Sean Fleming: I appreciate the Deputy's point of view on this. People are being paid by the Department and they feel that as such that they are employees of it. I would highlight that the parents come into this. They are the people who bring home tutors into their homes so that they can provide those tuition services to children in the household. The parents have a pivotal role and it is important that is not omitted because it is through the parents that this scheme happens.

That said, I accept the confusion between the Department of Social Protection and the WRC, if it was to adjudicate on this. There are many classifications where determinations have to be made on whether a person is self-employed or a contractor working for a business. The question is whether the person is in effect and in reality an employee. That determination has yet to be made and it is important that this case is put. I would recommend that the Department of Social Protection work on this. Revenue is available.

During the recent pandemic, the pandemic unemployment payment, which was available to employees and self-employed persons, was available to people carrying out home tuition. There was also an enhanced illness benefit available to employees and self-employed persons up to a maximum of two weeks when they were medically required to self-isolate during Covid-19.

The matters of PRSI status and employment classification are for the scope section in the Department of Social Protection. I suggest the Deputy table a Topical Issue matter for that Department to get the views from the Department of Finance and the Department of Social Protection on the Revenue's position on the record. It might be helpful to then bring the matter to the WRC.

Self-employed workers who pay social insurance contributions, or class S contributions, are covered for a wide range of social benefits, which I mentioned. I understand the difficulties with the lack of sick pay and holiday pay and not being able to contribute to a pension fund. Further discussion is required on this matter.

Departmental Schemes

Deputy Holly Cairns: In west Cork, we are lucky to have some of the most spectacular marked trails in Ireland, including the Sheep's Head way and the Beara way. We also have wonderful short routes such as the Fastnet trails, Castlefreke trails and Kilbrittain trails. Research carried out for West Cork Development Partnership in 2012 demonstrated that walking tourism generated €14 million for the local economy and supported an estimated 353 full-time equivalent jobs. It is exactly the type of sustainable tourism project we need in rural areas.

Rural recreation officers, who are employed by local development companies, are crucial. They are responsible for the roll-out of the national walks scheme. They administer the scheme, work with landowners and communities, complete maintenance plans, develop new routes and so much more. Unfortunately, there seems to be no correlation between the allocation of staff and the workload. The West Cork Development Partnership has the largest number of plans and payments to landowners by a considerable margin. The rural recreational officer in west Cork is responsible for 695 work plans whereas the national average is 190, and for 573 payments while the average is 138. This means the officer is responsible for three times the average for work plans and four times the payments average. The officer administers more than €800,000 in payments to landowners and co-ordinate in excess of 600 km of trails. The dedicated individual in the role had to apply for job sharing last year having been overwhelmed by the workload. While this has provided personal relief, it does not address the clear need for additional officers. Not only is this too much work for one full-time role, it reflects poor management from the Department. It is fundamentally unfair to have people in part-time jobs working full-time roles. One person cannot effectively do all that is required. There needs to be a set ratio between the scale of the schemes in an area and the number of officers employed to get the most for the public investment. It is essential that this is addressed immediately before the people concerned understandably leave their roles. Will the Minister of State assure the people of west Cork they will be getting necessary additional rural recreational officers as soon as possible?

Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan: The Sheep's Head way and Beara way are two of the most iconic, stunning and popular walkways in Europe. Their contribution to the local economies of Sheep's Head, Beara Peninsula, Bantry and the entirety of west Cork is immense. The two trails have a combined length of 400 km and involve more than 600 participants. They are an enormous success. However, those 400 km of trails and the 600 participants are administered by one full-time equivalent rural recreation officer. That is unsustainable. The workload involved in administering that number of trails and participants is beyond belief. That is why we are appealing to the Minister of State to give serious consideration to increasing the number of rural recreation officers to administer the west Cork walkways.

I will give him a small example of the equivalent position in Drumshanbo, County Leitrim. There are 25 km of walks in that area, with only 24 participants, and there is one full-time rural recreation officer to administer the scheme. That is compared to west Cork where 400 km of trails with 600 participants are administered by one officer. We are appealing to the Minister of State to seriously consider additional rural recreation officers for these fantastic schemes.

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke): I thank the Deputies for raising this matter which is important to their locality. The walks scheme, which is funded by the Department of Rural and Community Development, contracts landowners to undertake maintenance work on national waymarked ways

and other priority trails that traverse their lands. The landowners receive modest payments for maintenance work undertaken in line with agreed work plans. It makes an important contribution to maintaining some of our most valued walking trails and we want to ensure it continues to be resourced properly in the coming years. Both Deputies outlined the value of both ways to their community and others.

The programme for Government and Our Rural Future includes a commitment to double the number of walks covered by the scheme in recognition of the value of outdoor recreation amenities, not just for individual and community well-being, but also for the tourism impact these trails have on a local economy. The Government is committed to providing investment to further develop this sector in the coming years.

The process of expansion has commenced and the scheme is currently operating on 45 trails supported by approximately 2,040 landowners and is being managed by 16 local development companies around the country. Total costs in respect of the scheme in 2020 were in the region of €2.8 million.

At present, the Department funds rural recreation officers in 13 of these 16 local development companies. The rural recreation officers manage the scheme at a local level. They work with landholders to ensure that the designated walks are maintained at an approved standard, with repairs and improvements made as appropriate. They also make a significant contribution to the development of the outdoor recreation sector locally.

West Cork Development Partnership has two significant trails funded under the walks scheme. Those are the Beara way and the Sheep's Head way, to which the Deputies alluded. There are almost 580 landholders funded under these two walks, receiving funding of approximately €650,000. I am aware that an issue has arisen in West Cork Development Partnership and my colleague, the Minister for Rural and Community Development, Deputy Humphreys, has asked her officials to formally meet with the company. I understand her officials are in the process of confirming a date for the meeting with the company.

Separate to this, the Department has commissioned an external review of the walks scheme to examine the delivery and strategic development of the scheme. Some of the difficulties the Deputies are experiencing are in their locality have been articulated. The Department is also assessing the role and resourcing of the rural recreation officer posts throughout the country. The Minister, Deputy Humphreys, will continue to work with all of the stakeholders, including West Cork Development Partnership, to ensure that the scheme can continue to function effectively. I am assured the meeting to which I referred will take place imminently.

Deputy Holly Cairns: I thank the Minister of State and welcome the fact that the Minister has agreed to meet with the group in west Cork. We had requested such a meeting. The Minister of State outlined the scale of investment and that is the reason we need more rural recreational officers. That is the way to get the full benefit of the scheme, not to mention the obligations to the overstretched staff there.

As well as the existing duties, the west Cork rural recreational officer role is also responsible for a significant portion of the planned Beara to Breifne way, which will be Ireland's longest waymarked trail and about which we are all very excited. On top of that, the officer is assisting with new routes in Dunmanway and Ballingeary. That officer position currently has the largest workload in the country by far. It is only increasing, and rapidly. There is a clear and immedi-

ate case for the establishment and recruitment of additional rural recreational officers as soon as possible.

In his response, I ask the Minister of State to provide an update on the review of the scheme. Local development companies have outlined the need for more resources but are apparently waiting for a review to be made available to them. What is the status of that review? It is not required, of course, to know we need more staff in these roles. I wish to impress on the Minister of State the need for additional rural recreational officers in Cork.

Deputy Christopher O’Sullivan: I thank the Minister of State for his response. It is welcome that the Minister will meet representatives of the West Cork Development Partnership. I am sure she will hear first-hand the challenges they are facing in west Cork but also the considerable potential that exists. That is what this is about. At the moment, the single full-time rural recreational officer is struggling to deal with the enormous workload of running the two schemes about which we have talked. We should not just look to maintain what we have but expand it. We can expand walks such as those from Bantry to Drimoleague, around Dunmanway and walks around the entirety of west Cork. There is considerable potential in walking tourism in Ireland, particularly in west Cork where we have scenic peninsulas. I implore the Minister of State to listen to the people of west Cork, Deputy Cairns and me. I call on him to answer our calls for extra rural recreational officers in this area because they are vital.

Deputy Peter Burke: I have heard the views of both Deputies. I will raise the matter with the Minister on foot of this debate. I understand from both Deputies the importance of the amenities in question and what they provide. I acknowledge the scale of trails and the number of landowners on the scheme in west Cork compared to other areas, as has been mentioned. As I mentioned earlier, an external review of the walks scheme is nearing completion and assessing the role and resourcing of rural recreation officer posts is part of that review and is key in terms of the terms of reference to establish it.

10 o’clock

I understand the Minister, Deputy Humphreys, will publish the review once it has been fully considered by her Department. The recommendations contained in the review will inform the decisions on the further strategic expansion of the scheme, including the resourcing of local development companies such as the West Cork Development Partnership. Direct engagement with the company in west Cork by officials from the Department of Rural and Community Development, together with recommendations emerging from the external review of the walks scheme, should help identify the best approach for the future of the scheme in west Cork and elsewhere.

Water Services

Deputy Dessie Ellis: Lead is a very toxic heavy metal and is detrimental to human health, in particular, the health of young children. The risk to health is especially grievous where quantities of lead contained in water supplies are consumed over a long period, even if the lead present is at very low concentrations.

It has been shown that consumption of lead can affect the brain development of children. Infants and babies in the womb are most at risk from lead contamination as children and infants

absorb more lead than adults. Studies have shown that the toxic effects from the consumption of lead over time can lead to kidney damage and it has also been linked to cancer.

Over recent decades there has been a concerted effort to remove lead from both petrol and paint in recognition of both the harmful effects and the danger lead poses. Both the HSE and the Environmental Protection Agency, EPA, have indicated that no amount of lead in drinking water, no matter how small, can be considered to be completely safe. Every effort must be made, therefore, to eliminate it from drinking water and water supplies.

Water production across the State's treatment plants is lead free and the water mains network carrying the water is also lead free as a result of remedial works carried out over many years. A serious problem exists, however, for many houses built before 1980, where some have been exposed to lead contamination because internal pipes are made of lead. This is especially true for some older homes and buildings, particularly in Dublin, where some pipes in older houses date back to Victorian times.

It was the practice for many years to use lead pipes in service connections, which are the pipes running from the public mains to houses. Such lead pipes were routinely used in the plumbing of homes up until the mid-1970s. Many of the larger estates, such as those in my constituency of Dublin North-West, were built back in the 1950s and 1960s. The issue of lead piping has scarcely been addressed in these estates. Lead leaching from such connections into the drinking water of these houses clearly poses a health risk to the residents.

Irish Water has estimated that approximately 180,000 homes have been affected. That means possibly in the region of 500,000 people are living in these houses. Of this number, approximately 40,000 are thought to have shared backyard common service pipes, which Irish Water said it would take on the responsibility of replacing.

According to the EPA, the only realistic resolution to this health problem is to replace the lead piping in total and this should be done as soon as possible. Irish Water developed a national plan to address the issue and allocated €370 million to be spent over ten years in replacing lead pipes in the public water supply. These moneys did not include replacing pipes under the front gardens or in houses. Homeowners were deemed to be responsible for such works and some homeowners could avail of a means-tested grant to assist in the cost of replacing these pipes.

A short-term solution to the problem was to dose water supplies with orthophosphate. This chemical formed a protective film around the inside of the pipe and provided a barrier between the water and the lead. Clearly, this is nothing more than a short-term solution.

What is the status of the lead mitigation plan? As far as I can see from my constituency, there seems to be little or no progress in addressing this issue in my local area. I suggest that a public awareness campaign be put in place to highlight this issue and build greater public recognition of this problem.

Deputy Peter Burke: I thank Deputy Ellis for raising this very important matter. Following the publication of the national strategy to reduce exposure to lead in drinking water in June 2015, a new grant scheme was introduced in February 2016 to assist low-income households with the replacement of lead pipes and related fittings in their homes. The intention of the lead remediation grant scheme was to incentivise households to carry out these works. The scheme is administered by the local authorities on behalf of the Department.

As the Deputy quite rightly said, however, it is fair to say the uptake on the scheme has been poor to date. To aid the Department with further consideration of the issue, a behavioural science and lead mitigation research programme is being undertaken now by the Economic and Social Research Institute, ESRI, in collaboration with Irish Water and other stakeholders. It is anticipated this study will contribute to informing future policy considerations in the broader context of addressing lead remediation issues. It has been delayed somewhat due to restrictions with regard to Covid-19.

It is vital and important to note, however, that lead in drinking water can come from both private-side pipes and from the public network, which is the responsibility of Irish Water. Significant progress is being made in addressing the public-side network, including networks in housing estates, both council or where taken in charge.

There are an estimated 180,000 lead service connections in Ireland and Irish Water has replaced more than 36,000 to date. Since January 2014, Irish Water has replaced approximately 9,282 backyard and shared lead services and approximately 26,976 public-side lead services.

Under current funding arrangements, Irish Water will be targeting the replacement of a further 54,000 public-side lead services between now and 2030. This would bring the total number of public-side lead services replaced to almost 90,000.

In addition, Irish Water has assisted local authorities with the running of a number of trials to determine the best and most effective options for the replacement of private-side services. Irish Water also offers a customer opt-in scheme, where the replacement of any public-side lead is prioritised at no cost to the customer when the homeowner replaces their private-side lead pipework.

The Deputy will note that a lead mitigation advisory group, chaired by the Department with representation from the Department of Health, the National Parks and Wildlife Service, the Environmental Protection Agency and Irish Water, meets regularly to consider and make arrangements on the broader national lead mitigation strategy. The most recent meeting of the group was held on 9 June 2021. I assure the Deputy that my Department, as advised by the lead mitigation advisory group, will continue to develop actions to reduce lead exposure in our water nationally.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: I thank the Minister of State for his response. We do not really know about or have any analysis of the real effects of lead contamination in our water. We know it is a threat to our health and that tens of thousands of houses built in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s used lead piping.

Many people living in these houses are on pensions and have very little money. They bought their own houses from the local authorities. A scheme is in place but there is not enough awareness and not enough take-up. I am glad, therefore, to hear the Minister of State say there will be a study to see how we can speed up that process.

He mentioned that so many houses would be done by 2030, but that is not enough. The scale of the problem is very big. It is a real worry that we do not have enough incentives and proper awareness. We should be going out more to people and letting them know a scheme is in place which they can avail of. In some cases, it is quite expensive for those who have earnings. That is another issue we must address. We need viable solutions. We really need to address the whole idea of funding and how to fund this even more and much faster into the future.

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This is a very important environmental issue which is affecting our people right across the board. It is not only in Dublin; it is in Cork, Galway and in different places. It is an issue that is not going to go away. We do not honestly know the effects of this or what it has caused. We do not know what its impact may have been, for example on people who were treated in their homes for cancer. There is a whole raft of issues we do not have the answers to.

Deputy Peter Burke: I genuinely appreciate the concerns put forward by Deputy Ellis. I will raise the awareness aspect of the current scheme with the Department, as well as the results coming from the study. If it is an issue of awareness, we will try to see how we can target that and make people aware of it.

As I said, Irish Water is responsible for lead pipework in the public water distribution network. Water leaving Irish Water's treatment plants is lead free and, therefore, there is no lead in public water mains in Ireland. However, since connections within properties can contain traces of lead, the vast majority of lead pipes are contained within properties built up to, and including, the 1970s. Lead in drinking water is the responsibility of both water suppliers and property owners. The Water Services Act 2007 provides that owners of premises are responsible for the maintenance and renewal of the internal water distribution system to ensure that drinking water provided meets the prescribed quality requirements at the taps. Therefore, lead plumbing in buildings, within property boundaries and on the private side of the network is primarily a matter for the property owner, including local councils where appropriate.

As I outlined earlier, the Department provides funding and assistance to low-income households through the lead remediation grant scheme, where the premises is owned or occupied by the applicant, to support replacement of lead pipes and related fittings. We will take the Deputy's comments in that regard on board. The Department already provides support to local authorities to upgrade housing stock and, more generally, meet modern building regulations. While Irish Water is making significant progress in regard to the public network, including in housing estates, as referenced by the Deputy, it is clear that the assistance my Department provides for low-income households is not being utilised to the full extent. This is something we are taking very seriously. We are examining it with the ESRI and the lead mitigation advisory group. I hope improvements can be made to the scheme in the coming period.

The Dáil adjourned at 10.12 p.m. until 9.12 a.m. on Wednesday, 30 June 2021.