



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

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

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Dé Máirt, 6 Iúil 2021

Tuesday, 6 July 2021

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

Paidir.

Prayer.

Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The disgraceful practice of so-called cuckoo funds snapping up family homes in bulk, under the noses of ordinary workers and families, is an issue we have raised with the Taoiseach in the House many times. Indeed, it is perhaps the most abhorrent aspect of our broken housing system. Of course, what is even worse is the practice of these funds snapping up those homes and then leasing them back to local authorities. That is a triple whammy. The funds get away scot-free, the taxpayer pays over the odds for social housing that we do not own, and families and young people are priced out of the market.

The Taoiseach told the Dáil that this practice would cease. In fact, on 5 May, he said that no local authority should be engaged in leasing back homes from these funds. He went on to say that this message should “go out loud and clear from Government”. That was a fairly lofty pronouncement. It is now clear that the message from Government is loud and clear and it is, in fact, a direct contradiction of what the Taoiseach said on 5 May. Tomorrow night, it is the intention of the Minister for Finance to introduce an amendment that will afford these funds another tax break to incentivise them to buy up family homes and lease them back to councils. On the one hand, the Taoiseach told the Dáil that councils should not engage in long-term leases with institutional investors, but the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Deputy Darragh O’Brien, is now actively encouraging it. This is happening on the Taoiseach’s watch. One really could not make this stuff up.

The result of all of this, to be clear, is that aspiring home buyers will continue to be priced out of the market by institutional investors who avail of sweetheart tax breaks gifted to them by Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and, lest we forget, by the Labour Party in its time. If the Taoiseach really means what he said in May, he will insist that the Minister’s amendment to the Finance (Covid-19 and Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2021 is scrapped. He will not do that, however, because he is not serious about this and he never has been. He is content to allow these funds to rip off our citizens. He has done nothing to rein this shower in and their sweetheart tax arrangements remain *in situ*. Indeed, far from sorting this mess out, the Taoiseach is, in fact, adding to

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it at a time when families and young people cannot put a secure roof over their heads.

It is a free-for-all when it comes to apartments. In 2019 alone, 95% of apartments built were acquired by these institutions at the expense of first-time buyers. Last year, six out of every seven homes built in the city of Dublin were apartments and these funds have *carte blanche* to snap up all of them in bulk. The Government has surrendered our city to these vulture funds, to the detriment of ordinary workers and families. Now it is pulling another stroke and attempting another fast one by actively encouraging these funds to acquire houses and rip off the Irish taxpayer by exempting the funds from any tax hike. Is it not time now to rip up this plan and start all over again? Is it not time for the Taoiseach to be true to his word? Is it not time to have effective remedies and stop these funds from snapping up apartments and houses under the noses of families and working citizens?

The Taoiseach: First, I again reject the Deputy's assertions in regard to Government housing policy and our commitment to building social houses and, indeed, affordable houses, and providing the first cost-rental scheme in the evolution of State housing policy. The Minister has brought in a suite of measures and initiatives that the Deputy consistently ignores. We have allocated more money to the building of houses this year than ever before in the country's history. There is a difference between my approach and that of the Deputy. She sees the housing crisis as a political opportunity; I see it as a major social problem that needs to be fixed. All her language today is about votes and elections. That is all it is about. It is about how she exploits the problem, not about finding solutions. She sees a lot of young people, as do all Members, who cannot get access to housing and she thinks how she can use their situation to generate anger and division and get political advantage. That seems to be her approach and that of her party.

I look at the issue differently. I want to see how I, along with my Government colleagues, can resolve it. Resolving it means a range of measures, principally direct building of housing, both social housing and affordable housing. To be fair, the Minister has brought in a suite of measures, including affordable housing schemes, which the Deputy has railed against. By the way, she has been quiet enough in terms of actually opposing them in here on the floor of the House. She is saying one thing and articulating against the Minister a lot in respect of his affordable schemes. She opposed the help-to-buy scheme, she is opposed to shared equity and she is opposed to the Land Development Agency, which will be launched shortly and is very important in terms of getting houses built. The Government today approved a plan for Shanganagh, which will be a significant housing development in itself, both social and affordable. We are about action and getting things done. I am interested in getting results in terms of getting houses built. It is the most important task facing the Government and we have allocated substantial funding to it. That is how we are going to approach it.

The very clear focus of the housing for all strategy, which the Minister will be publishing and is being deliberated on at Cabinet level right now, is direct build for social housing and schemes for affordable housing so that young people, and people in general, can afford to buy houses, and the utilisation of State lands to facilitate the building of affordable homes and social homes. That is what is contained in the Land Development Agency legislation and other measures and in the reform of the serviced sites fund that the Minister has introduced. By any yardstick, his activity in the House in the past month illustrates the range of initiatives he is taking in terms of affordability and freeing up housing and direct build capacity. The cost-rental scheme, as I mentioned earlier, will be a further addition to that.

The Deputy referred to comments I made in the House. I do not believe there should be

any large-scale leasing by local authorities in respect of social housing. There can be limited use, which I said as well in the Dáil that day. The Deputy should go back to the next sentence, which she excluded, where I referred to mortgage to rent provision, for example, to help people who are in distress. It is important to get people out of mortgage arrears distress, which we have been doing for quite some time, and the repair and leasing scheme is important as well. The mortgage to rent scheme is a hugely important scheme, as the Deputy knows, that allows families and households in mortgage distress to remain in their homes. However, the central pillar of the housing for all strategy will be direct build. It is about getting houses built that people can own and local authorities will own, which will increase local authority housing stock over the next number of years. The social housing programme for the next five years will be the largest in the history of the State. We need to get local authorities building and we need local councils to get the projects delivered and so forth.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: At a time of crisis, when so many people struggle to put a roof over their head, they deserve much more than the kind of incoherent waffle we are hearing from the Taoiseach as Head of Government. It is really quite disgraceful. I have the Minister's amendment here. It is written down, black on white, what the Government is proposing to do. It is proposing to incentivise these funds to buy up houses, lock, stock and barrel, pricing ordinary buyers out of the market because they cannot compete with these big funds. The funds will be incentivised to buy up all of these homes and then lease them back to local councils. That is what it says in the amendment.

By addition, the Government has also allowed these funds to have a free hand in respect of apartment blocks. I have set out for the Taoiseach the reality that a significant proportion of new builds in this city and beyond are apartment blocks. Far from assisting those who are in the middle of this housing crisis, he is making things worse.

An Ceann Comhairle: Time is up, Deputy, please.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I am asking the Taoiseach simply to be true to what he said in May, that is, that there should not be an allowance for these funds to snap up homes and lease them back to councils.

An Ceann Comhairle: Time is up, Deputy, please.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I want him to be as good as his word and to call a halt to this.

The Taoiseach: When is the Deputy going to be honest with people? It is her behaviour that is disgraceful. It is her and her party who opposed 975 homes in Clondalkin which included 30% social housing. It is Sinn Féin that opposed 500 homes in Tallaght, of which 80% would be social or affordable houses. Sinn Féin opposed 278 houses in Swords. Most recently, it voted against 1,200 social, affordable and private homes at Ballymastone in Donabate, a development that would have delivered 238 social homes and 238 affordable homes priced at between €250,000 and €270,000. Sinn Féin opposed those houses. It opposed the Land Development Agency Bill which gives us the capacity to deliver houses, both social housing stock and affordable housing stock. The hypocrisy from the Deputy's party is incredible. Sinn Féin is about exploiting housing for votes but it comes up with no solutions. It opposes everything that is put before the House in respect of-----

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Taoiseach. The time is up.

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Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Does the Taoiseach propose to answer questions?

The Taoiseach: The contrast between the Deputy's rhetoric and her delivery in respect of housing on the ground is quite disgraceful.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Does the Taoiseach propose to answer questions during Leaders' Questions? Are there answers to our questions?

Deputy Róisín Shortall: I ask the Taoiseach to respect this House and to respect party leaders who are putting questions to him. I am asking him to give me a straight answer, unlike his last response, to a straight question that I will pose. He has stated that housing is the number one crisis facing people, young people in particular. He said that anything the Government can do in terms of housing, it is going to do. One of the things the Taoiseach promised to do was to deal with cuckoo funds buying up family homes. His Government eventually introduced a 10% stamp duty on the bulk purchase of ten or more homes. The Minister for Finance, Deputy Donohoe, described it as a strong deterrent and stated that funds that try to get around the measures will be caught and prevented from doing so. However, now we learn that what the Government is doing is actually quite different. Instead of catching out cuckoo funds trying to evade this measure, it is actually helping them to do so. Cuckoo funds that lease homes back to local authorities will be exempt from the stamp duty increase. This Government is renowned for saying one thing and doing something else but this U-turn can only be described as brazen and downright dishonest.

In May, just two months ago, the Taoiseach told my colleague, Deputy Catherine Murphy, that he did not agree with local authorities entering long-term leasing deals. He stated, "No local authority should be on the other side of this, engaging in a long lease with these institutional investors." Later that month, he was clear that long-term leasing is "bad value", as he called it, and stated, "That is my view and I continue to make that clear." He has not done a very good job of making it clear, given that his housing Minister has quietly tabled an amendment to the Finance (Covid-19 and Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2021 that will actually incentivise cuckoo funds to swoop in, purchase homes from under the noses of first-time buyers and then lease them back to the State. The measures the Government introduced to limit the activity of cuckoo funds in the residential property market were the bare minimum that was required. It did not even bother to include apartments. Now we learn that even the bare minimum has been diluted and that the promises the Taoiseach made to the people to do something about the activity of these funds are worthless. Fundamentally, the Government cannot be trusted. Instead of helping young people trying to buy a home, it prefers to help the vultures seeking to profiteer on their misery.

I am asking the Taoiseach to show some respect and answer my specific questions. Does he think long-term leasing is unacceptable and bad value? Is that still his view? If not, when did he change his mind? Why should anyone trust the Government to solve the housing crisis when it cannot even be trusted not to amend its own reforms?

The Taoiseach: First, I always respect Opposition leaders in terms of the questions they put-----

(Interruptions).

The Taoiseach: -----but I always reserve the right to respond robustly.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: Then answer the question.

The Taoiseach: When the Deputy sees the housing for all strategy, she will see the point I am making. The strategy will-----

(Interruptions).

The Taoiseach: -----cover the housing policy of the Government for the next five years. That will make it very clear that the focus will be on building houses, owning houses-----

Deputy Róisín Shortall: Just answer the question.

The Taoiseach: I will deal with it. I am entitled to reply and not to have this constant heckling which seems to have become a feature. If Deputy Shortall wants me to respect leaders, reciprocity is called for. I am simply making the point that when the housing for all strategy is published, it will reflect my views on the optimal way forward for local authorities. I believe the best value for money is for local authorities to buy houses and to own houses. That is my view, and it is a view that will be reflected in the housing for all strategy.

In my commentary in the Dáil, I also said it has limited use. Leasing had been built up before I came into office. It does have some limited use in certain circumstances in terms of housing people who need emergency social housing. We have had a 48% reduction in family homelessness, for example, partly facilitated through leasing and actions taken by Dublin City Council, on which the Deputy's party has members. That is exactly what I said last month in the Dáil in respect of this. Leasing, however, does not represent, in any shape or form, the core policy platform of this Government in respect of social housing. Can I make that very clear? Direct builds, both by local authorities and approved housing bodies, will do so. In addition, affordable housing is to be facilitated by local authorities and the Land Development Agency. With regard to the latter, legislation is going through the House that I hope will be passed before the summer recess. It will enable us to put the agency on a statutory basis to get houses built. Again, the Deputy is distorting the Government's response by focusing on a single amendment tomorrow evening as if it constitutes the entirety of Government policy. Of course, it does not.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: The Taoiseach knows I am not saying that.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy is saying that. She is implying that.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: No, I am not.

The Taoiseach: That is exactly what she has been doing.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: Just answer the question, please.

The Taoiseach: That is what she has been doing. She has been trying to undermine Government policy because the bottom line is that she does not know where her own policy is at the end of the day. We are clear that we have a suite of measures. The largest social housing programme in the history of the State will be part of that housing for all strategy which will involve direct build and building up the social housing stock of local authorities and approved housing bodies; building affordable homes, which is a critical need right now; developing cost rental, which is extremely important; and getting homelessness down.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: Thanks to the excellent work of the *Business Post* on this issue,

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we know that one industry source has said that social housing lease deals are like government bonds on steroids. That is what the Taoiseach is facilitating. He has not answered the specific question I asked. He is obfuscating. If his word means anything, he will withdraw the amendment due to be moved tomorrow evening and ensure that first-time buyers have at least a fighting chance of buying a home for themselves. The Taoiseach should do the right thing, withdraw the amendment, stick to his word and let us trust him on that.

The Taoiseach: Is the Deputy asking about first-time buyers? They will not be buying social housing.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: No, the competition-----

The Taoiseach: First-time buyers will be assisted by a comprehensive range of measures in the housing for all strategy, but also in terms of the help-to-buy scheme and-----

Deputy Róisín Shortall: The cuckoo funds are competing with them.

The Taoiseach: -----the shared equity scheme-----

Deputy Róisín Shortall: Does the Taoiseach get that?

The Taoiseach: I get what the Deputy is talking about but the point I am making is that-----

Deputy Róisín Shortall: The cuckoo funds are competing with them by being incentivised to enter these-----

The Taoiseach: -----we will be doing more to incentivise first-time buyers. The Deputy, or certainly the party opposite me, opposed the 22,000 people who gained from the help-to-buy scheme-----

Deputy Róisín Shortall: Sorry, that is not my party.

The Taoiseach: That is helping first-time buyers-----

Deputy Róisín Shortall: Just answer the question.

The Taoiseach: -----and we will be building far more-----

Deputy Róisín Shortall: Answer the question. Are you going back on your word?

The Taoiseach: ----affordable housing through the Land Development Agency legislation-----

Deputy Róisín Shortall: Two months ago, you said something.

The Taoiseach: -----which is going through the House this week.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: Now you are doing the opposite.

The Taoiseach: A Cheann Comhairle, is it regular that heckling is facilitated?

An Ceann Comhairle: You are having a cross- debate between the two of you.

The Taoiseach: No, a Cheann Comhairle, on a point of order, it is going on a lot.

An Ceann Comhairle: If the remarks came through the Chair, it would be easier for me to manage it.

The Taoiseach: A Cheann Comhairle, it has been remarked to me for quite some time that this is a growing trend and it is being facilitated, which was not agreed on Leaders Questions and is certainly not my understanding of Leaders Questions.. My understanding was----

An Ceann Comhairle: Taoiseach, what I would say to Members is that if everybody addressed their remarks through the Chair-----

The Taoiseach: That is a cop-out-----

An Ceann Comhairle: -----then we would have less of this going on and I would be in a better position to deal with it.

The Taoiseach: I do not accept that, a Cheann Comhairle.

An Ceann Comhairle: If people want to talk directly to each other one-to-one, it is rather difficult to deal with.

The Taoiseach: I do not accept that, a Cheann Comhairle.

An Ceann Comhairle: Are we finished with that question? Yes. I call on Deputy Boyd Barrett.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: There are many uncertainties with the Covid pandemic, particularly now with the emergence of the Delta variant. There is uncertainty about whether we can win the race in terms of vaccination to get ahead of this variant and ensure that things do not go into reverse, plunging us into lockdowns and more people getting sick and going to hospital. It is still unclear, given where we are at in the vaccination programme, whether the rise in the Delta variant will lead to higher levels of hospitalisation, sickness, admission to ICU, or, indeed, fatality.

However, there is one thing that we pretty much do know now, which is the more people who are vaccinated, the better protected we are and the less likely it will be that variants will undermine all the progress that has been made. We know that is not just true here. Critically, on a global level, it is true that even if we get to the point we need to - and we are not there yet - in terms of having sufficient numbers of people vaccinated, if huge swathes of the world do not have access to vaccines, more variants will develop and those variants will reach Ireland, Europe and other places, even though people may be vaccinated.

The question of vaccine supplies, both for here and globally, is critical if we are going to get beyond this grim, depressing pandemic. There is a very significant movement that has been calling, particularly on the EU, to waive the intellectual property rights and patents that the big pharmaceutical vaccine-producing companies are using to protect their profits. It is a serious problem. The European Parliament has voted by a majority to say that those intellectual property restrictions and patents should be removed and that the vaccine-producing companies should be forced to share the technology to produce the vaccines with anybody who can produce them across the world. Let us be clear, it is profit that is stopping them from doing that. Pfizer is making an 80% mark-up on the doses of its vaccine because it wants to protect the money it is making. That is not acceptable. In fact, it is immoral, when some of the poorest countries in the world have less than 1% of their populations vaccinated.

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We need to use every single bit of capacity, globally, to produce vaccines if we are going to defeat this pandemic and come out of this miserable situation that we have been in for the last year and half. Yet, the European Commission - it is not clear what the Government's position is on the issue - is not committing to that position and supporting the people's vaccine. There is a meeting of the WTO on 14 July. What is the Government's position? Will it call for the people's vaccine, which is being supported by Dr. Mike Ryan and the WHO, to allow the sharing of vaccine technology to increase the supply of vaccines globally to all those who need them?

The Taoiseach: Through the Chair, a Cheann Comhairle, the Deputy has raised an important issue in respect of the need for a global vaccination programme that is effective and efficient. I do not think the solution offered by the Deputy is the correct one. I think it is simplistic and in itself, it would not generate the additional supplies of vaccines.

I also think that the Deputy should acknowledge that of all the blocs across the world, the EU has been the most open, effective and efficient in terms of vaccine production and in the export of vaccines across the world. There have been no export bans in Europe, which has facilitated the capacity of countries all over the world to get vaccines. The Deputy never acknowledges that. It is always attack, attack, attack, through the Chair. He is attacking the Commission and attacking governments. The reality is that Europe has been to the fore. We should acknowledge and celebrate Europe's achievement, both in terms of the procurement of vaccines and the pre-purchase agreements, which gave funding, which was an important factor in getting vaccines produced within 12 months. Intellectual property is important in the advancement of science and research. It should not be dismissed as easily as the Deputy dismisses it. It is extremely important. Technology transfer and know-how are important.

The European Union has pledged €1 billion to Africa to develop manufacturing capacity and know-how to facilitate technology transfer. I would argue that the European Commission's response, and indeed that of the European Council, of which I am a member, as is the country, is more intelligent and sensible than the sloganeering of just waiving, TRIPS waivers and so on. The sloganeering does not cut it here in terms of the increased production of vaccines. It just does not cut it. It is ideologically fine and pure and all the rest of it, but it does not cut it. To be fair, the issue of global vaccination is absolutely essential if we are to deal with variants and get on top of this disease. However, we have to support know-how in certain locations across the world. Europe has made a very solid contribution to Africa.

As for the WTO, we are also engaging in the proposal at the TRIPS council in terms of initiatives and trying to reach a sensible working compromise that would get vaccines to the countries concerned with low and middle incomes. Europe has been constructive in that regard. It is all about production capacity. As I said, the EU has announced €1 billion in terms of building production capacity in Africa. That will provide long-term production capacity in Africa. The US Government-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Time is up.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: This business of attacking the Opposition and accusing it of sloganeering really has to stop. I do not think the Taoiseach would accuse Dr. Mike Ryan of being a left-wing sloganeer, but he is supporting the people's vaccine. Médecins sans Frontières and UN aid agencies are supporting the people's vaccine. Many of the countries that for years suffered the consequences of the refusal of big pharmaceutical companies to share the combination therapies to deal with AIDS and HIV until they were forced to back down by

a popular movement that demanded those intellectual property rights and patents restrictions were removed, which helped us actually get on top of the AIDS crisis, are saying the situation is exactly the same here.

Let us be clear. The Taoiseach mentioned a compromise. Why do the big vaccine-producing companies not want to share the technology? I ask the Taoiseach to tell me why. We all know the answer. They do not want to share the technology with other places that have the capacity to produce vaccines because it would impinge on their profits. Let us remember that it was public money, through those advance orders, to the order of €6 billion, that actually paid for the development of those vaccines. That is how they were able to do it. It was public money that paid for it. Public health and defeating the pandemic should come ahead of the profit hunger of these big vaccine producers. The Taoiseach should take a clear position in calling for the TRIPS waiver to be introduced.

The Taoiseach: We have taken a position. We have taken a sensible position to get vaccines produced in greater volumes. Waiving intellectual property rights tomorrow morning will not do that. It will not do it. Does the Deputy know anything about pharmaceutical production? This country does know a thing or two about it. It is about sharing technology, capacity and know-how-----

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Why will they not do it?

The Taoiseach: -----to get these vaccines produced.

We are doing it. The EU is doing it. It has pledged €1 billion to increase manufacturing and production in Africa. It is co-operating with the WTO and the TRIPS initiative to get a sensible outcome around the expansion of production and facilitating equitable access. There were discussions around here at the beginning of the year about the lack of enhanced production within Europe itself. Europe set about getting its house in order and increased production significantly. We are now doing RNA substance development in Dublin, which is important. Countries that know how to do this fast should do so faster. Some of those countries the Deputy is talking about were offered vaccines at cost price and refused at the beginning of the pandemic. There are leadership issues in some of these countries that we need to face up to.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: I am a small farmer, I own forestry land and I have worked for many years in the forestry services. I have raised with the current and past Governments the need for carbon credits to be given to farmers and others involved in forestry. As the Taoiseach will be aware, the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, denied many amendments by the Rural Independent Group and others, including those seeking carbon credits, but I believe that in recent days he has had a conversion. This is the second time during Leaders' Questions that the *Business Post* is to be complimented. I compliment it for excellent reporting over the weekend on the Minister's change of heart. He now recognises, rightly so, that farmers and forestry owners should have a system of carbon credits put in place. As the Taoiseach knows, I am very fair to everybody. I thank Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil Deputies and others, including those of no party, who have lobbied the Minister and tried to persuade him to understand and realise this is the right thing to do. I hate talking about somebody when he is not present but when the Minister is not here, I cannot help it. He said recently that young people should be supported in rural communities and that he wants them to live in them. The funny thing about it is that, at the same time, he does not want them to get planning permission to live in them. He does not want to build roads, even though he is the Minister responsible for roads. He wants briars out to the

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middle of the road in the countryside and cyclists avoiding potholes and trying to prevent the eyes from being taken out of their heads. At the same time, forestry has been neglected. There has been zero movement on the ash dieback scheme. Nothing has improved or changed. There is a lack of support for replanting after storm and frost damage. There have been no reconstruction grants. We have been crying out for those for a long time and have been told they are on their way but so is Christmas.

Is the Taoiseach aware that there are applications for more than 9,000 ha, or 22,239 acres, sitting in the forest service awaiting approval? That means 1,300 people are waiting for permission to plant trees, some for more than three years. Can the Taoiseach answer one simple question? Why is the forest service only capable of processing fewer than ten afforestation scheme applications per week in June? Is it a policy of the Department to favour felling applications over afforestation licences? Could the Taoiseach tell us once and for all what exactly the Government and Department have against people who want to be involved in the forestry plantation business?

ESB costs are rising enormously, with a 9% increase coming very soon, and gas prices are on the increase, on top of the increases last year. At the same time, the Green Party and Government are telling us we should rely more on electricity.

The Taoiseach: I acknowledge the Deputy's positive comments in respect of the Committee Stage amendments to the climate Bill in the Seanad last week. It illustrates the Minister's openness and accommodation in taking on the views and ideas of others in the legislative process. He has a high regard for agriculture and rural Ireland. He has made that clear on an ongoing and consistent basis. The amendments the Deputy referenced strengthen the Bill and provide greater clarity on the use of sinks of greenhouse gases and carbon and that removals will be used to comply with our carbon budgets and sectoral emissions ceilings.

I fully take on board the Deputy's comments on forestry in the sense that it is a key sector. The Government has nothing against forestry; it wants to encourage more afforestation. We have inherited a long backlog because of issues to do with serial objections in the courts in respect of the licensing of felling and planting. As the Deputy knows, legislation was introduced late last year. That legislation is being implemented but I acknowledge a lot more work needs to be done. There are extra staff. Twenty-one full-time ecologists are now working in the Department on forestry licensing. Ten permanent forestry inspectors have joined the Department's team in addition to those who were on it. More staff have been recruited. Fifteen more administrative staff have been recruited. A project management expert, a business analyst and so on have been recruited to try to expand the capacity of the forestry team within the Department. The last three months of 2020 were the months with the highest licence output, with almost 900 new licences issued. Licences for felling, covering a volume of some 2 million tonnes, were issued in that time, amounting to 40% of the output for the year. We have seen some improvements in licensing output during the first half of 2021. June saw the most to date. There have been 1,758 licences issued so far this year. That represents a 19% increase over the figure for the same period last year. Then again, I accept that further gains are needed. We are moving in the right direction. The average output for the past seven weeks was 95 licences per week. Farmers are the big beneficiaries, receiving 75% of these.

Licence output is only one measure of performance. The more realistic metric is the volume of material licensed. This is what really matters to the sector. In that regard, felling volumes are 77% higher than at the same point last year. The area for afforestation is 19% higher. The

licensing of road lengths is 121% higher. Coillte's 2021 felling programme is fully licensed. Coillte is working with the Department to ensure the availability of supply to the market.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: Not to kill the Taoiseach's comeback, I will make just one statement: forestry planting has fallen 70% short of Government targets for 2020. That is a damning indictment of this Government.

I will continue by finishing what I was saying about electricity. The Green Party and the Government are telling us all to use more electricity. At the same time, the Taoiseach knows we ran dangerously close to outages. I would be very surprised if we do not have electricity outages this coming winter because of Government policy and inaction.

New slurry-spreading dates have been suggested, meaning less time to spread slurry. A ban on soiled-water spreading during the closed period is also being suggested. These are more of the crazy suggestions being made by the Government. What set has the Taoiseach got on people living in rural Ireland? What set has he got on farmers? What set has he got on people involved in forestry? Why is it that there seems to be so much disconnection between the Government and the people? I would love to be standing up here today praising the Taoiseach from the sky down to the ground but I cannot because of the actions he is taking.

The Taoiseach: Maybe the Deputy is watching the European Championship because he has shown such agility of foot across the pitch here in the past two minutes. It is highly impressive. He has covered everything from slurry spreading and forestry to carbon sinks-----

Deputy Mattie McGrath: It is all rural Ireland.

The Taoiseach: I acknowledge it. I reassure the Deputy that the Government is for rural Ireland. We have invested unprecedented amounts in rural Ireland through a range of capital funding measures. The Deputy must surely acknowledge that. We have developed new initiatives in respect of forestry. The Government has, through both legislation and resources for the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine-----

Deputy Mattie McGrath: But has the Government delivered on that?

The Taoiseach: -----and we will deliver an increase in afforestation, certainly over the lifetime of the Government. We will do everything we possibly can to do that. We will continue to support all aspects of rural Ireland into the future.

An tOrd Gnó - Order of Business

An Ceann Comhairle: Are the proposed arrangements for this week's business agreed to?

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: They are not agreed. Tomorrow evening, a finance Bill that, on the face of it, deals with Covid provisions will be considered in the House. The Government has tabled an amendment to the legislation to insert a section 15. The explicit intent of the amendment is to exempt investment funds from a stamp duty surcharge when they bulk-buy homes to lease back to the State. This action is despicable. It is clear that the Taoiseach has no intention of putting manners on these big investment funds. It is lost on nobody that whereas the Government affords tax breaks to these investment funds, it is giving damn-all to renters. In fact, many would say that if you were a cuckoo, a vulture or even a seagull in the city of

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Dublin, you would have a better chance than if you were a young person, a worker or a struggling family looking to put a roof over your head. The Government has put up the white flag of surrender over Dublin city to these funds. The Government is a disgrace. What is worse is that it is proposing one hour-----

An Ceann Comhairle: I ask the Deputy to please adhere to the rules of the House, please. The Deputy had one minute for this and is way over time now.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: -----and then a guillotine to get this disgraceful law through.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy McGrath to speak next and I ask him to please stick to his time.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I asked for a debate at the Business Committee on the Common Agricultural Policy, CAP, reform negotiations that are taking place at this vital time for Ireland and the future of agriculture, which we were discussing a minute ago.

I also want a full comprehensive debate in this House before we rise for the summer on the whole issue of the vaccine passports and the medical apartheid this Government now wants to implement and force on publicans and which will pit families against each other as to who has a vaccine and who has not. This is outrageous and we are not even going to have a debate on it. The Minister, Deputy Donnelly, can now sign whatever statutory instruments he wants to. We must have a full debate in this House as we are responsible to the people regarding this medical apartheid which is going to be implemented by this Government. It is a shocking situation and is happening without any debate or discourse in this House.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Over the weekend many pubs and restaurants desperately seeking to earn a few bob had their businesses washed out. We saw images of people trying to get shelter under awnings and umbrellas. Some pubs have been closed for 450 days. Today the Minister, Deputy Ryan, has said that hospitality may not reopen until possibly the end of August. This crisis has to be debated on the floor of this House. We cannot keep the democratic Parliament of this country away from the decisions that are being made on this critical issue.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: The practice of guillotining critical debates is back with a vengeance, despite the Taoiseach's party in opposition often joining us in railing against the practice of guillotines. We have seen it on two Bills of critical importance, one of which is the Finance (Covid-19 and Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill, which includes the shocking amendment by the Government at the last minute to exempt vulture funds from a tiny and inadequate stamp duty being imposed on them, thus incentivising them to buy up houses and price out first-time buyers. Similarly we have a guillotine imposed on the Affordable Housing Bill, where this Government has notions of affordability that stretch up to €450,000, which prices are completely unaffordable for ordinary working people. We tried to amend those proposals to make affordable mean affordable and we have had a guillotine once again slapped down so that the Government can short-circuit debate and prevent proper discussion on these matters.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I object to the Order of Business on two counts. I support the Deputies calling for a full debate on vaccination and the decisions being made to discriminate on the roll-out of that and into pubs. I also object in the strongest possible terms that the Finance (Covid-19 and Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill will be allowed one hour's debate tomorrow night. Language means nothing, and if language means nothing, democracy means nothing. To cut that to one hour with a guillotine when the amendment alone from the Minister

for Finance is three pages-plus beggars belief. The Government has no interest in open discussion or in getting the views of the Opposition. It is ramming through legislation with the use of the guillotine and I fundamentally object to it.

The Taoiseach: First, there is a very comprehensive and busy agenda over the next number of days to be deliberated upon and to get through. The Government wants to progress legislation and bring it to a conclusion before the summer recess. We are very clear about that. We have been pushing for this and very adequate time has been provided over recent weeks for a range of legislative items in respect of housing, in particular, be it the Affordable Housing Bill or the Land Development Agency Bill, and that remains the Government position. We want to conclude certain items and in respect of single amendments, and our contention is that adequate time is being made available.

There was debate last week on the Common Agricultural Policy, or in the past two weeks, which is my understanding.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: It was three weeks ago.

The Taoiseach: The Opposition Members are saying two to three weeks ago and now it has gone to a month.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: There was no debate on it.

The Taoiseach: My understanding is that there was a debate in the House on the Common Agricultural Policy and there was a reasonable expectation that such a debate would not be sought again given the fact there was a comprehensive debate already on it.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: On a point of clarification, our group had a contribution of five minutes in that debate. If the Taoiseach calls that a comprehensive debate, that is nonsense.

An Ceann Comhairle: No, we are not having any points of clarification; I am sorry.

The Taoiseach: On the vaccine issue, which a number of Deputies have raised and which Deputy McGrath referred to as “medical apartheid”, which is an appalling phrase to use - Deputies Tóibín and Connolly raised this issue-----

Deputy Mattie McGrath: What else is it?

The Taoiseach: -----the fundamental objective of all public health advice we receive is to protect lives and livelihoods. Do not forget that - through the Chair. It is up to Government to operationalise that and we are in discussions at the moment with the hospitality sector with a view to having a plan ready by the 19th of this month. There is a big challenge facing us in respect of the Delta variant, not just in Ireland but across Europe and indeed across the world. One only has to look at what is happening in South Africa in respect of the impact of the Delta variant to see how we have to take these things seriously and take them out of the divisiveness of the partisan political debate I have witnessed too often in respect of Covid-19 in this House.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: What debate? There is no debate.

The Taoiseach: It is very regrettable that, since the Government was formed, debate has become very partisan and divisive.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: The Taoiseach is deluding himself.

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The Taoiseach: The public health advice should be accepted in good faith. One can disagree or agree but you should not be casting aspersions and using language such as “medical apartheid” and so forth-----

Deputy Mattie McGrath: That is what it is.

The Taoiseach: -----when the only objective from the public health perspective is to protect people who are not vaccinated. Why would we want unvaccinated people to get the virus? Why would we want to throw caution to the wind? Is that okay? Is that what we are actually saying, if you look at the counterargument?

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Taoiseach and his time is up.

Question put: “That the proposal for dealing with this week’s business be agreed to.”

<i>The Dáil divided: Tá, 26; Níl, 19; Staon, 0.</i>		
<i>Tá</i>	<i>Níl</i>	<i>Staon</i>
<i>Berry, Cathal.</i>	<i>Buckley, Pat.</i>	
<i>Brophy, Colm.</i>	<i>Clarke, Sorca.</i>	
<i>Bruton, Richard.</i>	<i>Connolly, Catherine.</i>	
<i>Carey, Joe.</i>	<i>Cronin, Réada.</i>	
<i>Chambers, Jack.</i>	<i>Harkin, Marian.</i>	
<i>Cowen, Barry.</i>	<i>Healy-Rae, Michael.</i>	
<i>Crowe, Cathal.</i>	<i>Kelly, Alan.</i>	
<i>Devlin, Cormac.</i>	<i>Kenny, Gino.</i>	
<i>Donnelly, Stephen.</i>	<i>Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.</i>	
<i>Donohoe, Paschal.</i>	<i>McDonald, Mary Lou.</i>	
<i>Farrell, Alan.</i>	<i>McGrath, Mattie.</i>	
<i>Feighan, Frankie.</i>	<i>Mitchell, Denise.</i>	
<i>Fitzpatrick, Peter.</i>	<i>Munster, Imelda.</i>	
<i>Griffin, Brendan.</i>	<i>O’Reilly, Louise.</i>	
<i>Hourigan, Neasa.</i>	<i>Ó Murchú, Ruairí.</i>	
<i>Lawless, James.</i>	<i>Shortall, Róisín.</i>	
<i>Madigan, Josepha.</i>	<i>Smith, Duncan.</i>	
<i>Martin, Micheál.</i>	<i>Tully, Pauline.</i>	
<i>Matthews, Steven.</i>	<i>Whitmore, Jennifer.</i>	
<i>McAuliffe, Paul.</i>		
<i>O’Dowd, Fergus.</i>		
<i>O’Sullivan, Pádraig.</i>		
<i>Ó Cathasaigh, Marc.</i>		
<i>Phelan, John Paul.</i>		
<i>Shanahan, Matt.</i>		
<i>Smith, Brendan.</i>		

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Brendan Griffin and Jack Chambers; Níl, Deputies Pádraig Mac Lo-

chlainn and Peadar Tóibín.

Question declared carried.

3 o'clock

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: On 21 June, the Minister for Health gave us a commitment that by the end of that day every hospital would have the same rules for partner visits, including access for the full duration of labour. Despite claims by the Taoiseach and others that the situation in our maternity hospitals and units had been resolved, clearly that is not the case. I have been contacted recently by dozens of people about their personal stories. They all revolve around the fact that a woman cannot have her partner present for the entirety of labour. Instead, she labours on her own. There are also stories of partners being asked to leave approximately an hour after birth, just when any new mother will need her rest most.

Women are watching and they see society reopening. They are very stressed at the thought of facing the pain, worry, anxiety and challenges of labour and childbirth on their own. The Government's guidance needs to say that partners are not visitors and recognise that they are an essential support, in line with what the Chief Medical Officer and the World Health Organization have said. The Taoiseach needs to stop treating this issue like it is sorted, and get it actually sorted for the full duration of labour and after birth.

An Ceann Comhairle: Time is up, please.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I hope we can agree that this is the least women and new mothers can expect.

The Taoiseach: That is Government policy. The Government has made it clear, particularly given the extraordinary success of the vaccination programme in the hospital setting and the very low rates of transmission within hospitals, that partners should be facilitated with absolute access in maternity wards and for scans and so on.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: It is not happening.

The Taoiseach: It is extremely important that the guidelines that have issued from the HSE and from the national clinical director would be applied in all maternity hospitals. That is the clear position that has been articulated from the top of the HSE and the clinicians on the ground should implement that.

Deputy Alan Kelly: Will the Taoiseach confirm to the House whether the new revised national development plan, NDP, will be published before the recess next week? Along with other Deputies and Senators from Tipperary, I had a meeting with Tipperary County Council yesterday evening where there was deep concern that the N24, a very important strategic corridor supported by all the local authorities, could be jettisoned. It is in the national planning framework, the southern regional authority and all the county development plans. This is an incredibly important project. It opens up the south east and the mid-west and has huge strategic value for investment and a whole range of other things. There is a story going around that it might be jettisoned as a result of issues relating to Tipperary town, which has suffered so badly

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from heavy goods traffic. It seems that a small bypass will be put in there instead of continuing on the strategic corridor, which is critically important.

An Ceann Comhairle: Time is up.

Deputy Alan Kelly: The Waterford to Cahir and Cahir to Limerick Junction proposals are going forward. Will the Taoiseach commit that this strategic corridor will remain part of the NDP?

The Taoiseach: My understanding is that the NDP will not be finished before the recess. Some further work must be deliberated on. It is very close to finalisation. The Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform is in discussions with line Ministers across different Departments, which the Deputy will be aware of given his previous experience. In particular, he is in discussions with the Minister for Transport on the full range of transport initiatives from public transport to roads. He is also in discussions with the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage because there will also be a significant housing programme as part of the housing for all strategy. I refer to the construction of social and affordable housing and the development of cost-rental housing on a very significant scale. Therefore, the NDP wants to encompass the very substantial step changes in policy that will result. I am aware of the strategic importance of the N24 as a strategic corridor. I will relay that to the Ministers.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: The Taoiseach may say that it is Government policy that the maternity restrictions have been uniformly applied across the country but that is not the case. I have reams of emails from women who state that within the last two weeks, they still have been unable to have their partners with them for their entire labour, they still have had to endure and go through the traumatic experience of miscarrying alone and they still have not received the support they need after caesarean sections when they have had to look after their babies by themselves. There is a huge disconnect between what is happening with women's lives and what the Taoiseach here in the Dáil believes is happening. Will he please listen to the women and believe their stories? I understand the HSE is surveying the hospitals at the moment to find out what restrictions are in place. The time for surveying is over. The Taoiseach needs to listen to and believe women who are telling him that there are restrictions on the supports they are getting during their pregnancy care and he needs to sort it out.

The Taoiseach: I hope that the Deputy is not suggesting that I do not believe women.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: The Taoiseach keeps on saying that it is sorted and it is not sorted. Those women are in there on their own.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Taoiseach to speak without interruption, please.

The Taoiseach: I did not say that at all. The Deputy should not make innuendo and wrongly imply what I said. What I have said, repeatedly, is that the national clinical director, the CEO of the HSE, the Minister for Health and the Government have said that there should be no restrictions. I acknowledge, because I am getting feedback from Deputies that they are getting feedback from constituents and people who have had experiences that are contrary to the policy, that there is an issue of clinical autonomy-----

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: What is the Taoiseach going to do about it? There is no point in standing in the Dáil and saying that he knows it is happening. He needs to do something about it.

The Taoiseach: There is an issue on the ground locally. I believe what people are saying to me. It should not happen. No one should have to go through a miscarriage on their own. That is appalling. They should not have to. If the Deputy can send me on the emails, I will pursue them with the HSE.

Deputy Gino Kenny: I raise the matter of students who were in receipt of the pandemic unemployment payment, PUP, last year. There are now difficulties when they apply for SUSI grants. Some have had reductions in their grants, some have had their qualifying income completely disqualified and some have had to defer their courses. This is putting a lot of stress on students for September. What is the Government doing to mitigate the plight of students who have been discriminated against because they were in receipt of PUP last year? They accepted the PUP, and that is fair enough, but now they will be punished when they need SUSI grants in September.

The Taoiseach: The PUP, in some respects, reflected what people were earning. It represented an unprecedented support of students because it would have been the first time they received welfare payments from the Department of Social Protection. The PUP was an exceptional payment in the context of the pandemic. It still represents a very unprecedented support of students by the Government over a prolonged period. If the Deputy has cases where the PUP may have put people over the threshold, he might forward them to us so we can get an idea of the extent of the issue. Generally speaking, the PUP rate was reflective, although not totally, of what a person was earning. A person might even have been earning a bit more, which would have caused him or her to be above the threshold, if what the Deputy is saying is the case. We can follow through on individual cases and assess the extent of the problem.

Deputy Matt Shanahan: The Taoiseach referred a number of times this morning to the success of the joint procurement agreement, JPA, for vaccines in Europe whereby Ireland receives 1.12% of European supplies. Could I ask him about the proposed purchase of 1 million doses of the Pfizer mRNA vaccine to be sourced directly from Romania? The purchase of this vaccine will be outside of the JPA. What oversight or allocation of resources is he considering to secure the integrity of the cold chain supply? This vaccine has to be kept at between -70°C and -90°C. There is a significant logistical difficulty in getting this done, not to mind the clinical validation of the supply. How does the Government propose to manage the process?

The Taoiseach: The President of Romania was anxious to help and has responded with this offer. The Danes did something similar in recent weeks and secured supplies, bearing in mind the logistics identified by Deputy Shanahan, which I had identified as having to be fulfilled in terms of the cold chain supply and the corresponding logistics. That work is ongoing between the HSE and departmental officials in respect of the follow-through and the agreement in principle arrived at on Friday.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I asked the Taoiseach some months ago about An Taisce appealing decisions of the Environmental Protection Agency, EPA, An Bord Pleanála and Kilkenny County Council regarding the Glanbia plant in south Kilkenny. The plant is badly needed, as young farmers have big commitments and borrowings. There have been three challenges in the High Court to date. Will the Taoiseach do something to get the An Taisce monkey off the backs of the people? It is getting €6 million in funding every year from all kinds of sources. There is now a rumour that it may appeal to Europe. This plant will be lost. It involves a high-end plant with 120 jobs and is a massive construction project. Above all, we are transporting milk from the south east all over the country, even up to the North. Where is the carbon footprint there?

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We must deal with An Taisce. I know the Taoiseach's intervention last year was very helpful. Something must be done. Either the Taoiseach or his Ministers must meet An Taisce and ensure its status as a prescribed body is removed or it is banished altogether because it has outlived its usefulness and it is destroying people's lives.

The Taoiseach: I made my position clear on this project, which is a very good one and is very important for the region in respect of the creation of jobs, but it will also provide welcome diversification given Brexit and the need to bring more diversity into cheese products. It is a joint venture with Royal A-ware, a specialist cheese processor in the Netherlands and Belgium, which would be very advantageous to our farmers, many of whom invested on the basis of this project coming through. The project is in the judicial process so I do not want to comment.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: It is out since last Friday.

The Taoiseach: I know, but I still do not want to comment on what may transpire, other than to say, as I said previously, that people need to look at all of the issues with balance and perspective, in particular in terms of the economic development of the region.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: We know the south-east region needs more economic development.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: Tá seirbhísí faoisimh á ardú agam arís, nó bheadh sé níos cirte easpa seirbhísí faoisimh a rá. Ní thuigim cén fáth nach féidir na seirbhísí faoisimh a chur ar ais. Tá daoine ag fulaingt ar an talamh. Táimid ag caint faoi rochtain do thithe tábhairne ach ní féidir seirbhísí faoisimh a oscailt.

A year and four months after we declared a pandemic, in a time when we are allowing people into pubs and restaurants and doing our best to facilitate that, we are making no progress with respite services.

The Taoiseach: Aontaím leis an Teachta faoin tábhacht a bhaineann le seirbhísí faoisimh, agus admhaím go bhfuil easpa ann faoi láthair. Is gá iad a thabhairt ar ais agus seirbhísí faoisimh a chur ar fáil. De réir dealraimh beidh siad ag teacht ar ais diaidh ar ndiaidh agus beidh mé ag caint leis an Aire Stáit, an Teachta Butler, ar thaobh amháin den scéal agus an tAire Stáit, an Teachta Rabbitte, ar an taobh eile.

I will be talking to the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, about elderly care, day care, respite and Alzheimer's services, which are being restored gradually. The same is the case with respite care for disability services, which is also being restored gradually. I will get the up-to-date position for the Deputy from both Ministers of State.

Deputy James Lawless: Shortly after the Government was formed, one of the first Bills to pass through the Houses was the Harassment, Harmful Communications and Related Offences Bill. As Chair of the justice committee I was delighted to prioritise its passage and ensure it got speedy progress and has since become law. I am sure the House will agree it is badly needed for cyberbullying and online harassment. Indeed, Coco's Law refers to the young lady who took her life as a result of such abuse, and the law was badly needed. However, I am beginning to get reports that when complainants present at Garda stations to report incidents, they are told that the law is "not really applicable yet". Will the Government ensure the Garda force has the resources, training, knowledge and wherewithal to enforce what is now the law of the land? It

is a criminal law passed by the Oireachtas. We have done our job and the Government has done its job. If there are any gaps in terms of Garda enforcement, they must be addressed as a matter of urgency so that the law of the land can be implemented and these important protections can be safeguarded.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. He has been a consistent and very powerful advocate for a law in this area for some time. He has contributed to the work of the Parliament in a very informed way, resulting in the passage of this legislation. I will follow through in respect of its implementation on the ground. It would concern me if complainants were getting that type of response. Therefore, I will engage with the Minister for Justice in respect of the operationalisation of this legislation and find out what are the issues on the ground and the needs the Garda may have identified as problematic in terms of resources or for whatever other reason. I will come back to the Deputy in that regard. I acknowledge his consistent advocacy on this issue.

Deputy Alan Farrell: I understand there are four Departments and two agencies working on the production of the appropriate software for the digital green certificate, which I know the Taoiseach has committed will be ready for the 19th of this month. Late last night it was suggested that the domestic certification for indoor dining could be paper-based. Surely the State will be in a position to use what it has learned from the process of producing the app for the digital green certificate to apply domestically in some way, shape or form rather than have an entirely paper-based system. Given we are vaccinating 1 million people per month in addition to the millions already vaccinated, it seems particularly odd that we are going to be operating a purely paper-based system for domestic certification, if that is what the Government intends to pursue.

The Taoiseach: In the first instance, we must be careful of pre-empting the outcome of the discussions between the hospitality sector and the Government and conflating the two issues in terms of travel and the digital Covid certificate. The latter has taken considerable work and has presented many challenges given the various sources of information – vaccination, disease recovery and PCR testing, which are three aspects of the travel certificate. That said, we are on track in terms of bringing that in for the 19th in line with the European Union framework for travel.

Up to recently, the Government position was we did not want to utilise vaccination certificates for access purposes to domestic facilities or amenities. The NPHEAT advice has been clear in respect of indoor hospitality and indoor dining. Its belief is that fully vaccinated people or those who have recovered from Covid represent the best and safest way of facilitating the reopening.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Taoiseach. The time is up.

The Taoiseach: The Government is now examining that with the industry as to how best we can operationalise it.

Deputy Pat Buckley: The Taoiseach may be aware that the Owenacurra health centre in Midleton is to close in October. With the current Covid crisis and the hacking of the HSE, it has been very difficult to get answers. Is there any way the Department of the Taoiseach or the Department of Health could find out what is going to happen with that centre when it closes in October? Nineteen long-stay patients will be relocated and every other service will be lost. It

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is a very big site and people are very worried and want to know what is going to happen to the site. Will the services return and, given there are job losses, will they be replaced? I cannot get answers anywhere so where do I go?

The Taoiseach: That is a very specific case of a specific facility, and I would not immediately have the answers. I can approach the HSE in that respect, although I do not know if the Deputy has approached the HSE or the management on the issue. I will follow through and endeavour to get an answer.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: I would like to raise the issue of rare diseases and orphan drugs. This is an issue which the Taoiseach would have a lot of experience of, having served as Minister for Health and given his engagement with the Orkambi case. Today, Senator Malcolm Byrne, Senator Fiona O'Loughlin and I launched our Health (Pricing and Supply of Medical Goods) (Amendment) Bill 2021, which is essentially a replication of former Deputy John Brasil's work in the previous Dáil. The Taoiseach is well aware of the issue that, on average, people are waiting up to 1,000 days to get an orphan drug approved for reimbursement. It is generally acknowledged that the process is not working, is not fit for purpose and needs to be looked at. I ask that this legislation would be given priority in the months ahead.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for his initiative in bringing forward this legislation. The whole area of rare diseases and orphan drugs is an important one, and there has been significant investment in research at European Union level under the Horizon programmes. There is a need here in terms of our pricing frameworks to facilitate the research and development that goes into orphan drugs in particular, which are very important for rare diseases but ordinarily would not command the necessary critical mass to facilitate the kind of investment that goes into conventional drugs. This legislation will facilitate a very important debate on this but also follow-through from Government. We will work with the Deputy and Senators Byrne and O'Loughlin on this initiative.

Deputy Richard Bruton: At this point, we have completed a series of pilots, which to my knowledge have generated no Covid cases, at sporting events, entertainment events and so on. The last of the pilot events is occurring this week. Are we now in a position to make decisions about a more permanent approach to these open-air events, where it would appear people can safely assemble, having had tests or having been vaccinated?

The Taoiseach: It is a very fair point. We have had a number of events and, from what I can gather, most of the outdoor events, and indoor events as well, have been well run. An evaluation is taking place and further decisions will be taken in respect of lessons learned from those events and how we can apply those lessons to further events, both outdoor and indoor. Obviously, we have to take on board international developments as well. Again, you can get a sense, in terms of what is happening in the United Kingdom, that when there are very large events with large crowds, it can go wrong too, as in regard to the England-Scotland game, for example, and the Scottish authorities are clear that had a significant impact on Delta cases in Scotland. Some of that is the travelling to and from the event as opposed to the event itself, but again there are lessons to be learned from that. Our levels have been quite low, to be fair, in respect of all of these events, so I think it lends itself to further analysis and evaluation with a view to expanding and moving on.

Deputy Marian Harkin: The Taoiseach's party made a general election promise to hold an independent inquiry into the historical use of sodium valproate, or Epilim, which, as the

Taoiseach knows, is a drug used to treat epilepsy. Many children have suffered devastating neurological disabilities because their mothers were taking this drug. The Taoiseach promised to do this. I asked the Minister one year ago and the most recent response from the Minister to a parliamentary question, which was just two days ago, was that his officials were still looking at this issue. The health committee recommended in 2018 that we hold an inquiry. I ask the Taoiseach to do all in his power to ensure this independent inquiry is set up immediately.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising the issue. I will go back to the Minister for Health in respect of it and see what proposals are coming forward. There has been a lot on in the health arena in the past year, as the Deputy knows, and it has been non-stop in respect of Covid and many other issues. I will pursue the matter with the Minister and get the latest update.

Standing Orders: Motion

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

That-

(a) notwithstanding the Order of the Dáil of 16th December, 2020, the sequence in which Leaders shall be called upon to put questions between 6th July, 2021, and 15th July, 2021 pursuant to Standing Order 36(*ca*) shall be in accordance with the rota contained in the report of the Committee on Standing Orders and Dáil Reform dated 5th July, 2021, entitled '*Rota for Leaders' Questions rota pursuant to Standing Order 36, and amendments to Standing Orders arising from recommendations of Committee on Budgetary Oversight*';

(b) Standing Orders 215 and 219 of the Standing Orders of Dáil Éireann relative to Public Business be amended as provided for in the aforementioned report, and that the new Standing Order 215A as provided for in the report be adopted; and

(c) the Resolution of the Dáil of 15th June, 2021, in relation to arrangements on the Order of Business be amended by the substitution of 'up to and including 13th July, 2021' for 'until Thursday 1st July, 2021'."

Question put and agreed to.

Ceisteanna - Questions

Cabinet Committees

1. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet Committee on Government Co-ordination last met; and when it will next meet. [33146/21]

2. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet Committee on Government Co-ordination will next meet. [33378/21]

3. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet Committee on Government

Co-ordination will next meet. [34650/21]

4. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet Committee on Government Co-ordination last met; and when it will next meet. [34684/21]

5. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet Committee on Government Co-ordination last met; and when it will next meet. [34687/21]

6. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet Committee on Government Co-ordination last met; and when it will next meet. [34689/21]

7. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet Committee on Government Co-ordination is next due to meet. [34711/21]

8. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet Committee on Government Co-ordination will next meet. [36565/21]

The Taoiseach: I propose to take Questions Nos. 1 to 8, inclusive, together.

The Government co-ordination committee last met yesterday, 5 July, and its next meeting is scheduled for Monday, 12 July. The committee generally meets in advance of Government meetings to review the activity of Cabinet committees, review the agenda for that week's Government meeting, discuss political priorities and review implementation of a specified element of the programme for Government. I am a member of the committee, with the Tánaiste and the leader of the Green Party. The Secretary General to the Government, my chief of staff and the chiefs of staff for the Tánaiste and the leader of the Green Party also sit in on meetings.

Deputy Alan Kelly: Has the co-ordination committee discussed antigen testing at all? The reason I specifically ask is this co-ordination committee co-ordinates things, I presume. It seems there is quite a divided and confused approach across the public service regarding antigen tests. As the Taoiseach knows, I have been raising this issue since last October, when we were still in Leinster House - it is so long ago. I know the issues with antigen testing but I also know the positives around it as part of a mix. After Christmas, the Department of Transport had no problem using these for Irish lorry drivers going to France. Last week, the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media used antigen testing for 4,000 people attending a pilot festival in Kilmainham and one person tested positive. The Minister for Health has now come up with another group to progress the use of antigen testing, which is an implementation group. The Taoiseach might tell us what it is going to be doing and when the remit of this group will be published. It is chaired by Professor Mary Horgan, the eminent president of the Royal College of Physicians of Ireland, who said an app would be considered. Will the Taoiseach tell us if that is the case and if it will be rolled out? Many people will be asking why Denmark can make 500,000 antigen tests available every day but, after months of back and forth, we are still engaging with pilots.

Second, I thank the Taoiseach for his confirmation in regard to the national development plan, NDP, timelines. I take it this will not be published before the summer recess but it is a fairly significant publication, so I presume we will have a chance to debate the new NDP in the Dáil after it is published, and that it will be published in September. Will the Taoiseach commit that the whole issue of water and waste infrastructure, which is at crisis point in regard to future developments throughout the country, will have a large allocation as part of that publication?

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: This afternoon, the Dáil will discuss the actions necessary to tackle sexual, domestic and gender-based violence. I thank the Taoiseach for facilitating my request and agreeing to these statements. The annual Women's Aid impact report published last month highlighted a 43% increase in contact with its services last year. Safe Ireland's 39 front-line service member organisations provided support to 25,000 women and children from March to December last year. The programme for Government recognises the epidemic of domestic, sexual and gender-based violence and makes a number of welcome commitments to victims and their families. I understand that the review of how responsibility for domestic, sexual and gender-based violence is segmented across different Government agencies was completed in April but that it has not yet been brought to Cabinet. Similarly, the review of emergency accommodation provision for victims of domestic violence has been completed but has not yet been published. In addition to other commitments and outstanding reforms, including in education, the courts, social protection and in the workplace, the third national strategy on domestic, sexual and gender-based violence is also due to commence next year. My concern and that of the sector is that in the absence of a single Department or unit within the Department of the Taoiseach holding overall responsibility for implementation of all strands of the strategy, the reforms and the progress so urgently needed simply cannot be delivered. Does the Taoiseach share these concerns? Has he discussed this matter with his partners in government?

Deputy Mick Barry: We were told by the Department of Social Protection at the start of June that the State's new work experience programme would be unveiled by the end of June. We are now a week into July and the Department is saying that it will give the details in July. I do not think I am the only one who suspects that the Government might be holding back on the details until after 15 July and the summer recess, so that the new scheme cannot be critiqued or questioned on the floor of the Dáil. We all remember the notorious JobBridge scheme. Is the Government planning a new cheap labour scheme or a JobBridge 2.0? Is this the reason for the delay? A Minister is trying to co-ordinate two Departments so I think it is a relevant question.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I do not know if it is a matter of a lack of co-ordination or a lack of honesty from the Government when the Taoiseach says repeatedly that there will be no cliff edge for income supports for people in sectors impacted by the pandemic where they cannot earn a living or work at all. On the other hand, the same people who are in receipt of the pandemic unemployment payment, PUP, receive notice or announcements from the Department to the effect that the payment will be cut completely in September if the rate of the payment drops to €203. Taxi drivers told me this week that they were getting phone calls from the Department of Social Protection and Intreo offices telling them that they would have to sign off the PUP or go on to a jobseeker's payment. One replied that he is not a jobseeker but a taxi driver who cannot make a living because much of his business is still not operating. The official who called said that maybe he could be fixed up with a job on a building site. He is in his 60s. That is outrageous. That situation pertains for people in the arts, music, entertainment and so on. They are now being threatened with a cliff edge in respect of the PUP being pulled or pushed onto jobseekers' payments when they are still waiting for their sectors to fully recover. Will the Taoiseach explain this anomaly and please tell me that he will not pull the PUP rug from under people whose livelihoods or incomes are significantly down and will remain so for some time through no fault of their own?

Deputy Dara Calleary: Nearly two months after the cyberattack on the health service, would the co-ordination committee be an appropriate forum for the Department of Health to present its response plan to address the full consequences of that attack in order that the Tao-

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iseach can provide the public with an update on the delays in treatment and administrative responses caused by this attack?

Deputy Paul Murphy: Has the co-ordination committee discussed the issue of ventilation? Last September, during Leaders' Questions, I said, "One crucial, immediate issue is that of ventilation." Since then, I and People Before Profit have consistently pushed for serious energy and effort to be given to ventilation in workplaces to help to combat Covid. It is ten months on from then. Last week, when I questioned the Tánaiste at the enterprise committee, he admitted that there are still no legally enforceable standards for ventilation. There are voluntary guidelines and protocols but there is no systematic monitoring, enforcement or investment. It is not just about indoor dining and hospitality; we are also talking about schools, universities and offices. Ventilation is a crucial part of any safe reopening. This is an airborne virus and that is why being outside is so much safer than being inside. We should have CO2 monitors in our workplaces and a threshold above which it is not safe for people to work in them. Will the Taoiseach act now, almost a year and a half into the pandemic, to ensure that there are proper, enforceable ventilation standards for all workforces, and put in the investment to make it happen?

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Today, 24 people will lose their lives to cancer and 480 people will get cancer. In the past week, I have secured statistics from the HSE, which state that so far in 2021, the number of people referred from GPs to rapid access clinics for cancer is 153% of the figure for the same period last year. It is 126% of the same period in 2019, which is worrying. Consultants have stated that a tidal wave of advanced cancers will hit health services in the coming years as a result of the lack of timely diagnosis. The HSE has also stated that cancer services are still not operating at pre-Covid levels or capacity, which is incredible. When will cancer services be able to operate at 100% of pre-Covid capacity? What research is being done by the Government or NPHET with regard to the impact of the restrictions in the health service on people's health and lives where Covid is not involved?

The Taoiseach: I will deal with the questions in the order that they were tabled.

In response to Deputy Kelly, the Cabinet co-ordination committee does not have endless debates on every issue. Its primary focus is to clear the agenda for the Cabinet, to discuss general issues affecting Government and issues related to Covid. We have Cabinet sub-committees on Covid, as the Deputy knows, the economy, education, environment, housing and social issues. Antigen testing was on the Government agenda today and was referenced to at our meeting yesterday evening. In terms of decision-making, the Government approved the establishment of the group chaired by Mary Horgan to primarily advise Departments, agencies and other sectors of the economy about how best to deploy antigen testing in certain settings. As the Deputy pointed out, it is in use in meat factories. It has been in use in other sectors of the economy. A significant pilot by the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science is under way for third level and further education campuses with a view to facilitating and assisting the reopening of those facilities for the academic year in the autumn. The Minister was anxious put together a strong team, which he has now, to assist sectors, Departments and agencies in rolling out antigen testing where it can be of value and assistance as an additional tool to the range of other tools available for testing.

It is fair to say that our PCR testing is among the best in class. We are not where Denmark is because it is way ahead of most other European countries but our capacity for PCR testing is high now. The HSE helped with antigen testing in a number of locations as well. The indica-

tions are that we will need that capacity in the coming weeks, given the rise in Delta variant cases. We are witnessing a significant increase in the numbers coming forward for testing. In the past week in particular, the numbers coming forward were significantly ahead of the previous week. The key message that we have for people is that, if they have symptoms, they should please come forward to be tested by the HSE. That is extremely important.

We will have an opportunity later to make statements on the issue that Deputy McDonald raised. Her points about emergency aid, supports for NGOs, in particular, and Women's Aid are issues that the Government is very seized of. We are anxious to make progress on them over the coming weeks and months, in addition to the work we have already done.

On Deputy Barry's point, Pathways to Work will be launched very shortly. It is not being held back because of the recess or any fear. The Minister is not in trepidation of any questions the Deputy might ask in respect of this but, clearly, the Deputy will have a different perspective from the Government or a Minister. Our key objective is to get young people back to work, to facilitate the long-term unemployed to return to work and to have a massive programme of investment in training places, apprenticeships and further and higher education as a key part of the economic recovery programme and the utilisation of recovery and resilience funds.

There will be no cliff in terms of impacts of supports. The Government has provided unprecedented and quite extraordinary supports, including the PUP and other supports such as the employment wage subsidy scheme, EWSS and the Covid restrictions support scheme, CRSS. The bottom line is that we will continue to work with different sectors and groups, as we have all along the way.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I am telling you what I have been told.

The Taoiseach: Indeed, the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media, Deputy Catherine Martin, has engaged with those in the arts and entertainment sector on a range of proposals they have brought forward and has responded generously to their suggestions. Likewise, we have met with members of a taxi group and those in that sector as well. Facilitation has been made to allow taxi drivers to earn so much. There is a threshold to facilitate that, which is important.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: They are being taken from them in September.

The Taoiseach: On Deputy Calleary's point about the Cabinet co-ordination committee, it has been briefed on cybersecurity. The cybersecurity issue had an enormous negative impact on our health services, and especially on front-line workers. I pay a very warm tribute to everybody in administration, in the higher levels of the HSE and on the front line of our healthcare services who bore the brunt of an appalling criminal act that attacked our health services and patients but, above all, put enormous strain on our workers in health. I salute them for their commitment and persistence, particularly coming after the pandemic.

There are guidelines on ventilation and reports have been published. CO2 monitors are being put into schools across the board. That came out of a working group, which recommended they be put into our schools and it is happening.

On Deputy Tóibín's point, the reasons we are being cautious in reopening society - people attacked us earlier about our approach to indoor dining and hospitality - is to give space to the health services to restore non-Covid treatments and screening programmes and to facilitate di-

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agnostics for non-Covid diseases, particularly cancer and diseases of the heart, liver and all the major organs of the body. We know there is a logjam because of Covid-19 and no other reason. That is one of the reasons we have to be very vigilant in keeping virus levels down. Once the virus infection rates go up again and hospitalisations rise, we retard the progress we have made to date in restoring health services.

Departmental Bodies

9. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the work, role and staffing of the recently established social dialogue unit in his Department. [33147/21]

10. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Taoiseach when the new social dialogue unit of his Department will next meet. [33406/21]

11. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the work of the social dialogue co-ordination unit of his Department. [34510/21]

12. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Taoiseach when the new social dialogue unit of his Department will next meet. [34651/21]

13. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Taoiseach the details and remit of the recently established social dialogue unit in his Department. [34712/21]

14. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach when the new social dialogue unit of his Department will next meet. [34839/21]

15. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Taoiseach when the new social dialogue unit of his Department will next meet. [34842/21]

16. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Taoiseach when the new social dialogue unit of his Department will next meet. [36305/21]

17. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Taoiseach when the new social dialogue unit of his Department will next meet. [36566/21]

The Taoiseach: I propose to take Questions Nos. 9 to 17, inclusive, together.

As committed to in the programme for Government, the social dialogue unit has been established within the economic division of my Department to co-ordinate and support our approach to social dialogue. The unit's initial focus is on supporting, enhancing and engaging with the social partners, including through existing mechanisms such as the Labour Employer Economic Forum, LEEF, which deals with labour market issues. The LEEF helped to ensure useful discussions between the Government, employers and trade unions during the Covid-19 pandemic. I chaired the most recent plenary meeting yesterday, where, along with discussions on Covid-19 and our economic recovery, we discussed ways to strengthen social dialogue and the LEEF. There is significant work under way in the LEEF on issues such as introduction of statutory sick pay, remote working and a high-level review of collective bargaining. In addition, I recently met with representatives of the environmental, community and voluntary and farming and agriculture pillars, where we discussed how social dialogue can be strengthened as well as current issues of concern to those sectors.

The social dialogue unit is also currently mapping out existing the dialogue and consultation practices across government, which have evolved over the years. There are many different forums in place for these conversations including the national economic dialogue, the National Economic and Social Council, various sectoral groups and initiatives such as the Citizens' Assembly. There is also regular engagement with social partners by individual Departments and Ministers, of which I am very supportive. The unit is developing a set of principles which could support this type of ongoing social dialogue undertaken across specific issues. The unit is currently supported by three staff at principal officer, assistant principal, and higher executive officer level. Further resources over time will be provided as required as this work progresses. I will also point out that I met recently with fishers, along with the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine, in respect of the challenges facing the fishing industry.

Deputy Alan Kelly: I will ask about two priorities for this unit. A motion from my Labour Party colleague, inner-city Councillor Kevin Donoghue, was passed by Dublin City Council last night. It was a very interesting motion on something we have been pushing to have considered for some time. It called on Dublin City Council's chief executive to engage with trade unions representing council staff with a view to piloting and introducing a four-day working week. Will the social dialogue unit seriously look at this? We have learned much from Covid and the Labour Party believes this is something that should be seriously studied. It was passed unanimously by all the councillors last night. I do not know what the Taoiseach means by "of course". It was passed because it deserves to be considered, to be fair. It should be assessed very quickly and proceeded with to see if it can be implemented. We can look at it across various sectors. It might not suit every sector, obviously. I do not know why the Taoiseach is grinning.

The Taoiseach: I take it the Deputy does not mean the political sector. It would not suit politics-----

Deputy Alan Kelly: It certainly would not suit us.

The Taoiseach: -----but maybe we can dream on.

Deputy Alan Kelly: Is it something the Taoiseach would consider and this unit will look into? That is what I am asking. Does the Taoiseach endorse it? We all have to rebalance our lives after the pandemic.

The second issue, which I do not have time to dwell on, is that of a catch-up programme for schools. My colleagues, Deputy Ó Ríordáin and Senator Bacik, have been pushing this for some time. A significant amount of funding is going towards this in Britain and other countries. Will there be a catch-up programme for schoolchildren, given what has happened over the last year? In fairness, the Taoiseach has taken an interest in this previously.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: There was a really shocking report in today's *Irish Examiner* newspaper that stated a complaint has been lodged with the Irish Prison Service by a female solicitor, who was instructed by a male prison officer in Clover Hill to remove her underwear if she wanted to visit her client because the underwire in her bra had set off the metal detector. The woman concerned has described how she felt extremely vulnerable and targeted as a woman, and how she felt humiliated to have her dignity so casually taken from her. So many things are wrong with this incident and, indeed, the Irish Prison Service's response to it. In my view, this is not just a run-of-the-mill complaint to be dealt with solely within normal

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procedures. It warrants a wider, and very full, review of prison culture and practices to ensure this type of degrading treatment of any woman never happens again. It was also reported that the woman in question later discovered a male colleague had previously visited the same client and despite the male colleague setting off the alarm three times, he was able to visit his client without any similar request being made of him. Does the Taoiseach know if the Minister for Justice has received a report from the Irish Prison Service on this complaint? What action has she taken to ensure policies and procedures are in place across all prison services to ensure no woman faces such degrading treatment ever again?

Deputy Mick Barry: Can the Taoiseach confirm that the Government will meet the Irish Congress of Trade Unions and SIPTU this week to discuss issues relating to aviation? Can he confirm that the issue of the planned lay-off of hundreds of workers in Cork in September is on the agenda? Does he agree that Aer Lingus and other airport employers should not receive bucketloads of State cash to keep workers on the payroll and, at the same time, plan to take hundreds of workers in Cork off the payroll in September? These workers must be kept on the payroll. Does the Taoiseach agree?

Deputy Dara Calleary: I welcome the motion from Dublin City Council but it is behind the Government on this issue in that the Government funded a €150,000 study by the Four-Day Week Ireland campaign last year. That study will be interesting, particularly in light of the Iceland report.

What role will young people's organisations play in the social dialogue unit? What focus will be on the issues of youth unemployment and education? Has the lived experience of young people during the pandemic, which has been particularly severe, featured in the discussions?

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: On the earlier question relating to dialogue, it is a fact that the Taoiseach met taxi drivers and that the Minister is engaged with musicians and entertainment people. The Taoiseach either does not know, which is dreadful, or he is being dishonest. According to the Department of Social Protection, the PUP will be withdrawn from those whose PUP rate is reduced on 7 September to €203 and they will be told to go on jobseeker's allowance or to sign off the PUP. Therefore, they cannot earn that extra bit of money to which the Taoiseach referred. They will be told they are unemployed or they can return to work and lose all supports when their industries will not have recovered. Will the Taoiseach please clarify the situation? These people have been writing to him on this issue. They want dialogue and they want answers.

Another group, comprising student nurses and midwives, including those in the disability and mental health sectors, were promised that they would get €100 per week for their placements. That is a miserable response to their demand to be properly paid when they are on placement, working on wards and so on, which in reality they have been doing for years, but particularly during the pandemic. I am informed this week by a student nurse that while the miserable €100 was paid to nurses and midwives, despite the promises, those working in disability and mental health care did not get their €100, a miserable amount. They should at least get what the Government promised them. I ask the Taoiseach to please look into that or to confirm if they will be paid the €100 they were promised. The Government should be giving them a hell of a lot more than that.

Deputy Paul Murphy: In response to Deputy Barry on the issue of JobBridge 2.0, the Taoiseach was coy about what he described as the pathways to work scheme. The language

he used in respect of activating people who are unemployed, in particular young people, was strikingly reminiscent of the language used around JobBridge. Let us remind ourselves what “scambridge” was about. It involved tens of thousands of workers being grossly exploited. They were compelled to work for free for nine months in fear of losing their social welfare benefits. They were paid €1.25 per hour for jobs such as a sandwich artist or working for a national chain of garages, which employed almost 30 people, saving itself almost €400,000 in wages. There was widespread abuse in the public sector to get around the employment moratorium at the time. The Taoiseach should come out and say what he is proposing. What rate of pay is the Government planning for this new pathways to work scheme? Is the Government planning to make it compulsory? Would it not be far better to invest in education, including apprenticeship schemes and on-the-job training, and a green jobs programme to create the jobs that are needed to do the work for a rapid and just transition?

The Taoiseach: A lot of questions were asked. Deputy Kelly raised the decision unanimously agreed last evening by Dublin City Council. The Government has initiated a study in regard to this issue and will examine it. It will need to be examined in considerable detail because the implications are significant and dependent on the outcome of that evaluation in terms of productivity and what is best in the overall sense. We have learned a lot through remote working and the potential for blended working as we emerge from Covid and people return to the workplace, offices and so on and whether they can work in part at home and in part in the office. That has to bed down and we will have to evaluate how that works out over the next year. The wider issue of a four-day week versus a five-day week needs to be evaluated in terms of all of its impacts. The proposal is very popular. Most people would say, “Great”. We have to be realistic about it as well. We will need to do the analysis on it instead of just agreeing with it straightaway and saying it is a great idea and let us all go for it. We have to work through it and identify the implications. Different sectors will have a different take on it. We have to look at it from a sectoral perspective as well. In terms of our competitiveness, it could lead to more productivity in some cases, but it may not do so in other cases. We will need to undertake a serious evaluation of it.

On the catch-up programme, the Minister for Education, Deputy Foley, is committed to, and has already provided resources, for it. The view now is that it would probably be better to integrate it into the next school session, in particular the autumn session. The proposal is that in addition to the day-to-day provision of the curriculum, there would be a special catch-up programme for children who may have been left behind as a result of the experience of the pandemic and being out of school for so long. A variety of approaches will be adapted in response to that.

On Deputy McDonald’s point, what happened is shocking and unacceptable. I was struck when I saw the headlines on that this morning. I will ask the Minister for Justice for a report on what transpired and the policies and practices of the Irish Prison Service. As I said, it is unacceptable and it should not have happened. I can understand why the solicitor in question would have felt her dignity was taken from her and felt undermined by the request. It is not good enough in any shape or form. It is all wrong and it needs to be addressed.

Regarding the aviation industry, which was raised by Deputy Barry, discussions were held yesterday with the Labour Employer Economic Forum, LEEF, on aviation. LEEF, working as part of the social dialogue, created a subgroup on aviation to look at the specific challenges facing the industry as a result of Covid-19. The challenges have been very severe in terms of the restrictions on travel. More than 90% of travel has been reduced as a result of Covid-19

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and this has had a severe impact on airlines, airports and workers who are feeling it most desperately. That is why workers are anxious that we reopen travel as quickly as we possibly can. That is what most of the workers in aviation are saying to me, notwithstanding the challenge globally around the Delta variant and Covid. It is one of the reasons we are participating in the EU directive and framework around a digital Covid certificate. We are very conscious of the economic impact of the continued suppression of aviation on individuals, airports, airlines and on the country at large.

Deputy Mick Barry: Did you discuss the people working on the boats?

The Taoiseach: The workers are who we are primarily concerned about. We had a discussion about the situation, and SIPTU in particular raised the issue in regard to the Cork workers and the need for intervention there. Government will reflect and work on that with the social partners.

Deputy Calleary is correct on the funding of the study in regard to a four-day week and social dialogue being a part of the overall examination of that issue. He made a good point regarding the lived experience of young people. I acknowledge there is more work to be done in that regard. There is also an issue around how we can get the voices of young people articulated in the social dialogue process. We did not meet the community and social pillar; we met the environmental pillar and the farming organisations. Macra na Feirme was part of the farming social dialogue, which was interesting. It was the one organisation among all we met that had a specific focus on young people. I will take the Deputy's views on board.

4 o'clock

Regarding the questions put by Deputies Boyd Barrett and Paul Murphy, the Pathways to Work scheme is about investing in young people across the board and helping people to get skills for work and to reskill. I will check out the situation in respect in of nurses in the areas of disability and mental health.

Northern Ireland

18. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Taoiseach when the shared island unit will host its next dialogue; and the topic that will be discussed at the dialogue. [34660/21]

19. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the shared island unit in his Department. [34713/21]

The Taoiseach: I propose to take Questions Nos. 18 and 19 together. The Government's shared island initiative aims to harness the full potential of the Good Friday Agreement to enhance co-operation, connection and mutual understanding on the island, engaging with all communities and traditions to build consensus around a shared future. I established a shared island unit in my Department to act as a driver and co-ordinator of this whole-of-government initiative.

In budget 2021, the Government established the shared island fund, whereby €500 million in capital funding up to 2025 was committed to and ring-fenced for investment in North-South projects. We are making allocations from the fund to support delivery of our commitments and objectives on a shared island, as set out in the programme for Government. The Government

will work with the Executive in Northern Ireland, the British Government and other partners to deliver cross-Border investments that enhance our shared island.

Progress to date includes the following measures. In April, phase 2 of the Ulster Canal restoration project was launched, enabled by an allocation of €6 million from the shared island fund and €5.6 million from the rural regeneration development fund. The shared island fund has also provided a further €1 million for development work on phase 3 of the project, which has now begun.

In April, the all-island strategic rail review was launched jointly by the Minister for Transport and the Northern Ireland Minister for Infrastructure. The review is an important step in implementing the Government's commitment to enhance connectivity on the island, including rail connectivity. Last week, on 29 June, I was joined by the Northern Ireland Minister for Infrastructure, Nichola Mallon, as I announced €3 million in Government funding from the shared island fund to progress work on the Narrow Water bridge to tender stage, with further funding to be allocated once the due diligence process has been completed.

On Monday, the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science and I announced that the Government will be investing €40 million from the shared island fund over five years in a new North-South research programme to support the deepening of links between higher education institutions, researchers and research communities on the island of Ireland. The Government will continue to develop and progress investment, policy and co-operation initiatives that contribute to the implementation of our objectives on a shared island as set out in the programme for Government.

To support development of a more ambitious agenda for co-operation and connection on the island, the shared island unit in my Department has commissioned a comprehensive research programme, working with the Economic and Social Research Institute, ESRI, the National Economic and Social Council, the Irish Research Council and other partners. Research will be published through this year and next and will be focused on needs and opportunities to deepen co-operation across a range of economic, social and environmental domains.

I have initiated the shared island dialogue series to foster inclusive, constructive civic dialogue that engages all communities and traditions on key issues for our shared future. At the Labour Employer Economic Forum, LEEF, meeting yesterday it was also agreed to commence a work stream on shared island issues of interest for trade unions and employers within LEEF's remit of economic and employment issues relevant to the labour market. I addressed the first shared island dialogue with young people in November, which was on the theme of new generations and new voices on the Good Friday Agreement. Dialogues on climate and environment, civil society engagement, the equality agenda and economic recovery on the island have also been held this year, with participation by Government Ministers. The next shared island dialogue will be on health and will take place this week on Thursday, 8 July. These dialogues are bringing together hundreds of civic representatives and stakeholders in the different sectors, from across all regions, communities and traditions, to discuss how we can work together to build a shared future on the island. Recordings and reports are available.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I thank the Taoiseach for his very comprehensive response. There is obviously a very significant amount of work under way. I commend the Taoiseach on driving it forward. I also commend the team of the shared island unit. The Taoiseach announced the dialogue on health this week. Would it be worthwhile for the unit and the dialogue to consider

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the shared experience of Covid on the island and how our shared response could have been much better if there had been more co-operation across the island?

The Taoiseach will probably have missed the interview this morning with the doctor from Donegal who spoke about 50% of his patients who have had Covid showing symptoms of long Covid. Would it be worthwhile to carry out an all-island study on the consequences of long Covid and on how we can assist those who are suffering from symptoms of long Covid on an all-island basis?

I welcome the commitment to the Narrow Water bridge. The Taoiseach and I have been at many meetings at which it seemed like a pipe dream. I commend the Taoiseach on delivering and moving on that. Will the Taoiseach give me a commitment on the all-island rail review? Will the revised national development plan include a commitment to fund actions based on the findings of that review?

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I have previously raised with the Taoiseach the need for the shared island unit's research funding model to be extended to include academics in both the North and the South who have a long history of shared work on policies relevant to the whole island. I welcome yesterday's announcement by the Taoiseach and the Minister, Deputy Harris, of a significant funding commitment for the North-South research programme. This is very welcome. I do not doubt that it will deepen existing links between researchers, academics and third level institutions across the island.

I will briefly raise the issue of the funding announced by the Taoiseach last week to progress work on the Narrow Water bridge. The €3 million in funding provided from the shared island fund will progress the project to tender stage with construction to begin in 2023. What funding has the shared island unit and the Government committed to the construction of the bridge? Will moneys be allocated in the Department's budgets for 2022 and 2023 for this next important phase of the project?

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: As I have said to the Taoiseach many times, an important component of developing co-operation on the island and, ultimately, achieving what many of us hope to achieve, the ending of partition and a united Ireland, is having a quality all-Ireland national health service with the capacity to deliver for people. We have to learn the best lessons from one another and address the deficiencies in different parts of the health service. One positive lesson we can take from the North relates to the recent decision to pay front-line healthcare workers a £500 bonus. For all the applause healthcare workers got down here, they did not get any reward. As I have mentioned, while student nurses in the UK's National Health Service get a bursary of £10,000, we expect them to work for effectively nothing while on placement. Front-line workers in the North are getting £500 as a reward.

I have highlighted a number of areas, such as the area of psychology, in which those trying to learn must pay excessive fees and, in many cases, receive no funding whatsoever when undertaking postgraduate courses. In the UK's National Health Service, PhDs and doctorates in areas such as psychology are funded in order to incentivise people to move into those areas. Should we not take the best lessons in order to move towards the sort of quality national health service we need?

The Taoiseach: Research into the shared experience of Covid on the island, how the response could be improved and what lessons can be learned from the interactions that took place

at the public health level is certainly an idea on which we can follow up. I am conscious of the fact that the chief medical officer in the North was very much directed from London and that part of that operation fell under the UK public health service. Nonetheless, he and our own chief medical officer came to a very good understanding and a good memorandum of understanding was developed. Deputy Calleary's general point with regard to improvements is valid.

On the Deputy's comments regarding long Covid, I did hear that interview this morning. This again points to the need for people to be very careful. It is not just about hospitalisations and deaths, although they are key. It is also about the impact of Covid on people's long-term health. Our understanding of long Covid is evolving. We need to be careful, particularly in light of what is going on in the UK at the moment and the idea that we can open up completely with no consequences. That is something about which I have concerns. A study on that would be very worthwhile. I will pursue that with the relevant bodies with regard to its facilitation.

The Narrow Water bridge is a very welcome development. The €3 million is to take the project to tender stage. We do not want to pre-empt the tender. We want to get the best value for money. Commitments are in the €500 million fund to fund subsequent stages of the Narrow Water Bridge proposal. We are committed to that, as we are to the research into the Ulster Canal. The research will undergo international peer review, based on the programme for research in third level institutions, PRTLTI, model for research I initiated in a different era. It is to make sure it is fair and transparent, deals with issues that can be of mutual benefit to all people living on the island of Ireland, and draws the best from the research capacities, North and South.

On the health service, research is under way by the ESRI on primary care systems, North and South. It aims to understand the differences between the two health systems and how they can complement each other and it looks at the strengths and weaknesses of each.

Deputy Boyd Barrett commented on nursing. One of the great innovations in this country was to move to a nursing degree programme. I initiated it as the Minister for Health at the time. It was a sea change and transformative of the nursing profession and of a lot of postgraduate education. It involved huge State investment, which does not get acknowledged in all the Deputy's commentary on nursing.

Domestic, Sexual and Gender-based Violence: Statements

The Taoiseach: Ba mhaith liom an deis seo a thapú chun déileáil leis agus caint faoin gceist ríthábhachtach seo. Is maith an rud é go bhfuil seans againn an t-ábhar seo a phlé.

I thank the House for the opportunity to discuss this urgent and very important topic. Domestic abuse is an issue of concern across the Oireachtas, regardless of our political backgrounds. Every one of us will have had to deal with disturbing cases in our professional lives. I will give Deputies an update on what progress has been made in some of the relevant key policy areas and an honest appraisal of where we are and what needs to be prioritised.

First, I speak to those that have suffered domestic abuse in the past or who may be living in an abusive relationship at this moment. One of the key messages from Government to the public over the past 18 months or so has been to stay home and stay safe. However, for some people, that was not an option. Staying home meant you were not safe. Your home was not and is not the safe sanctuary it should be for everyone.

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I commend those who have reached out and got the support they needed to exit an abusive relationship. It can be an extraordinarily difficult decision to make but they have done the right thing. Those still trapped with someone who is abusing them physically, mentally or emotionally should know and take heart from the fact the supports are in place to help. They deserve better than what is happening to them and there is a way out. Over the course of today's statements, we will correctly hear criticisms of some aspects of the services that are in place and valid calls for increased funding in some areas. However, it is critically important to state to anyone listening to this discussion who needs to exit an abusive relationship that help is out there.

Over the course of the pandemic, many countries have reported an increase in domestic abuse cases. That is one of the most depressing side effects of the widespread restrictions that were necessary. Unfortunately, this has been borne out in Ireland too. This was predicted by our experts and, from the outset of the pandemic, the Government put in place effective preventative and safeguarding measures. We prioritised help for victims of domestic abuse. We worked collaboratively with front-line service providers and community groups, including Women's Aid, on the Still Here campaign. This campaign worked to reassure anyone at risk of or experiencing domestic abuse that help is available, the Garda will respond in an emergency, and restrictions on movement do not apply if the safety of a person or family is in question.

We have increased the level of funding available to organisations which support victims, ensuring they can continue and build upon their critical work. We have worked with the Garda, the courts and the Legal Aid Board to ensure cases of domestic abuse and sexual violence are prioritised. Operation Faoiseamh, which is a proactive targeted approach adopted by An Garda Síochána to reach out to victims of domestic abuse and target offenders who have breached domestic abuse orders, is continuing and has resulted in a 24% increase in criminal charges brought against perpetrators of domestic violence in 2020 versus 2019.

Deputies will be aware from their work in their constituencies that, through Operation Faoiseamh, An Garda Síochána has helped many victims of domestic abuse throughout the pandemic. I commend and thank the Garda for that. However, I am deeply concerned, as I know all Deputies are, about victims who sought Garda help through 999 calls but may not have been responded to. The Garda Commissioner has assured the Minister for Justice that when someone calls 999 now, he or she can expect and trust that An Garda Síochána will help. Of course, that should always be the case. The Policing Authority is continuing its own investigation, as is An Garda Síochána. We will have to wait until those processes are concluded, but it is clear something went wrong. This should not have happened. The Commissioner has apologised for this and was right to do so. I understand the interests of victims are being prioritised by gardaí as they deal with this issue, which is the correct thing to do. An Garda Síochána fell short of the high standards the public expects of it, and this House will want to examine the recommendations arising from the investigations of both the Policing Authority and An Garda Síochána and will want reassurance of their full implementation.

The difficulties that have arisen with the 999 service have further highlighted the importance of the service provided by Women's Aid, which recently detailed an increase in calls and correspondence from people seeking help last year. Each year, the Women's Aid impact report plays a vital role in illustrating the stark reality facing thousands of women and children subjected to domestic violence in this country. The headline figures in the impact report for 2020 are harrowing. There were 29,717 contacts to Women's Aid, during which 30,841 disclosures of abuse against women and children were made. There were 24,893 disclosures of domestic

violence, including coercive control, against women. Some 340 disclosures of rape were made to the Women's Aid helpline. This is appalling. It takes exceptional bravery to make that call, and making that call is often a last resort for a victim. Behind each call is a person or family devastated by what is happening to them in what should be a loving relationship. I acknowledge the hard work and unwavering dedication Women's Aid has shown in this area. I know each person who contacted it was met with warmth and compassion and supported in their time of need.

Abuse does not always involve physical violence. Mental and emotional abuse is also often devastating. Thankfully, there has been extensive legal reform around domestic abuse and sexual violence in recent years, including introducing an offence of coercive control under the Domestic Violence Act 2018. I welcome recent convictions for coercive control and I again commend the resilience and bravery of victims who have come forward.

It is important to note the nationwide roll-out of divisional protective services units is complete. These units deliver a consistent, professional and sensitive approach to the investigation of specialised crime types, including domestic abuse. The recent enactment of the Criminal Procedure Act introduces preliminary trial hearings for the first time in Irish law. The purpose of preliminary hearings is to reduce delays and increase efficiency in the running of our criminal trials. They will remove some of the uncertainties victims face about potential issues arising after a trial has started, which will help them run more smoothly.

These are positive developments. While a lot of progress has been made, there are areas we must continue working hard to improve. A key priority of this Government is to continue improving services and policies to combat domestic, sexual and gender-based violence. We have discussed it on a number of occasions in the Dáil in recent months and have outlined as a Government what we are doing and planning to do. We have not just been talking about this important work; we are progressing the reforms needed to make our system work better for victims. We have some way to go before we have a justice system that, from end to end, places victims at its centre, but I reassure Deputies that this work is of huge importance and is being advanced.

The programme for Government commits to conducting an audit of how responsibility for domestic, sexual and gender-based violence is segmented across different Government agencies. This important commitment is reiterated in the justice plan for 2021. The audit was undertaken by external consultants, Mary Higgins and Ellen O'Malley-Dunlop, in consultation with relevant NGOs and service providers, while also taking input from Departments and agencies. The consultants, as part of their work, were also required to take account of the views of those working at the front line. The audit is an important part of the process that is under way to make sure we have the right structures in place in order that Government can respond to all of the issues related to domestic, sexual and gender-based violence. The audit report has been finalised and is expected to be brought to Government very soon.

The Department of Justice is also working to ensure the development of an effective third national strategy to address domestic, sexual and gender-based violence. This strategy will have a significant focus on service delivery, cohesive governance and oversight arrangements, and placing a priority on prevention and reduction. It will include a national preventative strategy. The audit outcome, along with the ongoing work of implementing Supporting a Victim's Journey, the current review of accommodation needs undertaken by Tusla, and the development of the third national strategy will provide us with valuable guidance for designing our systems

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to best meet the needs of victims of domestic abuse and improve how we do so in the longer term.

As noted, Tusla is currently undertaking a review of the provision of accommodation for victims of domestic violence, which will take into consideration both the needs of victims and the types of accommodation that are required. I understand that review is also close to completion. The Minister, Deputy O’Gorman, the Minister of State, Deputy Naughton, and other Ministers across Government are absolutely committed to addressing this issue and getting it right. The Department of Justice is also committed to delivering the full and timely implementation of the recommendations contained in the O’Malley review. As Deputies are aware, this plan when implemented will protect and support vulnerable witnesses during the investigation and prosecution of sexual offences. The implementation of Supporting a Victim’s Journey is critical to ensuring we have a criminal justice system that works for vulnerable victims at every stage of their journey. It will ensure we can support vulnerable victims and empower them to report offences, knowing they will be supported, informed and treated respectfully throughout the criminal justice process.

I mentioned the roll-out of divisional protective service units and the introduction of preliminary hearings for the first time in Irish law. These are important actions under Supporting a Victim’s Journey. Other actions, including the exercise to map the victim’s journey and identifying gaps in service provision, are close to completion. We are also taking significant steps to challenge societal attitudes. The Department of Justice has been running a six-year, two-part national awareness campaign to tackle domestic and sexual violence. It is designed to help identify instances or signs of domestic and sexual violence and make us question our acceptance of certain unacceptable behaviours and attitudes. It highlights that, at an individual level and as a society, we must change our attitudes if we want a country that does not accept any form of domestic or sexual violence. As political representatives and leaders in our communities, we in this House also have an important role to play by rejecting any sort of taboo and speaking openly about the issue, making it clear that any sort of abuse within a relationship is simply unacceptable and highlighting the supports that are in place.

I reassure Deputies that the Government understands and is tackling, in a proactive way, the challenge of preventing and responding to domestic abuse. Ambitious targets have been set and we are on course to deliver them. We are committed to building our systems around the needs of victims and we are working with front-line service providers to ensure our response in this area is victim-informed and effective. We have made significant progress but are under no illusions about the amount of work we must continue to do to ensure we provide the best possible range of supports, services and policies for victims of this heinous and often hidden crime.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I am sharing time with Deputy Martin Kenny. I asked for these statements following the publication of the annual impact report published last month by Women’s Aid. I very much welcome that the debate is finally taking place. That report contained shocking detail that exposes the horrific reality of domestic abuse taking place right across the State. It revealed that the number of people contacting Women’s Aid increased by 43% in the past year compared with the previous year. While we were all told to stay at home due to the pandemic in order to stay safe, home has been anything but safe for the many women and children who have been trapped with an abuser.

The report makes for heartbreaking and really harrowing reading. Behind the statistics are thousands of stories of real families in despair, with women and children being beaten, sexually

abused and subjected to psychological torture and coercive control. No one should ever have to live like that. Everyone deserves to live safely and with dignity and to know that if they experience abuse, support will be there for them as and when they seek it. This should be a given in a modern, equal society. However, the reality is that this Government, like the ones before it, fails to support survivors of abuse. That is an unacceptable reality and one that must change.

I take the opportunity to commend the important work Women's Aid and other organisations across this sector do, day in and day out, to support women and children who need help. They literally save lives. Their services were stretched to the limit before Covid-19 and the pandemic has made their work even more urgent. Women's Aid has warned of the unprecedented and exhausting impact of trying to combat this tsunami of abuse with already overstretched and underfunded resources. I have a direct question for the Taoiseach in this regard. When will the Government take domestic abuse seriously and provide the sector with the funding and resources necessary to give women and children the support they urgently need? We should not make do with half measures.

The Government is very quick to offer sympathetic words about domestic violence and such words are, of course, very welcome. However, survivors need more than platitudes and empty promises. They need clear commitments now that the Taoiseach will end this scandal and finally deliver the funding and investment needed. Nothing other than that is unacceptable. Year after year, Ireland fails to fulfil its obligations under the Istanbul Convention to provide refuge places for those fleeing abuse. Community and voluntary services try to bridge the gaps left by the State's failure but they are pushed to their limits. There are currently nine counties without any refuge provision whatsoever. Where refuges exist, they are stretched to capacity and faced with the appalling situation of having to turn away women and children who are in real danger simply because they have no room for them. We can agree that this is scandalous.

I ask the Taoiseach to commit today to meeting the State's emergency accommodation obligations under the Istanbul Convention. Will he commit that budget 2022 will contain the additional investment needed to guarantee these refuge spaces are delivered? Will the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage finally commit to including all adults and children living in Tusla-funded emergency accommodation in the monthly homeless figures, thereby ensuring those families are no longer brushed under the carpet by the Government's failure even to acknowledge they exist and count them as part of its statistics?

Recent revelations that members of An Garda Síochána cancelled 999 calls made by people seeking help for domestic abuse have compounded fears that a culture still exists in Ireland in which abuse is not seen as serious and a priority for emergency services. We have to send the message loud and clear to all those affected that abuse is never the fault of the victim, it is never something one simply has to put up with, and help will be there if one asks for it.

Women's Aid has called for a complete root-and-branch revision of this system to work out what went wrong and how the Garda can learn from it to ensure it never happens again. Can the Taoiseach commit to that today?

Survivors of domestic violence also need to have the right to take paid leave from work so that they can attend court or medical appointments or arrange safe accommodation without worrying about losing their jobs. Sinn Féin has developed legislation to deliver this, with my colleague, Deputy O'Reilly, taking the lead in that regard, but the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment, Deputy Varadkar, will not consider this legislation in terms of a workplace

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right. I am again asking the Taoiseach to ensure the Government parties work with us to progress this legislation, to recognise this as a worker's right and to ensure victims and survivors get the support they need. Survivors cannot be expected to wait any longer for these vital rights.

We also need major reform of the courts, which are far too often misused by abusers as a way to continue harassing women and children who have fled. I welcome the establishment of the family justice oversight group by the Department of Justice, but its work must be expedited, along with the family court Bill. This must be delivered along with a statutory child maintenance service and a network of child contact centres to modernise our system and bring it into the 21st century and to protect survivors of abuse.

I want to send a clear message from the Dáil today to anyone listening who may be experiencing abuse. I say to them that they are not alone and they do not have to accept this situation. I assure them that they will be believed and supported in finding safety and rebuilding their life. I would like the Government now to measure up to their great courage and to provide the resources that are so badly needed.

Deputy Martin Kenny: It was very appropriate that, in fairness, when the lockdown came in the Garda Síochána and many others recognised that it was going to be a time of great turmoil for many women in particular who were locked in situations where domestic violence was a threat to their safety and, in some cases, their very lives. That was made a priority, as was appropriate and right. Of course, those fears were borne out, as evidenced by the high number of calls and incidents of domestic violence in the past 18 months during the pandemic.

I am not unique among Deputies. All Members regularly deal with people who suffer as a result of this problem. A woman who came to me recently told me that one of the things her partner used to do was to put their three children in the car and drive away and maybe not come back that night. She would lie awake for the whole night worrying about what was happening. The vindictiveness of doing that to a person, without ever laying a hand on them, reflects the kind of individuals in society who we, as a nation, have to stand up against. These people are bullies in the most extreme form. The way in which they have treated people who are supposed to be close to them as something they can control, abuse and terrorise is atrocious.

I refer to the message Deputy McDonald sent to women out there who are suffering. Although it is not only women who are affected, it is predominantly women who find themselves in these circumstances. There is help available to them. We have to ensure that despite the difficulties there may be with 999 calls or the absence of services and all that, we still have to encourage people to come forward to, please, ensure their lives and those of their children and families are not terrorised in this way. We have to ensure they have hope because there is a generous and compassionate community in this country that wants to help them. They need to come forward and seek that help.

The State has a key role on this issue. I refer to the revelation in recent days that so many 999 calls went unanswered and were cancelled. The Taoiseach stated that we will all wait to see what comes from the Garda Síochána and Policing Authority investigations into this. There needs to be more than that. There needs to be an investigation by a body outside the Garda Síochána in the form of an independent review of how this happened because it was not human error; it was human intention. Somebody intentionally cancelled those calls and ensured these people did not get a response. The system has to be held to account for that as well as the individuals involved. It is clear that this issue cannot just be investigated by the Garda; it has to

be done by an outside body. That is one of the clear things that has to come from that situation.

Women's Aid and many other organisations, such as community organisations, are often founded by people who experienced this problem. These organisations seek funding and get some help from the State, but then must fundraise and do all those things to fill a gap that, in all honesty, the State should. The State should provide these services without these voluntary organisations being needed to do it. That is a lesson for us. However, we are in the world we are in and these people need assistance. They need adequate funding to provide safe places, in every county and part of the country, to which women in particular can flee and have a safe place. Many of them do not have that at the moment or are being turned away from refuges. It needs to be a priority of Government that the funding is put in place to ensure these places can be provided for the many vulnerable people who need them.

Reports on this issue are published all the time. There is so much great work being done by Women's Aid and all the other organisations. Safe Ireland has launched a report in respect of all of this. Much of the work these people do, they do because they believe we can do better. They are part of the generous society to which I referred. In fact, they are at its cutting edge. However, we cannot simply push this issue over for that sector to deal with it. It is too big an issue for us to allow that to happen. Deputies are aware that thousands of families are affected by this and that we, as a society and as a country, have to provide them with support. That has to be provided centrally. It has to be something the Government does for its people rather than being something the Government funds others to do. That is the primary change that has to happen.

Although I welcome the various reports that are being carried out and the studies into what is happening at the moment, many such reports end up on a shelf and nothing comes of them. That has been the case for many decades, The opportunity is now. Through the pandemic, there was a recognition that people were in serious danger. Now is the time to act on the reports, rather than just putting them on a shelf, and to provide the services people need to be safe. It is time to make a change not just in how we provide services, but also in our attitude. The attitude we, as a society, have towards all of this needs to change. Men, in particular, have a significant role here. Young men have to learn that their place is to be there for everyone, not just to have some macho attitude to life. Such attitudes have to change. I think all Members will concur with that. However, to make that happen, there is work to be done in all aspects of society, such as the education process. That and every other aspect of how we develop and go forward will have to have the issue of domestic, sexual and gender-based violence at its core to ensure we eradicate it from society and move on.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: I warmly welcome the tabling of these statements and the opportunity to contribute to the debate. I strongly support the very direct words of the Taoiseach in his opening remarks to victims of domestic violence - largely women, as well as some children and men - who, right now, are suffering, that people are there to listen. People are there to respond. Collectively, we should send that message to people who are in desperate straits right now. One of the greatest concerns many of us had at that outset of the lockdown was the potential for the increase in unseen acts of abuse and domestic violence within the home environment. I am afraid that those concerns, not only in Ireland but across the globe, have proven to be well founded. The Women's Aid report has shown that the Covid-19 pandemic and measures introduced to combat it had "an unprecedented and exhausting impact" on victims of domestic abuse. "Exhausting" is a very important word. The victims were ground down and exhausted by the confinement and the constant abuse. Women's Aid reported a 43% increase in contacts with its services and 30,000 disclosures of domestic violence, including almost 6,000

related to children.

One of the issues the Taoiseach referenced was coercive control. That is something that we debated a lot during the passage of the Domestic Violence Act 2018. We defined it in section 39 of that Act. There was concern that there would not be prosecutions because it is so difficult to prove coercive control in court, but there have been. I commend An Garda Síochána and its specialist units on following such cases up. The belittling abuse and control of people's lives, and women's lives, by and large, by coercive men is a shocking destruction of the quality and value of people's lives that must be rooted out.

As others have mentioned, we are hugely dependent on the voluntary groups to organise shelters and refuges for women and their children who are caught up in domestic violence. We need to do better. We are building units. I am very familiar with the one in my home town of Wexford. It is a brand new unit that is currently under construction. There is a fundraising effort to fit it out. The so-called "Three Amigos", Alan Corcoran, Fr. Sean Devereux and Pádraig Murphy, spent the month of May running every day to collect money to provide basic equipment. That should not be the case. I applaud and commend the voluntary effort that sustains it and all the organisers that are involved in providing it, but it is time for the State to step in and ensure that proper refuges are provided as a matter of course and are available to anybody caught in such dreadful situations.

I must make mention of the Garda response. The tremendously good work done by the specialist units and Operation Faoiseamh and so on has been fundamentally undermined by the report that 14,000 emergency domestic violence calls were cancelled. Quite frankly, that is just beyond belief. Retired assistant commissioner, Pat Leahy, whom I think is held in high regard by most of us, said that it was likely that vulnerable people suffered as a result. That is certainly a statement of truth. I cannot begin to imagine the double trouble trauma of enduring domestic violence, being in fear, getting the courage to reach out and dial 999, finding the space to do that, and to get no response. Garda representatives were quite understandably flabbergasted by it. How could it happen? It is the basic job and responsibility of An Garda Síochána to respond to such situations. Many members were genuinely flabbergasted at that situation. The full facts must be disclosed, because we have gone through it with other major issues. Some 1.4 million breath tests were recorded that never happened. They were bogus. It was a massive fraud. There were 146,000 people taken to court and 14,700 were wrongly convicted of motoring offences because there were issues with the fixed-charge penalty notice system. They were all scandals of the minute. What ever happened? What accountability has been brought about in these scandals? Each time a new shocking issue arises, the Minister for Justice and the Garda Commissioner say that they are hugely disturbing and fundamentally unacceptable. Yet, they reoccur. This time, on this issue, let us have the full facts of how it happened. This House should demand that.

In my final minute, I wish to make brief mention of the family courts. The *in camera* rule has great importance and should be maintained, but it means that there is an awful lot going on in the domestic situation that is not known to the public. Last November, the Law Society held a conference on child and family law. Some of its discussion was fundamentally informing. One practitioner, Joan O'Mahony, talked about not being able to learn about the facts of domestic violence at university. She said that we need a more realistic assessment of what has been going on in relationships before we offer separation or divorce. These are matters to which we need to return, because they are of such fundamental importance to many of our citizens who are suffering.

Minister of State at the Department of Education (Deputy Josepha Madigan): One question that very few would be brave enough to ask me is how old I am. If you did, however, I would say that I am young enough to be a working mother of two teenage boys and I am committed to public service and was privileged to have been appointed not just as Ireland's 19th female member of Cabinet but also Ireland's first female lawyer at Cabinet. However, in terms of this debate, I would say that I am old enough to know that there are very few women my age who have not been subjected to some form of sexual assault in their respective lifetimes. I know this because I am one of them. It will not come as a surprise to those of us of a similar age who have suffered this trauma. Sometimes, we have suffered it more than once. It was, and is, a lot more common than many believe. I always take statistics that I read with a pinch of salt. Most victims do not report their crimes. There are many reasons for this, including shame, a fear of judgement and a desire to forget. It should not be this way. As the Taoiseach said earlier, it is a form of hidden abuse. It is important to state that not all abuse is continuous. There can be isolated incidents that can be just as damaging, either at home or outside the home.

No doubt, for someone watching this contribution live or who will read it later, somewhere near to them at this very moment in time, whether it is in a town, a public space, an office, a street or a home, some form of sexual assault or violation is taking place. The Me Too and Reclaim the Night movement, following the murder of Sarah Everard in London, and the social media support for Sarah Grace after the brutal and savage attack she suffered in Dublin have highlighted even more so how vulnerable we can be as women. The scary part about sexual assault, in particular, is that the perpetrator is not always the random monster in the middle of the night, but often a friend, spouse, acquaintance or someone the person knows. It is a corrosive blight on female safety and morale.

The Leas-Cheann Comhairle knows only too well that many of the 36 women Deputies and 18 Senators may disagree on ideology and policy, but on a completely personal and human level, we all agree on one thing: we are all very much a part of the unfinished democracy that is Ireland when it comes to the representation and treatment of women. How much we decide to share is a purely personal decision, but I know that I am surrounded in this House by remarkable, talented, strong women who are all doing their best to bring about a fairer and more compassionate Ireland, regardless of what challenges we may each have faced.

While I am on the subject, I hope that a full debate will be afforded to Members to discuss the further constitutional reforms that have been proposed by the Citizens' Assembly on Gender Equality. I await a response from all party leaders on that. Indeed, I await a response from the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, who I know is here in the House today, to my correspondence regarding the establishment of a special Oireachtas committee. I would also be grateful for a response from the Taoiseach in that regard. As a practising family lawyer, I am particularly interested in the progression of the Family Courts Bill, which others have mentioned. I echo that sentiment.

I welcome the work that has been carried out by the Department of Justice, the Minister for Justice, Deputy Humphreys and the Minister of State, Deputy Naughton, who is present, on the third national strategy on domestic, sexual and gender-based violence, which will place a priority on prevention and reduction and should hopefully include a national preventative strategy. While we must do everything we can to prevent domestic and sexual violence, we must also be realistic, and acknowledge that new victims will continue to experience violations. Therefore, we must be very aware of the impact that this new strategy will have on both new and existing victims. I note the public consultation for this eagerly awaited and most important document

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closed three weeks ago. I hope the Minister will be able to provide further updates on the strategy in due course. Furthermore, I hope we will receive updates from the Department of Justice on the development and delivery of the national survey on the prevalence of sexual violence in Ireland by the Central Statistics Office.

In recent weeks, I have read the stark and alarming figures contained in the annual reports of Women's Aid, FLAC and the many other organisations that play a role in assisting victims of gender-based violence. Since the pandemic first arrived on our shores, all the emerging data and reports from those on the front line have shown a dramatic increase in the many forms of violence against women and children, particularly in the home, a place that is supposed to be a haven, sanctuary and safe space. While most of us have worked hard to ensure Covid-19 was kept out of our houses, for some women and children the real danger was not something found in the air but rather in the home itself. Almost 31,000 people felt the need to reach out to Women's Aid to make a disclosure of abuse. That represents a 43% increase on the rate for 2019. When broken down, the grim reality is crystal clear: a 30% increase in emotional abuse disclosures, a 24% increase in physical abuse and a 41% increase in sexual abuse. What is even more frightening is that these figures account only for incidents that occurred up to December 2020, which was well before we entered the most recent and longest wave of level-5 restrictions.

Shortly before the election of the current Government, I remember stressing at a meeting of the Cabinet the importance of providing additional supports and options for those women and children who were facing the torturous reality of being further trapped with offenders. That is why I welcomed the non-application of the 5 km travel limit to those who were escaping dangerous domestic scenarios and the recently extended partnership of Airbnb and Safe Ireland to provide temporary accommodation to victims of domestic violence. I was glad to have played my part in assisting with this collaboration in its first iteration.

I have always wanted victims of these horrific crimes to know they are a priority of the Government and that support is always available to them. That is not to say that men do not also suffer from sexual assault and violence because they do, and they should be supported wholeheartedly where it occurs, but it is simply a fact that it is a much more prevalent issue for women. The violence emerging now as a dark feature of this pandemic is a mirror and a challenge to our values, resilience and shared humanity.

I raised this topic during the term of the Thirty-second Dáil, when I was a backbencher. I am not sure whether Members are familiar with the Eurythmics song "Sexcrime (Nineteen Eighty Four)", in which Annie Lennox uses four powerfully tragic lines to encompass perfectly how victims of sexual assault continue to feel:

And so I face the wall

Turn my back against it all

How I wish I'd been unborn

Wish I was unliving here

What some people fail to understand is that the consequences and repercussions of a sexual offence against a victim are multifaceted. The scale of the damage inflicted varies from one victim to the next, depending on the level of depravity.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I am not sure if the Minister of State is aware that she is sharing time with Deputy Devlin.

Deputy Josepha Madigan: I am not aware that I am sharing time.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Minister of State is down as sharing time.

Deputy Josepha Madigan: I apologise.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Devlin has five minutes.

Deputy Josepha Madigan: Apologies. That is fine.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I am sorry to have interrupted.

Deputy Josepha Madigan: I thank the Leas-Chathaoirleach.

Deputy Cormac Devlin: I am not sure what happened. I apologise to the Minister of State, Deputy Madigan, for that.

It is really important that we discuss this topic today. Tackling domestic, sexual and gender-based violence has been a priority of mine. Since I was first elected to Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council, I have repeatedly pressed for an increase in the number of refuge places and the establishment of a dedicated facility in Dún Laoghaire–Rathdown. As a State and society, we must do more to support people, mainly women and children but also men, who are subject to domestic violence. I welcome the commitment in the programme for Government to tackle domestic, sexual and gender-based violence as a priority.

During the pandemic, we saw an increase in domestic violence. It continues to be a pervasive problem in our society. Unfortunately, figures for 2020 show that the Garda received more than 43,000 calls to respond to domestic abuse incidents, representing a 16% increase on the figure for 2019. Nearly 15% of women between the ages of 18 and 74 have experienced some form of physical and sexual violence in their lifetimes and nearly 31% have experienced psychological violence.

In May, the Department of Justice launched a public consultation process in partnership with Safe Ireland, which coincidentally is having a talk as we speak, and the National Women's Council of Ireland to inform the development of a new strategy, the third, to combat the problem. This strategy will emphasise prevention and reduction and is to be agreed by the Government by the end of this year. This is welcome and necessary. The new strategy must be supported with resources that provide practical measures to make it easier for victims to report crimes, access justice and protect their families. We need all agencies to step up. Reference was made earlier to the inappropriate cancellation of 999 calls. I welcome the Garda Commissioner's statement and apology for that. The cross-government budget to tackle domestic and sexual violence must be increased in 2022 to ensure bodies such as the Garda and Tusla and NGOs such as Safe Ireland, Woman's Aid and Men's Aid Ireland have sufficient resources.

The provision of emergency accommodation to allow people to exit abusive relationships is critical, particularly given the issues concerning the general shortage of housing, with which we are all familiar. I understand Tusla is finalising a review of emergency accommodation nationwide. I hope this review will result in a joined-up policy. For far too long, we have seen refuges fall through the bureaucratic cracks.

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As I mentioned, from 2009 I, first as a member of Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council, and others have been pushing for a refuge in the south-east of Dublin but, unfortunately, owing to the stance of both the council and Tusla — it was the HSE at the time — it has never taken hold. This is not good enough and it must change. Women and men and their children all across Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown and the rest of the country deserve better. We need a single lead agency to take responsibility for planning, funding and the construction of the family refuges.

We also need to see practical measures to support victims, including paid leave to attend court, faster access to housing support and generous allowances from community welfare officers to offer support in meeting day-to-day needs as victims break free from abusive relationships.

Deputy Pauline Tully: There are actions that, if taken, would have significant outcomes in tackling sexual, domestic and gender-based violence. It is reassuring that there is increased awareness of what domestic abuse is. Many people, including me, once believed that domestic violence was only where physical violence occurred and that physical violence alone was the only reason a barring order or protection order could be obtained. It is reassuring that people are becoming more aware that it is not just physical violence that constitutes abuse within the home or within a relationship and that abuse can involve coercive control or financial abuse, for example. A lot more needs to be done, however, to continue to generate awareness of what abuse is, the information on what supports are available and the laws people can rely on to resolve issues. Education on what comprises a loving and respectful relationship is paramount.

Many young people are accessing pornography, which is feeding and normalising abusive and controlling relationships. Measures need to be taken to counteract this. Educating our youth is vital.

The experience of the court system is one that many victims of abusive relationships find daunting at the very least. Currently, there is no link between the criminal court system and the family court. Therefore, decisions made in the family court are often made in the absence of information on the level of violence and control that may have been perpetrated against one partner within a relationship. Consequently, access to children may be granted to someone who has already committed severe violence against one partner and frequently in the presence of the children. This is highly dangerous and an unsafe practice that must not be allowed to continue. Children must be listened to and have their decisions on access taken into account. There must be a system established whereby trained personnel can work with children and determine the best course of action for them in regard to visitation with the parent where there has been abuse.

Currently there are no supervised contact centres where supervised access is granted. There is a need for a full and thorough review of the court system and how it deals with people who have been subjected to domestic abuse and the impact it has on children. There also needs to be a plan put in place to deal with the serious backlog of cases within our court system. It has worsened because of the pandemic.

Action on the non-payment of maintenance needs to be taken so one party will not need to resort to court, which is a tedious and costly affair. This is often used by the abuser to continue to exert control over a former partner. A statutory maintenance authority is urgently needed to deal comprehensively with the issue of maintenance.

Deputy Denise Mitchell: Our talking about the crisis that is domestic violence may give

hope to those suffering in horrific circumstances and encourage them to reach out and seek help to end their nightmare.

5 o'clock

It saddens me to say the problem of domestic violence is getting worse. We all have to work together to address it. Covid-19 without doubt made a very horrible and dangerous situation for vulnerable people even worse. We must be conscious there will be long-term fallout for victims. We must resource and support them.

I welcome the additional protections that were put in place in the Covid-19 emergency legislation. These specifically recognised the horror that is domestic violence. This welcome awareness must continue into the future.

The shocking recent revelation that 3,100 calls from victims of abuse to An Garda Síochána between October 2019 and last year went unanswered was scandalous. That the Garda Commissioner had to issue a public apology for this entirely unacceptable failure shows the seriousness of the situation. A further investigation should take place to ensure this never happens again, and additional measures to those already introduced should be put in place to prevent it. That very vulnerable victims of domestic abuse, after having taken the courage to seek help, were silenced by the very authorities that were meant to protect them and keep them safe is scandalous. We all must do better by victims.

There have been very welcome moves in recent years to address this scourge but we have much more progress to make. A stigma still exists for men and women suffering domestic abuse and we as a society need to smash it. A safe haven and safe space must be available for victims of domestic abuse. Anything else is a failure.

Before finishing, I applaud and thank the efforts of all groups offering services and supports, and I appeal to victims to please reach out if they are suffering abuse. They do not need to suffer alone.

Deputy Holly Cairns: Any opportunity to discuss sexual and domestic violence in this House is a good thing. For too long, victims have had to suffer in silence and fear as the State and our society have failed to recognise and respond to these crimes. However, I raise the same points every time, as do other Deputies, so until we address the underlying causes rather than just talk about them, victims and survivors will continue to suffer in silence.

Two weeks ago, like other Deputies have outlined, we found out that over 40% more people contacted Women's Aid last year compared with 2019. This trend is also reported by West Cork Women Against Violence Project which has experienced a similar increase in calls. Campaigners and support organisations had warned us this increase was going to occur.

That same week, we discovered that more than 3,100 emergency calls made by domestic violence victims to 999 were cancelled, as it were, between 2019 and last October. This is particularly alarming as victims, on average, are assaulted up to 35 times before reaching out for help.

Highlighting and discussing these matters is important, but without substantial policy change, more people are being and will be condemned to sexual and domestic violence. One of the key measures the Government can take is to provide sufficient refuge space. The Taoiseach

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said in his statement that Tusla is undertaking a review of accommodation.

I have raised repeatedly in this House our obligations under the Istanbul Convention to provide one refuge space for every 10,000 people, and instead of meeting this international standard, the Minister and Tusla have insisted on the much lower provision of one refuge space per 10,000 women, which is 50% of what we should have. While I welcome the review, we do not need a review to tell us that at the very least we need 50% more refuge spaces at the moment.

The continual refusal of the State to put in place the minimum amount of refuge space undermines any strategies and casts doubt on commitments to help those in need. It is essential to note that for anyone affected by domestic or intimate violence, there is always support and alternative accommodation out there, often thanks to voluntary services filling in the gaps the State is not filling. If you are in that situation, seek help, because it is there.

Refuge space is one part of a complex issue. Safe Ireland's No Going Back report outlines the transformative response required that considers the intersectional factors and an integrated approach. Domestic and gender-based violence has emotional, psychological, financial, physical and many other interconnected manifestations. An adequate response needs to reflect this complexity. We need Departments and State agencies to understand the issues involved and provide exceptions and supports.

In rural areas, it is often GPs or those in family resource centres who have to assist victims. They need more support, training and funding to deal with these issues. We need to ask ourselves if staff in public services are trained to assist victims. Does our immigration process protect vulnerable migrants whose status depends on their partner or family member? What systems are in place to detect less visible cases, such as elder abuse or financial abuse of people with disabilities?

Each of these indicates some of the complications involved. Campaigners have repeatedly called for a dedicated Minister with reach across all relevant Departments and agencies with which a survivor may interact, and a Cabinet standing committee. We need this leadership to drive the necessary transformative change to provide integrated support, on-the-ground specialists, and preventative strategies. When will we see this leadership?

Sexual violence overlaps with domestic violence, but it is also an issue that needs targeted responses. Research from Trinity and Maynooth universities has established that 49% of women and 19% of men have been sexually assaulted or harassed, with almost 15% of Irish adults having been raped. These are deeply worrying figures, especially when the true figures are, realistically, a great deal higher. In 2019, more than 14,000 contacts were received by the Dublin Rape Crisis Centre national 24-hour helpline. There were, however, only 3,307 offences reported to An Garda in 2019. The prevalence of sexual violence is seriously underestimated.

The Realities of Rape Trials in Ireland report has highlighted the issues with our justice system's response to sexual assaults. Delays, with cases taking years, have a significant impact on those involved. The use of so-called sexual experience evidence, although rare, is completely unacceptable. Unfortunately, social understandings of consent, pre-existing biases and rape myths are found in our juries.

I welcome the Minister, Deputy McEntee's, move towards reform in this area and the use of pretrial hearings, but sexual violence and rape crisis support organisations have outlined the further necessary changes which the Department of Justice and the Department of Children,

Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth need to implement immediately. These include introducing guidance for juries to address rape myths and providing free legal advice and information for anyone reporting or considering reporting any type of sexual offence. There is a clear need for a significant strategy on improving the broad understanding of sexual consent. This involves evidence-based sexual and relationships education in all schools and compulsory consent classes in further and higher education, but it also means reaching adult groups and using existing organisations to help adults understand issues of consent and abuse.

It is important to note that sexual assault does not have to involve being restrained or penetration. It is any sexual act you are forced into against your will. This needs to be understood by all people and most importantly by our State services. Speaking at the Committee on Justice recently, Deirdre Kenny of One in Four, explained how in cases of rape and sexual assault, “The law is applied to the crime, but very little attention is paid to how the system interacts with the personal impact of the crime.” We need a radical change to ensure our legal system and State services are victim-centred in all instances of sexual, domestic and gender-based violence.

In rural areas, sometimes the way people in these situations report and seek help is very different. For example, in the past, if you were presenting as homeless in a rural area, you went to your local community welfare officer. Due to the increased demand on that service as a result of the homelessness crisis, people now have to go to the local housing authority. In one example in west Cork, you would have to go from Castletownbere to Clonakilty and there is not even a bus service to there, whereas before, you could always go to your community welfare officer. Recently there has been a proposal to move the family courts out of west Cork and into the city, which would mean that somebody seeking a domestic violence order potentially would have to travel for two hours and may not have transport.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy O’Reilly is sharing time with Deputy Clarke.

Deputy Louise O’Reilly: Thank you, a Cheann Comhairle, for the opportunity to make a short contribution to this important debate. I echo the comments expressed by previous speakers. I hardly know a woman among my acquaintances or people I work with who has not been in some way the victim of a sexual assault. It does not necessarily have to involve restraint or penetration but it is that common that it is terrifying when we think about it. Regrettably, as a younger woman I might have brushed it off, whether it was a man on a bus wanting to rub the back of your neck or sitting too close to you. There are a whole load of things like that and you just get off the bus, shake it off and think, “I will not think about it.” Now, however, I am mindful of my daughter, who is a young woman who is not afraid to speak her mind, and that is a very good thing.

It is good we now have the opportunity to speak out. However, that has to be matched by support services. In that regard I pay tribute to the people who run the Aoibhneas service in my constituency. They do Trojan work. During the first lockdown, calls to Aoibhneas’s helpline increased by 125%. When the restrictions were lifted, it saw a huge influx of women, for the most part, whose homes were not safe for them or their kids. We need to do an awful lot more. It is wrong that a heavy emphasis is placed on the need for dialogue. That is important but it cannot stop there. We cannot simply come into this Chamber and talk about this and commend the fact we now speak about issues of domestic and sexual abuse in a way perhaps we did not when people my age were younger. We have to do more. We have to do better.

In the few seconds remaining to me I urge the Government to work with me to pass my

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legislation which would give paid leave to the victims of domestic abuse. We in Sinn Féin have gone out to consult. We have done all the work on this. It is ready to go. It is about to go to Committee Stage. I want the Government to work with me because this leave is a workers' rights issue and a workplace issue, particularly when your workplace becomes a site of abuse. We need to give that support to men and women who are victims and survivors.

Deputy Sorca Clarke: I echo Deputy O'Reilly's call for the Government to support the very important legislation she has introduced. It is vital.

We know through research and study that sexual, domestic and gender-based violence has a negative impact physically, emotionally, financially and psychologically. We also know it is insidious and pervasive. Increasing numbers of organisations are raising concerns about the formation of unhealthy relationships in our younger population. As an elected representative and a mother, I am not trying to gloss over parental roles in these cases. There is, however, an active space for schools, colleges and sporting organisations to have a positive impact, and there is a responsibility on us as legislators to provide fit-for-purpose frameworks for policies and laws and, more importantly, resources to support the efforts of these groups. None of us as adults, and certainly as parents, relishes the reality that there are teenagers out there being subjected to this level of abuse, but they are and we need to face that reality and deal with it. Our wishing it away is not helping our teenage girls and boys. It does not help them to recognise the signs of coercive control in intimate relationships. Campaigns such as TooIntoYou by Women's Aid need to be properly resourced and continued, as do the other organisations that work tirelessly with survivors of gender-based violence and domestic abuse. They need to be properly funded and adequately resourced.

There are, however, other, very easy steps that can be taken. There can be no more letters sent by Tusla to the woman who has been battered black and blue by her partner telling her it is her responsibility to shelter her children from physical violence. That is unacceptable. It was unacceptable when it was sent and it remains unacceptable today. Not a single corresponding letter was sent to the perpetrator of that violence. No more - that needs to end. I say to the women of Longford and Westmeath and to the men who may be suffering: reach out. It is never too late. There are always support services there. Whether it is Longford Women's Link, Westmeath Support Service Against Domestic Abuse, or Esker House, reach out to somebody. There is help. There is assistance.

Deputy Paul Murphy: The situation of domestic abuse calls to the Garda being ignored is a major scandal. It is not a scandal that should be ended with an apology and a promise to do better. In just one shocking case a woman phoned 999 three times in one hour begging for help for her and her children. In her first call she reported she was being assaulted, in her second call she explained her partner was threatening her children, and when she did not hear back she phoned a third time to plead for help. All three calls were ignored; she and her kids were abandoned. We know now she was one of 3,000 emergency domestic abuse callers who were ignored by the Garda. The apology from the head of the Garda, Commissioner Drew Harris, is simply not good enough, especially considering the fact the Garda can find the time and the resources, for example, to break up the picket line of the Debenhams workers or, incredibly, to pursue and prosecute an activist for ROSA, Aislinn O'Keeffe, precisely for the crime of organising a protest against gender-based violence during the pandemic. However, women looking for protection from abuse are ignored. This means we are not dealing with just a few bad apples here. This is systematic and despicable. What is exposed by this situation is, on the one hand, the unfortunate and horrific prevalence of gender-based violence within our society and, on the

other, a failure to take it seriously in a systematic way by a patriarchal and sexist capitalist state and its various actors.

I will share with the House some figures to indicate both sides of this. People have probably seen the figures but they are worth noting. They show the scale of the so-called pandemic within a pandemic of gender-based violence. Women's Aid received more than 30,000 disclosures of abuse in 2020, a 43% increase on the figure for 2019. Of those disclosures, almost 6,000 involved a child victim. Women's Aid described this huge number of contacts as the tip of the iceberg. On the other side of this, Women's Aid CEO, Sarah Benson, claimed the current family law system is repeatedly failing those who need help and in some cases is a tool for the abusers to continue to torment their partners even after they leave them. There is also the completely inadequate number of women's refuges. That is the situation facing people.

I will make particular reference to one area. My colleague, Deputy Boyd Barrett, met with the group FairPlé, which campaigns for gender equality within the arts. It has raised the issue that there is a significant number of cases of harassment and abuse within the industry. We have seen this being exposed worldwide. We know that artists, women in particular, can be vulnerable in this sector because of the precarious nature of employment in the sector and because of the power, authority and control that can be held by those at the top. FairPlé is demanding that all public funding should be linked to appropriate representation and the establishment of an independent body that people could go to to complain.

There are many other issues I could raise but my time is up. It is not just words we need from the Government; we need funding and action.

Deputy Mick Barry: Those who experience gender-based violence, mainly women, should get a big helping hand but instead the State stacks the odds against them. If you have rung 999 in recent years, the Garda might have cancelled your call and ignored your plea for help. If you try to leave the family home, you are confronted by a housing crisis and a shortage of refuge places. If you try to achieve financial independence, you are hemmed in by low pay and child-care costs. The society of the mother and baby homes and of the Magdalen laundries is in the past, but the attitudes that underlay them still live on. The system is not fair. It has misogyny in its DNA. I find it incredible that the only person in the entire State facing prosecution under the Covid laws for being an alleged event organiser is a woman who organised a small stand-out on the streets against femicide and gender-based violence, Aislinn O'Keeffe from Limerick, a member of the socialist feminist group ROSA. In March, she organised a stand-out in the aftermath of the Sarah Everard murder. The stand-out was socially distanced and attended by ten people wearing masks. She was fined €500, but she refused to pay and is now awaiting a court summons. Her case says a lot about the system. It is a case that should now be dropped.

An Ceann Comhairle: It is not appropriate to talk about court cases in the House or to express views on them.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: We all have a role to play to make the world safer for women, for girls and for all young people in all their diversity. Gender-based violence is a global emergency. Having these statements as part of today's Government business means we are highlighting the urgency of this matter.

The Women's Aid report showed a staggering 43% increase in contacts compared to 2019. Almost 15% of women between the ages of 18 and 74 years have experienced physical and

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sexual violence in their lives. Nearly 31% have experienced psychological violence. These statistics show us that this is an emergency. Women's Aid has made 43 recommendations. It is vital that they are considered in our strategy. We have to listen to people and I ask that these 43 recommendations be considered.

I welcome the third national strategy, especially as it will have a significant focus on service delivery and will place a priority on prevention and reduction. It will include a national prevention strategy. Public consultation has begun but it is important that we highlight communications. I have serious issues with communication. It is one of the most serious issues that we have as a Government.

Carlow's Women's Aid needs support and funding. It does great work. It is yet to be contacted about this review. We need to look after the small rural towns such as Carlow and learn what is necessary to support them to make the system better for women. Across the country, we must do what we can to support local organisations. I can only speak for my own area, where Carlow Women's Aid does a marvellous job. I also want to compliment Carlow County Council which has been fantastic in providing emergency accommodation in my constituency. However, we need to look at resourcing supports properly. We do not have a women's refuge in Carlow. It is absolutely shameful that this is the case in 2021. The Taoiseach spoke about the audit which is looking at the overall responsibility and co-ordination. I welcome this but we must all play our part. We need an all-of-government approach that is well co-ordinated. Regardless of party, we all have a responsibility to respond to domestic sexual and gender-based violence.

I know how hard the gardaí work. Their role is vital, particularly in supporting of victims of domestic abuse, but I was very upset to hear of the cancellation of more than 600 emergency domestic violence calls to 999 in 2019 and 2020. I welcome the Garda Commissioner's public apology to those who did not receive the standard of service from the Garda that they required and deserved. I have received phone calls about this. We cannot let this happen again. It takes an enormous amount of strength and bravery to make one of these calls and support should be there when it is sought. I am assured that when someone calls 999, they can expect and trust that An Garda Síochána will help those who most need it. Gardai play an important role. It is important that we recognise that and I say "well done" to them.

Since 1 January 2019, coercive control has been a criminal offence in Ireland. In 2019, Ireland also ratified the Istanbul Convention on violence against women. Our criminal legislation now enables prosecution for online and other forms of abuse. We are doing more. The online safety and media regulation Bill is about to go through these Houses. We need to make it safer for women to be online, and we need to make it safer for our children. We need to learn more about the level of intimate relationship abuse experienced by young people. For us to know how to help we really need to know what the issues are. It is all about communication and speaking out. People need to know that there is someone there to talk to and who can help. There are so many people out there who will help but the biggest issue is encouraging people to get help.

We need to reach out to our young people and highlight healthy relationships and what an unhealthy relationship looks like. Many people who watched the highly acclaimed "Normal People" said it was a great lesson in consent. We really need to open conversations around consent and around healthy and unhealthy relationships and to remove the stigma of seeking help, which is the biggest problem. We can overcome this and tell people that we are there to help.

I welcome the €2.7 million in additional funding to combat domestic, sexual and gender-based violence, as well as support for victims and the contingency funding related to the pandemic. However, we need more. There is a serious requirement to identify the needs and then to fund them.

It is vital that the Tusla review of emergency accommodation nationwide be completed as a matter of urgency. We urgently need to implement a comprehensive strategy to combat trafficking of women and girls. We all know this is urgent. I ask all Members across all parties, inside and outside the Government, to play a role in ensuring we do everything we can to help people, particularly women and young children.

Deputy Réada Cronin: The words “domestic” and “violence” simply do not belong together. Home not being a place of safety for a woman or her children should be anathema to us as a State and as a society. We see eyes the colour and size of ripe plums, but we do not see the invisible violence when it is at home - the sly kicks to the stomach, the spine or the labia; the bank accounts checked; the shopping money doled out; and the taunts about weight, looks, family or figure. That invisible violence is echoed by the State in how it abandons women in their safety needs, their housing needs and their healthcare needs, as we have seen with CervicalCheck. Even now, there are women worried about starting labour alone or getting bad news from scans alone because, despite the Taoiseach’s earlier protestations, there is still no clarity or consistency in maternity hospital attendance. No chosen birthing partner is a visitor in a maternity hospital.

We talk a great game about equality and respect for women and girls, but what we deliver as a State is vastly less because culturally and institutionally there is the old residue that women deserve less and cannot be trusted. When women ring 999 in a domestic violence crisis, there is nobody to pick up their calls because terrified women making emergency calls are not important enough for the State’s police force. They were ignored and cancelled. This patriarchal State is still deeply suspicious of women. You would never know what we might get up to. This State’s mindset allows social welfare inspectors to rifle through a single mother’s knickers drawer. Women no longer get the belt of a crozier but we can still get a right belt from the State when we are waiting on a housing list or in emergency accommodation or when we are desperate to get help for a son or daughter who needs a school place or therapy for their mental health. This speaking time is given to statements on action to tackle sexual, domestic and gender-based violence. Given its own violence against women and in all actions it will take to tackle it, the State and the Dáil could do well to start looking at itself. It can start with the response to Deputy Martin Kenny’s call for an independent investigation into the disgraceful scandal of the cancellation of 999 calls from victims of domestic violence. The action to tackle domestic violence and gender-based violence must start here in the Dáil, in our attitude and in legislation.

Deputy Mark Ward: Domestic abuse is sadly all too common in society and not enough is being done to prevent abuse and support victims. While domestic violence is more commonly perpetrated by male abusers, it can also be committed by women. The domestic violence prevention programme, Choices, only accepts male abusers. There is currently no facility or programme for female abusers. This is deeply concerning and I would like to know the rationale behind it. Abuse committed by female abusers is a serious issue and it must be taken as seriously as abuse committed by men. Survivors of female abusers can often face stigma due to the violence not fitting into society’s understanding and general norms. At least one in seven men in Ireland experiences domestic abuse in his lifetime but less than 1% of the budget for domestic abuse goes to support for male survivors.

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Today, I spoke with Men's Aid, the national charity that supports men and their families who experience domestic violence and coercive control. It receives up to 27 calls a day from men. In the first quarter of the year, it received 1,644 calls for help. These calls come from men from every conceivable walk of life, including carpenters, CEOs, GPs, civil servants, men living on the margins, homeless men and suicidal men. It is disgraceful that Men's Aid is not funded to provide the freefone service. We have a duty as a society to support all victims of domestic abuse. Every victim deserves to be believed and supported. For example, if a man has to leave the family home, there are no supports available and the children often remain with the abuser. Unless this changes, it is very difficult for men to go from being victims of domestic abuse and coercive control to being survivors of domestic abuse and coercive control.

Deputy Verona Murphy: In December last I had the opportunity to speak on the Organisation of Working Time (Domestic Violence Leave) Bill, which was introduced by Sinn Féin and received support from all sides of the House. I will take the opportunity to reinforce some of the things I said on that occasion, but also to highlight some very concerning developments which have come to light in recent weeks.

We all know that abuse can take many different forms: sexual abuse, domestic abuse, emotional abuse, threats, intimidation, manipulation, neglect, financial control, domineering behaviour, coercive control and other threatening and controlling behaviours. The figures available from the National Crime Council show that one in seven women experiences severe abusive behaviour of a physical, sexual or emotional nature from a partner at some point in her life. Its survey estimated that 213,000 women had been severely abused by a partner. These figures display the extent of the problem. The figure of 213,000 will no doubt have increased since then. It is not just women who are on the receiving end of such abuse either, but it appears that men are less likely to admit vulnerability in that regard or to seek help. Plenty of work is being done to encourage men to get help, but there is still work to be done to encourage greater openness.

A couple of major problems presented in the past month with regard to domestic abuse. The first is a reported increase in the level of domestic abuse. Women's Aid reported a 43% rise in contacts with its services from 2019 to 2020. Among the difficulties being expressed is that due to lockdown and working from home, victims found it even more difficult to get away from the abusive situation. People reported being stuck with abusive partners all day, but with no money and no housing it can often seem pointless to think of leaving. We must ensure that the message and train of thought changes through making provision for victims.

The second issue concerns how disclosures of abuse have been dealt with. I shall repeat the final sentence of my speech from last December: "to those who may be currently experiencing domestic abuse ... seek help in any way they can from the gardaí, local support services, a trusted friend or family member. Do not suffer in silence." When I advised victims of domestic abuse to seek support from sources such as the gardaí, I did so in good faith in the belief that if victims of abuse contacted the Garda, they would find the help they needed. Unfortunately, recent reports show that the Garda response in a large number of cases appears to be unsatisfactory to say the least.

The news that gardaí cancelled 3,120 domestic abuse calls is hugely concerning and stomach-churning. The investigation found that only 35% of those cancelled calls were cancelled legitimately. The report says that in a further 20% of calls there was a Garda response but no official record was kept, while the remaining 45% of cancelled calls are still under investigation. I hope we will see a thorough investigation and report on the remaining 45% to identify

the reasons for cancellation and the procedures put in place to prevent the problem from occurring again.

We can all see the problems with revelations like this. We have seen over many years the efforts made by support services and support groups, but campaigns to encourage people to seek help will only be successful if people are confident that the help will be available when sought. Picking up the phone to ask for help is a big step. It is often a very traumatic step and it takes a lot of courage. In the last month we have reports splashed all over the news that domestic abuse calls are being cancelled. What is the damage as a result? How many people will decide to suffer in silence rather than seek help?

In a follow-up to the news of the cancellation of domestic abuse calls, we saw news last week that the Garda had launched a follow-up investigation into more than 19,000 other cancelled emergency calls related to crimes such as sexual offences, assaults and burglaries. I hope there is some innocent explanation for all of this, and that people's cries for help were not ignored or cancelled by gardaí. Nonetheless, we need answers, because the perception is already out there now that help was not always forthcoming when required.

The gardaí involved in the cancellation of calls, not on a legitimate basis, have done a great disservice to their colleagues. We should never paint all gardaí with the same brush, but it is fundamental to the reason we need some very targeted, dedicated and visible campaigns to help to repair some of the reputational damage that reports like this will no doubt have caused.

A great many things can be done to improve the situation for sufferers of abuse and for those who commit abuse. We must recognise that in addition to punishment, in most if not all cases, the abuser needs help with rehabilitation and possibly treatment for an underlying condition which may be causing them to act in an abusive way. Even if the abuse is at such a level where the punishment is a prison sentence, we must have systems in place where the abuser is less likely to reoffend on his or her return to society at the end of the sentence. Otherwise, the punishment is just kicking the can down the road. This is a big challenge. I know work is already ongoing for the rehabilitation of offenders and perhaps we could look at ways of further supporting such rehabilitation. Whatever we do, we must make sure we have the basics right, and to me the basics include confidence in the fact that when an abuse call is put into the Garda it will be dealt with in a thorough and professional manner. We can have numerous awareness campaigns and television ads that encourage people to seek help but, first and foremost, we must ensure that when that help is sought, it is available. When the victim of abuse shows the bravery required to pick up the phone, we must ensure there is a helpful response at the other end in order that the feeling of hopelessness ends in a positive, not a never-ending negative.

I pay tribute to those who are involved in dealing with men and women victims of domestic abuse or violence of any nature, such as Women's Aid, the Wexford Women's Refuge, Still Here and gardaí, many of whom are the only port of call for victims and have done their job to the best of their ability.

Deputy Patrick Costello: I want to start by pointing out that the programme for Government refers to domestic violence as an epidemic, and that was long before Covid hit our shores and long before we saw, as Deputy Paul Murphy said, a pandemic within a pandemic. Many Deputies present in the House today have quoted the figure from Women's Aid of a 43% increase to its helpline, and the Garda is reporting a 22% increase in domestic assaults. The pandemic has heightened and highlighted the challenges we face in terms of dealing with domestic

violence.

It has also highlighted in many ways the inadequacy of our response to domestic violence. According to Safe Ireland, we have one third less refuge space than we should have, based on our population figures. Tusla has told me there are nine counties with no refuge at all. We heard from Deputy Ward about the failure to fund Men's Aid so it can provide even a freephone helpline. These are all examples of how we are not taking domestic violence seriously and how we are not doing enough on domestic violence. These are all issues that need to be addressed quickly.

When a victim of domestic violence makes that difficult and dangerous decision to leave and to escape, we need to ensure the help is there for him or her, that there is housing, refuge and supports, and that when he or she picks up the phone and dials 999, the call will be answered instead of being cancelled. Quite simply, we need to do more in terms of domestic violence.

I think we are doing some things right and I want to dwell briefly on some of these. With regard to the Garda, the roll-out of the district protective services units is an excellent initiative and it provides a great resource for front-line gardaí, many of whom are doing great work in this difficult and challenging area of domestic violence. There is an opportunity missed in not having Tusla ensure social workers are seconded into or linking closely with the district protective services units. I appreciate this is not within the remit of the Department of Justice but of the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth. It is something I have raised repeatedly with the Ministers from those two Departments when given the opportunity to speak. I understand there is roll-out of the Barnahus model from Tusla, which is an excellent model for dealing with child sexual abuse, but we can do better by ensuring there is a link between Tusla and the district protective services units. I appreciate this is an issue for the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth because, as I have said before, when we want someone to dance, we have to make sure they have been asked and that they are invited. While I will, of course, say it to the Minister, Deputy O'Gorman, I would encourage the Department of Justice to reach out to that Minister and to Tusla to ensure creative ways are found to ensure the social work and child protection elements that are needed within the district protective services units are in place. Let us face it: as well as the victims, the children in the home are as much a victim of the emotional abuse perpetrated as part of domestic violence as the person receiving the physical abuse.

I want to take a moment to highlight the story reported in the *Irish Examiner* this morning about the treatment of a female solicitor by, it is to be hoped, a small handful of members of the Irish Prison Service. I understand this incident was investigated and, although I do not know what the next steps are, certainly what was reported in the *Irish Examiner* is very concerning. It is particularly concerning when it comes on top of other stories that have been reported to me by people within the Irish Prison Service of deep-seated sexual harassment within that service. I am concerned that more stories will be coming out, and I hope, if more stories do come out, we respond to them properly. I hope the Minister will reach out to the woman at the heart of the story in the *Irish Examiner* to ensure this does not happen again and that any deeper issues within the Irish Prison Service that it speaks to can also be addressed.

An Ceann Comhairle: It has come to my attention that the Deputy is sharing time with Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan.

Deputy Patrick Costello: Thank you. I was just about to finish as I had run out of things

to say. I will leave it there.

Deputy Christopher O’Sullivan: I apologise to Deputy Costello if I put him off his train of thought. His contribution was well made. I am just finished an online call with Safe Ireland. Speaking to groups in my constituency, such as West Cork Women Against Violence, has very much underlined for me and painted a picture of some of the horrible, horrific and terrible experiences women in particular have gone through. This has been exacerbated over the course of this pandemic, but it is something that has existed for a long time and continues to be a huge societal issue.

The ask of these representative groups is very simple, namely, that we put domestic violence right at the very centre of Government policy. Their ask is simple and straightforward and they do not mince words. They want domestic violence and how it is dealt with by the Government to be taken out of Tusla, which at the end of the day is a child and family body, and instead to have its own place within Government and within a Department. I echo that call today because it is vital if we are serious about dealing with this. By doing that, we can stop the silence, the stigma and the shame that is associated with domestic violence, which is vital going forward. We can create an atmosphere where groups like West Cork Women Against Violence can excel in terms of the services they provide to women who find themselves in these horrific situations through no fault of their own. I reiterate that call today from Safe Ireland.

There has been discussion in regard to the recent revelations about Garda calls and, again, the ask of these representative bodies is very simple. At the moment, the training received by gardaí in terms of responding to domestic violence call-outs, which make up a large proportion of their work and their call-outs, is completely inadequate. Training needs to be increased in Templemore from the start of their training and to be updated and developed so that An Garda Síochána is in a position to deal with all incidents of domestic violence, gender-based violence and sexual violence. Another example of how this violence towards women is going online is the story of a brave young woman in my constituency who experienced online sexual violence against her where an Instagram account purporting to be her, using her image and profile, was set up with explicit images. You can imagine the horrific experience that young woman went through when that happened to her. She made the point that the gardaí were not equipped to deal with that situation. They need to be. That can only be done with intense training to deal with those situations.

I refer to the lack of accommodation, especially emergency accommodation. The West Cork Women Against Violence Project funded its own safehouse to cater for one family. We need to look at this. We cannot have a situation where women who have these horrific experiences are put into accommodation such as bed and breakfast accommodation where they may be surrounded by more men. You can imagine what a traumatic experience that would be after having been through a domestic violence situation. That needs to be addressed. It can be addressed by implementing and, most importantly, funding the recommendations that I hope will be in the Tusla accommodation review. If we can put domestic violence at the centre of Government policy, then we can, as a nation, be at the forefront of responding to domestic violence.

Deputy Michael Collins: Tackling violence in domestic situations can be difficult for local gardaí. It helps when the local garda has some knowledge of a person. This is why we must encourage gardaí to settle into our communities and become involved in the area. A worrying recent development has seen Ireland being placed on a watchlist by the US Government due to failure to combat human trafficking. The trafficking in persons, TIP, report 2021 confirms that

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for the second year running, Ireland will remain on a watchlist due to its inadequate response in tackling the problem. Ireland has been placed on this watchlist by the US Government for failing to combat human trafficking as migrant women continue to be brought to Ireland and forced into the sex trade. This is a dreadful reflection of the lack of urgency shown by this Government to deal with this issue, despite being aware of the situation.

Domestic abuse victims can be women and men. One in seven domestic abuse calls is from men. The other six are from women, which is six too many. We must encourage men to make the calls themselves because they have had a mental block on doing it over the years. Domestic violence against women must be stamped out and the law must be adhered to. Strong sentences must be forthcoming for those who carry out this kind of sick crime. Gardaí come in for much criticism here. They deal with this daily. We always look at the negatives. No one is prepared to look at the positives when the gardaí work on this. As I said, local gardaí are important and should be acknowledged for the work they do on this, because it is a difficult situation. Somebody mentioned that very few think of the children. The children need to be thought about. It does not just affect the man or the woman but the children in the family too. It is a sad reflection on society to think that during the pandemic, there was a 43% increase in domestic violence, mainly against women.

I thank the gardaí for doing such good work in this area over the years. Mistakes have been made but those who have not made mistakes have made nothing. I have often heard that. The letter of the law must be adhered to and the gardaí are the only ones who can make sure that is done. I take the opportunity to acknowledge the retirement of a local garda, Martin Hegarty, in Castletownbere. I thank him on behalf the people of Beara and west Cork, where he has spent the last 30 years. He is a prime example of what community policing is all about. On behalf of the people of west Cork and Beara, I wish him the best and a long retirement. I hope that we will tackle the issue of domestic violence. Whether it is against males or females, it needs to be at the forefront of political agendas.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: This debate is hollow and meaningless, as the Government has consistently failed to address key issues concerning domestic and gender-based violence over the last year. The ongoing lack of action by the Government is both worrying and pathetic. For example, there is a disgraceful delay in publishing two reports which aim to highlight the grave nature of the situation and utter lack of provision of services and emergency accommodation to assist sufferers of domestic and gender-based violence. This House continues to have statements on domestic and gender-based violence but there is an ongoing failure on the part of the Government to address the issues raised time and again. During the pandemic, there has been a horrific increase in domestic violence.

The physical, spiritual and social cost of domestic violence is shocking. The economic cost is €2.2 billion. I salute An Garda Síochána in Tipperary, including Sergeant Ray Moloney, Sergeant Kieran O'Regan in Clonmel, Garda Claire Murphy, and the community gardaí in Cahir, Jenny Coff and Noel Clavin. When the new sexual violence unit was set up in Tipperary, it was far oversubscribed and needed two sergeants and ten gardaí. The gardaí are zealous and want to do their job, which is fabulous, but it has been blocked institutionally. Many State organisations are blocking it. Commissioner Drew Harris has to take responsibility. I salute the staff in Cuan Saor women's refuge in Clonmel, including Geraldine Mullane, Verona Nugent, Breeda Bell and many others, as well as all the volunteers who help.

Some 3,120 calls to 999 about domestic violence were cancelled, which is despicable and

shocking. Problems are continuing, including in the Prison Service. There was a story in the *Irish Examiner* today about a solicitor and what she was expected to do when she went in to meet a client. The harassment, coercion, intimidation and victimisation of decent prison officers that is being carried out by the cabal that runs some of our prisons is disgusting. I have raised it here before, as has Deputy Peadar Tóibín. We have spoken and written to the Minister. I have written to the Minister and may as well write to Clew Bay or Bray Head because I have not got a response. There is an institutional cover-up of the bullying and intimidation of good, decent prison officers. They are coerced, have false allegations and smear campaigns against them, and have letters sent to their homes making scandalous allegations. The prison authorities and the Minister for Justice refuse to deal with this. Some of this is done against female prison officers too. It is done by a power-hungry group that wants to keep control. That is systemic in our society and Government Departments refuse to deal with it, since it is supposed to be okay because it is institutional. It is not acceptable to drive people demented, to drive them to suicide or to drive good prison officers out of their jobs. This needs to be investigated. Reports and statements here are no good. Proper, robust legislation is required to allow the gardaí to do their job.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I do not want to use the word “welcome” because I cannot convey my sense of frustration that I am back here talking about domestic abuse during statements. The only change here is that we are talking about actions to address domestic abuse. That is a slight positive change.

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The Taoiseach’s speech was very good on generalities and positive messages with very few specifics. If we are talking about actions, I had hoped, at the very least, he would have given specifics. Deputy Howlin reinforced that by stating we should all collectively give a message to victims of domestic violence that they are not alone. I do not think that is my role. My role is to ensure that services are adequately resourced and that I use every opportunity in the Dáil to hold the system to account.

The Taoiseach’s speech today was not adequate. He referred to an audit and a report by Tusla. In response to a question I asked last September, I found out that Tusla was carrying out a review of services on the ground. This was the most basic review of the need for refuges on the ground, and whether they were adequate, yet here we are today. I hope the Minister of State tells us in her closing statement when that review will be published, why it was delayed and what is going on. The terms of reference of the report looking at the segmentation of services stated it would be finished by March. It is now July and the Taoiseach made a speech today giving us no reason that has not been published. Maybe the Minister of State could address that in her closing remarks.

The Policing Authority tells us the response from An Garda was not adequate. In May, the chairperson expressed his, and the authority’s, acute disappointment and intense frustration that information in the possession of, and immediately available to, An Garda Síochána had not been, and was not being, provided to the authority. Again, the Taoiseach did not give us an idea when the internal review by An Garda will be completed. There are no dates. My colleague, Deputy McGrath, referred to the cost. At a conservative estimate, the cost of not treating domestic violence is more than €2.2 billion per year. Researchers from the university in my city tell me that figure is grossly underestimated.

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We need to deal with domestic violence on every level, but, first, let us please stop talking about it and let the Taoiseach come back to tell us about the actions, one, two and three, identified by the Minister for Justice almost a year ago. I would appreciate it if that could be done by the Minister of State. That would be progress.

Deputy Marian Harkin: We are told that one in every five women experiences violence, domestic violence and abuse in their relationships. That is a gut-wrenching statistic. If we really think about what that means, the eradication of domestic violence needs to be right at the top of our agenda. We are talking about so many women. Approximately 370,000 women will experience some form of violence or abuse in their lifetime. That is the population of counties Sligo, Leitrim, Roscommon, Donegal and half of County Mayo. If we consider that probably as many children will also be in the same position, living in homes where coercive control and domestic violence are to be found, then we see the incredibly negative, heartbreaking impact on their lives as well as the negative societal impact.

Sometimes I think that we, as a society, do not fully appreciate the extent or horror of domestic violence, where women and children are afraid to live in their own homes. This afternoon, I attended most of a webinar facilitated by Safe Ireland, which gave us a comprehensive and thought-provoking picture of the journey victims of domestic violence take from a fearful coercive situation to one of independent living. The challenges faced by those trying to navigate that journey are overwhelming. The objective of this webinar was to let us know how we, as legislators, can make a difference to those who are navigating a journey, which was called, “No Going Back”. Those who spoke talked of the critical co-dependencies that keep women and children in homes where there is domestic violence. They talked about the four pillars of legal protection, health services, secure income and housing. I do not have time to go through them, but each is an important piece of the jigsaw that helps women make that journey.

As Mary McDermott said, we have 19th-century infrastructure in this country trying to address a 21st-century problem. That is why our response must be comprehensive, co-ordinated and resourced. I heard the Taoiseach speak earlier about different Government agencies and ongoing audits. That is fine, but we should be well past that point. The problem is immediate and massive. Speaking of 19th-century infrastructure, on too many occasions I have had to raise the fact that the constituency I represent, covering Sligo-Leitrim, north Roscommon and south Donegal, does not have a domestic violence refuge. Victims have to access rental accommodation. It is scandalous and unacceptable that these black spots for refuges for victims of domestic violence exist across the country.

We do not need an audit on this. We know when something could be tackled immediately. I hope I never again have to stand in this House and say that there is no refuge for victims of domestic violence, or no plans for such a refuge, in my constituency.

Minister of State at the Department of Justice (Deputy Hildegard Naughton): I welcome the statement from the Taoiseach and the shared level of concern demonstrated by Deputies. I also welcome the opportunity to hear their views on how we ensure the best outcomes for victims of domestic abuse and violence. No person or family should have to endure these experiences. My Department is fully committed to combating this type of violence.

Along with the Minister for Justice, Deputy Humphreys, one of my key focus areas is the continued implementation of Supporting a Victim’s Journey. We are working to create a victim-centred system that supports and empowers victims and gives them the confidence to engage

with all services knowing they will be supported, informed and treated with respect and dignity at every point and by every person they come into contact with. The supports being introduced will be provided regardless of whether criminal proceedings are in train and will extend beyond the trial and verdict because victims do not stop needing support at the end of a trial.

The way our system has historically treated victims of sexual violence has, quite simply, not been good enough. Victims did not feel supported and the system did not protect them from further trauma. When it was published, it was made clear that Supporting A Victim's Journey was to be a living document and we are continuing to listen to victims as they courageously share their experience of the criminal justice system with us. We are considering how best to address additional concerns that have been raised and will continue to prioritise this aspect of our work.

The issue of emergency calls from victims of domestic violence not being responded to has also been raised by a number of Deputies. It is, of course, of particular concern to us all that anyone experiencing domestic abuse and, indeed, anyone in a vulnerable position, who summoned the courage to seek assistance may not have received it. It is vital that the best interests of victims and anyone whose calls were cancelled inappropriately are the priority and focus as this is being investigated.

In February, the then Minister for Justice, Deputy Helen McEntee, requested the Policing Authority to oversee the ongoing work by An Garda Síochána to review how 999 calls were handled. It is welcome that there has been ongoing engagement on this issue between the authority and the Garda Commissioner at both their public and private meetings. The report from the authority on this matter will be provided to the Minister, Deputy Humphreys, and she will consider any recommendations made in that report. Importantly, the Garda Commissioner has assured the Minister that when someone calls 999 now, he or she can expect and trust that An Garda Síochána will help and, of course, that should always be the case.

When I launched the Women's Aid impact report for 2020 last month, I was immediately taken aback by the headline figures of more than 30,000 disclosures of abuse against women and children, almost 25,000 disclosures of domestic violence, including coercive control, and 340 disclosures of rape to the Women's Aid helpline. Each of these calls represents a woman or, perhaps, a family in dreadful circumstances, desperate for help. It was upsetting and it is an area that is justifiably a priority for this Government.

I was heartened also at the report launch. It is important to recognise the incredible work undertaken by everyone across the sector who plays such an important, but usually unheralded, role as we strive to achieve our strategic objectives on domestic abuse intervention. This collective contribution not only brings a focus to the often hidden consequences of domestic violence but also provides the support services so vital to those who reach out. I share that collective aim. I am committed to making sure we have the necessary systems in place to ensure victims' needs are met in every practical, legal and emotional way.

Supporting victims is crucial and this means, in part, having in place robust legislation to bring perpetrators to justice. The landmark Domestic Violence Act 2018 recognises in law the devastating impact of coercive control on those on whom it is inflicted. I echo the Taoiseach in welcoming recent convictions for coercive control. It conveys the message that perpetrators cannot act with impunity, and it changes how as a society we view and tackle such heinous behaviour. The bravery of the victims in these cases is to be commended. It is hoped that as more convictions follow, other victims of coercive control will feel confident to come forward.

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The Taoiseach spoke earlier about my Department's continuing commitment and response to combating domestic abuse and the wider issues of domestic, sexual and gender-based violence. The Taoiseach and a number of Deputies referred to the audit on Government responsibility, the review being undertaken by Tusla of emergency accommodation, and the development of the third national strategy. I can inform Deputies the audit report has been finalised and I expect to bring it to Government before the summer recess. I understand the review of emergency accommodation is also nearing completion.

It is vital we have in place the right structures and supports for victims. This is a personal priority for the Minister, Deputy O'Gorman and me. The information from the audit and review will feed into the development of the third national strategy to address domestic, sexual and gender-based violence. This whole-of-government strategy will place a priority on prevention and reduction, it will include a national preventative strategy, and it is on track to be adopted before the end of the year.

Domestic abuse can devastate an entire family unit. It is important to mention a number of important actions under way in my Department to ensure we have a justice system that works for families. A family justice oversight group has been established to agree a high-level vision and key medium and longer term objectives for the development of a national family justice system. In parallel, a dedicated family court structure is being established under the forthcoming family court Bill. As part of its work, a public consultation on the future of the family justice system has been recently completed and a dedicated consultation with children and young people will commence later this year. As I mentioned, a family court Bill is being drafted and its enactment will be a key element in the development of a more efficient and user-friendly family court system. This will be a system that puts families at the centre of its activities, provides access to specialist supports, and encourages the use of alternative dispute resolution in family law proceedings.

I thank Deputies for their invaluable contributions on this important and often difficult issue. We are working hard on it and will continue to do so, liaising closely with all relevant groups and stakeholders across the sector to meet the needs of victims and to continue to combat domestic abuse.

Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters

An Ceann Comhairle: I wish to advise the House of the following matters in respect of which notice has been given under Standing Order 37 and the name of the Member in each case: (1) Deputy Paul McAuliffe - to discuss supports for taxi drivers; (2) Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan - to discuss the lack of water and wastewater infrastructure in rural areas of Cork North-Central; (3) Deputies Fergus O'Dowd and Ruairí Ó Murchú - to discuss the need for a public inquiry into the Covid-related deaths at Dealgan House nursing home; (4) Deputy Brian Stanley - to discuss the important role of local employment services and jobs clubs as part of labour activation; (5) Deputy Jennifer Whitmore - to discuss unresolved water quality issues at Barndarrig, County Wicklow; (6) Deputy Bernard J. Durkan - to discuss the provision of a suitable educational place for a person (details supplied); (7) Deputy Thomas Pringle - to discuss the Brandon report and the HSE response; (8) Deputy Colm Burke - to discuss reinstating the temporary assistance payment scheme, TAPS, for nursing homes; (9) Deputy Paul Donnelly - to discuss the Danu school in Dublin 15 in regard to its move to Riversdale Community College;

(10) Deputies Mattie McGrath, Carol Nolan, Michael Collins and Richard O'Donoghue - the need for a full investigative financial review into the use of taxpayers' funding to An Taisce through various Departments and agencies; (11) Deputy Brendan Griffin - to discuss the local improvement scheme backlog and additional funding to clear the list; (12) Deputy Joan Collins - to discuss if mandatory hotel quarantine for UK visitors by air and sea has been considered following the announcement of the lifting of all UK restrictions on 19 July; (13) Deputy Darren O'Rourke - to discuss the growing trend of scam phone calls and need to address it; (14) Deputy Matt Carthy - to discuss plans for ensuring the opening of the Group Home in Carrickmacross for people with physical and sensory disabilities; (15) Deputy Joe McHugh - to discuss the difficult circumstances of a family (details supplied) due to mica in their home; (16) Deputy Holly Cairns - to discuss the environmental implications of the granting of a licence for a salmon farm in Bantry, County Cork; (17) Deputy Maurice Quinlivan - to discuss progress in efforts to reduce overcrowding and the number of people being treated on trolleys at University Hospital Limerick; (18) Deputy Jackie Cahill - to discuss the blanket ban on peat harvesting for the horticulture industry and the delay in issuing a licence for harvesting for summer 2021; and (19) Deputy Kieran O'Donnell - to discuss an update on plans to review and expand the living city initiative scheme.

The matters raised by Deputies Paul McAuliffe, Fergus O'Dowd and Ruairí Ó Murchú, Joan Collins and Brendan Griffin have been selected for discussion.

Ban on Rent Increases Bill 2021: Second Stage [Private Members]

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: I move: "That the Bill be now read a Second Time."

I am sharing time with a number of colleagues. The first legislation I introduced following my election to the Dáil was the Rent Certainty Bill 2016. At that stage, rents had been already rising sharply for two years. The purpose of that Bill was to link rent reviews to an index such as the consumer price index. As CPI was at virtually zero at that stage, that would have constrained rents and given renters a break. Unfortunately, on that night, on the floor of the Dáil, a coalition of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael Deputies defeated the Bill. Not once, but on five separate occasions during the course of the previous Dáil, legislation and amendments tabled by Sinn Féin and other Opposition spokespersons to do exactly that were blocked by Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. The impact of those votes was very significant. Rents continued to spiral out of control and renters continued to be burdened with ever-increasing rents, not only placing themselves in enormous family hardship, but also damaging the local economy because that reduced the disposable income they had to spend on local goods and services.

The introduction of the rent pressure zones commencing in January 2017 did very little to constrain that rental inflation. Even though it was meant to cap rents at 4% annually, in and of itself too high, it did nothing of the sort. Many loopholes and little effective policing in the early stages of that regime meant that, for many renters, increases over the past four years have been in the region of 18% to 38%, depending on where they live. What that means in financial terms is that those renters who have experienced the burden of rent increases because of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael objections to rent certainty are today paying between €4,500 and €6,500 more annually than they would have paid otherwise had the Sinn Féin Bill been supported in 2016.

The problem now is rents are so high that linking them to inflation is not enough. That was

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a policy for four or five years ago, not for today. The reason for that is inflation is rising. The most recent figures from the Central Statistics Office, CSO, clearly show that the harmonised index of consumer prices rose by 1.9% last month and it is on an upward trajectory. For the overwhelming majority of renters, no rent increase - not 4%, 3% or 2% - is acceptable. It is for that reason Sinn Féin is retableting its ban on rent increases legislation.

The legislation is simple. It seeks to give renters a three-year breathing space by introducing an emergency ban on rent increases for three years. This is one of three key measures for which Sinn Féin has been arguing for a number of years. We also want to see rents reduced. We believe the quickest and most legally sound way of doing this is a refundable tax credit that would put a month's rent back into the pocket of every renter. We also need to see dramatic increases in direct State investment in affordable cost rental to deliver somewhere in the region of, on average, 4,000 affordable cost rental units annually with rents of somewhere between €700 and €900 per month, depending on size and location.

There are two arguments that were made against rent certainty when we introduced it and there are two arguments that are often made against a ban on rent increases. The first is that it will discourage new supply in the market. I do not accept that, particularly given the scale of investment we are advocating for cost rental. The idea that a private investor could not make a reasonable return where rents are at the highest point since the Celtic tiger era, or higher, makes no sense. There is also an argument that it could be unconstitutional. Again, eminent professors of constitutional law in Trinity College have debunked this. In addition, we had a two-year ban on rent increases before, introduced by Fine Gael and the Labour Party. If that was constitutional, a three-year ban would also be.

Our rental system is broken. Renters simply cannot take any more. Linking rents to inflation is the wrong policy at this point. We need something much more dramatic and much more urgent. That is why an emergency three-year ban on rent increases, coupled with the other policies I have outlined, is the only approach that will give renters a break. Any Deputy in this House who wants to stand up for renters has no other choice but to support this Bill, which I commend to the House.

Deputy Denise Mitchell: For years, we in Sinn Féin, led by Deputy Ó Broin, have called for a rent freeze to stop rents, which are already out of control, from increasing further and further hammering young people. Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and vested interests including property speculators have allowed the so-called housing market to dictate how much money can be taken from a young person's salary to secure a roof over his or her head. Their policies have robbed our young people of hope. These parties' unwavering defence of the property market rather than young people sent those young people to transform politics at the last election and to demand change but they still did not take the message. They cobbled together an unwanted three-party coalition that has maintained the *status quo*. Rents are out of control and the Government is showing blind loyalty to the institutional landlords that are sucking the life out of our young people for profit. The Minister told us that a rent freeze could not be introduced and that it would be unconstitutional. Covid changed everything, however. Overnight, the Government rightly introduced a rent freeze, which proved that its refusal to introduce a rent freeze was driven by policy.

Young people will be watching this debate tonight. In the week of a by-election, the issue of the housing crisis is being raised at door after door. These young people will eagerly await the outcome of this debate. The Minister can stand on the side of young people. He can sup-

port this legislation and introduce a rent freeze for three years. He can finally tell the housing market that his Government is taking a stand and intervening at last. Alternatively, he can vote it down. That is his choice. Young people are not fools. Change will come and the Government will not be able to stop it. It tried the last time but the realignment of Irish politics will continue and Sinn Féin and young people will be at the centre of it.

Deputy Thomas Gould: Rents in Cork city, one of the Minister's rent pressure zones, rose by 6.3% in the last 12 months despite a ban on rent increases being in effect for five months during that time. This figure proves that rent pressure zones do not work and have never worked. The average rent in Cork city is €1,483 per month. In 2020, people on the minimum wage took home an average of €363 a week. How are people supposed to live like that? How can the Minister sit by, watch people living on such low incomes and then say it is okay for rents to increase by 8% this year? Does he realise how many people are struggling to live and are living week-by-week? Does anyone in this Government ever take a minute to consider what it feels like to be constantly worried that today is the day on which the letter will come telling one that one's rent is going to be increased and that, if one cannot pay, one will lose one's home? Sinn Féin's Bill would give people some peace of mind and security. Is that too much to ask for?

People say that the legacy of the last decade of Fine Gael government is a generation of renters. The legacy of this Government will be its absolute failure to tackle investment funds. One of the largest investment funds in this State took in almost €30 million in rent last year. Ordinary people have struggled over the last 12 months but we should not worry because, thanks to this Government's complete failure to tackle the rental crisis, this investment fund increased the amount of rent it received in 2020 by €2 million. While ordinary people struggle to get by, the Government having stripped them of any protections or safety, investment funds are increasing their turnover. This is what Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have done to this State and to ordinary renters.

Deputy Claire Kerrane: I will use my time to talk about rents outside of the rent pressure zones. I refer to places in my constituency such as Roscommon town and Ballinasloe, County Galway. Rents in County Roscommon have increased by more than 9% in the last year alone, with the average rent now €783 per month and continuing to rise. The average rent in Ballinasloe is €743, which is an increase of almost 8% on this time last year. However, in many cases, rents are much higher. County Galway is one of eight counties in which the average rent countywide is more than €1,000. These are not big urban areas but rural towns in the west of Ireland. The 2016 census showed that the majority of people living in towns like Ballinasloe are renters who are either renting privately or through the local authority. Those tenants renting privately have few or no protections. I have been contacted by people in Ballinasloe whose rents have increased by between €200 and €300 in one go. What are we to say to these workers and their families? Where rents are increased, tenants have no choice but to struggle on, paying more. They have no other option. A constituent put it to me that there was nowhere else to rent in town and that they could not afford to save a deposit.

Supply is also a major issue. As I stand here this evening, there is one one-bed apartment available to rent in Roscommon town. In Ballinasloe, there are two. That is it. People are being trapped. They are paying extortionate rents, which are still rising, and are unable to save a deposit for a house. This is particularly impossible for young people starting out. On top of increasing rents, we saw a EUROSTAT report last month which showed that goods and services are the joint second most expensive in all of Europe. Irish prices for housing, heating and light are the highest in Europe at 78% above the EU average. Now is therefore exactly the right time

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to ban rent increases. There was nothing in what the Minister announced last week with regard to rents that will help a single renter in constituencies like mine.

Deputy Matt Carthy: When the Tánaiste accused Sinn Féin of promising free housing, he exposed the Fianna Fáil-Fine Gael ideology-driven agenda that lit the embers of the housing crisis and fanned the sparks, leading to the catastrophe we witness in every community in this State. This catastrophe means that most young people cannot even dream of ever owning their own home. I grew up in a council house. It was never a free house. Rent was paid in line with the income coming into the house. The State bought an asset and it was paid back in spades. Public house building was an investment that benefited all within society. Those who needed help were able to get it, those who wanted to rent were able to do so affordably and those who had relatively good incomes were able to purchase or build at a reasonable price with a good expectation that the property's value would rise in a steady but stable manner. Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael governments decided to change tack not because they were opposed to free houses, but because they wanted to make housing a speculative commodity. In fact, these governments did provide free houses but only to vultures, cuckoo funds and speculators. Last year, the Government handed €800 million in subsidies to private landlords. This year, the figure is set to top €1 billion. That is not even to mention the tax breaks, loopholes and sweetheart deals. The Minister is providing free gaffs all right, but he is giving them to the very people who are fleecing our renters across the country. This catastrophe was a long time in the making. It will take a long-term strategy and policy approach such as that presented by Deputy Ó Broin to resolve it. We need proposals to help those at the coalface of the natural outworkings of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael policies. They are policies of boom and bust cycles, homelessness and out-of-control rent prices. Deputy Ó Broin is bringing forward the proposals that will make a difference. This Bill has been brought forward because it is what renters need. It is an opportunity for Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael Deputies to recognise the crisis of their making and the catastrophe that is visiting families the length and breadth of this State. This Bill is an opportunity to turn the tide and recognise, once and for all, that our renters need a break. It will provide that break.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: I commend my colleague, Deputy Ó Broin, on bringing forward this Bill. It is timely and necessary. Government policy continues to drive up the price of rents. They are now in excess of anything anyone can afford, as are house prices. In many senses, it seems to be mission accomplished for the Government.

In my home county of Galway, rents have increased by 6% on last year, while rent for a double room in Galway city has increased by a massive 16%. The rent pressure zones, RPZs, the Minister's predecessor introduced were always likely to fail and now we have ample evidence for this. They were supposed to limit increases in certain areas to 4% a year but, as Threshold CEO John-Mark McCafferty pointed out, Galway city is a designated RPZ and rents for double rooms have increased 16% over the past year. Mr. McCafferty said this "is yet more evidence that the RPZs are not being adhered to".

Deputy Ó Broin's Bill seeks to amend section 19 of the Residential Tenancies Act by capping the current rent on new and existing tenancies for three years. In Galway city, not far from where I live in Mervue, a build-to-rent apartment block is being developed. We know these funds are investing in property to make the maximum return, which means more sky-high rents for tenants and pricing local people out of the market. The Minister for Finance decided to exempt these funds from the 10% stamp duty charge that was supposed to deter them from these kinds of bulk purchases. This was done against the advice of his top civil servants and will mean more bulk purchases by investment funds and ever-climbing rents for ordinary working

people in Galway city who cannot afford to live or buy in the city. That is not good enough. Policy after policy by this Government excludes people in Galway from renting and buying in their local areas. We saw the same disregard for the former top civil servants of the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, the ESRI and the Central Bank, who said the shared equity scheme would push up prices. It is not good enough. We need action now. This is a good Bill and should be supported by Government.

Deputy Brian Stanley: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the Bill, which is about easing the pressure on renters by bringing in a three-year rent freeze. It can be done, as has been shown during Covid. We have witnessed a massive escalation in rental costs across the country, including Laois-Offaly, over the past decade. People need a rent freeze to give them a break.

Since 2013, rents in County Laois have increased by 85.4% and in County Offaly by 67.2%. Those are whopping increases by any standards. This surge in rental costs has put an incredible burden and stress on families and workers struggling to keep a roof over their heads. This has consequences for the health services and a range of other services in the State. Figures recently released by *Daft.ie* outline that, despite Covid, rents went up by 6.6% in Offaly and 3.4% in Laois in the past 12 months. Increasing rents also drive up house prices, as they make it more attractive to landlords to buy and rent them, which pushes out couples and single people who want to buy a home, get going in life and secure a roof over their head.

Sinn Féin proposes a range of measures to tackle the housing crisis. This rent freeze is one part of our plan. We would also introduce tax credit of 8.5% to put a month's rent into renter's pockets and ease the pressure. We would increase capital investment to roll out affordable-to-purchase and cost-rental homes at a significant scale. There are no affordable to-rent or to-buy homes in Laois or Offaly, nor are there plans to supply them, unfortunately. This needs to change. The Government appears to have no plans for renters or solutions for those looking to buy a home at an affordable price.

The problem facing us of pensioners who will be forced to rent privately without sufficient income is also worrying. This is coming down the track quickly. A generation of people in their 30s, 40s and 50s have missed out on the opportunity to buy a home or secure a local authority home. How does the Government intend to provide them with secure housing as pensioners? Will HAP and rent subsidies be introduced with more taxpayers' money being thrown into the pockets of landlords? Is that the solution? We need to face this head-on.

Sinn Féin is putting forward a range of solutions, one of them this evening, to the housing crisis. We hope the Government and other Deputies will back these.

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage(Deputy Darragh O'Brien): I move amendment No. 1:

To delete all words after "That" and substitute the following:

"Dáil Éireann resolves that the Ban on Rent Increases Bill 2021 be deemed to be read a second time this day 12 months, to allow for the Government's Residential Tenancies (No. 2) Bill 2021, which is due to be enacted shortly and which will provide a change from the 4 per cent per annum rent increase restriction in Rent Pressure Zones to a rent increase restriction requiring that any rent increase cannot exceed the percentage rate of general inflation, to take effect."

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I will explain the rationale of the amendment as I respond to the Bill. I thank Deputy Ó Broin for bringing forward the Bill again and providing me with an opportunity to outline the actions Government has taken so far in a 12-month period to protect renters. I regret that some of his colleagues have used the opportunity to attack without trying to advance their position. That is fine. One would have previously questioned, as to the timing of the tabling of this Bill, whether it was about renters or about Sinn Féin and the by-election due to be held on Thursday. Having said that, to be fair to Deputy Ó Broin, he has tabled this legislation previously, as recently as last year. I will address it in my response.

I will bring forward further rent reform legislation in the autumn. The Government has tabled a timed amendment to this Bill and will consider it again on Second Stage in 12 months when the impact of the new legislation I have brought forward in respect of increased restrictions by the Residential Tenancies (No. 2) Bill 2021, which passed unanimously last night in Seanad Éireann, has been given time to be felt on the ground. I expect that replacing the current 4% cap on annual rent with general inflation will result in far lower increases for an estimated three quarters of all tenancies in the RPZs. This significant reform will be felt by those renters who are struggling, including individuals, families and pensioners. I speak to these people every day, as I am sure many Deputies do. They are fed up of the insecurity and many would prefer to own their own home. That is why the affordable housing legislation the Government is progressing simultaneously is so important. It provides for a new cost-rental model whereby tenants will pay a minimum of 25% below market rents for secure tenancies. It also provides a pathway to home ownership for those currently paying rents, stuck in a rent trap and who want to get out of it.

The timed amendment we have tabled clearly demonstrates that Government is open to re-viewing the position 12 months down the road in consultation with stakeholders and taking any legal advice from the Attorney General. The facts remain the same. A ban on rent increases alone will not increase the supply of rental accommodation. It may have the reverse effect. Supply is a key constraint across public and private. We are addressing that in our housing for all plan. Rents rise when demand outstrips supply.

I am sure Members of all parties and none can agree that, judging from the past 12 months, the Government has been responsive in tackling rental issues. In less than a year, we have enacted four rent protection Bills, backed by financial support to help protect the most vulnerable renters from the impact of the pandemic. A fifth Bill, as I mentioned, is currently making its way through the Oireachtas and I expect it to be passed this Thursday. This demonstrates the seriousness and speed with which the Government is determined to protect renters. The Bill we are bringing forward this week represents the most significant change in rental terms for at least five years.

To stay within the law and serve the sector well, we need to strike a balance between restricting the level of rents tenants are paying and keeping ordinary landlords in the system. We have discussed many times in the House the unintended or, indeed, intended consequences of supply being reduced in the sector, which will further exacerbate the problem. However, some of those who have spoken on behalf of the Sinn Féin Bill have simply ignored that fact because it does not suit their narrative. We must have legislation that is appropriate, based in reality and legal, and that is what we are doing. I will bring forward further measures in the autumn and I propose to keep this Bill under review.

I welcome the support of Members of all parties and none for the changes I have made thus

far, which will have an immediate and positive impact. We also firmly need to increase the supply within the sector by way of the provision of affordable rental housing, affordable purchase homes and public homes. The new rent restrictions will take effect upon the passing of the new Bill this week and will result in far lower increases for an estimated three quarters of all tenancies. The harmonised index of consumer prices has shown an average increase of 0.73% over the past three years. The new measure will be impactful for the people experiencing difficulties. As I said, all Senators agreed to the provisions last night. The Sinn Féin response to the Government's amendments to reform the operation of the RPZs is to reintroduce a Bill that has been debated a number of times and does not address some of the legal questions that have been raised in respect of its provisions. Nevertheless, it deserves to be looked at in more detail. We will examine both responses on Second Stage in 12 months but I will quickly respond to them now.

Section 2 proposes to ban increases in rent for existing and new tenancies for three years. Specifically, it proposes that, for existing tenancies, no rent increase will be allowed for three years. For new tenancies, the new rent would be set in line with the RTB rent index for equivalent dwellings in that local electoral area and no increases would be allowed for three years. The ban on rent increases would be subject to an annual review. The Government's response is more comprehensive and targeted. We recognise that some landlords also find themselves on the wrong side of the Covid-19 pandemic. I have heard the main Opposition spokesperson discuss that on many occasions but it does not appear to be recognised in any of the legislation brought forward by his party.

We also must recognise the protected property rights that are in place. Building on the urgent Covid-19 rental protections introduced by Government, the Planning and Development, and Residential Tenancies, Act 2020 provided for temporary modifications to the operation of the Residential Tenancies Act 2004, subject to certain conditions, such that for a period from 11 January to 12 July 2021, a 90-day, rather than 28-day, termination notice applies where a tenant is in rent arrears due to the Covid-19 pandemic and at risk of losing his or her tenancy. The earliest termination date allowed in such circumstances is 13 July 2021. We have now gone further than that by bringing forward proposals, which we hope will have the support of everyone in this House, to extend further, right through to 12 January 2022, the protections for tenants affected most by the Covid-19 pandemic and at risk of losing their tenancy. Some speakers have said we brought no measures forward on rent but they have supported four of the five Bills I introduced. I have also replaced the current cap of 4% on annual rent increases. Rents will only be able to go up, if necessary, in line with general inflation, as recorded in the harmonised index of consumer prices. I will expand on this further in the House on Thursday night, when we debate the Seanad amendments to the Residential Tenancies (No. 2) Bill 2021.

The Government is helping tenants. They are important and we want to protect them and ensure their tenancies are more secure. We will do further work on that in the autumn. Taking account of that, we need to ensure everybody in the sector is treated fairly. I do not believe Sinn Féin's Bill would ultimately help renters. The temporary fix proposed in the Bill would negatively impact on supply and lead to a further loss of individual landlords. Whether people want to admit it, landlords are needed in the sector until we are providing more public homes, cost-rental housing and affordable purchase homes. The exit of more landlords from the market will place further pressure on future rents. The measures in the Bill that passed in the Seanad last night, and which I hope will be passed by this House, provide a timely, effective and proportionate response to help the most vulnerable tenants impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic. As I

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said, that Bill represents the most significant change to rental terms in at least five years and is the fifth Bill I have brought forward to protect renters.

I thank the Deputies who have used their time to put forward the Bill we are debating as, in their belief, part of the solution to the problems we face. There is no single, silver-bullet solution to rents. There are many solutions and a multifaceted approach is required. That is what the Government is doing. A realistic way of dealing with this would be to assess, over a 12-month period, how the measures we hope to pass tomorrow night, with the support of Deputies across all parties and none, are taking effect. We must have a proportionate response that is not going to impact on supply in the market.

Deputy Paul Donnelly: I am sharing time with Deputies Munster, Ellis and Cronin. Regarding the Minister's amendment to the Bill, the people will recognise the can being kicked down the road again. Unfortunately, unlike him and most of us in the House, they cannot wait 12 months. Their rent is due every month. The Minister's do-nothing attitude this evening will not help anyone, but our Bill will help everyone. The Bill, if implemented, will ensure that rents on existing tenancies will be capped at their rate on the date the new legislation is enacted. Rents on new tenancies will be set according to the RTB rent index. The ban on rent increases will run for three years, with an annual review built into the legislation. The Bill also makes provision for a refundable tax credit that would give renters back one month's rent.

I have lost count of the number of people who have contacted my office in despair about rent costs. They include parents who are desperately worried whether their adult children will ever get a chance to move out and rent their own accommodation, let alone buy their own home. Rents are too high and the extortionate rates people are being asked to pay are only rising. That is proven again by the latest *daft.ie* report. In Dublin West, the situation is shocking. In Waterville, Blanchardstown, for example, a one-bedroom property is available for €1,650 a month, a three-bedroom house in Castlewood, Hartstown is €2,200, a one-bedroom home in Rathborne, Ashtown is asking €1,800 and a three-bedroom property in Castlecragh, Mulhuddart is available for €2,500.

Rents cannot be allowed to continue to rise year-on-year. The Minister cannot continue to use the Constitution as an excuse to avoid helping renters. The Covid pandemic exposed that lie. He must accept that the current crisis warrants a better response from Government. Unfortunately, what we have heard tonight amounts to a do-nothing response for another 12 months. Sinn Féin believes it is wholly reasonable to ban rent increases for three years. We believe it is fair to give hard-pressed renters a break from extortionate rent rises. We believe everyone deserves a home that is affordable, whether rented or purchased. I commend Deputy Ó Broin's Bill and urge the Government to change its position and support it.

Deputy Imelda Munster: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this Bill, which seeks to ban rent increases for all existing and new tenancies for three years. It is not news to anyone that we have a housing crisis and, within that, a private rental crisis. Rents have skyrocketed over a number of years.

In my home county of Louth, the average rent is now €1,311 per month but, in reality, the cost is between €1,400 and €1,600. Rents have increased by 4.7% in the past year. In County Meath, the average rent is more than €1,400, which is an increase of 4.9% in a year. In reality, people are paying anything from €1,600 to €1,800. In fact, since their lowest point after the economic crash which, incidentally, was also caused by Fianna Fáil's housing policy, rents in

County Louth have increased by 114% and those in County Meath by 118%. That is crazy. Unfortunately, there is no end in sight. Rents continue to soar and the Government continues to look the other way. According to the most recent figures available from Daft.ie, the increase in the last quarter alone was 2.1% in County Louth and 2.5% in County Meath. Until this Government allows for the building of enough houses to deal with the demand that exists, rents will never fall. I have no confidence that the Government will build affordable houses, so we need this Bill to ensure rents cannot increase further for a period of three years.

The Bill is just one part of a suite of housing solutions Sinn Féin has put forward. The Government has refused to help renters. It has turned a blind eye to the issue and is hiding behind legal excuses as to why it will not act. We all know that the Minister and his Government colleagues are protecting their own - their developer friends and landlords. They always have done so and they always will. They could not care less that renters are being bled dry with extortionate rents month after month. We need this Bill as a protection for renters and I call on all Deputies, particularly Government Deputies, to adopt a backbone and, for once, put their constituents first, take a stand and support the Bill.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: The current situation is that rental prices are, effectively, outstripping the cost of monthly mortgage repayments. That being the case, one might ask why a person would rent instead of buying. It is because house prices have risen so high that it is very difficult for most people to put together the deposit required for a house in the first place. This is an abnormal situation that indicates how broken and dysfunctional the property market is today. This generation is increasingly becoming one of people who will never be in a position to own a home and will be forever caught in a cycle of renting, with its resulting instability.

The reality is that many people who are now dependent on renting and are being faced with spiralling rental costs are no more than a missed rent payment away from being made homeless. Rent prices are moving beyond the reach of many. According to a report commissioned by Daft.ie, the national average monthly rent stood at €1,443 in the first quarter of 2021, up by 1.7% on the previous year and up almost 95% from the low of €742 a month in late 2011. However, rental prices in Dublin average €2,000 per month. The housing and rental market is like a pressure cooker and the increasing incursions by cuckoo funds into the rental sector in particular are adding fuel to the fire of an already volatile and unstable property market.

Those most affected by this dysfunctional property market will be those looking for housing and reasonable rental costs. The consequences of this dysfunction will be long housing waiting lists, homelessness and people not being able to get on the property ladder. Government policies on rent pressure zones have ensured that people on homeless HAP or housing HAP in recent years have been subjected to large increases in their HAP payments, in some cases amounting to up to 4% every two years. Such increases came about because landlords could avail of the rules in place for such zones that allowed them to put such increases onto tenants irrespective of inflation. The Bill seeks to give renters a break by freezing rents for three years and allowing them a tax credit equivalent to one month's rent. This will go some way to lifting the financial burden on hard-pressed renters and new tenants.

Deputy Réada Cronin: Time is up on this renting crisis. The same old political faces doing the same old thing just does not work. Even when people manage to find a place to rent, the rent they are expected to pay is out of control. The Minister has heard my colleagues say that Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have had their chance. They had it, they took it and they blew it. They prefer to tinker around the edges of a housing crisis that is, in fact, a humanitarian crisis. Being able

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to afford a decent place to live is one of the most fundamental needs of human beings.

I encounter these issues day in, day out in my constituency of Kildare North. My constituency office in Naas is out the door with people trying to find out where they are on the Kildare housing list. Some of them have been waiting up to 15 years for housing. They would be very lucky to find even a three-bedroom property in north Kildare for less than €2,000. I see people's pain and fear when they cannot afford a home. Homes are what people need in a decent, modern society guided by the true principles of republicanism, where the public's business is the most important business, coming before any political sector or business sector or profit.

I am proud of the Bill brought forward by Deputy Ó Broin. It is in the best traditions of republicanism and it is as far away as possible from the Government's survival of the fittest mentality that cheapens and degrades us all. The Bill looks after people and dignifies them and their lives. It does not cast them aside but, rather, raises them up. It will ban rent increases for three years for new and existing tenancies. This will bring security, peace of mind and the ability to plan ahead in renters' lives, which is so important for families. On top of banning rent increases, it will make sure every renter gets a month's rent back in their pocket through a refundable tax credit. It is about respect for renters.

Sinn Féin has a plan to fix the housing crisis and this legislation is just one step in that plan. The amendment tabled by the Minister is disappointing. I urge my constituency colleagues in Kildare North and all Deputies to come with us on the Bill for our people, their dignity and their future. Bígí linn.

Deputy Duncan Smith: The Minister is correct that there is no silver bullet for the housing or rental crises, but the Bill is a bullet. It is a very good Bill. It is short but it is potent and, if implemented, it will make a real difference. There is no reason why it should not be implemented. As Deputy Ó Broin, the proposer of the Bill, stated, a version of this has been done before. It is not unconstitutional to bring in a ban on rent increases. The Labour Party did so on two separate occasions while it was most recently in government, so it can be done.

The proposer of the Bill and all those who support it acknowledge wholeheartedly that it will not solve every single element of the rental crisis that is occurring within the housing crisis, but it will go a long way to providing some security and certainty. The next step would be to reduce rents. To freeze rents at the incredibly high rate is insufficient. Deputy Paul Donnelly, who may have left the Chamber, went through a list of rent prices in his constituency of Dublin West, where the rent prices are similar to those in my constituency. The rents that are now accepted as the norm are absolutely astronomical, such as €2,500 a month for a modest three-bedroom home in a suburb of Dublin or another major city.

The rental crisis may be concentrated and most dramatic in cities but it is in every county in the State. In every village and hamlet there are manifestations of the rental crisis. It cannot be lost on any Member who is in any way connected to his or her constituency just how dramatic the rental crisis is. I receive daily phone calls, emails and social media communications about it. I recently restarted my advice clinics post Covid. The first constituent to come through the door was there regarding the rental crisis. The constituent in question is a non-EU citizen, a worker paying a high rent of €1,200 a month and working seven days a week not only to pay the rent but to raise a family and pay all their other bills. However, the family is now going to be the victim of a no-fault eviction because the landlord wants to sell the home. One search on *daft.ie* for a similar-size property in the area will show that the rent to be paid by that family will

jump from €1,200 to more than €2,000. That is unaffordable without State supports. This individual, like so many others, will have to go through the very difficult and arduous application process for HAP. The family does not want to be on HAP but that is what they will have to do.

7 o'clock

They do not even know if they will be entitled to it, but they are going to have to go through the process anyway. If they do not meet the threshold to qualify for HAP, they are going to have to make choices in their life which will diminish their standard of living to such a degree that the “E” word, emigration, is considered again. Those who have been connecting with their constituents, particularly anyone who has been campaigning in the Dublin Bay South by-election, where 44% of residents are renters, know that the word “emigration” is being used more consistently, not just by young people but by people who are renting. It was put to me very succinctly and directly by a man in Irishtown a few days ago. He told me that the last time we had a wave of emigration in this country it was because there was no work. Now there is work, but the work is not paying for people to be able to afford to live. Fundamental to that is the cost of providing a roof over a person or a family’s head. Those who are most vulnerable to that are tenants. The beauty of this Bill is its simplicity and how concise and short it is. That is why it is potent. It cuts to the very heart of why people are so insecure and are worried about their future - not just in their home, but in their city and country.

Before the pandemic, it was estimated that one in ten households missed a rental payment due to financial difficulties. I am not an economist. I am not sure whether there are any such people in this room at the moment, but I think we can all make an educated guess that as the pandemic continues to be tackled, hopefully, and as we relax measures and try to move on, that number will jump. It will rise to a large degree. Significantly more than one in ten households will be missing a rental payment due to financial difficulties. Yes, these people may be working after the pandemic, but they will be working in insecure employment with low or middle incomes. Their rent will have increased to such a degree that they will not be able to afford to pay it. That is the reality of it. That is where this Bill is coming from.

As we have all said, this Bill is not a silver bullet. Last week, my colleagues, Senator Bacik, and our housing spokesperson, Senator Moynihan, launched our own renters rights Bill. There is a lot of overlap in Bills that are being proposed by the Opposition. Indeed, a very strong suite of Bills is being proposed by Members of the Opposition. When the current Minister was an Opposition Deputy in the not too distant past, he proposed Bills with contents that overlap with the Bills we are presenting now. I am sure Deputy Ó Broin and others who have drafted Bills to tackle the issue will agree that we need to remove no-fault evictions. We need to remove them straight away. If a person is paying their rent and adhering to the rules as per their tenancy agreement, they should not be allowed to be evicted. We need to remove the ground that allows a landlord to terminate a tenancy on the basis that they intend to sell the property within three months. That is an absolute nonsense. I am sick to death of seeing people evicted for that reason and seeing the property lie either vacant or, more often than not, unsold for it to go back on the rental market at a much higher rate to get new tenants in. That must stop. We must provide that landlords can only evict tenants for renovations when no reasonable measures can be taken to maintain the dwelling as fit for human habitation. It is another flimsy excuse that some improper landlords are using to remove tenants from their homes.

There are heartbreaking and truly sad stories out there of families investing in their rental properties. I am not talking about investing by putting chandeliers in halls or building exten-

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sions. I am talking about simple investments like painting a child's bedroom with the child, picking out a colour, asking them what colour they want for their big-boy or big-girl bedroom, getting a new bed, putting a few pictures up and perhaps putting a shelf up on which to place their special photos or toys. I am talking about those kinds of investments. They are investments that might cost €100 and a weekend of labour and fun, only for the family to receive a letter through the door on the Monday telling them that they have to be out within three months because the landlord is selling the house or wants to do renovations. It is absolute nonsense. It is breaking the hearts of people in this country who are just trying to live a modest life and are abiding by every single rule that is being asked of them. As a country, we cannot stand over this anymore. It has gone beyond partisan politics. There is a consensus of opinion in terms of what is happening out there. However, we are not reaching a consensus on the measures that need to be taken from the Government side. It is holding back on the key measures that need to be introduced to stop events such as those I have described from happening. It breaks the hearts not only of the parents but also of the kids. Their parents have to tell them they are sorry and they know their room has been done up, but they have to move on. When the child asks to where they are moving, if they will be able to hang out with their friends, if they will have to move school and if they will stay in their new home forever, their parents will tell them they do not know. Their parents will tell them it is unlikely that they will stay in the new home and they may have to move all over again. It is absolutely scandalous. That is a word that is overused and which has perhaps lost all meaning. It is truly wrong, but it is what is happening right now in this country.

The Government should not kick the can down the road on this Bill. It is a simple, good Bill. It will help. Unfortunately, it is not going to pass because of this can-kicking measure that the Government is introducing. It is wrong.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: I will start where Deputy Duncan Smith finished. He made a very good point about the impact on children whose parents are renting. It is what I have heard from parents who are renting and are subject to rent increases that they cannot afford or are given a notice to quit, an eviction notice. It is exactly as Deputy Smith described. Their children do not know if they are going to see their friends again, if they will see the other kids in the GAA club again or if they will have to move school. In some cases, it may have taken the children a long time to settle into school and make friends. The parents finally overcome all those hurdles and deal with all of that - it may have taken two or three years to get to that point - only to be served with a rent increase or an eviction notice and that is it. They cannot find another home in that locality and community and they have to move and start from scratch all over again. It is absolutely heartbreaking for those parents and their kids.

That is a matter of political choice. It is the system that is designed here and allows for that. In fact, it encourages and facilitates it. It is one of the things that goes to the heart of why the Bill that the Minister is talking about is so weak. We do not need 12 months to know what the impact of the legislation will be; we know what the impact is now. It has two impacts. It allows for rent increases at a time when we have some of the highest rents in Europe. At the same time, it allows for the loopholes that mean that people get evicted. It is exactly as Deputy Duncan Smith has described. It is the system of a landlord serving their tenants with an eviction notice, renovating the home, sometimes just by repainting it or whatever, and then increasing the rent by as much as they want. That is the system we have in place currently. It adds to all of that insecurity and heartbreak for families and children. It is a system that is not in any way defensible. It should be changed. We should have legislation on that now to shut down those

loopholes.

I agree that the key challenge here is about how we get rents down. This Bill is a welcome step in that direction by providing for a rent freeze and rent certainty for the next three years, which will buy some time and give renters space. However, the challenge is how to reduce rents and get proper security for renters in this country, as is the norm in most other northern European countries. There is no reason we cannot do it now. In fact, rents are so high here and rental returns are so high that any arguments that changes here would affect investment are completely spurious. The rental sector in Ireland has tripled in size over the last 20-odd years. There is no issue with investment being affected there. We also know from rental yields, which are higher in Ireland than any other European country, that there is no issue or concern for people in terms of investing and the rental yields they receive. They are way above the yields they would receive from bonds, deposits or other kinds of investments. Therefore, the arguments are highly spurious. They are also spurious because not only are the returns to investors on rent in Ireland so high but the capital investment alone probably justifies an investment given the significant increases in house prices. It is a win-win for anyone investing now. There has been an exodus by some landlords over recent years. That is mainly driven by debt resolution in respect of mortgages on buy-to-let properties in financial distress. In addition, as the properties of those who never intended to be landlords came out of negative equity, it was possible to sell them on. That has been the main driver. The investment by investment funds has distorted house prices.

The Minister referred to cost rental and the proposals that will be before us later this week. I have a serious concern related to cost rental. As stated explicitly by the Green Party before the last general election, since cost rental is not about profit but based on the cost of building and maintenance, rents should be set on that basis. Despite that, this Bill is allowing cost rental based on the cost of building and maintenance but also based on profit and equity returns. Allowing in the for-profit sector is not what the Green Party advocated before the election and it is not what cost rental is generally understood to be about. It is understood to involve a not-for-profit arrangement. Our ambition should not be to focus on having 25% of rents below market rates; what we should seek to achieve, given how rents are and how the objective could be met on a not-for-profit basis, is a rate around half the full market rate, certainly in the Dublin area. That is what the scale of our ambition should be.

On property rights, which the Minister raised, it is worth saying that previous Governments have argued against introducing measures to limit rent increases, claiming it would not be constitutional or that it would interfere with property rights. Over the years, under pressure, they have introduced such changes, including the RPZs and the 4% limit. We also saw the measures owing to Covid, including the temporary ban on rent increases and the ban on infections. We have now heard the announcement of a restriction based on the consumer price index. The current and previous Governments have proved, through their actions, under pressure, that measures to limit rent increases are, in fact, possible. There is ample legal opinion to the effect that the Government can act in the interest of the common good. That is constitutional.

Dr. Rachael Walsh of the school of law in Trinity College Dublin, in an article entitled “Housing crisis: There is no constitutional block to rent freezes in Ireland”, states:

There is significant scope in our existing constitutional order for property rights restrictions, the extent of which can be uncovered only through the introduction and testing of new measures.

[...]

[W]here a clear objective is identifiable for a restriction on the exercise of property rights that plausibly secures the common good and social justice and is procedurally fair, there is every chance of such legislation surviving constitutional challenge. There is no absolute right to begin or continue any profitable use of property guaranteed by the Constitution.

[...]

[W]e require judges to make difficult decisions about the fairness of the distribution of the benefits and burdens of collective life. Faced with this challenging task, they often defer to solutions to complex social problems that are arrived at through the democratic process.

Dr. Walsh's strong opinion is clearly that, in a democracy, the legislature has a right to legislate in the interest of the common good under the Constitution. In this regard, there are strong provisions that can be used. We have seen this in the various measures introduced over the years. It is a question of why the Government will not go far enough. It cannot be that the Minister is unaware that rents have almost doubled over the past decade and that he is unaware of the rental yields. It cannot be that he is unaware that only 26% of renters are renting by choice. He cannot be unaware that, according to the recent Threshold survey of renters, not a single respondent aged over 54 wants to be renting. The Government cannot be unaware that most renters are effectively trapped paying unaffordable rents when they want to own their own homes, and that they are simply unable to compete with investment funds that are bulk-buying homes. The Government cannot be unaware that 40% of renters do not feel secure and that 20% report having a bad relationship with their landlord.

According to the National Oversight and Audit Committee, NOAC, performance indicators report for 2009, just 10% of rented properties had been inspected in that year. Of the 10% of properties rented, 93% were not compliant. Therefore, people are paying incredibly high rents for properties that are, in the vast majority of cases, non-compliant with basic regulations.

The lack of action from the Government on this matter is not because it cannot address it legally. There are no credible excuses. We have a housing emergency. Unaffordable rent is one of the main reasons people who end up losing their homes end up homeless. They cannot afford rent in the private rental sector. Why is the Government not supporting this sensible Bill and saying it needs 12 months to know the reality of what is going on? It can see that reality now.

Deputy Bríd Smith: In answer to the last question, on why the Government has to wait 12 months to do anything, it parks everything for 12 months no matter what we bring before the House.

I welcome the Bill and thank Sinn Féin for introducing it. Watching the ongoing housing crisis, specifically the issues in the private rental sector, including those concerning tenants' rights, security of tenure and rent security over the past five years, has been akin to watching a train crash in slow motion in that everyone can see where we are heading, what will happen and the consequences, yet effectively nothing has been done to stop the crash and ameliorate its consequences. The Government, in its responses, has, at best, played the part of providing emergency services after the crash, in effect sticking a plaster repeatedly over a gaping wound.

One of the first things People Before Profit did when we were elected in 2016 was address this crisis, or attempt to do so, with a Bill. I am specifically referring to rents. We tried to get

NAMA to prioritise the provision of public housing on public lands, to stop rent increases and reconnect rents with people's wages and inflation. We called our Bill the Housing Emergency Measures in the Public Interest, HEMPI, Bill. This was a deliberate play on the Financial Emergency Measures in the Public Interest, FEMPI, Acts passed by Fianna Fáil and the Green Party and later by Fine Gael-Labour Party Government because we wanted to highlight the hypocrisy and double standards that surround the debates on rent freezes and rent issues generally. Let me remind those defenders of property rights present, namely those legal experts who faint when anyone mentions rent increase prohibitions, about the Constitution. The Constitution, or its protection of property rights, did not prevent major parties from dipping into the pensions of the public sector and other workers via the FEMPI Acts from 2010 onwards. They did not shirk behind constitutional niceties when it came to bailing out banks; they justified it by calling the Acts that permitted it emergency legislation. We had a financial crisis so we permitted the trouncing of private property rights, which is what pensions are. We have a housing crisis, a crisis that is blighting an entire generation and that sees families roaming our streets while trying to access emergency accommodation, record-breaking numbers sleeping rough and dying on our streets from homelessness, people terrified of the next rent increase or of receiving a notice to quit from their landlord, and gleeful prospective brochures from investment funds informing investors that circumstances can only get better, yet the same voices and Ministers who bravely ignored property rights when it came to the FEMPI legislation are vocal defenders of property rights when it comes to the housing crisis.

The constitutional argument is entirely bogus. There have been many legal and constitutional experts who have stated this clearly, and I will not go over that again as we do not have time. The question is, however, why we have never attempted to do so until now? Why has this argument been used time and again to pretend we cannot legislate to protect people from the enormous burden current rents are having on them and their families?

We have pointed out before in this House the large and disproportionate number of Deputies who are also landlords and who have vested interests. Indeed, many are the same ones who pretend they are supporting ordinary people or poorer rural communities while also amassing millions in rents and other business ventures. That might be one reason, but I also believe it is deeper and goes to the very nature and foundation of this State.

The obsession with property rights lies at the heart of the nature of the elite and privileged in this country. Since the State's foundation, the elite and their public representatives in Fianna Fáil and in Fine Gael were different from other elites in other nations. They did not get their wealth and privilege from manufacturing or industry, by and large. The biggest source of wealth for the Irish elite has always been property. The fetish around property rights stems from that fact and from the material base that property and the wealth generated from property has played. Those days must end.

Change is coming. It is clear Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael are being dragged into that. If we are to address the nature and causes of the housing crisis, however, we will need to push over the next few years. It will need a mass movement to tell the landlord parties the days of their rule are coming to an end, that people will not put up with a housing system built for developers and landlords or a private rental sector built for and on behalf of an elite and wealthy group, and that the housing system is there to provide a basic human right in an affordable and secure manner for all people in this country.

One final point on this issue is that this crisis in rental accommodation and housing gener-

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ally is being used by far-right and fascist parties to spread hatred and division. We have seen this in the by-election and in material that claims we have a housing crisis because we have too many immigrants and not because we have too many greedy landlords and developers combined with the failures of political parties to address basic human rights. The far right has been allowed to do this with the cover of the Government. The Government parties have let them off the hook and have fallen hook, line and sinker into the trap of allowing others to be used as an excuse for hatred and division in this country, no more so than where landlords have been allowed to impose rent increases of up to 8% under the newly discovered loophole as the Covid-19 rent freezes end. Shame on this Government.

I thank Sinn Féin again for putting this Bill forward and for opposing any attempt by the Government to stop it going forward.

Deputy Mick Barry: It has become fashionable in recent times for opponents of a rent freeze to say we should a look at what happened when they tried to freeze rents in Berlin. I am going to do precisely that.

Under the old neoliberal market *status quo* before the rent freeze in Berlin, rent had increased by 100% in the period 2009 to 2019. Under pressure from below, from a mass movement of tenants, the Berlin municipal government in early 2020 froze rents for a period of five years at mid-2019 prices. From November 2020, rents still above the mid-2019 price had to be reduced. The price of rent fell by an average of 7.8% for Berlin's 1.5 million renters in the course of the freeze.

Was there a corresponding negative in terms of renovation or modernisation for climate change, as opponents suggest? No, not really. According to the Berlin tenants' association there was a modernisation rate of 1% prior to the freeze so there is not much scope for any corresponding negative there.

Did the rent freeze cripple supply, which is the key argument of the opponents? According to Germany's largest property website, Immo Scout24, the number of rentals advertised did fall by 19% in 2020-2021. Properties for sale increased also by 23% if you look only at the properties impacted by the freeze. A minority were excluded. This attempt to exit the market by some landlords can be taken as a negative or it can be taken as a positive in that it was an opportunity to switch from for-profit landlordism to non-profit housing provision by way of municipal acquisition. The decision of the German Federal Constitutional Court to overturn the rent freeze this April has given a big boost to the campaign called Expropriate Deutsche Wohnen & Co. This is a campaign to nationalise the properties of all landlords with 3,000 apartments or more. This proposal will now go to a referendum in September and I hope it passes.

In short, the Berlin rent freeze benefited 1.5 million tenants financially, had a negligible impact on modernisation, displaced the most profit-crazed landlords, could only be overthrown by an unelected court and opened the door to the possibility of state provision of housing with lower rents. Was this a negative experience? For some landlords it probably was but for renters this was far from the case. The example of the mass movement from below in Berlin should be emulated here and the example of the rent freeze, in going further, should also be emulated here. I support the Bill.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh): Deputy Fitzpatrick is sharing time with Deputy Tóibín.

Deputy Peter Fitzpatrick: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the Bill. I thank the Deputies who brought it to the House. As I have said many times, I welcome each and every opportunity to discuss the rental and housing crisis we face in this country. The rental situation in Ireland is now a crisis. In my constituency of Louth, house rent has never been higher as far as I can tell. In my home town of Dundalk it is normal for a standard 3-bedroom house to have a rent bill of between €1,300 and €1,700 per month. To put this in perspective, that is the equivalent of between €300 and €395 per week. This puts renting a home out of reach for most young couples.

The Bill before us calls on the Government to take a number of immediate actions that will help those caught in the rental trap. I would support a ban on rent increases if I thought for one minute it would help solve the rental crisis. To implement this, however, we must put in place the necessary legislation to protect renters.

When we look at mainland Europe, it is quite common to see people rent for all of their adult lives. This is not what we are used to here in Ireland but is it a case that we need to re-adjust our thinking? In mainland Europe it is commonplace for tenants to have long-term lease agreements with their landlords, in many cases for terms of 20 years or more. Furthermore there are very strong rules which protect tenants and, for that matter, landlords. In Ireland at present, it is common for lease agreements to last no longer than a couple of years. This does not give certainty to the tenants and is one of the major issues as far as I am concerned.

We must be able to protect tenants and give certainty to the landlord. Why can we not look at implementing the proper legislation that will facilitate longer term tenancies which, in effect, could last an adult lifetime? We must support those tenants who need the support and not those who do not require such help. Again there would be challenges on how we implement this, but if we give this serious consideration, an answer can be found.

One area we must look at is vacant homes. There are varying estimates of the number of vacant homes there are in Ireland today. Surely, these houses can be brought into the housing stock again. In my home town of Dundalk there are most likely in excess of 100 homes that are lying idle and vacant. While we do not know the full facts, it is suspected the vast majority of these vacant homes are in the possession of the banks. I have raised this issue in the House before and I will raise it again. Why are these houses allowed to remain vacant? Surely, the Government can make provision to bring these homes back into the housing stock. Many of these homes are in established residential areas where there are services in place like schools, shops and public transport. Why are the banks holding on to these properties? This merits further discussion to get to the bottom of this issue.

In my constituency offices, one of the big issues that is constantly raised is that of young couples not being able to get a mortgage. One of the most frustrating aspects of this is that in many cases these couples are paying in excess of €1,500 per month in rent, yet when they apply for a mortgage, on which repayments are normally in the region of €1,000 to €1,200, they are being refused by the banks. Why is this the case? If they can afford the rent, surely they can afford lower mortgage repayments. I have in the past called on the banks to recognise, give credit for and take into account the rent a mortgage applicant pays when assessing the affordability of a mortgage.

We must also look at the proper introduction of indefinite terms for tenancies. This is commonplace in Europe and is a policy we must embrace. Why are landlords so reluctant to enter

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into long-term lease agreements? Some would argue it could be greed on the part of the landlords. That may well be true, but we must look at both sides. Why should a landlord not commit to, say, a 20-year tenancy agreement if any rent increases or decreases under that agreement were based on inflation? Surely this would lead to a win-win situation. The tenant would be safe in the knowledge that his or her rent would increase only in line with inflation, while the landlord would have the safety net of a long-term tenancy linked to inflation. We must look at this and see why it is not happening now.

I thank the Deputies for bringing this Bill before the House. As I said, I support any efforts to debate the rent and housing crisis, no matter what side of the House they come from. I welcome the Government's move that the rent pressure zones will be extended to the end of 2024 and that the 4% caps on these zones will be replaced by inflation-linked increases, although I do worry inflation might not be the best option, considering the way prices are increasing now. We all agree that families and children need stability. The moving from one house to another has to stop. Children are moving between houses, having friends one minute and no friends the next. It is very important that for once and for all we all work together and stop playing games. This is very serious.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: We have had dozens of debates in this Chamber on rents and house prices over the past seven years yet, despite the endless Bills and all the legislation, we have seen rents continue to spiral radically. Housing affects everything. There is no doubt in my mind that the lack of Government action over the past seven years especially has pushed many families into significant poverty. This poverty is all-encompassing, affecting all elements of people's lives and radically reducing the level of opportunity they have in their lives. It also has a physical effect on people. I know this from my constituency. I have seen it over the past seven years. I have seen people move from Dublin to Ashbourne, from Ashbourne to Navan, then from Navan on to Kells, then from Kells to Virginia and from Virginia to Cavan. They are surfing a wave of affordability westward so they can still afford a roof over their heads. They still have to work in Dublin but they cannot afford to live in the same province their job is in, which is incredible. Children are being pulled out of schools each time such a move is made, which is having a big impact on their lives. The rents in my constituency are incredible. The average rent is more than €1,400 and in many areas is much higher than that. Under Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil the rents in my county have doubled in just the past seven years. That is an atrocious reflection on Government policy on rent.

The backdrop to all this is that Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael and now the Greens have been rigging the property market in favour of institutional investment funds in part and have not provided the necessary capital for builders to be able to build. The report on the international investment funds in *The Business Post* was just fascinating. We had the Government tear itself apart here a couple of weeks ago. The Taoiseach, incredibly, stated that local authorities should not be on the wrong side of these deals and that no local authority should engage with long-term leases with these institutional investors. Then, after the big existential debate we had just a couple of weeks ago, we had a report in *The Business Post* which showed us that in fact these institutional investment funds will be exempt from the 10% stamp duty increase as long as they rent properties back to local authorities. The Government is saying one thing and doing the complete opposite at the same time. Of course, this follows the earlier discovery in May by *The Business Post* that the Government itself had invested €225 million in cuckoo funds that were buying up hundreds of houses in this State.

I remember the debate taking place here and Minister after Minister and Deputies feigning

shock that this could happen in our country when in fact the State was investing in these funds. Then, when asked why the State was doing so, the Government said it could not make a decision in the direction of the investment of funds. Damn right it can. It can invest money on the basis of common sense, logic and objectives on housing. Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael admit these investment funds are on a gravy train but at the same time they facilitate that gravy train. We know REITs, international investors and vulture funds have been turbo-boosted by Government preferential tax deals. IRES REIT, Ireland's largest private residential landlord, owns 3,700 residential properties in Dublin and Cork and its portfolio is estimated at €1.38 billion as of 2020. This is a 47% increase on the figure for the previous year. IRES REIT has seen a 22% increase in its rental yields as of 2019. Since that time its portfolio has increased in size and its rental income has grown. You can go down through the investment funds. I do not have time to do so now, unfortunately.

We in Aontú have in the past three weeks introduced a Bill to the Dáil that would delete the tax advantages that have been given to REITs in this country on residential properties. It would level the playing field. Remember, these international investment companies have endless access to cash. They have cheap cash, probably at 0% interest rates, and they have the special tax deals with the Government. The citizens, the families who are competing for homes with these investment funds, do not have any of that. They are being stuffed by the Government that claims to represent them. I welcome this Bill and I urge the Government to support the Aontú Bill as well.

Deputy Michael Collins: This is a very short Bill which seeks to prohibit any rent increases for all existing and new tenancies for three years. I will cut to the chase. In my constituency of Cork South-West we need more investment in social housing. We need to sort out our planning laws, which are completely outdated at best. It is time for rank-and-file change in the planning system. It is full of negativity and Government policies steering the planners to negative results on so many planning permission applications from our young people. I have constituents who have expertise on many fronts that are being worked on in other European countries to solve the European housing crisis as we speak. Last Sunday evening I visited one such constituent in west Cork who showed me how shipping container living is possible for our young people to get them off to a start without having to rent or to go on any social housing list. This is happening in other European countries, but the planners in Ireland look negatively upon this container living. That has put an end to another great idea to help solve our housing crisis.

It is most frustrating then for me and the public to hear the Tánaiste say he will build 40,000 houses a year if in government in the future when we know he is leading the public, as we would say in west Cork, down the garden path. This morning I also heard the Minister of State's party leader, Deputy Eamon Ryan, stating he wants more people living in our smaller towns and villages, living, as he called it, over the shop, something I called for during the talks on Government formation in 2016 and in 2020 as a perfect chance to turn our smaller towns and villages into vibrant towns and villages. In spite of all this talk, however, including from the Minister, nothing is happening - absolutely nothing. It is lovely to talk. One Minister is trying to con the people, telling them he will build 40,000 houses. Another one is dreaming about all the derelict houses and over-the-shop housing being sorted in rural Ireland. It sounds beautiful but we need action on the ground and we have not got it.

We need to get down to brass tacks. If young people have solutions like shipping containers and log cabin living in and around the homes of their parents, we need to force a mindset change with the planning authorities and, if built in an unobtrusive way, make these projects allowable

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immediately. I have no doubt that if the Government does so, it will help wipe maybe half the people seeking social housing from the housing list. It will give these young people a chance to build a bit of capital either to buy their own home or get a mortgage.

My clinics every Friday and Saturday are inundated with people seeking houses from Inishannon all the way out to Goleen. It is a massive area where people are pleading with me to get houses. They are broken-hearted, inside my office, crying their hearts out, asking why they cannot get a home. Some dread the thought of being homeless. It is an awful fright for people. There are solutions and, if the Government is willing to work with local politicians or someone locally with expertise, who might have come from abroad or worked abroad all his or her life, then that is what it needs to do.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: We have heard people ask how to get rent to decrease and meet demand. How do you meet demand? The Minister of State's own party leader spoke about meeting demand. Deputy Michael Collins spoke of how Deputy Varadkar wants to build 40,000 houses a year. There is a lack of materials now, and it is a worldwide problem, but he will still build 40,000 houses a year. I think it may be out of Lego he will build those houses. The Government looks like a comedy show, the way it comes out with these facts and figures, which only the Government itself seems to believe.

Deputy Eamon Ryan talks about developing the houses in the towns, villages and cities so that everyone can live over the shop. I have said from the start, however, that the Government has failed to invest in infrastructure. If I want to build over the shop in Oola, Askeaton, Dromcollogher or any similar town or village in County Limerick, I cannot do that because raw sewage is going into rivers because the existing system does not have the capacity. The Government says it will upgrade the existing system but it will not allow extra capacity. From one side of its mouth the Government says "let's do this" and is on RTÉ saying it will build the houses and everyone in Ireland will be sorted, but here is a reality check: it cannot do it because the capacity is not there. The water supply is not there, nor is the sewerage capacity. If the basics are not there, you cannot do what the Government wants to do. It got caught with its pants down recently when a vulture fund came in and bought up all the houses, and local authorities in Dublin and throughout the country could not compete with it. The Government does not have a clue about reality. It is a reality check it wants and I hope it gets it at the next election because it will deserve everything coming to it.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: I thank Sinn Féin for bringing forward this very important Bill. Any discussion that can be had in this Dáil to try to help the situation and highlight the need to build more houses is welcome. It is a supply and demand issue at the end of the day. There is one thing we must be very careful about. I have heard people this evening, well-intentioned people, as good as ridiculing those involved in the private supply of housing and making out that they are wrong and somehow doing something out of the way. Nothing could be further from the truth. People are providing accommodation, something I have been doing since a young age. Some of the people involved in this pay tax at over 50%. That is fine, well and good, but it is not good for these people when they hear people maligning them as though they are doing something out of the way.

It would be ideal if the State could deal with the local authority housing lists and if it could build enough houses to cater for the list. I deal with people looking for housing every day of the week at my clinics and on the phone. I am trying to get the local authority to have social housing in as many ways as possible, be it for our young, middle-aged or older people. For

instance, the county I represent has a crisis in one-bedroom accommodation. There are people who might qualify for accommodation of only one or two bedrooms. I asked the Taoiseach and was grateful for a reply that if our local authority could come up with housing solutions to cater for that need, the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage would look favourably at supporting it. I welcome that; that is what we want.

In this very sound Bill, Sinn Féin wants to encourage our local authorities to provide as much housing as possible. Not to criticise this Government, as it goes back to every government going back as long as I can remember and before that, but they were not able to do that. There is a need for the private market. If you attack and undermine the private market too much, and I have seen this, those involved will sell what were houses rented to people as homes, so those houses are gone off the market and there is less availability of housing which further increases the cost of rent. I know that in no way does Sinn Féin want to do that, but we must be careful we are not the cause of something like that inadvertently.

I have seen the Residential Tenancies Board analysis that some renters in the Dublin area have experienced rent increases of between 20% and 30% over the past four years despite the introduction of the rent pressure zone legislation, which was good legislation. That can mean some renters are paying between €4,000 and €6,000 more a year than they were in 2016. That is wrong and unsustainable. People cannot afford that. At the same time we must be balanced in our approach to this. We all want to have a solution. We want rents to be affordable but we do not want to be the cause of knocking housing opportunities that are there now out of the market and compounding the problem.

I want to see more local authority housing being built in County Kerry. I know young families who desperately want to get the security of their own home at an affordable rate, but unfortunately the practice when I was young where a local authority bought a piece of land, built a scheme of houses and let the young people into it and built single rural cottages is all gone. It is very seldom you would see our local authority building a scheme of new houses in a greenfield site and letting young and middle-aged couples move into them. We have to see more of that.

Deputy Thomas Pringle: There is no doubt the rental sector in this country is facing a crisis. I strongly support the long overdue ban on rent increases. However, let us be clear: this crisis has not happened overnight. Under successive Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael governments, rents have soared exponentially over recent decades and there is no sign of it stopping anytime soon. Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael's failed housing policies have done nothing but dehumanise this issue, treating houses as an investment and as a way of making money rather than as actual homes for actual people.

There needs to be a serious shift in how this Government looks at housing. My office in Donegal is inundated with calls from constituents throughout the county in desperate search of affordable rent. They are part of generation rent who do not have the option to buy their own home and, as a result, have been forced into the rental sector. Similar to the rest of the country, rent in Donegal has skyrocketed, rising by over one third in just under seven years. In 2013, the average rent in the county was €432 per month. This has risen to €662. This might seem low in comparison with the extortionate rates here in Dublin but it is a significant hike, and the lack of available rentals and job opportunities in the county contribute to it. It is completely unacceptable and unsustainable to force people into the rental sector and then expect them to pay extremely high and continually rising rents. These people are being left with no options or opportunities, which is, sadly, reflected in the high level of hidden homelessness and the high

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level of emigration in the county and the country.

Furthermore, many Donegal families already facing the devastating mica crisis are now also be forced to face the rental crisis on top of that, as they have to rent a home while their own home is being done up. As if they did not have enough to deal with already, families affected by mica have had no choice but to leave their deteriorating houses to rent alternative accommodation until the issue is resolved. Due to the Government's seeming reluctance to address this issue, it appears they will be forced to do so for a long time to come. These families have not been compensated for the rent they are forced to pay. How can we expect them to pay a mortgage on their crumbling house on top of the rent in the middle of a rental crisis?

The lack of action and urgency on this issue proves that, unfortunately, Donegal really is the forgotten county, and the Government has not bothered to take any steps to disprove this fact. These families have been failed time and again by the Government and they have been forced to endure hardship after hardship and crisis after crisis. It is only right that we recognise this and do all in our power to help to support them. It is time for the Government to stop creating problems for these people and to start finding solutions. I look forward to the Minister's proposals, conveniently on 31 July, as we go into the silly season of August and September. I hope the proposals will reflect that and will come forward on 31 July so that people will get some respite.

Covid-19 has only intensified the rent crisis and exposed the existing problems and inequalities in the private rental sector. The already problematic private rental sector, combined with Covid, has created a very worrying situation in Donegal and throughout the country. As Dr. Michael Byrne of UCD outlined, 44% of households working in the sectors of the economy most impacted by Covid were private tenants and almost a quarter of households in the private rental sector are at risk of poverty. Struggling families have had to face cuts to their income due to the pandemic as well as insecurity in their employment. Due to Covid-19, they have had to seek rental assistance to meet the already extortionate levels of rent even before having to consider whether the rent might increase. The very least we can do is assure them of some sort of stability in these extremely uncertain and unstable times.

Over the years, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have created a situation where it is not possible for people to own their own home, but yet they continue to make it almost impossible for them to rent. It is very unfair to force a generation into renting. If the Government is going to force people into this situation then rent should be regulated. At the very least, bans must be put in place so that already high rents cannot increase any further. We must stop viewing renters as a commodity and see them for who they are: real people and real families, people whom each of us is elected to represent. It is about time the Government started to do that.

Deputy Joan Collins: As my colleague, Deputy Pringle, has said, the housing crisis has not come about by accident. It is in fact a result of deliberate policy decisions by successive governments dominated by Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael and the interests of landlords, property speculators, developers and the private for-profit banks. The housing crisis is not a failure of policy from the point of view of these people. The aim of creating a landlord class and driving people into the private rental sector has been a success. Since the year 2000 there has been a 21% increase in the sector. One in five now rents in the private rental sector. The policy of enticing vulture funds and cuckoo funds into the sector with tax breaks and access to NAMA properties has also been a success for these people and institutions. In 2010, investors bought 10% of property; now it is 25%. High rents are a necessary factor in this policy, hence the reluctance to take effective action to curb spiralling rents. The 4% cap in rent pressure zones, RPZs,

was a mechanism which allowed landlords to increase rents yearly. It did not apply outside the zones and it did not apply to new properties coming onto the market. The proposed policy of linking rent increases to the rate of inflation is welcome, as it is the norm in Europe. It is a step forward, but it is like all measures proposed so far by the Government – too little, too late. Again, it will not apply to new rental properties.

Inflation is likely to rise as the economy comes out of lockdown and we could easily see inflation of more than 2% next year. The situation is an emergency and it needs an emergency response. Rent should be frozen for a three-year period, as proposed in the Bill, to give renters a break. A rent freeze is necessary and welcome, but it is not a solution to the general crisis. I accept it is not suggested that the proposal in the Bill is the solution, but it is part of solving the crisis. For a start, there must be recognition that a reliance on the private rental sector has been good for the vested interests involved. However, it has been an unmitigated disaster for people seeking to put a roof over their heads and seeking a place to call home.

The State has the resources to transform the situation. Let us take NAMA for example. NAMA is completely State-owned. It has paid off its debts. It owns 747 acres of land. It has 30,000 units under development or in the planning process. NAMA should be used by the State as a key element in a national strategy to provide affordable homes to rent or buy. NAMA is currently selling 54 apartments in Finglas in Dublin as a block and, most likely, they will be bought by a fund and rented out at the highest rent possible. These apartments should be sold to an approved housing body or a local authority to be used as cost rental housing or public housing. A national strategy by the State to build affordable houses by using the existing public lands held by NAMA and the local authorities to build at least 20,000 units a year for the next five years would have a significant effect on reducing rents and house prices generally.

The problems in the private rental sector do not just relate to unaffordable rents. A recent study by UCD and Maynooth University shows that 80% of renters do not feel secure in their tenancies. The ban on evictions made no real difference in reducing their sense of insecurity. They did not trust the landlords to comply. One in four felt that where they lived was not a home and one in five said they had a bad relationship with their landlord. We need legislative change urgently to give long-term security of tenure. In particular, we must remove the right of a landlord to evict tenants through the sale of the property. We need an effective vacant property tax to bring vacant and derelict properties back into use. We also need an increase in the vacant site tax to penalise land hoarding. These issues are not addressed in the Bill, but a rent freeze must be an essential part of a new radical strategy to solve this crisis. I commend Deputy Ó Broin on introducing the Bill to the Dáil.

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Malcolm Noonan): I thank all Deputies for their contributions. I am grateful for the opportunity to close the debate for the Government on Sinn Féin's Ban on Rent Increases Bill 2021. I have listened intently to the contributions of Deputies since my arrival in the Chamber.

As the Minister outlined, the Government is submitting a timed amendment to this Bill and we will consider it again on Second Stage in 12 months' time when the impact of the new RPZ rent increase restriction provided in the Government's Residential Tenancies (No. 2) Bill 2021, which passed unanimously last night in Seanad Éireann, will have been felt on the ground. The Government expects that the switch from a straight 4% per annum rent increase restriction in RPZs to the new restriction where any rent increase cannot exceed general inflation will be impactful on the ground.

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The Government is keenly aware of the challenges tenants face. We know rents are unaffordable for many people and that rent increases can exacerbate financial difficulty. We are aware that many people would prefer to own and not to rent their home. We are also aware that people want a secure home. In addition, we know we need a residential rental sector with an adequate supply to ensure rents are affordable.

The Government has implemented and will continue to implement measures to promote equity, fairness and security of tenure in the private rental sector. With the support of Government colleagues and acting on the evidence produced through research by the Economic and Social Research Institute, ESRI, the Minister introduced significant tenancy protections in the Residential Tenancies and Valuation Act 2020, the RTVA, with effect from 1 August 2020. The Act introduced permanent and temporary protections for those tenants facing rent arrears and, as result, are at risk of losing their tenancy. While those temporary protections have been subsumed under the Planning and Development, and Residential Tenancies Act 2020, the PDRTA, permanent protections under the RTVA still apply, requiring landlords to serve both the Residential Tenancies Board, RTB, and the tenant with a 28-day warning notice, increased from 14 days, seeking payment of rent arrears and any related notice of termination.

Upon receipt of the warning notice, the RTB acknowledges receipt to the landlord and the tenant, provides information to the tenant to enable him or her to get advice from the Money & Budgeting Advice Service, MABS, and offers assistance to the tenant in obtaining this advice.

8 o'clock

Any notice of termination grounded on rent arrears will be invalid if the rent arrears warning notice or the related notice of termination itself had not been served on both the RTB and the tenant. The aim is to ensure that early action is taken to address rent arrears to the benefit of both the tenant and the landlord.

The tailored approach in the Planning and Development, and Residential Tenancies, Act protects tenants from imminent tenancy termination caused by Covid-19-related rent arrears. The Planning and Development, and Residential Tenancies, Act introduced similar temporary residential tenancy protections to those under the Residential Tenancies and Valuation Act to cover the period from 11 January to 12 July 2021, while recognising the constitutionally protected property rights of landlords. The most vulnerable tenants in rent arrears due to Covid-19 and at risk of losing their tenancy can gain enhanced tenancy protections under the Planning and Development, and Residential Tenancies, Act if they follow the procedures under that Act and make the necessary declaration. The Planning and Development, and Residential Tenancies, Act temporarily protects tenants from any rent increases and any termination notice on grounds of rent arrears.

In addition to making the necessary written declaration to the RTB and his or her landlord under the Planning and Development, and Residential Tenancies, Act, a tenant is required to immediately request the RTB to assist him or her to obtain advice from the MABS and serve a written notice on his or her landlord requesting a consultation to make an arrangement for the payment of the rent. The aim is to set tenants and landlords on the right track to resolving any rent issues arising. The Planning and Development, and Residential Tenancies, Act protections against rent increases are available to the most vulnerable tenants and, under the Residential Tenancies (No. 2) Bill 2021, these protections will continue to be available until 12 January 2022.

In addition to significantly reducing the level of any rent increases in RPZs, as detailed by the Minister, the Bill will also restrict the level of upfront payments required of tenants to a total value that does not exceed two months rent to cover any deposit and one month rent in advance.

Any proposed measure that impacts on private property rights requires detailed consideration and scrutiny, having regard to the provisions of Article 43 of the Constitution and the associated legal complexities. During the recent drafting of the Emergency Measures in the Public Interest (Covid-19) Act 2020, the Residential Tenancies and Valuation Act 2020, the Residential Tenancies Act 2020, the Planning and Development, and Residential Tenancies, Act 2020, the Residential Tenancies Act 2021 and the Residential Tenancies (No. 2) Bill 2021, the Office of the Attorney General has advised on the complex legal issues arising with any limitation of property rights under the Constitution. The need for careful targeting of enhanced legal protections to those most vulnerable tenants for a limited timeframe and for the balancing of the legal rights of both tenants and landlords informed the drafting of these Acts.

Deputy Ó Broin's Bill does not show any evidence of appropriate policy balancing within the proposal. I am confident that the restrictions provided for in the Residential Tenancies (No. 2) Bill 2021 constitute the correct and balanced policy response and we need to give it time to bed in to the sector in order to have any effect on rents.

I wish to emphasise that the programme for Government recognises the important role that the private rented sector plays in housing many people and will continue to do so into the future. The Government will address challenges in this sector, including standards, security and affordability for renters. The measures under the Residential Tenancies (No. 2) Bill 2021, passed by Seanad Éireann last night, provide a timely, effective and proportionate response to help the most vulnerable tenants impacted by Covid-19 and to help all tenants in rent pressure zones by requiring that any rent increase does not exceed general inflation. The Bill helps all tenants outside RPZs by maintaining the frequency of rent reviews to no more than every second year. Landlords will also benefit from the rent certainty provided for under the Bill into the medium term.

The Bill provides for the enhanced tenancy protections under the Planning and Development, and Residential Tenancies, Act to continue until 12 January 2022. As a result, rather than the usual 28 days notice that applies for a termination of notice grounded on rent arrears, a 90-day notice period applies. The earliest termination date allowed for those most vulnerable tenants will be 13 January 2022. Rent increases are also prohibited for relevant tenancies until 13 January 2022, with no backdating allowed.

My Department will work hard with the RTB to continue its change management programme to strengthen its functions and its assistance to tenants and landlords. The RTB has been highly responsive, particularly in the fast moving context of Covid-19, to the needs of tenants and Government in continually providing up-to-date assistance. I wish to record the Government's sincere gratitude for its continuing efforts in this regard and for the help of MABS, Threshold and all NGOs, approved housing bodies and local authorities that help in addressing the evolving housing crisis. The Government is committed to supporting an adequate supply of residential rental accommodation by ensuring equity and fairness for landlords and tenants alike. Improving the standards, security and affordability for renters is a priority for me, the Minister and the Government. We are making significant changes in recognition of the fact that tenants continue to face persistent pressures in the rental and housing markets. Our approach to change must continue to be carefully balanced.

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Acting Chairman (Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh): I call Deputy Guirke, who is sharing time with Deputies Mythen and Ó Broin.

Deputy Johnny Guirke: I commend my Sinn Féin colleague and our spokesperson on housing, Deputy Eoin Ó Broin, on bringing this Bill to the House. The Ban on Rent Increases Bill 2021 will give families and workers living in uncertain times a little comfort as they plan their finances without the fear of rent increasing. There is huge concern and a growing call for a ban on rent increases in my constituency of Meath West because rents have gone out of control in the past ten years. To rent a house in County Meath in 2011, a family would have paid €672 per month. Now, in 2021, under the watchful eyes of Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil, that same house costs almost €1,300. That is nearly double the amount paid ten years ago and it hits the most vulnerable in society, as families count their last few shillings to pay their rent and utility bills and try to put food on the table. Our offices are inundated by people who are not able to pay these extortionate rents. To rent a home in Westmeath in 2011 would have cost €525 per month. Ten years later, it is now an average of €850 per month. We can see the rents in every county rising at an extremely worrying pace. In County Meath, rents increased by 6% in the last quarter of 2020.

Who is to blame for the current rental market? In 2016, our housing spokesperson introduced the Rent Certainty Bill, which would have stopped the enormous jump in rents over the last five years. Who blocked it only Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil, by voting it down five times. Why would the Government parties have done this? They did it to protect the vulture funds, the cuckoo funds and the big landlords. People who are renting live with the fear of eviction every day because some landlords continue to raise their rents, which leads to families becoming homeless. Previous Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael-led Governments have failed to deliver on affordable housing. They have failed the people of Ireland and, during the last election, the voters made it clear they wanted a change in direction. The two parties teamed up, however, to make sure that did not happen. In 12 months time, when they look at this Bill again, there will be a lot more people homeless or in emergency accommodation.

Deputy Johnny Mythen: I commend once again my colleague, an Teachta Eoin Ó Broin, on bringing forward this Bill. Should this Bill be passed, it will ban rent increases for all existing renters and new renters for up to three years, with a rent review to be considered by the Minister on an annual basis. This concept is not new and has operated in many countries around the world.

The cost of renting has spiralled in every county, with average rent now standing at €1,256. My county of Wexford, according to *daft.ie*, has seen a year-on-year increase of 8.9%. Young working people and college students are financially strapped by the huge cost of renting and the ever-increasing house prices. Have we learned nothing from the bubble markets and the so-called Celtic Tiger era? Young working people today are as ambitious as any generation before them. They want to be able to settle down in their own home and they want to rent at reasonable prices. However, this is not the case. Homes have become the new cash cow, the new trading commodity, no different than shares or a gold, and, I daresay, encouraged and protected by the laws passed in favour of big developers and big landlords by successive Governments. Landlords know they have a product that gives them market power and they exploit that market power by pricing above the marginal costs.

This legislation is one of the components needed to protect renters, who are mostly young and starting off their own independent lives. We all have a responsibility not to default on the

upcoming generation. The history of our country with landlordism was not good. This is not a battleground that we want to relive. It is important that we recognise the difficulties and consequences that high rents have for our young citizens and the consequences for society as a whole. The Bill, which bans increases for three years, is a moderate ask and will help in some ways to create a temporary breathing space for families and individual citizens who are being exploited to the last cent. I hope that all Deputies will see fit to support this Bill but I see that the Government has done its usual delaying tactics and added another year. Perhaps the Minister and Government should adopt Johnny Logan's song, "What's Another Year?", as their theme song for 2021.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: I thank all the Deputies who spoke in support of the Bill. It is five years since I introduced a Bill to constrain rents in the private rental sector in this House. At that time, the Minister of State's party supported the Bill to link rents to inflation. All of the arguments that I have heard tonight are Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael arguments, even when they are made by Green Party Deputies, and they are the same arguments that were used five years ago not to take the kind of action that I proposed then. Since Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael refused to listen to the Opposition not just five years ago but on the other four occasions when rent certainty was voted down, renters are in a much worse position today than they were then. What I am hearing tonight is, just as Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael refused to listen to the Opposition then, to the great detriment of renters, that history is now repeating itself.

The one argument that nobody on the Government side has explained is why they think that any rent increase is acceptable over the next period. Linking rents to inflation is better than 4% if inflation stays below 4% but inflation is currently running at 1.9% and rising. What happens if it rises to 3% or 4%? Are we really saying that renters paying an average rent of €1,750 in Dublin or €1,350 outside Dublin can bear any level of rent increase? Are we seriously saying that new entrants to the Dublin market, who are paying between €2,000 and €3,000 a month, can bear any level of rent increase in the current year? The answer to that question is a categorical "No", which is why the correct policy at this point in time is an emergency three-year ban on rent increases in the private rental sector.

The Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, said that a ban will not increase supply. He is right but nobody on this side of the Chamber claimed that it would. It is simply to stop rents from rising any further. What would increase supply would be if Government invested hundreds of millions of euro in thousands of affordable cost rental accommodation units annually, which every agency advising Government has recommended for years. We have not seen that to date. I await the Minister's housing plan and budget 2022 with great interest but on the basis of the record of both this Government in its first year and its predecessor, that level of investment and the volumes of supply of cost rental accommodation that we want to see are unlikely to be forthcoming.

The Minister also said that we have to be mindful of the impact on landlords. This is one of the arguments that I just do not understand. What this Bill proposes is incredibly modest. It states that landlords can continue to charge the rents that are currently locked into our market. It is significantly above the peak of the Celtic tiger. Any new investment into the market is at an exceptionally high level of return, so I do not see how a three-year temporary ban would have any negative impact on levels of investment. The Minister is right that, for three years, I have urged both the last Government and this Government to undertake an urgent review of the chronic loss of accidental and semi-professional landlord properties from the market. Neither Government was willing to do that. We have a problem but insisting that renters have to pay

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increasingly extortionate levels of rents is not the solution. The Government should do what I have advised it to do for three years and ask the Residential Tenancies Board and the ESRI to conduct a study of why those landlords are leaving and what can be done to slow down that disorderly exit. The idea that the solution lies in the pockets of renters is not acceptable.

The argument about protecting property rights is absolutely bogus. If we can stop rent increases for two years, as was done in 2014 and 2015 and during the pandemic, we can absolutely stop rent increases now. There is significant legal opinion in the public domain to give effect to that.

I will make the arguments that I made at the start again. We have to ban rent increases for three years. Renters simply cannot take any more. We also have to reduce rents and the quickest and legally simplest way to do that is a refundable tax credit to put a month's rent back in every renter's pocket for that emergency period of three years. We need hundreds of million of euro of Exchequer expenditure, from Government borrowing, to be invested in the delivery of at least 4,000 affordable cost rental units every year until we have built that stock. We also need to see action on standards and NCT-style certification for minimum standards should be introduced as a matter of urgency. We also need tenancies of indefinite duration. I know the Government has said it will do it but I understand that what it will introduce does not include tenancies of indefinite duration. We will judge that when it comes.

The bottom line is that once again, Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and, regrettably, the Green Party, are walking away from renters. They are siding with the institutional interests of the private rental market. The people who will suffer will be the hard-pressed renters. It is a shame that anybody thinks that the Government's deferral of the reading of Second Stage for 12 months is anything other than a cynical ploy to avoid the blushes of having to vote against such an urgent and eminently sensible measure. On that basis, I commend the Bill to the House.

Amendment put.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh): In accordance with Standing Order 80(2), the division is postponed until the weekly division time on Wednesday, 7 July 2021.

Ceisteanna - Questions (Resumed)

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Guardian Status

44. **Deputy Kathleen Funchion** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the legislative actions he plans to take in cases in which there is a question or doubt concerning a child's guardianship status that their rights are ensured from the perspective of the best interests of the child; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [36448/21]

Deputy Kathleen Funchion: I thank the Minister for taking this question. I understand and appreciate that it does not fall solely within his Department's remit. It concerns the guard-

ianship status of children and ensuring their rights in the best interests of the child. Will the Minister make a statement on the matter?

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman): The issue of guardianship is a matter for the courts in the first instance, under the Guardianship of Infants Act 1964. However, I have a continuing interest in ensuring that the legal and practical arrangements for the welfare of children are well-founded and appropriately applied at all times. As Minister in this Department, I have no formal or defined role in the determination of cases where there is a legal issue about the guardianship of a child. That is, and must be, a matter for the courts. However, there are guardianship matters to consider relating to children in the care of Tusla. Children are received into Tusla’s care either through a voluntary agreement or by way of a care order issued by the courts, each of which are provided for under the Child Care Act 1991. My responsibilities in this area relate to care orders under the Child Care Act 1991 rather than the Guardianship of Infants Act, which relates to the courts and the Minister for Justice.

Regarding the actions under the remit of the Department of Justice, under section 6(c) of the Guardianship of Infants Act 1964, a person can apply to court to be appointed as a child’s guardian if he or she is married to or in a civil partnership with the child’s parent, or has cohabited with the child’s parent for over three years, and if the person has shared responsibility for the child’s day-to-day care for more than two years. As issues relating to surrogacy concern areas of law that intersect across the remits of several Departments, the Minister for Health, the Minister for Justice, the Attorney General and I are working together on these matters. The provisions of section 6 of the Guardianship of Infants Act are being examined in that context. I have met with the Ministers on three occasions to address the issue and we have also met with the Attorney General on one occasion. Work is ongoing among our officials about how to address the relevant and very complex legal issues in a manner that vindicates the rights of the child.

Deputy Kathleen Funchion: Surrogacy was the reason behind me raising this. I understand that other Ministers are involved. The Department of Health is limited with regard to questions due to the cyberattack and it is important that I can raise this in the Chamber to keep children’s rights on the agenda. Dr. Conor O’Mahony produced an excellent report on this. It is important that the recommendations in his report are looked at. It makes some excellent recommendations and Dr. O’Mahony is very well placed to look at this issue. There are difficulties around the issue of international surrogacy and these are not accounted for in the proposed Bill. International surrogacy is a big part of it and we all have to be very honest about that. It is important that is considered. Families are also very concerned about the issue of retrospection and whether a Bill passed in 2021 will apply from this year onwards or will apply to other families. I will ask a supplementary question shortly.

Deputy Roderic O’Gorman: Some of these matters fall within the remit of the Department of Health. The drafting of a Bill on assisted human reproduction and associated research was based on the published general scheme of the assisted human reproduction Bill, which was published in the previous Dáil. Work on the Bill, including drafting, is ongoing by officials in the Department of Health. There is a commitment in the programme for Government that this legislation will be passed. The legislation is comprehensive. It encompasses the regulation, for the first time in Ireland, of a range of practices, including domestic altruistic surrogacy. The provisions related to surrogacy are dealt with in Part 6 of the Bill. The Bill sets out a court-based mechanism through which the parentage of a child born through surrogacy may be trans-

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ferred from the surrogate and her husband, if applicable, to the intended parent.

As the Deputy stated, the Bill does not deal with commercial surrogacy on an international basis. Dr. O'Mahony has produced a report with recommendations in that regard. The report is being examined by the three Ministers and the Attorney General.

Deputy Kathleen Funchion: I am very glad to hear that. It will be welcome news for families who have gone through surrogacy or are facing surrogacy in the near future. It is welcome that surrogacy is an option and I am sure we will see much more of it in the near future.

On the report, the Minister has met with some of the families and advocacy groups. They are open to meeting with him, the Minister for Health, Deputy Stephen Donnelly, and any other Minister they need to meet. They get their stories across very well and I commend them on all their work.

Parental leave, maternity leave, maternity benefit and many other areas that some of us probably take for granted are also very important. I am glad to hear the Minister's comments so far and I appreciate, as I said, that it is not his area only. However, the crux of the matter is Dr. O'Mahony's report.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: This issue extends across a number of Departments. The three Ministers are working together and meeting regularly, which is important. We hope to meet again in the near future to continue our discussions. We are getting support from the Attorney General on the issue. I have met some of the groups and there is an alliance formed in this particular area. It is important that provision is made for children in Ireland who were conceived through surrogacy and are deeply loved by their parents.

In all of this, when a child is conceived through surrogacy a number of individuals and adults are involved. As we know from our experience in the area of adoption, it is important that a child has full access to knowledge about all parties involved. One of the points I will be bringing from my Department to the discussion on this legislation is that a child has to know all parties involved in his or her conception.

Question No. 45 replied to with Written Answers.

Departmental Schemes

46. **Deputy Kathleen Funchion** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth if he requested his departmental officials to conduct a review specifically into the continual discrimination of disadvantaged children through the under allocation of hours under the national childcare scheme, NCS, given comments he made during parliamentary questions in May 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [36216/21]

Deputy Kathleen Funchion: This question relates to the review of the national childcare scheme, an issue I have raised a few times. Deputies are coming across continual discrimination against disadvantaged children under the allocation of hours through this programme. I ask the Minister to make a statement on the matter.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: I have discussed this matter with the Deputy on a number of occasions. As she is probably aware, I recently contracted Frontier Economics to undertake a

review of the national childcare scheme in line with section 26 of the Childcare Support Act. In conducting that review, I asked the company to give consideration to a complaint made against the NCS, as we discussed during oral questions previously, concerning the application of a work-study test, which determines the number of subsidised hours of early learning and childcare a child may be eligible for under the scheme. I do not believe the NCS and, in particular, the work-study test gives rise to discrimination in the way the Deputy suggests.

Under the NCS, children are provided with access to subsidised early learning and childcare that is at a level necessary to support positive child development outcomes regardless of whether parents are in work or study. Where parents are not engaged in work or study, the NCS subsidises up to 20 hours per week. Where parents are engaged in work or study, the NCS subsidises up to 45 hours per week. The definition of work or study is broad and covers all forms of work or study arrangements, including full-time, part-time, week-on, week-off contracts and zero-hour contracts. Moreover, the minimum hours required to engage in work or study to qualify for up to 45 hours per week is very low at just two hours per week.

The NCS also includes sponsorship arrangements that allow for additional support for vulnerable families where there is an identified need for early learning in childcare on the grounds of child development or child welfare. Already, external assessment by the OECD and the Economic and Social Research Institute, ESRI, points to a range of benefits of the national childcare scheme, including a reduction for families in the cost of early learning and childcare and an increase in family incomes, with the most disadvantaged families experiencing the greatest gain. However, I have asked Frontier Economics to extend its research to review the activity test, which I know to be a feature of early learning and childcare schemes in other jurisdictions. I have also asked the expert group convened to look at the new funding model to consider the issue of childcare services in areas of disadvantage.

Deputy Kathleen Funchion: I am glad to hear the Minister's comments because they address the crux of the matter. We raised this issue in May, and I have raised it a number of times since. Following that, some services that had brought it to our attention tried to get in contact about the review. They were led to believe it was a one-year review of the whole NCS, which was not looking at the issue of potential disadvantage. I reiterate that the cohort of children we are talking about are those who will not necessarily come to the attention of Tusla. They are in an in-between category, for want of better words, of children who rely on childcare and early years services for a hot meal and security. It particularly relates to after-school care. We have had that conversation. A lot can be teased out through a review and if the Minister is now clarifying that this issue is being included in it, I welcome that.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: Yes. I specifically asked for this issue to be included in the review. Although I am confident the NCS is designed in a way to lessen disadvantage, I am also cognisant, having listened to the Deputy and having met childcare providers, especially from areas of geographic disadvantage, that they have raised concerns, which I want to address. As the Deputy knows, I have done a number of things. We have engaged with Tusla to enhance the application of the sponsorship arrangements and I spoke directly to the chief executive to make sure sponsorship would be provided in a broad manner.

On information about how parents can access the higher number of hours, SOLAS, in conjunction with the education and training boards, ETBs, is providing better information on how parents can access various courses that will allow them to access the full 45 hours per week. I have made a commitment to review this particular issue in the context of the Frontier Econom-

ics review of the NCS. However, as regards the bigger piece, the funding group is also looking at the issue of disadvantage in childcare facilities and how funding can be targeted to address that.

Deputy Kathleen Funchion: This is the point I was trying to get to. I believed the issue had been clarified in May but question marks arose again afterwards. However, the Minister has made it very clear that the issue of disadvantage will be part of the review and I welcome that. As I said, it is about the children who will, potentially, fall through the cracks, which is what we are always trying to avoid. I say this regularly, but this is particularly the case with early year and childcare settings. It is not just about parents. We are all guilty of sometimes thinking that childcare equals parents working, but it is also about the children and all the various benefits to them from socialisation to security and everything they learn. I welcome that and I look forward to the review. Our next question will probably be about when we will get the results of the review, but I welcome it for now.

Deputy Roderic O’Gorman: As the Deputy will know, it is early learning and care, with the emphasis on the early learning. On the review, I would expect it in the last quarter of the year. The review of the Child Care Act 1991 and, as significant, the report of the expert group are expected in the final quarter of this year. This is something I have been speaking about a great deal, although I did not initiate it. It was initiated by the former Minister, Katherine Zappone. The expert group is a really important group, comprised of eminent experts in the area of childcare from within Ireland and internationally as well. It will bring its report to the Government in light of its commitment to double investment in early learning and care in school-age childcare by 2028, as contained in the First 5 strategy. This is the body that will show us how we can ensure that the extra money we are investing gives us more services, better quality and can ensure that the workers in these services are paid appropriately and that parents are not paying so much as well. I look forward to publishing the expert group report. I am sure that once published, the Deputy and I will engage further on it.

Mother and Baby Homes Inquiries

47. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the steps he is taking to ensure that the experiences of the 550 persons who gave evidence before the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes and Certain Related Matters confidential committee are recognised and officially reflected. [36297/21]

Deputy Holly Cairns: What steps is the Minister taking to ensure that the experiences of the 550 people who appeared before the confidential committee of the Commission of Investigation on Mother and Baby Homes and Certain Related matters are officially reflected? The Minister has committed to formally recognising these testimonies. The lived experiences of 550 survivors were not reflected in the final report and the Minister now proposes to commission a new report, which means we face the prospect of two contradictory documents. Which report will form the basis for the redress scheme, especially in regard to forced adoptions, discrimination and the avoidance of direct and actionable attribution of responsibility to the State and religious orders?

Deputy Roderic O’Gorman: I thank the Deputy. I have reflected deeply on many aspects of the commission’s report since its publication and the survivors’ response to it. I understand that some survivors are disappointed with how their personal testimonies were reported. People

expected to see their full narrative as they told it, rather than abbreviated sections. It has become apparent that many did not know that the twin processes were in operation during the investigation. Much of the frustration is as a direct consequence of this. The process has not fulfilled their expectations and I deeply regret that.

The intention of establishing any inquiry under the Commissions of Investigation Act 2004 is to provide an effective mechanism to investigate complex and sensitive matters, while also respecting fair procedures and natural justice. That was undoubtedly the intention of the Oireachtas when it approved the establishment of this commission. In recognising the importance of maintaining the confidentiality of so many, the commission was required to produce a report of a general nature. This is what it was tasked to do in its terms of reference.

While it has been widely reported that the testimonies were discounted or discarded, I do not believe that is correct. In its correspondence to the Oireachtas joint committee, the former chair of the commission confirmed that they were taken into account and relied upon by the commission in making its determination on crucial questions. However, I am conscious of the need for the lived experiences of those who attended the confidential committee to be more clearly heard, understood and officially recognised as part of our history.

Over the past year, I have met many survivors and their advocates and I have sought to understand directly from them their diverse and valid responses to the publication of the report and the Government's action plan. Their views are paramount. I have worked to listen to them and to try to rebuild trust. I have always been clear that the commission's report does not represent the end point of the State's response to the mother and baby institutions. Survivors are telling me that they want the historical record of these institutions to reflect their experiences and they want them recounted. I am currently exploring mechanisms to achieve this. I will continue to engage with survivors, professional archivists and historians to determine how best to preserve these important oral histories.

Deputy Holly Cairns: To say that people were disappointed that the full narrative was not in the report is not an accurate description. The Minister spoke about how the survivors spoke before the academic committee and they were disregarded. He also spoke about the statutory instrument at that time. If he does not think it is correct that they were disregarded, why is he commissioning a new report so that they are reflected? The confusion and contradictions contribute to the increasing distress for everyone affected. The Minister says he believes survivors and simultaneously the Chief State Solicitor is opposing judicial reviews by survivors who say their testimonies were misrepresented in the report. This is deeply callous hypocrisy. The Minister cannot commit to officially recognising their evidence and then oppose that same evidence in the courts.

Survivors expressed entirely justified scepticism around any State response to the abuses and silence they experienced but 550 of them took the incredibly brave step of testifying before the commission. When they found that their testimonies had been misrepresented or disregarded, they were forced to seek a judicial review to enter another potentially re-traumatising process.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Thank you Deputy. We are over time.

Deputy Holly Cairns: Why is the State forcing them down this route? As ageing survivors of some of the worst atrocities, the least the Government could do is support them in seeking

justice instead of obstructing them.

Deputy Roderic O’Gorman: I agree with the Deputy in terms of the bravery of the 500 individuals who appeared before the confidential committee to give their personal accounts of their experiences in these institutions. I have always said that that chapter and the extracts from their stories have had a huge impact on me, but I am aware that they are just extracts. I know from my engagement with survivors that they wanted their entire stories, not part of them, reflected on the historical record. Survivors can obtain their testimonies from the archive through a subject access request but they just become their personal documents. It is that element that I am seeking to address. I want to ensure that for those who so choose, their full testimonies can form part of the historical record of what happened in these institutions. I do not have the full answer just yet on how to do that. I spoke with Deputy Cairns and colleagues on the joint Oireachtas committee about the issue. I have some more work to do, but that is what I am seeking to achieve.

Deputy Holly Cairns: The Minister says that he knows from speaking to people that they want their entire stories in the report. That is not what the rest of us are hearing. People have very considerable and legitimate concerns around findings such as that there was no evidence of forced adoption. That is not someone saying that she wants her entire story represented in the report; it is saying that she wants an historical fact represented in the findings of the report. The long overdue redress scheme is at the heart of this issue. If the commission links its findings to the potentially flawed report - who knows what the new report will find, although the Minister may be renegeing on that now because he has not mentioned it but he did say previously that he was going to commission a report to look into the 550 testimonies that were disregarded - then which report do we work off in terms of redress? How do you square that? I do not think anybody understands that. It is a blatant contradiction. Anyone who was forced into the institutions, who was separated from his or her family, or lost a family, in the system, is entitled to the fullest possible redress as a matter of justice.

Deputy Roderic O’Gorman: I am absolutely committed to providing a comprehensive redress scheme. When the parameters of the interdepartmental group were being established, the Government made clear that we would not be bound solely by the recommendations contained with the commission’s report. That is an important step. It allows us-----

Deputy Holly Cairns: Is the Minister speaking about the old report or the new report? Will the redress be based on forced adoption or not?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Allow the Minister to answer.

Deputy Roderic O’Gorman: It allows us to go past the commission’s report and to publish a scheme of redress that is comprehensive. I have always said it should recognise the time spent within these institutions, across both the mother and baby institutions and the county institutions. That is what the Government has committed to do and that is what we will deliver. I accept that we are a little behind in terms of publishing the scheme of the redress. I hope to have that soon. I believe it will be comprehensive in terms of the range of the survivor body that it will cover and provide redress to.

Early Childhood Care and Education

48. **Deputy Pauline Tully** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the steps he is taking in relation to assessing the childcare needs of parents in County

Cavan where service providers are indicating that they are no longer taking children under two years of age due to the financial strain in meeting the Child Care Act 1991 (Early Years Services) Regulations 2016; the consideration that is being given in this regard to forward planning of the provision of places or services or both at both local level in County Cavan and national level; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [36217/21]

Deputy Pauline Tully: What steps is the Minister taking in regard to assessing the childcare needs of parents in County Cavan, where many service providers are indicating they are no longer taking children under two years of age? They are claiming that this is due to the financial strain of meeting early years services regulations under the Child Care Act 1991. What consideration is being given to forward planning for childcare places and service provision in County Cavan and at national level?

Deputy Roderic O’Gorman: I thank the Deputy. Officials in my Department closely monitor developments in relation to early learning and childcare capacity, including the supply of and demand for places. Before the onset of Covid-19, data gathered through the annual early years sector profile survey revealed that the sector was running at near capacity, with evidence of undersupply for certain cohorts, including children under the age of three, and in certain areas, including Cavan. This evidence informed the allocation of funding under the Department’s annual capital programmes. We have been able to increase capacity by 27,433 places nationally since 2015, with 494 of these additional funded places in County Cavan.

Since the onset of Covid-19, there has been evidence of some depressed demand for early learning and childcare due to changes in parental working arrangements. The very substantial Covid supports we have put in place for the childcare sector have ensured that we have not seen a loss of services. We maintained the same number of services in 2020 that we had in 2019. Ensuring that supply is sufficient to meet demand, particularly once work patterns stabilise after the Covid pandemic, is a key priority for my Department. We are doing the fieldwork for the annual early years sector profile survey at the moment. This will allow us to update our data on capacity, which will inform capital investment plans and the prioritisation of future capital funding.

The cost of delivering early learning and childcare is higher for children aged under two years. This is because of the lower adult-child ratios. However, we also give higher subventions for younger children under the national childcare scheme, NCS. The maximum weekly subsidy rate for children under one is €229.50 and for children aged one and two years it is €195.75. These rates exceed the average full-time fee for children under one and aged one and two years in Cavan. The data the Department has gathered says that these fees are €166.33 and €165.36, respectively.

This year’s early years sector profile survey will also include an income and cost module. Data from this module will form a key input into the setting of future funding rates and will also be considered by the expert group I spoke about earlier.

Deputy Pauline Tully: Constituents have been contacting me. One lady told me that when her maternity leave finished and she tried to find a place for her little baby, she could not because no crèches in her area would take a child under one. She ended up being forced to take 16 weeks of additional unpaid maternity leave even though this had not been her intention and was not what she wanted to do. She was worried about what she would do when she had to return to work because she was finding it extremely difficult. She had even tried to source a childminder

to work in her own home but they were charging exorbitant rates.

Another mother recently told me that she had one child aged two in a crèche and when she attempted to enrol her ten-month-old child in the same crèche she was told it was not taking any babies under two. She tried six other crèches and they all refused. They were either not taking babies or were full and did not have a waiting list. She is a civil servant and was able to work from home while trying to mind a ten-month-old. Trying to work with a ten-month-old in the house is practically impossible. What is the timeframe for the review about which the Minister was talking?

Deputy Roderic O’Gorman: The Deputy made a point about childminders. The Government is advancing plans to allow childminders to be paid through the national childcare scheme. The subvention that many parents get for centre-based childcare will also be available to childminders following registration. That was discussed at the Oireachtas joint committee earlier today. That is an important step forward. I absolutely take the point. There can be increases in demand both in geographical areas and in specific demographics. The Deputy pointed out that it is often harder for parents to access services for children aged under two. We are gathering data at the moment and hope to have it in the third quarter of this year. That data will then guide my Department’s capital allocations to support new services in 2022.

Deputy Pauline Tully: That is welcome and the sooner it is done, the better. The situation is at a crucial point at the moment. There is a lack of availability and affordability. It is difficult to retain staff and fees for parents are increasing. All of these things need to be dealt with. This applies in Cavan but I know it also applies elsewhere. There is a severe lack of crèche places in Cavan. I am also hearing about a severe lack of community crèche places. Many in the work-force can afford to pay these fees, which are quite high, but those who are not in that position do not have a choice. They either have a community place and supports offered to them or they have to stay at home and mind their children. There are no such places. There are a number of resource centres working with the Cavan County Childcare Committee and Tusla to try to source premises for a community crèche. Any support that can be given in this regard would be more than welcome.

Many staff in childcare facilities are highly trained professionals and yet they are paid basically the minimum wage or certainly under the living wage. Can something be done that would result in increased pay for the workers and decreased fees for parents?

Deputy Roderic O’Gorman: No provider should be increasing fees at this time because the State is providing a great deal of support, offering the employment wage subsidy scheme at the upper rate to all childcare providers across the country regardless of the turnover rule. That is a decision we made and I know the vast majority of childcare providers really welcomed that additional support and have acted fairly. No provider should be increasing fees at this stage. I see no reason for that.

With regard to the wages and salaries paid to childcare professionals, I absolutely agree with the Deputy. I was delighted when the Minister of State, Deputy English, signed the commencement order for the joint labour committee a number of weeks ago. I initiated a process earlier this year to create a joint labour committee for the childcare sector. This will lead to an employment regulation order setting a salary scale for childcare professionals. That is very valuable and I am very pleased to have been able to lead on that.

Early Childhood Care and Education

49. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth his proposals to improve the pay and conditions of professionals in the childcare sector. [36211/21]

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I understand Deputy Funchion is taking the next question.

Deputy Kathleen Funchion: Yes, I am taking this question on behalf of Deputy Carthy. What are the Minister's proposals to improve the pay and conditions of professionals in the early years childcare sector?

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: I thank the Deputy. In answering this question, I will expand on what I said to Deputy Tully a moment ago. I am very conscious of the need for a significant improvement in pay and working conditions for staff in the early learning and childcare sector. The level of pay they receive does not reflect the value of the work they do for children, for families and for wider society and the economy. As the State does not employ staff in the early learning and childcare sector, the Deputy will appreciate that my Department cannot set pay or determine working conditions. However, my Department has, over a number of years, provided a range of supports to early learning and childcare employers to enable them to improve pay and working conditions.

There are also some important developments currently under way. In December of last year, I began a process to examine the possibility of regulating the pay and conditions of employment of staff in the early learning and childcare sector and to examine the suitability of establishing a joint labour committee for the sector, in line with a programme for Government commitment. Arising from this process, I am pleased to confirm that the Minister of State with responsibility for business, employment and retail has signed an establishment order for a joint labour committee. This order came into effect on 1 July and has been laid before the Houses of the Oireachtas. Once established, a joint labour committee could lead to an employment regulation order, which would establish binding rates of pay and working conditions for the sector. I regard the establishment of that joint labour committee as a significant and welcome development. It will help to vindicate the position of those who work in the early learning and childcare sector and offers a way forward on an issue with which successive Ministers have been dealing for many years. The move to establish the committee was welcomed by both unions and employer representatives.

As I said earlier on, work is also progressing on a new funding model. The recommendations of a dedicated expert group are due later this year and will be central to addressing both affordability and quality issues. The expert group's draft guiding principles to underpin a new funding model recognise the importance of the workforce in delivering quality services. Finally, work on the workforce development plan continues. We expect the final outputs by the end of the year.

Deputy Kathleen Funchion: I thank the Minister. As users of Facebook will now, one has memories come up on the platform and, funnily enough, it was four years ago yesterday that the Dáil unanimously passed a motion I brought forward with regard to the pay and conditions of those working in the early years sector. The Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, and some others who were here at the time will probably remember that. It would be good to see progress on this issue all these years later. Obviously, the workers were waiting for this long before I

ever tabled that motion.

With regard to the joint labour committee, does the Minister have any updates on time-frames or how it is progressing? Perhaps he does not. Is there a definite timeframe for it? It would be interesting to hear about that if the Minister has such information.

Deputy Roderic O’Gorman: I thank the Deputy. It is good that we have been able to make this significant progress, particularly after a year in which childcare professionals have bravely and consistently stood up across the country, particularly in January when so many others were not working. It is a fairly intricate process. The order to establish the joint labour committee, JLC, has been laid before the Houses of the Oireachtas. The Labour Court will establish the JLC. The parties to the JLC will then agree proposals for an employment regulation order, ERO, and submit those proposals to the Labour Court. There has to be at least a six-month gap between the ERO submissions. The Labour Court then publishes a draft employment order and a public consultation on that takes place. Where the JLC cannot agree a proposal and the chairperson feels the issue cannot be resolved, it is referred to the Labour Court. The Labour Court will then hold a hearing and make recommendations.

Deputy Kathleen Funchion: I reiterate that it is important to address the issue of pay and conditions in the early years sector. It is one of the most difficult jobs. One entrusts one’s children to excellent people and I often wonder what their trick or skill is to get children to do certain tasks that I, as a parent, struggle to get my kids to do. It is an invaluable role. They do not want to hear sympathetic talk. One shows how somebody is valued in his or her wages. Having worked in a trade union, I believe one can offer claps and say “Well done” and “That is great”, and sometimes there is a role for that, but showing the workforce that it is valued is done through wages and ensuring everyone has a decent wage. My next question is very similar to this one.

Deputy Roderic O’Gorman: I fully agree with the Deputy. I am pleased we are in the position to start the process of giving that very justified recognition. As the Deputy says, praise is all well and good but we all accept that financial recognition is well deserved. A number of processes are coming together, including the JLC process I have established, the expert group on the funding model that the former Minister, Katherine Zappone, established, which will report later this year, the workforce development plan and the review of the operating model I initiated which looks at the infrastructure that oversees childcare across the country. That will also report later this year. I hope, with that vision of mind, the First 5 strategy will have doubled the amount we are spending on childcare by 2028. I hope these reports will give us the information and the database upon which to make some significant decisions on funding and structure for the future.

Early Childhood Care and Education

50. **Deputy Kathleen Funchion** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth when he expects the survey on income and costs for the childcare sector being compiled by Pobal to be published; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [36208/21]

Deputy Kathleen Funchion: This is quite similar to the previous question. Some of the points have probably been raised. The question relates to the survey on the childcare sector that is being compiled by Pobal. When will that be published? Is there an update?

Deputy Roderic O’Gorman: The deadline for responses to the income and costs survey and the annual early years sector profile survey was 30 June. This date was extended from the original deadline in response to requests from providers, and in order to facilitate improved response rates. A significant amount of data has been collected through both surveys. These data will now be prepared for analysis. This involves a number of steps to clean and organise the data before they can be analysed, written up and reported on. Due to the volume and complexity of the data, these steps will take several months. I expect that the findings of the annual early years sector profile survey will be published in quarter 4 of this year followed by the publication of findings from the income and cost survey in early 2022.

This year’s income and cost survey will help us to understand the nature of the additional costs that arise in delivering early learning and childcare in accordance with Covid-19 public health guidance. The survey will also help us consider the best means of supporting the sector as we move beyond Covid. The survey allows us to update the hourly unit costs of delivering services. It gives us valuable information on the costs of different types of service and updated assessments on the breakdown of providers’ operating costs across services.

The data collected in this year’s income and costs survey build on a previous survey undertaken in 2018 as part of the independent review of the cost of delivering quality early learning and childcare in Ireland. The findings of that review, published in November 2020, underpin the substantial Covid-19 supports secured for the sector, including the exemption to the employment wage subsidy scheme turnover rule. The findings of that review are informing work under way to develop a new funding model for the sector. Following the launch of the independent review in November, I requested additional data analysis to be undertaken to better understand profit in the sector and which services make significant profits. That analysis is almost complete and I hope to publish the findings shortly.

Deputy Kathleen Funchion: A number of reviews are ongoing. When does the Minister expect that this will filter down to the sector? A lot seems to be due at the end of this year. Does he imagine some of this will be implemented early next year?

In the context of this and the previous question, the workforce in the sector is primarily made up of women. Time and time again, we see that sectors dominated by women have inferior terms and conditions and lower wages.

Pobal launched its annual early years sector profile. It seemed to find that childcare fees are going up. Yet, in reply to Deputy Tully, the Minister said fees should not be going up. Is there something that needs to be looked at in that regard?

Deputy Roderic O’Gorman: I take the Deputy’s point on the gendered nature of the workforce. We passed the Gender Pay Gap Information Bill in Seanad Éireann last night. That Bill constitutes a significant step forward. It will provide us with the raw data about something we know already, namely, the fact that women do not receive the same pay as men for work of the same value. We need to address that as a Government and a society.

I will look at the data and information I already have in terms of my Department’s ask in 2022. I hope to be in a position to implement some of these changes next year. This is a big change across childcare. It will not happen in one budget; it will be rolled out across a number of budgets. I hope to be in the position to do something in the budget but that is in the context of future negotiations.

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Deputy Kathleen Funchion: I hope there will be something in the budget because I noticed that the early years childcare sector was very much forgotten in last year's budget, particularly those who work in it. I would welcome moves to include it. I do not think anyone expects all this to be done overnight or in one go but if the Minister wants the trust of the sector, he has to show he is doing something. It would be welcome to have some moves in this budget.

The fees are so high in many areas, probably particularly in Dublin, but everywhere, including my constituency of Carlow-Kilkenny, they are going up. This is an issue. I tend to focus on the impact on women but I do not make an apology for that. There are not enough of us in here and we need to make sure our voices are heard. Women often get affected by the fact they cannot get childcare or they go back part-time, effecting career opportunities, pension and all those things.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: We discussed our investment in childcare last year. The budget line that comes directly from my Department did not change. We have had enormous investment into the early years sector, however, initially in the specific scheme designed for that sector and, since November of last year, in the employment wage subsidy scheme, EWSS. We have had millions every month going into the childcare sector. It has kept services open, even though the pod system means the staff-child ratio has had to be increased. I know from talking to childcare providers that they recognise it has kept their service open, enabled them to meet the public health requirements for pods and to take on more staff, such as, maybe, a floating member of staff to give additional support to children. If we say the budget line in my Department did not change, it is important to note a huge amount of investment came from the Exchequer in terms of the EWSS.

9 o'clock

Direct Provision System

51. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the immediate steps he is taking to address the child safeguarding concerns raised in the report of the Ombudsman for Children, Safety and Welfare of Children in Direct Provision. [36288/21]

Deputy Holly Cairns: My question is about safeguarding concerns in respect of the direct provision system. In April, the Office of the Ombudsman for Children published its report entitled Safety and Welfare of Children in Direct Provision, which identified a range of child protection and welfare concerns, including that staff members working in centres had not been vetted to work with children and a failure to report a serious child protection concern. What assurances can the Minister give that these issues are being addressed?

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: I welcomed the report of the Ombudsman for Children and accepted its recommendations in full. I received the report soon after responsibility for the international protection accommodation service, IPAS, was transferred to my Department. Its content makes for difficult reading. IPAS has embarked upon a series of actions, planned for the short and medium term, that will build upon existing work to ensure the recommendations of the Ombudsman for Children are implemented as quickly as possible. I am encouraged by the comments of the ombudsman, Dr. Niall Muldoon, regarding the co-operation with his office by both IPAS and Tusla and the measures taken by them since they received the report. Both

agencies and my Department will continue to work collaboratively with the ombudsman on this matter.

The key priority will be to move all remaining children and families still residing in congregated hotel-style living to own-door or independent living accommodation. With this in mind, a full public procurement process will take place in 2021 with the aim of securing the additional spaces required to end the use of emergency accommodation by IPAS. The procurement will have a specific focus on the provision of child-friendly accommodation that allows parents and children to enjoy a quiet and private family life.

A new resident welfare team has been established within IPAS to manage cases of individual families and single residents identified as having special reception needs and ensure such needs continue to be identified and addressed in the most appropriate way possible. The multidisciplinary team includes social workers and experts from the fields of education, health and childcare. IPAS is also committed to working with Tusla during 2021 to develop interagency protocols and operating procedures that will ensure both organisations are sharing information on relevant cases. All existing and new centres will be required to develop a child safeguarding statement. IPAS will work with Tusla to ensure that compliance with child safeguarding statements and Children First legislation is audited this year.

I see the ombudsman's report as a significant contribution to promoting dignified and appropriate accommodation for people seeking international protection. My Department will continue to work with IPAS and Tusla on these issues.

Deputy Holly Cairns: The ombudsman's report highlighted systematic faults in the direct provision system. The report was unambiguous in stating that the direct provision model "does not have the best interests of children, or the protection and promotion of the human rights of the child refugees at its core". We know many asylum seekers are vulnerable due to language barriers, lack of social supports and the traumas of forced migration. There is an inherent kind of power imbalance between staff and residents, which is made clear in the report, with one parent fearful of making legitimate complaints due to the risk of reprisals and weaponisation of child protection. While I really welcome the Minister's commitment to ending direct provision, we know it will take years to achieve. Can he guarantee that staff members in the centres will be vetted to work with children and trained in child protection?

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: The ombudsman is absolutely right to highlight the inappropriateness of the direct provision system to deal with the needs of anybody, particularly those of children. That is why we brought forward the White Paper proposing to end direct provision and replace it with a new international protection support service, with all the wrap-around supports it entails. As the Deputy notes, this will take a number of years to achieve, specifically, until the end of 2024. I have outlined some of the immediate actions both IPAS and Tusla are taking, individually within their own spheres but also together. This is important because one of the findings of the ombudsman's report was that the two bodies were not talking to each other. Both now come under my responsibility and that will help to ensure there is full cooperation between them. Our introduction of the vulnerability assessment is really important because it will ensure that when somebody new comes into the international protection system, we can immediately identify specific vulnerabilities they may have and make provision for them within the services we provide.

Deputy Holly Cairns: There has been a clear failure by previous Governments and State

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agencies to oversee direct provision. Is the Minister working with the Minister for Justice to address issues such as IPAS's failure to follow its own child protection and welfare policy? What is he doing in response to the failures on the part of Tusla that were identified in the report, including its failure to co-ordinate services to meet the needs of children in direct provision and identify a named social worker for a direct provision centre in one area? In light of this country's history of child abuse in State-sponsored institutions, we all hope the Department of Justice and the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth will work together to ensure the highest standard of child protection practice. That is not the case at the moment, unfortunately, but I am glad the Minister is working towards it and we all support him in doing so. The ombudsman's report details a catalogue of failures to protect incredibly vulnerable young people.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: I will give the Deputy some further information on what is happening in this area. Additional child safety training will be rolled out to all centre managers during 2021, as soon as the Covid-19 restrictions are lifted. The child safeguarding statements will be translated into all relevant languages across all centres, which will enable people to understand them immediately. In terms of the wider issues, particularly issues that fall under the remit of the Department of Justice, such as the times for processing international protection applications, I will be engaging with the Minister of State, Deputy James Browne, on them later this week. The point has been made by me, by NGOs and, in particular, by people living in direct provision that it is only by getting the processing times directly shortened that we can have real success in terms of the implementation of the White Paper. I will be working on that with both the Minister of State and the Minister, Deputy McEntee, when she returns from leave.

Direct Provision System

52. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth his views on the decision not to implement the recommendations in the McMahan report on direct provision; the reason those recommendations were not implemented; if the recommendations of the Ombudsman for Children in his report on the safety and welfare of children in direct provision will be implemented before the new system of direct provision is in place; his views on the report by the Ombudsman for Children; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [35954/21]

Deputy Martin Browne: My question follows up on the issues raised by Deputy Cairns. Why have the recommendations in the McMahan report on direct provision not been implemented? Will the recommendations of the Office of the Ombudsman for Children report, entitled Safety and Welfare of Children in Direct Provision, be implemented before the new system of direct provision is in place? What are the Minister's views on the ombudsman's report?

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: The Deputy has asked two quite broad questions and I will do my best to cover them. First, I have always stated my view that the current system of provision of accommodation for people in international protection is not fit for purpose. That is why we are replacing it and we have set out how we are going to do that in the White Paper. We are ending direct provision. In designing the White Paper, we had the opportunity to see the first draft of the report of the Ombudsman for Children. It was very much reflected in how we designed the White Paper, particularly the supports we are putting in place for children and ensuring Tusla is represented in the reception and integration centres that will be established.

The McMahon report was published in June 2015 and included a total of 173 recommendations for various Departments. The Department of Justice, which was then the lead Department, has indicated that 98% of those recommendations were either implemented or at least put in progress. It has been noted that the McMahon report resulted in substantial improvements in the direct provision system at that time. More than 70% of residents now have access to cooking facilities, for example, which was an important recommendation. It remains my Department's target that all centres will be capable of providing independent living facilities as soon as possible.

However, we know the McMahon report was coming from a low base. That is why we are not looking to tinker with direction provision; we are looking to end it and bring in a new system. I am also very conscious of the failings on the part of Tusla and IPAS that were illustrated in the report of the Ombudsman for Children. I covered several of them in my response to Deputy Cairns. The ombudsman recognised when he published that report the very substantial co-operation he received from both Tusla and IPAS, our full acceptance of the recommendations and our action to implement them as quickly as possible.

Deputy Martin Browne: I appreciate that the situation has improved since the publication of the White Paper. However, as Chairman of the Joint Committee on Public Petitions, I was shocked when the ombudsman came before us recently to present his report. It highlights how children in the direct provision system are not deemed to be a vulnerable group. How that ever happened puzzles me. Inspections are not frequent enough and do not take account of the mental health and emotional needs of children. In emergency response centres, they do not take place at all. The report also pointed out that the recommendations of the McMahon report have not been implemented. That is the point on which I want to focus because the Ombudsman told the Committee on Public Petitions when he appeared before it that there has never been a rationale behind the failure to implement the McMahon report or even the recommendations that came out of it. He suggested that political priorities and changes of Government may have contributed to that failure. As the Minister stated, the report of the Ombudsman for Children also pointed to the fact that IPAS failed to implement the recommendations. HIQA agreed to undertake inspections but the Ombudsman has noted that the legislative change that would be required could take years and we do not have that time. Does the Minister have proposals on the legislative change needed?

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: The Deputy is correct that implementation of the White Paper is key. We have to learn from the fact that parts of the McMahon report were not implemented. What we set out in the White Paper is a transition team. It is made up of new civil servants in my Department with the specific job of changing the system. I am not asking the people who are running the existing system and have their hands full with that to bring in the new system. Rather, I have set up a new team, the international protection support service, to do so. It is overseen by a programme board staffed by representatives of my Department and other Departments such as the Departments of Justice and Education and involving local authorities and the Housing Agency to bring in that wider degree of expertise because, as we know, dealing with the accommodation needs of international protection applicants will be very important. Finally, there is an advisory committee comprising three people who have an independent oversight role and a responsibility to, I suppose, hold my feet and those of the Government to the fire in terms of making sure we implement in a timely fashion.

Deputy Martin Browne: I remind the Minister that the Ombudsman stated there is a lack of operational guidance between IPAS and Tusla. I appreciate he acknowledged that already.

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Those agencies both have responsibilities for children in direct provision, which has resulted in a situation in which children lack visibility in their systems. Direct provision is on the agenda of the Committee on Public Petitions again this Thursday. Representatives of Doras, an NGO, will attend the meeting alongside the Irish Refugee Council and are due to tell the committee that people in direct provision are 15 times more likely to be diagnosed with depression, anxiety or post-traumatic disorder. Although I acknowledge that this country has failed for many years to have a fit-for-purpose mental health system, these are vulnerable children who have been in situations most of us cannot even imagine. Will the Minister give me a firm commitment that he will ensure, to the best of his ability, the changes in the White Paper will be implemented before the new system of direct provision is in place in a few years time?

Deputy Roderic O’Gorman: In terms of the report by the Office of the Ombudsman for Children, many of those recommendations have been implemented or are in the process of being implemented in terms of the changes required of IPAS and Tusla. The Ombudsman has recognised the co-operation that both bodies have shown. I am sure he will continue to monitor our co-operation and our implementation of those measures and I absolutely appreciate that. The Ombudsman for Children and the Office of the Ombudsman both contributed to the process of establishing the White Paper and I think they both recognised what the Government is seeking to achieve in terms of the very significant change in how we accommodate persons seeking international protection and, in particular, how we accommodate their children. As I stated to Deputy Cairns, the introduction of the vulnerability assessment allows us to identify specific issues that each new applicant faces and make provision for those.

Childcare Services

53. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the steps he plans to take to fully address the devastating impacts that the national childcare scheme will have on the provision of care to disadvantaged children; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [36034/21]

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I have dealt with the Minister previously in respect of the national childcare scheme, NCS, and I welcome the interaction we have had in that regard. Much as we might welcome the national childcare scheme as a job activation scheme, the problem relates to funding for groups that deal with disadvantaged kids. The Minister has already answered questions relating to some of the review processes but, obviously, there is still a need to look at Tusla in the context of sponsorship and expanding sponsorship. I will deal with that at a later stage.

Deputy Roderic O’Gorman: The Deputy and I have engaged in substantial discussion on this issue. I addressed similar issues with Deputy Funchion earlier today. I am strongly committed to supporting children to develop to their full potential, especially those who are most disadvantaged. The national childcare scheme has been designed specifically with the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children in mind. It represents the first ever statutory entitlement to financial support for early learning and childcare. It marks a shift away from previous schemes, which were based on medical card and social protection entitlements, to a more progressive system of universal and income-based subsidies. Under the NCS, significantly more families are eligible for support, with families on the lowest incomes getting the most support.

Similar to schemes in other jurisdictions, the scheme is designed to ensure access to early

learning and childcare is provided at a level necessary to support positive child development outcomes, regardless of whether parents are in work or study. Where parents are not engaged in work or study, the NCS subsidises up to 20 hours per week. Where parents are engaged in work or study, the scheme subsidises up to 45 hours of per week. As Members know, the definition of work or study is broad and covers all forms of work or study arrangements. The minimum number of hours required to activate the full amount is small, at just two hours per week.

As we have discussed, the NCS includes sponsorship arrangements that allow for additional support for vulnerable families where there is a need for early learning and childcare on the grounds of child development or child welfare. I have engaged with the sponsorship bodies, particularly Tusla, to encourage them to take a wide definition of children's vulnerability and this has seen an increase in the number of sponsorships being provided.

In line with the Childcare Support Act, I recently commissioned a review of the national childcare scheme. This will assess how well the scheme is serving the needs of children, among other issues. As the Deputy is aware, I specifically asked that the review deal with the issue of disadvantage.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I very much welcome the review process and the fact that the Minister wants it to look specifically at disadvantage. The problem is that the facility at Moneymore in Drogheda now has 12 children but capacity for 26. The number in The House in Cox's Demesne is 24, down from 32, while in Lios na nÓg it is 45 although the facility had capacity for 72. In Toberona, it is 14, down from 22, and in Muirhevnamor it is 17, down from 26. Those services are interacting with Tusla. The House in Cox's Demesne might have a bit more interaction because it has a service-level agreement, SLA. There is a possibility that the others may enter a meitheal-type scenario but none of this is guaranteed. These groups are going to contact the Minister soon to seek a meeting. That would be useful, particularly in dealing with those specific issues relating to disadvantage.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: I continue to listen to providers on the ground with regard to issues they are experiencing because that is one of the best sources of information. I have set out the measures I have taken in the short term in terms of broadening the applicability of sponsorship. I have also made reference to the sustainability fund, which is open. Any service across the country that is facing a challenge in terms of its overall sustainability can apply for the sustainability fund. We opened it up for Covid sustainability challenges in particular, but also for wider sustainability challenges.

As regards the short term, we have taken the action on sponsorship, have provided the sustainability fund and are undertaking the specific review of the NCS and its impact on services working in disadvantaged areas. As I discussed earlier, we have the bigger piece, that is, the expert group on the funding model, which is specifically looking at funding for disadvantaged services as part of its terms of reference.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I welcome the Minister's remarks. As regards Tusla, there are certain families that are incredibly frightened when they hear Tusla mentioned, which can create its own difficulties. However, there are specific issues which I will discuss later with the Minister relating to the interactions with some of these groups. We do not necessarily have it across the line in the context of meitheal or how exactly the process will work for some of these groups.

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One of their asks will be to expand the sponsorship, particularly in the context of the Department of Education. Many referrals were made by home-school liaison teams and the school completion projects that were operating in DEIS areas and those are specific areas at which we can look. I have spoken to the Minister before about the fact that as much as we see the absolute necessity of the NCS in terms of job activation and, in particular, those at the lower end, but there are specific needs of disadvantaged families and children that need to be considered. We might need to look at a separate pot of funding. I hope the review process will deal with that.

Deputy Roderic O’Gorman: In its terms of reference, the expert group established by the former Minister, Dr. Katherine Zappone, was specifically asked to examine what I believe was described as “a DEIS-type model” of childcare. That is being looked at. We hope the expert group will report by November of this year. As I have said to the Deputy previously, the NCS is two years old. A significant change has been rolled out in the middle of the Covid pandemic. We must accept that there is an element of bedding the system down. However, I also recognise that a system that works very well on the macro level can sometimes have impacts on the micro level. I welcome the Deputy’s engagement and that of other Deputies and Senators who have voiced concerns about impacts in certain areas. I will continue to listen. We have introduced some short-term measures. The safety net of the sustainability fund is available. We commit to continue to look at that issue and act on the data we receive.

Departmental Strategies

54. **Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth his views on the development and implementation of a national autism strategy. [36231/21]

56. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth his plans to advance an autism empowerment strategy; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [35503/21]

Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne: I ask the Minister of State for her views on the development and implementation of a national autism strategy.

Minister of State at the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): I propose to take Questions Nos. 54 and 56 together. I recently announced my intention to establish a working group to develop an autism innovation strategy. I made the announcement at the AsIAM “What Autism Acceptance Means to Me” online event, celebrating World Autism Day. My intention is to launch the strategy in January 2022.

The Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth currently co-ordinates the national disability inclusion strategy and the comprehensive employment strategy for people with disabilities. Complementing these two major frameworks, the aim of the autism innovation strategy is to address the specific barriers that may be faced by individuals with autism and their families. The focus of the strategy in the short term will be to deliver real and tangible solutions to the challenges, needs and experiences of people with autism.

As an initial step, I intend to set up an autism innovation strategy working group. This group will develop and subsequently monitor the implementation of the strategy. I will personally chair the working group, once established. The intention is that the working group is to

be formed in September of this year. It will be made up of officials from relevant Departments and agencies, as well as public stakeholders. The tasks of the working group will include pin-pointing priorities within areas of education, employment, health and housing that the strategy will aim to address; working collaboratively to identify actions which support the effective implementation of the plan; and ensuring that the lived experience of people with autism is part of the design, implementation and monitoring of the strategy. The working group will also provide oversight and critical, constructive analysis that will help the autism innovation strategy achieve its goals. The strategy will be cross-departmental in nature, as autism is not solely an issue to be addressed with health supports, but one which requires a more holistic and rights-based approach to be taken, reflecting the entirety of a person's lived experience.

Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne: I appreciate the Minister of State's response. I have posed the question as a public representative and also as a parent of a child with special needs and a diagnosis of autism. Therefore, it is a matter that I will be following very closely. It is most important that there is an urgent commitment to undertake the development needed to recognise the diverse needs that people with autism have and attempt to level the playing field of access to services for those with autism.

There are major gaps in the current continuum of provision, of which I am sure the Minister of State is aware. I wish to mention a few of them, briefly. As diagnostic rates have increased, waiting lists for assessments and follow-up services continue to rise, with some families waiting 18 or 19 months for an assessment of need and, very often, between 30 and 36 months for full access to essential intervention. That amounts to a three-year wait. That is three essential years of formative and developmental growth that are stalled due to an inexcusable lack of resources.

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: In response to the Deputy's additional questions, as she is aware, the progressing disability services, PDS, for children and young people model is being rolled out. The problem the Deputy described in respect of people falling off a cliff when they reach certain ages as they go through the process has now been stalled. No longer will a child age out of services, particularly in the transition from the early years to the school age teams. Second, we are carrying out a comprehensive and ongoing review of waiting lists. There are primary care, disability and school inclusion waiting lists. I am trying to address the issues with waiting lists to ensure that people and family members know exactly which list they are on. With that, I hope we will also see a reduction in waiting times.

Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne: I wonder whether there is an opportunity for parents to join the working group to which the Minister of State referred. Perhaps she will consider that.

I highlight as a cause of concern the lack of opportunities to collate CSO data on the number of people with autism in the population. Let us be realistic, however. The lack of disaggregated data is not what is preventing a more concerted effort to provide equal access to services. There is a legal onus on the Irish Government to compile comprehensive disaggregated data under Article 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. I am highlighting the issue to the Minister of State to hopefully spur further action on the part of the Government to follow the example of other countries such as Denmark, Hungary, the UK and Malta. These countries are setting a standard of international best practice and their governments have played a central role in the formation and implementation of a national autism strategy, much to be benefit of those with ASD.

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I am aware that the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth has initiated a review of the Equality Acts, but it is a slightly redundant development as the Acts have not been fully commenced.

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: The autism innovation strategy will be cross-departmental in nature, as autism is not solely an issue to be addressed by health supports, as I stated. In order to ensure that we find the best possible independent individuals and organisations to participate in the working group, I will launch a public expression of interest process over the summer. Key criteria for the working group members will include knowledge, lived experience and expertise in autism, particularly in the areas of education, employment, health and housing.

In answer to the Deputy's question, applications to join the working group will be open to parents and advocacy groups. We will all be working together. We aspire to be like countries such as Malta.

Adoption Services

55. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth if clarity will be given on the rights of mothers to access their own care or adoption file and the rights of siblings to information about each other in forthcoming birth information and tracing legislation. [36285/21]

Deputy Holly Cairns: My question concerns clarity on the rights of mothers and siblings to access information in the forthcoming birth information and tracing legislation. It is an opportunity to ensure that the law is victim and survivor-centred. That definition has to include mothers and siblings, as people impacted by the State's deeply problematic adoption system. The proposed legislation, as it currently stands, ignores the rights of natural mothers to their personal information and the rights of siblings to information about each other. I ask the Minister to address these deficiencies in the legislation.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: The proposed birth information and tracing legislation will enshrine in law the right of a person to know his or her origins for the first time. The priority policy underpinning the scheme is to allow access to identity information, including unredacted birth certificates, birth and early life information to all adoptees, persons whose birth was illegally registered and those in care arrangements, for example, those who have been boarded out. The proposed legislation will empower these persons to access vital records related to their own identity.

Mothers can continue to avail of their existing rights under the GDPR, data protection and freedom of information legislation to access information pertaining to themselves. They can also avail of the right to rectification, which is enshrined in the GDPR and is a route for mothers to rectify personal data held about them in historical files which they consider to be inaccurate or incomplete. The issue of inaccurate or incomplete information is one about which mothers who have spoken to me are particularly concerned. As they can already obtain their own information and have it corrected under existing legal mechanisms, there is no provision for their rights under proposed legislation. However, mothers and other relatives will be able to avail of other important mechanisms under the birth information and tracing legislation, namely, the statutory contact preference register and a service to trace relatives for contact or information.

The contact preference register will be held by the Adoption Authority of Ireland. Persons, including mothers and siblings, can make applications to have their contact preference recorded or to lodge information. I have given very careful consideration to the issue of access to historical records by siblings where a relevant person is deceased. In this regard, I am conscious that GDPR can place significant restrictions on rights of access to personal data relating to third parties. This may constrain our proposals. However, I am also very much aware of the strong wish of people to access historical records relating to deceased relatives. My Department is engaging with the Office of the Attorney General on the matter. It is complex because of GDPR but I have sought to explore all opportunities. We will discuss this as the legislation progresses.

Deputy Holly Cairns: If mothers can already exercise their rights under GDPR, why can adoptees not do the same? As the Minister says, the legislation is about access to one's own information. For adoptees, it is about access to their birth certificates, a right still denied to them by the State despite GDPR guidelines, and it is also about access to other early-life information. A mother should be able to gain access to her own care and adoption files. Even under current data protection law, they can gain access to some information, but the scheme provides no mechanism for adopted people and natural mothers to access the administrative files of institutions, agencies and individuals involved in forced family separation. Many adopted people and their siblings, whether adopted or not, are eager to learn about each other and to be in contact. They are entitled to this under GDPR so they must be facilitated in this regard. The Bill needs to provide all affected people, including relatives of the deceased, with a clear pathway for immediate access to their records and administrative files. The Minister just said there could be a barrier where an individual has a deceased relative but, according to the experts, there is no way the deceased person's GDPR rights override those of a living relative.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: I was speaking in the context of the GDPR rights of the mother in circumstances where she is still alive. Where there is a mother, a child and a sibling of that child, the GDPR rights of the mother also have to be taken into account. A mother has a right to access her own file under GDPR. That is often the file the adopted person is also seeking to access. For the mother, the file is her own, whereas the adopted person is seeking access to third-party information. In the past, this has raised the issue of competing rights, that is, the right to privacy versus the right of access to information. We believe, in respect of the adoptee, that we have been able to resolve the issue of the balancing of rights by the mechanism we have included in the Bill, which is the information meeting. That is a matter we will address as the legislation is debated.

Deputy Holly Cairns: It is just confusing that there is acknowledgment of some rights under GDPR but not others. Access to birth information has to be unconditional. The Bill currently proposes a compulsory information session with a social worker. This is another issue. Adoptees have rightly pointed out that this is a barrier, not to mention that it is also condescending. It would be more appropriate if the Bill ensured that all people seeking information were provided with medical and counselling support rather than a compulsory information session, which insinuates they do not understand what is occurring. The information session is to be conducted by a social worker employed by Tusla or the Adoption Authority of Ireland, two bodies adoptees have heavily criticised, understandably. Some campaigners have called for a new agency independent of both bodies to deal with the implementation of the legislation. That would make sense given the historical context. Can the Minister assure those who have raised concerns that any information session will be optional and that independent medical and counselling supports will be offered to everyone seeking access to personal data or data concerning

a deceased relative?

Deputy Roderic O’Gorman: The information session we have provided for is in no way meant to be condescending towards adopted people. It is described as an information session; it is not described as a counselling session, as it is in other jurisdictions. The session is modelled upon the social worker-led approach adopted in other jurisdictions but the key reason the session is included is to provide for the balancing of constitutional rights, namely, the right to information that we are recognising for the first in this Bill and the right to privacy of the natural mother, which is recognised in law. We have done this in such a way that the right to access information will always win out. That is the big change we have achieved in this legislation but, for the legislation to reflect a balancing of rights, we have provided for the information session. I am happy to engage with adoptees on how to frame the session. We are not closed on that. The mechanism is one we have used to resolve an issue with constitutional balance that has bedevilled legislation in this area for 20 years. We have taken an important step with this draft legislation.

Question No. 56 answered with Question No. 54.

Question No. 57 replied to with Written Answers.

Direct Provision System

58. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the number of persons admitted to direct provision since January 2020; the number who left direct provision in that time; the arrangements being made to provide independent living units for all these residents; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [35624/21]

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: This question relates to the number of people admitted to direct provision since January 2020, the number who have left it since then, and the independent living arrangements that have been made for those who remain in direct provision in line with the programme for Government. The Minister might let us know what is happening in this regard and whether the numbers are going down.

Deputy Roderic O’Gorman: I thank the Deputy for the question. As of Sunday, 27 June 2021, there were 6,465 persons accommodated by the International Protection Accommodation Service, IPAS, of my Department across 70 accommodation centres. Of this number, 71%, or 4,564, are being accommodated in centres that provide independent living facilities that include cooking facilities at least. A majority of these enjoy the full suite of independent living requirements, and 33%, or 2,158, have own-door access to their accommodation. In the 46 permanent centres, some 74% of the 7,719 bed spaces allow the resident full access to independent living, with 31% of total bed-space capacity being in own-door units where residents have private cooking facilities in self-contained units, such as apartments. Of the 24 emergency centres, nine provide independent living in the form of cooking facilities.

Regarding the numbers arriving and leaving, I can confirm that 1,007 persons entered IPAS accommodation in 2020 and that 465 persons had entered up to the end of June 2021. Between January 2020 and May 2021, 1,486 persons formally left IPAS accommodation. We do not have the numbers for the period up to the end of June just yet.

My officials are currently developing a tender process to secure additional accommodation for families with children, couples and single people seeking international protection. This is to ensure my Department has adequate capacity and can respond flexibly to increases in demand as they arise and move away from reliance on emergency accommodation. The aim of this process is to improve the quality of the accommodation and services offered to international protection applicants and to align more closely with the aims of the White Paper and with national standards. As the Deputy will be aware, independent living is central to the national standards.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: Would I be right in believing that the number who entered in the past year and a half is lower than in previous years? Am I correct that the number leaving has been matched by the number coming in? I would have believed that there was an opportunity in the past year and a half to radically reduce the number in direct provision, no matter how good that provision is. I recognise the progress being made, particularly on independent living but not so much on own-door facilities, although I acknowledge 33% have own-door accommodation. What discussions has the Minister had with the Department of Justice on how to expedite the reduction in the number of people in direct provision?

Deputy Roderic O’Gorman: The Deputy touched on an important point in that the success of the Government’s White Paper is predicated on the ability to process claims for international protection in a far more speedy manner than is currently the case. There is a commitment in this regard by the Department of Justice in terms of its response to the report of Dr. Catherine Day. It is a matter on which I have engaged extensively with the Minister, Deputy McEntee. The Minister of State in the Department of Justice, Deputy James Browne, is currently taking responsibility for this. I am to meet him in the near future to discuss it.

Deputy Ó Cuív is correct that there was a significant drop in the number entering in the past 16 months and that approximately the same number left as entered. During the worst period of the Covid pandemic, it was not possible for the Department of Justice to process international protection applications in the same manner as it was before it but that Department is considering a more online and satellite-type approach, including in its initial engagements with applicants. I hope to see its approach maintained after Covid.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: I am very disappointed to hear the Department of Justice could not do what the rest of us had to do and continue processing the applications. Most of these processes lend themselves to being completed online. All sorts of services have been provided very effectively during this period. It seems cruel that people are being retained in direct provision because of the inability of the service to deal with the applications. I wish the Minister all the best in his meeting.

When will the Minister have the number or what is the target for increasing the number of own-door or independent living accommodation? He gave figures of 71% and 33%, respectively. What does the Minister hope to achieve between now and the end of next year, that is in the next year and a half, by way of percentages in independent living and in own-door accommodation?

Deputy Roderic O’Gorman: I thank the Deputy for his support for the process. In respect of the White Paper, we are currently setting out the transition team and the programme board. They will set out a clear set of goals as to what we expect to achieve in 2022, 2023 and by the end of 2024. A procurement process is about to be commenced right now in order that we can move away from those 24 emergency direct provision centres, which are the ones that are least

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likely to have own-door accommodation or cooking facilities. That tender process will insist upon an independent living model. My goal this year is to end the reliance on emergency accommodation and bring in this new set of direct provision centres that meet the national standards while at the same time working towards the wider vision of ending direct provision by the end of 2024.

Questions Nos. 59 to 67, inclusive, replied to with Written Answers.

International Protection

68. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the accommodation arrangements made for applicants for international protection in Galway city and county who are working as front-line workers during the Covid-19 pandemic; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [35625/21]

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: I ask the Minister, in respect of the accommodation arrangements made for applicants for international protection in Galway City and county who are working as front-line workers during the Covid-19 pandemic, whether he will make a statement on the matter. This is a matter which lies somewhere between the IPAS and the HSE but it is the ultimate responsibility of the international protection system.

Deputy Roderic O’Gorman: The onset of the Covid-19 pandemic presented challenges to maintaining the health and safety of residents living in accommodation within the International Protection Accommodation Service, IPAS, as it did for the country as a whole.

In order to safeguard our residents, specific measures were put in place by IPAS in close collaboration with the HSE from the outset of the pandemic. These measures were first implemented at the same time as country-wide restrictions were imposed in March and April 2020. IPAS continues to work closely with the HSE to ensure that all appropriate measures are taken for the safeguarding of IPAS residents.

One of the measures introduced was a HSE-operated accommodation scheme for all health-care workers, which can be availed of by IPAS residents. Queries in relation to any premises currently being operated by the HSE for the housing of front-line healthcare workers are matters for the HSE.

A number of other measures were taken as part of the pandemic response which include: provision for self-isolation facilities centres and off-site self-isolation; increased capacity to support physical and social distancing to ensuring no more than three non-related persons share a bedroom, which is now a permanent policy in IPAS; enhanced cleaning regimes and provision of PPE to all accommodation centres; regular communications and information on public health advice to residents and centre managers, both on the IPAS website and through resident newsletters; and the cocooning of all medically vulnerable and over 65-year-old residents.

My officials in IPAS have at all times co-operated fully with the HSE in respect of any testing that public health may decide to undertake. Any resident who tests positive is moved off-site for self-isolation along with their close contacts in the centre, until such time as the HSE considers that they can safely return to their centre. The HSE operates two off-site facilities and IPAS has also provided one isolation centre.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: The Minister seems to be saying that these applicants for international protection, because they have become front-line workers, are no longer the responsibility of his Department and are purely the responsibility of the HSE but has the Minister insisted that the HSE provide these applicants with suitable accommodation because I have received complaints as to their accommodation, particularly taking into account that these are front-line workers providing front-line services in our country?

Deputy Roderic O’Gorman: I thank the Deputy. I am not saying that they are not the responsibility of my Department. They continue to be IPAS applicants and their IPAS space within the direct provision centre is reserved. What I am saying is that in order to take up this particular scheme, it is the HSE which supplies and oversees it and in particular, the HSE oversees the accommodation that is provided.

If the Deputy is happy to so do, I ask him to refer to me the complaints about the specific type of accommodation he has come across. I would be happy to engage with him and with the HSE about that particular matter. I appreciate his drawing it to my attention.

Written Answers are published on the Oireachtas website.

Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Leas-Cheann Comhairle agus leis an Aire. I want to bring to the attention of the Minister and the House the concerns of many taxi drivers who have over the past 12 months, like many sectors of society, dealt with the fall-out of the pandemic. I acknowledge that throughout that process at different times, the Government has sought to intervene and to alleviate the hardship that many taxi drivers are experiencing. There is no doubt that the pandemic unemployment payment, PUP, is the single biggest contribution in ensuring that taxi drivers in their own personal finances have been able to stay afloat. What we have not done but which we have done in other industries, is support them in their business costs.

I should acknowledge that following a meeting with the Taoiseach, the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, announced a package of over €6.5 million aimed at the taxi industry. That focused mainly on statutory costs amounting to about €290 per driver and dealt with regulatory issues such as licences and so on. What it did not deal with was the other non-statutory costs which drivers have, with insurance being the primary one. The restart grant which I am aware has benefited many businesses, is unfortunately still only available if one comes off one’s pandemic unemployment payment. Many drivers are reluctant to do that because they are not certain about the level of business. The Delta variant has knocked that confidence even further as has the pushing out of the resumption of indoor dining.

The Government has made progress on the statutory costs but on non-statutory costs such as insurance and other such issues, we still have not come to the table. Much of this is because we are we are relying on the Department of Social Protection to administer a support scheme for taxi drivers. The principal concern to drivers is the issue of the age of the vehicle. I am fully

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committed to the decarbonisation of the fleet, not just of the taxi fleet but of the entire vehicle fleet in Ireland and I understand that there are significant grants for electric vehicles. At this time, the idea of making a once-in-a-decade investment in one's business in order to renew one's vehicle because it is at the end of its life is very difficult to justify. While there have been extensions in the previous year, my principal question to the Minister is will he extend the age limit on vehicle life for the nine-year rule to the end of 2022?

My second follow-up question is the very strongly given commitment by the Minister to ensure that those on the PUP could continue to have that entitlement and work up to a limit of €960 until February of next year. I understand that the Department of Social Protection is interpreting that differently and that those people on the €203 payment will have to return to work in September at a cut-off point. I will expand on that in my later contribution. The Minister might concentrate on the vehicle life in his initial response.

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I thank Deputy McAuliffe for raising this matter and for giving me this opportunity to set out how the Government has allocated over €24 million to targeted measures to support this sector since the start of the pandemic. The Government is acutely aware of the very difficult situation facing the taxi and small public service vehicle, SPSV, industry as a result of the impact of the pandemic. I recognise that low passenger demand has meant that many SPSV operators have been simply unable to work and have relied on the PUP. I understand that many operators have had to temporarily suspend their licences in order to reduce major costs such as insurance and dispatch operator fees. In response to this, the Government has sought to ensure that a range of sector-specific and more general supports are available to SPSV operators to provide tangible assistance in the face of these impacts.

As for targeted, sector-specific supports, over €24 million has been allocated to the sector since the start of the pandemic. Part of this includes the package of measures I recently announced, worth €6.5 million, which will mean that SPSV standard vehicle licence renewal fees, usually €150, will be waived in 2022 at an estimated cost of €3 million. These fees were also waived in 2021 at a further estimated cost of €2.6 million. The National Transport Authority is being provided with €3.5 million in funding to enable the establishment of a scheme to refund NCT fees, which cost €55, and motor tax for SPSV operators, which costs €95, for a 12-month period. The commencement date of this scheme has yet to be determined. Further details of the schemes, including how to apply, should be available during the third quarter of this year from the National Transport Authority.

A significant proportion of the allocated €24 million relates to support for the transition of the taxi fleet towards zero-emission or low-emission vehicles, an objective to which I am wholeheartedly committed. The replacement of a vehicle is the largest single cost faced by any SPSV operator, and the funding available through this eSPSV grant scheme directly supports the purchase of electric vehicles. The overall funding for the scheme was increased from €1 million to €15 million for 2021. Furthermore, a scrappage component for older vehicles was introduced, doubling the amount payable under the scheme to €20,000. Additional amounts are available for those switching to vehicles which are both electric and wheelchair-accessible. Interest in the scheme has been very strong, with over 700 applications received since it opened in February. Some 65 new vehicles have already been licensed under the scheme at a cost of €1.2 million.

These sector-specific measures augment and enhance the range of Covid-19 support measures with broad eligibility criteria that the Government has put in place. Taxi operators can

avail and have availed of these critical supports, which include the PUP, liquidity and investment measures and tax relief measures. There is also the enterprise support grant, worth up to €1,000 towards business reopening costs such as personal protective equipment, vehicle costs and cleaning supplies.

The Government is committed to supporting drivers to return to work as society starts reopening. That is why self-employed individuals, including taxi drivers, can earn up to €960 in a given eight-week period, net of expenses, while keeping their PUP entitlement. The Minister for Social Protection, Deputy Humphreys, would have to answer any further specific questions about this measure's operation into next year. My understanding, however, is that it will be extended along the lines announced when we announced the measures for taxi drivers.

The NTA has also extended age limits for taxis and hackneys three times since the start of the pandemic. The most recent extension, made last month, ensures that no vehicle will be forced to exit the fleet due to age limits alone in 2021. Furthermore, and to answer Deputy McAuliffe's question, I have asked officials in my Department to engage with the NTA to make sure we will bring about an extension of that measure until the end of 2022, which I hope will help add to the other measures and provide some support to those taxi drivers who have been in real difficulty throughout this period.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: The news that the Government will extend that until the end of 2022 is very welcome. I know there are many who would wish it would go further, but at this time the Minister's commitment in the House to that will be very welcome news to those people who are facing that cliff edge. I understand this may have to go through public consultation with the NTA and, obviously, I would encourage us to accelerate that process as much as possible. I thank the Minister for the engagement he has had with me and with the representative bodies. While the NTA is the regulatory body and the Taxi Advisory Committee represents both taxi passengers and the taxi industry, the representative bodies are agents of change for us to deliver projects such as the decarbonisation of the fleet. We do that by building up credibility with them, engaging with them and ensuring they know there is a body on their side to protect them as a key part of the public transport network.

I accept what the Minister says about the Minister for Social Protection answering my questions. I have raised this directly with her and I will follow that up. I welcome that he says there will be change in this area, but at present it is proposed that those drivers who were on the €350 PUP rate will continue to work on a taxi rank and receive their PUP until February next year, while those taxi drivers on €203 will not. We will therefore have two different taxi drivers on the same rank, one receiving the PUP and the other not receiving it. That is an anomaly. I think the Minister recognises it is an anomaly. I imagine the Taoiseach recognises it is an anomaly. We should iron it out and again get back to the industry, communicate what we want to do and build up a relationship with them, both at the NTA and at Government level. I promise the Minister that these are ordinary, decent taxi drivers who want to deliver this public service, and they want Government support for it.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I agree with the Deputy. Our taxi drivers provide a really important service right across the country in various circumstances. In my city, Dublin, they are part of our public transport system. They are an essential service for many people who perhaps cannot drive. They often provide a more economic way to travel. The problem we have had in the past year is that the business has disappeared. Tourism business and airport business have not been there. Social, nightlife and corporate business - everything has gone. It is starting to come

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back now, and with that we will start to see fares come back. That is the key to helping drivers get back on their feet.

As for the measures we have introduced, perhaps individual taxi drivers would say they deal with only a part of the cost, but we have looked at every single way possible to reduce some of those costs. I must give credit to the Minister, Deputy Humphreys. Mechanisms were devised whereby that income disregard was possible because it encouraged people to keep on the road, even where volumes were very low and it did not make economic sense to try to make it work. How far the Minister can stretch the PUP system in having different rules for different sectors is something on which she, rightly, has to make the call. We are in the closing phases now, it is to be hoped, of managing this pandemic. Yes, it is important we keep some of the social supports in place into early next year. However, I expect, as we get fully vaccinated, that we will see the key thing we want, which is business back. In those circumstances, when people start to look at maybe getting a new car, I think they will then turn to this incredibly popular scheme. It will fundamentally change the whole taxi business and make it much cheaper to run a taxi because the lower fuel costs and the lower maintenance costs are the key. That, I hope, will kick in with the grants we are giving to help out the taxi industry.

Covid-19 Pandemic

Deputy Fergus O'Dowd: I welcome the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, to the House. As we are all aware, more than 2,000 people have died in our nursing homes due to Covid over the past 12 months or so, 1,000 of them, sadly, in the third wave. What is special about Dealgan House is that 23 residents died from Covid there in April 2020 and it is the only nursing home in the country, notwithstanding all the deaths elsewhere, that was taken over by the HSE. A serious, significant administrative decision was made to go in there and take it over, and the families want to know why that happened. On 5 April they expressed serious concerns about the nursing home. On 11 April, Paul Reid, the head of the HSE, was made personally aware of the unfolding tragedy. It took until 17 April for substantial supports to be in place in the nursing home.

10 o'clock

The families want to know what happened in the meantime. They are entitled to know that, they are entitled to closure. The families met have met, with due courtesy, with the Minister and Minister of State, Deputies Donnelly and Butler. They met the head of the RSCI Hospital Group, Ian Carter. We have put in dozens of parliamentary questions. They have put in dozens of freedom of information requests. The families who suffered most are still waiting on the truth. The only way they will get that truth, I believe, is through a commission of inquiry. There is a precedent for that, namely Leas Cross. It was the only nursing home taken over by the HSE. The Minister can make the order and the Dáil will approve it. There can be voluntary co-operation of witnesses, power of search, and compellability of witnesses is needed under fair procedures. I know two witnesses who want to give evidence to such an inquiry who were shocked and appalled by what they found in the home when they went in there. They are ready, willing and able to come before such an inquiry. I ask the Minister of State to address that significant failure of management in that nursing home in her reply. The only way that truth will out is by such an inquiry, transparent, open and accountable.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: The Minister of State and the Minister met these families. The

Minister said that a mechanism was needed for these families to be able to get to the truth. I reiterate what Deputy O'Dowd has said. We need to lay out what these families have done through their freedom of information requests, the parliamentary questions we have tabled and through a great deal of interaction, negotiation and questioning of all the bodies from the HSE, CHO 8 and the RCSI Hospital Group. A huge amount of information is in the public domain. Ultimately, a tragedy occurred in Dealgan House nursing home with 23 deaths. It was a nursing home that the RCSI Hospital Group took under operational control because that was regarded as necessary. There is a disputed narrative. A mechanism is the only way we will get to the bottom of what happened and to learn what we need to learn to ensure this never happens again. Unfortunately there have been a number of these cases. The families need that mechanism. I am not particularly worried about the means. Deputy O'Dowd spoke of a commission of investigation but whatever means are necessary need to be used. There needs to be engagement with the families on the type of investigation and it must be one that will provide all the answers. We cannot have this situation continue on and on. The families have been very good. They accepted there were issues in December and January and following the ransomware attack but this needs to happen as soon as possible.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): I thank Deputies O'Dowd and Ó Murchú for raising this, and it is not the first time they have done so with me both on the floor of the Dáil and in person. The Covid-19 pandemic has led to an unprecedented challenge across our health services and none more so than in our nursing homes. I think it is fair to say that the health and safety of residents in nursing homes has been paramount in all our minds over the past 16 months especially. The National Public Health Emergency Team, NPHE, the Department, the HSE and the Health Information and Quality Authority, HIQA, placed a focus on supporting older people in nursing homes throughout the pandemic.

Every person who is supported in older persons services is entitled to expect and receive supports of the highest standard. Quality care and patient safety is a priority and our continued focus is and will always be to deliver safe, high quality services. The safety and protection of older people is a priority for the Government.

Nursing home providers are ultimately responsible for the safe care of their residents. Since 2009, HIQA is the statutory independent regulator in place for the nursing home sector, whether a HSE-managed or a private nursing home. The authority, established under the Health Act 2007, has significant and wide-ranging powers up to and including withdrawing the registration of a nursing home facility, which means that it can no longer operate as a service provider. This responsibility is underpinned by a comprehensive quality framework comprising registration regulations, care and welfare regulations and national quality standards. HIQA, in discharging its duties, determines through examination of all information available to it, including site inspections, whether a nursing home meets the regulations in order to achieve and maintain its registration status. Should a nursing home be deemed to be non-compliant with the regulations and the national quality standards, it may either fail to achieve or lose its registration status. In addition, the chief inspector has wide discretion in deciding whether to impose conditions of registration on nursing homes.

During the response to Covid-19, nursing homes continue to be regulated by HIQA which, under the Health Act 2007, has the legal authority to examine the operation of any facility under its remit. HIQA undertook inspections of this nursing home both in May and September 2020. The reports of these inspections were published in late 2020. The May report notes that HIQA was satisfied to re-register the centre with several improvement-focused conditions including

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some on individual assessment and care planning. In its role as regulator, HIQA will continue to inspect individual nursing homes. For the purposes of providing additional supports, and as a once-off measure, the Department requested that the patient advocacy service extend its service to Dealgan House Nursing Home in order to support families during this time. This service continues to support residents with complaints relating to issues experienced during March to August 2020 and to support families of residents who sadly died during that period.

It must be recognised that the pandemic has not concluded and at this time a priority focus of Government remains on the ongoing management of the Covid-19 response to ensure that the positive gains now being experienced are preserved and that those most vulnerable to the virus continue to be safeguarded in light of the residual risk.

I am very aware that listening to families can bring great learning to many situations. While we are still dealing with a degree of risk in nursing homes due to Covid-19, we are continuing to look at options which may be available to the State in listening to the voices of those who have lost a loved one. I would like to conclude by expressing my condolences to those who have lost a loved one during this period.

Deputy Fergus O'Dowd: I am very disappointed by the Minister of State's response. I am offended by her comment that the pandemic has not concluded. It has concluded for these families; their family members are dead. The home was taken over by the HSE. There are serious questions about the management of the home. The Minister of State knows that as does the HSE and the hospital group. This week, Dr. Sarah Donnelley wrote in *The Irish Times*: "Now is the time for a comprehensive public inquiry involving a root-and-branch review and reform of our nursing home sector, based on human rights principles." There was a critical failure of management in this nursing home. I have absolutely no doubt about it and lots of other people know that too. We cannot hide behind this speech. I have to say I am deeply unhappy and I cannot accept what the Minister of State is putting before us this evening. It is a whitewash. It is unacceptable. It is insulting, most of all to those families who have fought tooth and nail. They have had no closure and will not get it until there is a fair inquiry into the failure of management, into the weak policy of legislation and the weak regulation. We do not have confidence in HIQA. We know what it did. I can give chapter and verse on that. It does not investigate individual complaints. The Minister of State and I both know that; everyone knows that. This will continue until we have the inquiry and I will continue to raise it here and insist that we do our job as a Government. I support the Minister of State and this Government. She has to do her job and I will insist that she do it. It must be done for truth and confidence in the system as we go forward.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: A public inquiry is the only thing that will give an answer to these families who deserve it. I think everyone accepts that. We need that timeline and then to look at mechanisms. The onus is on the Minister of State and the Minister, Deputy Donnelly, to go back to those families and give them that mechanism. We cannot continue as we are. If there are logistical reasons it cannot happen now, and I cannot see that it cannot, we need to give the families a timeline. That is fair. There are questions to be answered by the nursing home but also by the HSE, by HIQA and the RCSI Hospital Group. HIQA has put it on the record many times that it would accept its own weaknesses as a regulatory body and that it needs greater legislative powers. We have had a number of reports on nursing homes and elder care, and they have all pointed out the weaknesses. It is not just that we have an insufficient amount of home care and that people are sometimes forced into nursing homes, we must examine the entire issue. In simple terms, we need a timeline and a mechanism and we must deal with the

families.

Deputy Mary Butler: The pandemic has been hugely difficult for all residents of nursing homes, their relatives and staff. Suffering a bereavement is even harder when all the normal rituals have been disrupted. I acknowledge that Covid-19 has had a very challenging and sad impact on the lives of people living in nursing homes, their families and friends.

The Covid-19 nursing home expert panel established last year provided a comprehensive report and package of recommendations on both the ongoing response to Covid-19 and the longer term strategic reform of older persons' care. Many of the short and medium term recommendations of the Covid-19 nursing home expert panel report have already been implemented. A number of those relate to the delivery of a broad suite of supports provided to private nursing homes, including free PPE, serial testing, HSE Covid-19 response teams, infection prevention and control training and temporary accommodation for staff.

Continued learning and understanding of the progression of the disease in Ireland is an integral part of the expert panel's recommendations. There has been a significant and ongoing consideration of the impact of the pandemic, with various examinations and the compilation of reports with a focus on Covid-19, its affect on nursing homes and the learnings that can inform future policy regulation and the model of care for older persons. There has also been a very clear national commitment to continue to learn from the pandemic, as the national and international understanding of the virus evolves and, where necessary, to ensure that the public health-led approach evolves as evidence and learning materialises. The findings of these reports confirm that the very infectious nature of Covid-19 makes it difficult to prevent and control in residential care settings. We are continuing to look at options that may be available to the State in the context of listening to the voices of those who have lost loved ones.

Covid-19 Pandemic

Deputy Joan Collins: I tabled this matter not to scaremonger or bring about a spiral of fear but to raise a very practical question. My concern does not pertain to those who are vaccinated, it relates to those who are unvaccinated coming from the UK by air or sea. Immunologists and scientists are extremely concerned about the situation. The UK is going to return to the herd immunity strategy it launched at the beginning of the pandemic.

On 15 June, we changed our travel restrictions for travellers from the UK when the Delta variant began to take off there. We increased the number of days required in home quarantine up to ten days and following a second PCR test. There has been a quantitative change in the context of the 19 July or "Freedom Day", as Boris Johnson calls it. To date, 86% of people in the UK have received their first jab and 64% have received their second. The timeline is that all adults will not be fully vaccinated until mid-September. The north east of England is seeing a massive surge in cases. South Tyneside has recorded an increase of 195% in the past seven days and the jump in cases in the same period in Sunderland was 131%. The Delta variant now accounts for all new cases of Covid-19 in the UK. The authorities in the UK expect to have 50,000 cases per day by 19 July and there could be as many as 100,000 cases per day later in the summer when the children are going back to school.

Euro 2020 is taking place, including a semi-final at Wembley tonight, with thousands of supporters out on the streets. In Scotland, there was a huge surge in cases after the national team's

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matches. Nicola Sturgeon has stated that the Delta variant will just rip through the population. We are also opening for non-essential travel from Europe on 19 July. The vaccines have protected people, but the chain has been broken to a certain degree. We do not know how much it has been broken. There are fewer people in hospital, fewer people in ICU and fewer deaths, but my concern is that with the Delta variant running rampant, the UK could become a variant Petri dish or factory. Mutations could develop in light of how the Delta variant is running through the population in the UK. We must protect our vaccination programme from the point of view of our population. We must learn from the experience at Christmas, when the Alpha variant came in as a result of people travelling here from the UK who did not quarantine as they were asked.

Some 50% of our adults have been fully vaccinated but only 69% of people have had a first dose. We are moving quickly and we hope to have most of the population vaccinated by August. It would be a great success if we did that. We still have to rely on the public health advice. We need more public health consultants and teams. We must continue with our track-and-trace process and ensure that people social distance, wash their hands, wear masks and self-isolate. There must be serious discussion with NPHE and the HSE on whether mandatory hotel quarantine is put in place for those travelling to Ireland in order to keep more infection and possible mutations of the Delta variant out until our vaccination programme is fully implemented. I am not trying to increase the fear factor, but we have come so far and the population has done so well and we should remember that asking people to quarantine for ten days in their own homes did not happen at Christmas. We have learned from the experience and we should consider mandatory hotel quarantine now.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): I thank the Deputy for raising this matter, which I am taking on behalf of the Minister, Deputy Stephen Donnelly. The script I am going to read is the one he has provided.

Government advice to avoid non-essential travel, including from Great Britain, will remain in place until 18 July. The common travel area allows Irish and British citizens to move freely between Ireland and the UK. Throughout the course of the pandemic, however, the Government has targeted public health interventions for travel. Evidence on the epidemiological situation is given close consideration due to the high volume of travel between Ireland and the UK. Currently, passengers travelling from the UK are required to complete a Covid-19 passenger locator form. Those arriving from Great Britain must also have evidence of a negative pre-departure PCR test, taken no more than 72 hours before arrival, and are required to quarantine at home for 14 days. Legally, passengers can exit quarantine with a negative PCR test taken five days after arrival. At present, however, additional advisory measures apply following travel from Great Britain. Passengers are advised to continue to quarantine until a test can be taken after the tenth day and the result is negative.

The Department has put in place enhanced communications with relevant travellers to promote awareness of these measures, including on-board announcements on all relevant flights and ferries, radio advertisements and additional calls and texts issued through the passenger locator form to provide public health advice. From 19 July, Ireland's approach to international travel will broadly align with the EU, including on the operation of digital Covid certificates. Discussions are ongoing between the European Commission and certain third countries, including the UK, to facilitate the mutual recognition of digital Covid certificates.

Those who have been in a designated state within 14 days prior to their arrival into the State must quarantine in a designated facility. From 19 July, the list of designated states will

broadly align with the countries to which the EU has applied an “emergency brake”. There are also certain other circumstances where arrivals from non-designated states must quarantine in a designated facility, for example, those who arrive without evidence of a negative pre-arrival PCR test. There are some exemptions from the obligation to undergo mandatory hotel quarantine, including for example essential workers or those who have received the full course of a Covid-19 vaccine which has been approved for use by the European Medicines Agency. The mandatory hotel quarantine policy will continue to be kept under ongoing review, informed by the trajectory of the pandemic, the progress of our vaccination programme and the management of risks to public health. Ireland and the UK remain in close contact at political and official level on our respective approaches to managing travel in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, including in the context of our systems for mandatory hotel quarantine.

Deputy Joan Collins: I know the Minister of State is standing in for the Minister, Deputy Donnelly, but I do not think there is a sense of urgency in this reply, to be honest. Our population has gone through 18 months of severe restrictions and we are still maintaining those restrictions because we are obviously concerned about our families and the people around us who we love. Even the WHO’s Mike Ryan said today there is a huge danger from our neighbours, the UK, unless we start talking about this now and unless we start looking at what we have to do. I am not talking about mandatory hotel quarantine for the next ten months but until our vaccination programme is robust enough to be able to protect our population. We should at least give that break to our population and that security that at least we are making an attempt.

On the question in regard to the North and people flying through Belfast, we should be talking to our counterparts in the North and if not having checks on the Border, then, perhaps, a kilometre or two beyond the Border, checking people flying in and coming down from Belfast. We have to give ourselves all the chances we can to stop this disease coming in again, on top of the Delta presence that we know is going to increase quickly. We are trying to deal with that but we have more infection coming in from the UK and also possible variants. That is the crucial thing that could break the chain of the vaccination programme unless we take this seriously.

I urge the Minister of State to go back to the Minister, Deputy Donnelly, the HSE and NPHET to ask them to seriously discuss this, so we have something in place for 19 July and are not responding by bringing in something in two weeks time, when it is too late. It is very important that we protect our population.

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: I thank the Deputy. I will take back to the Minister, Deputy Donnelly, exactly what she has relayed here on the floor of the Dáil. The Minister and his team are being proactive. It was only last Friday that they took the twin-track approach to the vaccination for those aged 18 to 34 when we are still coming down through the cohorts. That is in order to keep pace with the Delta variant and to try to get as much of the population vaccinated as quickly as possible. It was very good to hear that we will have 50% of the population fully vaccinated today. I know that does not allay any of the Deputy’s fears, as outlined in her questions, but I will take on board exactly what she has said and bring it back to the Minister who, hopefully, will be able to answer her in the coming days.

Rural Schemes

Deputy Brendan Griffin: I thank the Leas-Cheann Comhairle for being here on the graveyard shift and the Minister of State, Deputy Malcolm Noonan, for staying late to take this

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Topical Issue matter. It is a very important issue that affects thousands of families all over the country. Right now, thousands of local improvement scheme, LIS, roads are awaiting funding to be repaired and brought back to an acceptable standard.

There is a misconception that these are private roads and they are often referred to as private roads. The reality in many cases is that these are roads that local authorities have, to be kind, ignored for years. They are non-council roads but there is an impression they are gated roads that only one family can use, which is a misconception. These are very often important roads used by multiple families. Unfortunately, many have fallen into a terrible state of disrepair and people need financial support from the State to keep the roads in a decent condition in order to be used.

Just last night, I was on Farnes road in Castlemaine, County Kerry, where there are 13 houses. There is nothing private about that road but it is a non-council road in appalling condition. The neighbours came together last night and themselves filled some of the potholes with tarmac, but that is a stop-gap measure and the road is still very substandard. These are all citizens who deserve to have excellent infrastructure, as every citizen deserves to have, but particularly for that last half a mile up to their house. People pay their motor tax and they contribute to society in so many different ways, yet the road to their home is in an appalling condition.

This is happening all over the country. There are hundreds of cases in Kerry and thousands nationwide. I acknowledge the work that has been done in recent years to get the scheme moving again and to get extra funding to clear the old lists and open up new applications, but, quite simply, the money there now is not enough and is only a drop in the ocean. I understand some €10 million was allocated this year and while I acknowledge that is a 5% increase on last year, realistically, €10 million would only cover a fraction of the roads in Kerry, never mind the roads all over the country.

I have started a campaign in the last couple of weeks to “clear the LIS-t”. The local improvement scheme is very worthy of funding and it is money that can be spent immediately. Employment would be created immediately and people would not have to get planning permission as these are shovel-ready projects. It would mean a huge difference to the quality of life of people living close to these roads. It is not just homes and farmyards that are connected by these roads. Many important amenities, such as our mountains, lakes, rivers and walkways, are connected. Even in my own community, I can point to numerous roads that connect the seashore, the mountain and the walkways, and they are local improvement scheme roads that are awaiting funding.

I do not think the Department of Rural and Community Development can do this alone as it does not have a huge overall budget. That is why I am glad the Minister of State, Deputy Noonan, is present because I feel that his Department, through local government, has a role to play, as absolutely and very blatantly does the Department of Transport. It used to be a transport issue and it was shipped over to the Department of Rural and Community Development in 2016. I congratulate the former Minister, Deputy Michael Ring, on the work he did to progress this issue and the Minister, Deputy Humphreys, has done great work as well. However, they cannot do it alone and they need help. I call on all three Departments to chip in but I also ask that, in every Department, there be a look at redirecting capital funding that cannot be spent at the moment because of Covid and the re-profiling of that towards the local improvement schemes. As I said, it would improve quality of life but would also provide much-needed employment for people all over the country.

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Malcolm Noonan): I was here for the first Seanad Commencement matter this morning on behalf of the Minister, Deputy Humphreys, and I am here in the Dáil for the last matter this evening on behalf of the Minister, Deputy Humphreys, as well.

I thank Deputy Griffin for raising this issue. I certainly recall that, during my time on Kilkenny County Council, the local improvement scheme was a hugely popular scheme and was always oversubscribed. There is no doubt it is a challenge to try to clear that list, as the Deputy said.

The local improvement scheme is a programme for improvement works on small private or non-public roads in rural areas which are not under the normal maintenance of the local authorities. As the Deputy is aware, the scheme is funded by the Department of Rural and Community Development and is administered through the local authorities. The focus of the scheme is to support the continued improvement of rural roads and laneways that are not normally maintained by local authorities but which represent a vital piece of infrastructure for rural residents, as the Deputy stated. I know how important the scheme is for people in rural areas, and for farm families in particular. There is no other source of funding for these roads, which provide vital access to agricultural lands and rural homes. The Deputy mentioned Castlemaine and the property owners themselves coming out to fill the potholes. It is a huge challenge. The scheme is also used to fund non-public roads leading to important community amenities, such as graveyards, beaches, piers, mountain access points or other tourist and heritage sites, which are very important in my own remit.

The Department provides an allocation of funding each year to the local authorities for works on these roads. The selection of roads to be funded under the scheme is then a matter for each local authority based on the priority or condition of particular roads in their county. The local authority may rely on existing lists of eligible roads and-or advertise for new applicant roads.

Individual applicants contribute towards the road projects. This can vary from 10% to 15%, depending on how many beneficiaries are on the particular road. This contribution is currently capped at €1,200 but the majority of beneficiary contributions are well below this figure.

Since the LIS was relaunched in its own right in 2017, almost €69 million has been allocated to local authorities for improvement works on these roads. As part of the Our Rural Future policy, the Government has committed to increasing the level of investment in the repair of non-public roads through the local improvement scheme. Given the value of the scheme for people living in rural areas, the Minister, Deputy Humphreys, was pleased to be in a position to increase the allocation for the LIS this year. Funding for the scheme in 2021 increased by 5% to €10.5 million, although I accept that is not enough to cover the scale of the challenge we are talking about. Every local authority received an increase in its funding this year. I confirm that the Minister is exploring the potential to allocate further funding from the scheme in the coming weeks if there are cost savings elsewhere in the Department of Rural and Community Development's budget. The Deputy made a good point about the responsibility and relationship between the three Departments that could share the burden. It will become an increasing challenge. We are dealing with increased weather events due to climate change, with deluges of rain throughout the year. This adds to the pressure on these local roads, especially where road surfaces are washed away, sometimes in a single rainfall incident. There is no doubt that this is a significant challenge and we should look at trying to increase support and funding for

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this across Government.

Deputy Brendan Griffin: I appreciate the Minister of State's response. I also appreciate that it is not his primary area of expertise. I think it is pertinent that he is in the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage. That Department can play an enhanced role, as can the Department of Transport. While the intention was positive, it was quite regressive that the local improvement scheme was moved out of the Department of Transport. It is such a large Department with such a large budget that the scheme could have been better off in that Department. We are where we are today and it is never too late for those three Departments to adopt a collaborative approach, come back together again and do what they can for those local improvement schemes.

Wheelchair users, people trying to push buggies, little children who are trying to learn how to cycle bikes and other people have no way to use the roads that I have seen and helped to repair recently. We have to think about road users who simply cannot avoid the potholes. Some of these roads are peppered with potholes. People with young children and elderly people await funding to improve the roads. I acknowledge the hardship schemes that local authorities have for ambulance access, etc., but there are many similar situations around the country, with vulnerable people with specific health issues. In an emergency, emergency personnel would have a difficult time getting to the location.

Deputy Malcolm Noonan: The points about access for services and especially ambulances are important. There has been a 5% increase in the allocation for this year. Approximately 350 projects are expected to be completed this year. That is a significant step forward and we need to ramp that up significantly. I appreciate the points. I will be happy to take the matter to my colleagues in the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, especially the Minister of State, Deputy Burke, and to discuss the matter with the Minister, Deputy Ryan, and the Minister of State, Deputy Naughton. The opportunity to look at supports from other Departments should be explored. The Minister intends to try to clear that list. While there have been calls for the scheme to be expanded to other road services such as farm sites, the Minister's current intention is to clear the list, since there is a considerable backlog. We should consider other options to support rural communities to which the Government gave a strong commitment under Our Rural Future.

Teachtairacht ón Seanad - Message from Seanad

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Seanad Éireann has passed the Private Security Services (Amendment) Bill 2021, without amendment.

The Dáil adjourned at 10.34 p.m. until 9.12 a.m. on Wednesday, 7 July 2021.