



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE  
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

**DÁIL ÉIREANN**

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

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# DÁIL ÉIREANN

*Déardaoin, 15 Iúil 2021*

*Thursday, 15 July 2021*

Chuaigh an Leas-Cheann Comhairle i gceannas ar 9 a.m.

*Paidir.*

*Prayer.*

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## Ceisteanna - Questions

### Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

#### Common Agricultural Policy

1. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the planned framework for developing the CAP strategic plan; the redistributive measures he plans to pursue within the flexibilities provided; and if he plans to submit the plan to the Houses of the Oireachtas for amendment or approval. [38153/21]

**Deputy Matt Carthy:** The Minister is running out of places to hide on the Common Agricultural Policy, CAP. It is getting to the point where he will need to tell us what his position is. He said he is going to carry out a consultation on the CAP strategic plan. I would appreciate if he would outline the format and the timeframe that will take, as well as whether he is willing to put the on record of this House his proposals and his position on further redistribution measures.

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** I thank the Deputy for the question. It is a bit rich to be talking about hiding. Every time he talks about convergence, I do not see too many Sinn Féin Deputies from certain parts of the country fronting up, or in his company. However, I thank the Deputy for the question.

These are the first oral questions since the agreement last month, which was really important. It happened at the end of June when the Council of Agriculture Ministers reached political agreement with the European Parliament on the reform of the Common Agricultural Policy. It is a fair, farmer-friendly and, critically, a flexible CAP deal. The agreement strikes the right

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balance in seeking to ensure a fair distribution of payments between farmers, while also supporting the agriculture sector to achieve a higher level of environmental and climate ambition.

Significant flexibility is given to member states to achieve this, in accordance with their own national circumstances. This flexibility was one of my key objectives in the negotiations. I am pleased to have secured flexibility to best serve our farmers.

Specifically, on the targeting and redistribution of payments, the agreement provides for voluntary capping of direct payments at €100,000, with member states also free to reduce payments above €60,000 by up to 85%, a policy that I fought very hard for. Internal convergence of payments will continue with each entitlement value to reach a minimum of 85% of the national average value by 2026. A mandatory redistribution of 10% of direct payments funding to small- and medium-sized farmers is also provided for, with a derogation for member states where they can demonstrate that their redistribution needs can be satisfied by other measures in Pillar 1.

I will consult widely with farmers on how we best apply this flexibility to address these issues at national level. The overall draft strategic plan and draft environmental report will also be subject to a further statutory public consultation and environmental assessment later this year. I will continue to update the Oireachtas this in this regard, including through the Joint Committee-----

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I thank the Minister-----

**Deputy Charlie McConalogue:** -----on Agriculture, Food and the Marine, over that period. Government approval will be sought-----

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Go raibh maith agat. A Theachta Carthy.

**Deputy Charlie McConalogue:** -----before submitting the plan to the European Commission by the deadline of 1 January 2022.

**Deputy Matt Carthy:** I can assure the Minister Sinn Féin's position on these matters is the same across the State. This stands in stark contrast with the Minister's party. His position was often nuanced, depending on where exactly he was. He has, as he rightly said, fought for flexibility. I have always been sceptical, in that I believe he is using that as a turn of phrase in order to fight against any redistributive measures. I hope he proves me wrong when we see the outcome. I hope that we see further convergence. That will be the test, whether he introduces convergence measures quickly, and at the early part of the next CAP. That will be the test, whether he ensures that we have front-loading.

The Minister has not outlined the timeframe as to when the consultation process will take place, when it will be concluded and when he will publish the CAP strategic plan. He still has not committed to bringing the CAP strategic plan before this House, considering that his big sell at EU level-----

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** The Minister to respond.

**Deputy Matt Carthy:** -----was for national sovereignty. This is a real opportunity for the Minister to put his money where his mouth is.

**Deputy Charlie McConalogue:** This Government is sovereign and is elected. It makes

these decisions on behalf of the country. Importantly, in doing that, I will consult first and foremost with the farming community. This is something Deputy Carthy did not want to do. He wanted Europe to dictate what should be happening. Over the last number of weeks, he advocated for that to be done. That contradicts the stances Sinn Féin takes on many other issues. I have always said that I want to bring this to farm families across the country, and that is what I will do. I will consult widely with everyone in the political system, through the joint committee and by having a debate in the Dáil. The Government and I, as Minister, will ultimately decide on that after consulting widely with everyone, and that is the way it should be.

I have heard Deputy Carthy in different parts of the country and in my own county talk about how Sinn Féin takes a nationally united stance on this. He proudly stands up and declares this, in places like Donegal, Cavan, and Monaghan. However, Sinn Féin Deputies are absent in other parts of the country from similar meetings. It would be interesting to see how over the next couple of weeks he will follow up with that. Even in the Chamber-----

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Minister, you are over time.

**Deputy Charlie McConalogue:** -----we see Sinn Féin Deputies from certain parts of the country absent from the debate.

This will have significant implications for farm families of the next seven years. It is important that this is brought them, fully debated and examined. I am glad to have brought that flexibility back home so that we can-----

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** The Minister can ignore the Chair, but it is not good practice. I ask both the Deputy and the Minister please to comply. The Deputy has one minute.

**Deputy Matt Carthy:** Are my eyes deceiving me? Is this place falling down with Fianna Fáil Deputies that I have not been able to notice? I can assure the Minister that attendance at oral questions does not reflect interest in the agreement. I can assure the Minister-----

**Deputy Charlie McConalogue:** It is the same at every meeting in the country.

**Deputy Matt Carthy:** I can assure the Minister I have attended meetings with the Irish Farmers' Association, IFA, and other farm organisations in almost every constituency. I will tell the Minister that I will not be dubious or duplicitous about this. I know, as the Minister does, if he were honest, the position of every single farm organisation and I will analyse the outworkings of their positions. I know, as the Minister does, where farmers stand on all of these matters. The Minister has been trying to bide his time, but the time is running out. It says it all that he will not let the Dáil pass judgment on the CAP strategic plan before pen is put to paper.

One of the measures is the maximum upper limits payment. It does not go as far as I would like. It does not even go as far as the Minister said he would like. I ask the Minister if he will introduce those measures without any loopholes or discretion-----

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Deputy, your time is up.

**Deputy Matt Carthy:** -----so that we have an upper limit of a maximum of a €100,000 payment that cannot be breached.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I ask the Deputy and Minister to put their questions and answers through the Chair. I call on the Minister to conclude. He has one minute.

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**Deputy Charlie McConalogue:** Would you get back up the yard, Deputy Carthy? It is rich to come in here and make a big song and dance about the Dáil being able to make decisions about this, when the Deputy wanted Europe to make these decisions.

**Deputy Matt Carthy:** The Minister fought against it. I wanted distribution but he fought against it.

**Deputy Charlie McConalogue:** The Deputy did not want to have the flexibility for us and for me, as Minister, to work and consult with farmers across the country and to have that flexibility at national level.

**Deputy Matt Carthy:** I am just exposing the Minister's hypocrisy-----

**Deputy Charlie McConalogue:** The Deputy wanted to cut that off at the pass at European level.

**Deputy Matt Carthy:** The Minister went to Europe and fought against the interests of the farmers of Donegal and now he-----

**Deputy Charlie McConalogue:** Now he has come in here to talk about engaging and consulting, which is total hypocrisy. I hope he will welcome the fact that I secured the capacity and potential at European level to introduce a maximum payment of €66,000.

**Deputy Matt Carthy:** The Minister did not.

**Deputy Charlie McConalogue:** I fought for €60,000 and I achieved €66,000. This is a good deal less than Deputy Carthy's party's position of €80,000 until he decided to follow the Fianna Fáil policy.

**Deputy Matt Carthy:** When will the Minister introduce it?

**Deputy Charlie McConalogue:** I am glad to have secured a good, balanced, flexible CAP deal European level. I look forward to discussing that with farming families across the country, those who are going to be served and impacted by it over the next seven years.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Minister, your time is up. Déanfaidh mé mo dhícheall a chur in iúl gur ceisteanna agus freagraí atá i gceist anseo. Cuirtear ceist agus faightear freagra, tríd an gCathaoir, más é bhur dtoil é. Questions and answers should be through the Chair.

**Deputy Matt Carthy:** On a point of information-----

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** There is no point of order. Deputy Carthy should resume his seat.

**Deputy Matt Carthy:** The problem is that the questions were not answered. This is supposed to be oral questions to the Minister.

*Question No. 2 replied to with Written Answers.*

*Dáil Éireann*  
**Agriculture Industry**

4. **Deputy Seán Canney** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine his plans to organise the sheep wool industry in Ireland to ensure that sheep farmers get a fair price for their produce. [37226/21]

**Deputy Seán Canney:** There seems to be a bit of crankiness this morning. Maybe it is due to the late night last night. I welcome the opportunity to ask the Minister what plans the Government has for the wool industry to ensure that sheep farmers get a fair price for their produce.

**Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Martin Heydon):** I thank the Deputy for raising what is a very important issue for many people involved in the sheep trade. Wool production is an important component of the agri-industry. There are approximately 46,332 sheep flock-keepers registered on the database of my Department and departmental officials oversee and inspect 50 approved and registered wool stores where wool is held while awaiting sale. Wool is a sustainable, organic and renewable natural material which can be used in a wide range of products such as textiles, fertilisers, insulation and packaging, as the Deputy will be aware.

One of the actions under the programme for Government is to undertake a review of the potential demand in domestic and international markets for wool-based products such as insulation and fertilisers. Following the allocation of €100,000 in budget 2021 for this review, we in the Department initiated a public consultation process in early March 2021 to determine the terms of reference for such a review, which included the identification of market opportunities domestically and internationally for wool-based products, carrying out economic feasibility and cost benefit analyses on proposed market opportunities, determining mechanisms that could be used to support industry initiatives, and identification of potential research projects applicable to supporting the identified market opportunities. As part of the public consultation process, we invited stakeholders to submit their proposals on the potential market opportunities for wool products on the domestic and international markets and more than 40 submissions were received.

I am pleased to advise the Deputy that through the competitive public procurement procedure the request for tenders seeking service providers to carry out this major study was established on the e-tenders website on 8 July 2021. The closing date for submissions is 9 August 2021. The successful service provider will be contracted to carry out a feasibility study in accordance with the terms of reference detailed above and will be required to examine and evaluate the proposals received during the public consultation and report on its findings. The timeframe for the completion of the review, including the tendering process, consultation with stakeholders which we are establishing and publication of the final report, is the end of November 2021. The recommendations from this review will help focus the development of a robust policy roadmap for the Irish wool industry.

**Deputy Seán Canney:** I thank the Minister of State. I welcome the fact that some progress has been made in that regard. Having studies done, getting consultants in and getting what I would call feedings from the industry is one thing. However, to give one example, in my constituency of Galway East several sheep farmers came together to form a co-op. They set out a deal with Donegal Yarns for the purchase of more than 4,000 kg of Galway wool at a price of €2.50 per kilogram. The going market rate generally is 20 cent per kilogram. That shows there is potential to make sure the product we have, which the Minister of State described as natural

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and having the potential for various facets in production, gets a fair price. It is important we support this co-operative system.

**Deputy Martin Heydon:** I am very interested to learn more about that co-operative approach. I assure the Deputy that although we sometimes get caught up in discussing brand new and shiny initiatives that have never been done before, as far as I am concerned, as Minister of State with responsibility for new market development, it is not about reinventing the wheel; it is actually about looking at indigenous elements of trade that had great value for farmers in the past but that have lost that value in more recent times. I am happy to discuss further with the Deputy the initiatives that are happening in his constituency. He will be aware there were 3.88 million sheep in the State as of 31 December 2020. Market forces and demand dictate prices in industries such as the wool industry. It moves in cycles and the current cycle, in the context of the Bradford wool market in the United Kingdom that tends to set the price, is very low. As such, any new opportunities we can find to work together or to take new approaches such as a co-operative approach are something I am very happy to seek to extend further. The report offers a great opportunity to identify all opportunities in the sector.

**Deputy Seán Canney:** I thank the Minister of State for the invitation. I will set up a meeting for his Department to speak to the people who brought this about and made sure it was a great day in Athenry on a Saturday two weeks ago when farmers came in with their wool and it was packed and sent up to the county of the Minister, Deputy McConalogue, to be used in Donegal Yarns. It demonstrates that simplicity is often key. We should not over-complicate this.

The Minister of State mentioned that insulation is a wool by-product. The price of insulation at the moment reflects its status as a scarce commodity. We need to work on this issue fairly rapidly. We do not have to reinvent the wheel. The approach to which I refer is currently being used across the world in the context of insulation. We need to take best international practice and support the setting up of the industry. That will create the demand and set the price within this country and keep the material here. There is also the fact that fabrics produced in Galway are being made in China and other places.

**Deputy Martin Heydon:** The Deputy is dead right that insulation is an area in which wool is used. It is also used in fabrics, carpeting, bedding and gardening. It makes an excellent compost. Another possibility for the use of wool is in the production of wood pellets, which is an excellent organic fertiliser. The current market uncertainties should act as an impetus for the industry players to come together, as the Deputy described happening in Galway, to see what opportunities there are to promote the excellent product to the market in as many ways as possible. My Department wants to assist in that regard. The work we are doing in terms of the overall consultation and the report that is being compiled and will be published by the end of November will be of great assistance to the industry. My office is open. I am determined to work with the sector to identify and maximise every opportunity to increase the value of what was always an integral part of the sheep industry and an integral income for sheep farmers in the past.

## Horticulture Sector

3. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine his plans to address the emergency situation in the horticulture and mushroom sector due to peat short-

ages. [38154/21]

**Deputy Matt Carthy:** The Minister will be aware that the horticulture sector, particularly the mushroom sector, is potentially facing an emergency situation due to peat shortages. Unfortunately, this issue crosses several Departments, but there is a role for the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine to pull all those Departments together and ensure this situation is resolved before it reaches crisis point.

**Deputy Martin Heydon:** I thank the Deputy for raising this very important issue. The Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine has no involvement in the regulation of peat extraction. As the Deputy outlined, this issue crosses several Departments. My Department does not have an involvement in the regulation of peat extraction. This is a planning process under the remit of the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage and an integrated pollution control, IPC, licence process under the remit of the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment.

As regards the future use of peat moss in the horticulture sector, which is of significant importance to us in the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, on 7 September 2020, the Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Deputy Noonan, published a report on the review of the use of peat moss in the horticultural industry. The review report was prepared by an inter-agency working group following on from submissions from stakeholders. After the publication of this report, the Minister of State, Deputy Noonan, proposed the establishment of a working group to include representatives from relevant Departments and State agencies, environmental non-governmental organisations and industry stakeholders under an independent chairperson to examine the issues identified during the review. In this respect, the working group will address the key issues raised in the report, including future use of peat by the horticulture sector. The independent working group sent an interim report to the Minister of State at the end of May for his consideration. The Minister of State and his officials are currently examining the report.

In addition to these developments, I, as Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine with responsibility for research and development, along with my ministerial colleagues, am actively looking at alternatives to peat. I have overseen the funding of two research projects to date and recently sought to ensure further research is conducted here to explore alternatives to peat-based growing media for horticultural production in this area in our latest research call for 2021. These alternatives must be available, affordable and sustainable and meet quality as well as environmental requirements, as I am sure the Deputy will agree. It is an important issue for us. It is of huge concern to everyone in both the amenity horticulture and mushroom farming sectors. I have no doubt but that it is an issue of great concern in the Deputy's constituency, as it is in mine. It is one on which we are all determined to work together to find a solution.

**Deputy Matt Carthy:** Herein lies part of the difficulty. As I mentioned, we already have had interactions with the Minister of State, Deputy Noonan, the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, and the Minister of State, Senator Hackett. The reason I submitted this as a priority question was to appeal to the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine, Deputy McConalogue, as the lead Minister in his Department to recognise that the issue is putting farms at risk. As the Minister of State recognises, mushroom farming makes up a substantial part of the economy in County Monaghan, as in many other counties.

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County Monaghan, in particular, is a good test case. The farmers who changed to farming mushrooms did so because they were encouraged to do so. They had smaller holdings that were unprofitable and the farmers diversified. They did exactly what they were asked to do. They moved into an area and turned small, unprofitable holdings into an economic driver for the entire region. Now they are at crisis point. They are at crisis point because of tokenism and inaction across three Departments. Those farmers deserve to know what will be done to ensure that peat can be extracted this year.

**Deputy Martin Heydon:** I would like to take the opportunity to reassure the Deputy that the Minister, Deputy McConalogue, the Minister of State, Senator Hackett, and I are united in our determination to support the horticulture sector. As such, our Department provides support to the horticulture industry through the scheme of investment aid for the development of the horticulture sector. Financial support is available to assist growers and businesses through grant aid for capital investments in specialised plant and equipment including renewable energy, as well as technology adoption specific to commercial horticulture production. A 50% budget increase to €9 million has been secured for 2021, reflecting the importance of the sector. The scheme is 100% funded by the Irish Government. In addition, our Department administers the EU producer organisation scheme for fruit and vegetables, which allows growers to jointly market their production to strengthen the position of producers in the marketplace.

There is no question but that we see the importance of the horticulture sector. We understand the challenges it faces. We are determined to work very closely with those in the sector to support them through the current challenges and to ensure that the industry is in a robust position heading into the future.

**Deputy Matt Carthy:** The problem is that the question was not answered. There are no credible, sustainable alternatives at present. As for research and development, Teagasc has stated that it will take up to a decade before that is available. What is being proposed as the alternative by Ministers such as the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, is that we import peat from third countries. That is nonsensical. It is tokenism and hypocrisy of the highest order. It does nothing for the environment or the Irish economy. It could mean, in the medium term, that we lose vital sectors such as mushroom and strawberry farming, as well as other key components of our rural economy.

Why has there been such a delay? I believe that some Ministers are quite happy to frustrate the matter. I again ask, what is being done to ensure that peat can be extracted this year for the sector?

**Deputy Martin Heydon:** As a Member of this House from County Kildare, I can assure the Deputy that the importance of the horticulture industry is something of which I am acutely aware. I have worked closely with what is a very strong amenity horticulture sector in my area. We are all aware of the importance of the sector. We should be mindful of the fact that the challenges we face now came about as a result of a recent decision of Bord na Móna to cease harvesting peat earlier. The impact of that on the peat supply has been felt by the industry earlier than had been anticipated.

It is clear there is a need for a short-term solution and a longer-term solution. Indeed, the Deputy has touched upon the point himself. In terms of our role in the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine and my role in the area of research and development, we are working on and investing in research into the longer term solutions. There is a need for short-term solu-

tions, not all of which are within the gift of our Department. We are working very closely with our colleagues in government to find those solutions.

I can reassure the Deputy and am happy to put on the record of the House that nobody wants to see peat being imported into this country. That is why the short-term solutions, with the other Departments and all players and stakeholders in the sector, need to be examined. We look forward to working closely with everybody to ensure that those short-term solutions are found to support what is a really important industry for our agriculture sector.

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

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** The next question is in the name of a Deputy who is not present. We will move on to the next question, in the name of Deputy Daly.

*Question No. 5 replied to with Written Answers.*

### **Aquaculture Industry**

6. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the number of aquaculture licence appeals currently pending in his Department. [38314/21]

**Deputy Pa Daly:** Ba mhaith liom ceist a chur ar an Aire mar gheall ar the aquaculture licences, and to ask him how many licence appeals are currently pending in the Department. Last year there was an issue with applications from Castlemaine Harbour, between Cromane Point and the town of Killorglin. Some applications had been languishing in the Department for up to four years. What plans are in place to perhaps review the whole situation in that area?

**Deputy Charlie McConalogue:** I thank Deputy Daly for his question. The Aquaculture Licences Appeals Board, ALAB, is an independent body established by statute for the purpose of considering appeals of ministerial decisions in respect of aquaculture licence applications. The situation in respect of the number of appeals pending is an operational matter and one on which the board can respond directly to the Deputy. We will ensure that the Deputy is provided with the relevant information from ALAB.

There has been a challenge in recent years in relation to a backlog of licensing appeals within the Department in particular. That backlog then started to impact on the number of appeals that were forthcoming to ALAB. Significant work has been under way over the past number of years to get on top of that licensing situation and the backlog in terms of making licence decisions within the Department. Thankfully, it has now been addressed and we are in a situation whereby applications are being dealt with in a timely fashion as they are received. That is most important in relation to providing certainty to those who make applications. There has also been a significant issue in recent years where, as a result of the need for a different approach to licensing and for appropriate assessments to be completed on many of our bays, many of the licences had expired and applicants were given temporary licences, pending full consideration of the licence application. Thankfully, licences are being issued in a prompt fashion now.

The Department resources ALAB. It is an issue on which I have engaged with ALAB. We are willing to resource ALAB further to ensure that it is in a position to deal with the applica-

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tions it has received. It is important that decisions are made and responses are given within a reasonable timeframe, right through the system, in respect of both initial decisions and appeals.

**Deputy Pa Daly:** The Minister mentioned providing clarity. In respect of the area that I spoke about between Cromane Point and Killorglin, we all saw the devastation that was wrought on the tourism industry last year and this year. Given that industry is in such a precarious position, the aquaculture jobs are essential to the area. They provide supplementary income and part-time income to many small farmers and local people, many of whom have been farming oysters for generations. When many of the people made their applications, there seemed to be a blanket ban or a blanket refusal to grant applications in that particular area. Some of the information relied on in the decision-making was a report that dates back some years. I ask the Minister to consider committing to producing an updated independent ecological report for that area in order that clarity can be provided. If there is no point in applying for the licences, it should be made clear to applicants. If there is a chance, given the jobs are essential, I ask the Minister commit to the publication of a report for the applicants.

**Deputy Charlie McConalogue:** It is not appropriate for me to get involved or to comment on decisions that are currently with ALAB, specifically. ALAB operates statutorily separately from the Department and has to be given the opportunity to fulfil its statutory obligations to assess any appeals. I understand that there are appeals in respect of the applications and the areas to which the Deputy referred.

On a broader note, I must emphasise the importance and dedication of the Department in ensuring there is a timely approach to ensuring that licences are issued when applications are received and that the resourcing and supporting of ALAB is appropriate for it to fulfil the responsibilities on it. I thank the Deputy for raising the matter. I am aware of his commitment to ensuring an effective licensing system. I am also aware of the importance of the aquaculture sector to his county, just as I am aware of its importance to mine.

**Deputy Pa Daly:** I thank the Minister for the reply. He is aware of another area of Kerry, around Renard Point, where applications were made for oyster licences. That process was abandoned last year for various reasons but I believe it is up and running again. Is the Minister aware of whether there have been difficulties with notification in respect of licensing applications in the Renard area? Some local people who have expressed an interest in the special area of conservation have been inquiring whether the difficulties that arose last year regarding the submission of applications have been arising since the application process was reopened.

**Deputy Charlie McConalogue:** I thank the Deputy. I do not have the details on the application in question or the notifications associated with it because those details were not encompassed by the initial question. I will, however, have a note sent to the Deputy outlining the current position.

## Agriculture Industry

7. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the extent to which he remains satisfied that the combination of Brexit and CAP reform will not negatively impede the development and viability of the agrifood export sector; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38178/21]

**Deputy Bernard J. Durkan:** This question seeks to raise the possible double negative impact of Brexit and the Common Agricultural Policy, CAP, to try to ensure the future viability of the agrifood production sector and our exports.

**Deputy Martin Heydon:** I thank Deputy Durkan for raising this important point. As he will be aware, political agreement on CAP reform was reached at the end of June. The agreement strikes the right balance between ensuring a fair distribution of payments between farmers and achieving a higher level of environmental and climate ambition. This is a fair, flexible and farmer-friendly deal in the context of the many competing pressures we face in reaching a solution.

The agreement provides member states with the flexibilities required to implement the CAP in a way that best suits their national circumstances, more than has ever been the case. This flexibility was one of our key objectives, and we intend to use it as effectively and as fairly as possible to ensure that our CAP strategic plan, CSP, will be designed in a way that secures a sustainable future for Irish agriculture on all levels — economically, environmentally and socially. We cannot have one without the other; they are all interlinked, as our agrifood strategy for 2030 recognises, based on Ireland taking a food-systems approach.

As the Deputy will be aware, the EU–UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement came into effect on 1 January 2021. It creates a new framework for the future EU–UK relationship based on tariff and quota-free trading arrangements. Now that the UK is outside the Single Market and customs union, it is setting its own import policy, including in regard to controls on imports from the EU. The next phase of these controls will come into effect from 1 October 2021. All consignments of products of animal origin moved to or through Great Britain must be accompanied by an export health certificate and pre-notified to UK authorities.

My Department continues to refine its preparations, which include the deployment of the necessary staffing resources, IT systems and administrative processes to meet the requirements. Industry will also have a vital role to play in ensuring that these requirements can be met as seamlessly as possible, through consolidating and simplifying their official certification requirements to the greatest extent possible.

I am satisfied, as are my colleagues in the Department, that a collaborative approach, involving the Government and stakeholders, to meeting the challenges that lie ahead will ensure a viable agrifood sector.

**Deputy Bernard J. Durkan:** I thank the Minister of State for his substantive reply. Does he remain satisfied that the negotiations on compliance with revised UK standards will be resolved to the satisfaction of the industry here? Is he satisfied that the steps being taken by the industry are sufficient to ensure the future viability of the sector, with particular reference to employment in our respective constituencies?

**Deputy Martin Heydon:** Absolutely. Deputy Durkan will be aware that the changes brought about by Brexit comprise entirely new ground for us. These are challenges that Irish agrifood businesses face. We in the Department are dealing with the agrifood businesses every day to make them as prepared as possible for all the next stages, with 1 October being another important date in the calendar for companies that export products of animal origin to or through Great Britain. We work really closely with those concerned. Extensive planning and trialling of all systems is ongoing to try to identify all the challenges we will face and to ensure our busi-

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nesses will be as prepared as possible. We are taking the time we have to ensure businesses are aware of the challenges and informed about what is expected of them. There is a range of approaches. In my area, covering trade and market export, it is important that businesses are aware of the changes because there is now a new normal. Brexit has brought that about in that it has made Britain a third country. I am satisfied that every effort is being made and every step taken to ensure businesses are prepared for all the changes that are coming.

**Deputy Bernard J. Durkan:** I thank the Minister of State again. Is he satisfied that there is in his Department a quick-response system that will identify the issues as they arise and attempt to clarify outstanding difficulties to ensure the streamlined continuity of exportation from the point of view of industry here and given the importance of the industry in the aftermath of Covid and the need for the economic recovery that we all long for?

**Deputy Michael McNamara:** The Minister mentioned Britain being a third country. One of the biggest effects of that is that it is free to negotiate deals with other countries. What impact, if any, does the Department foresee from the deal Britain has concluded with Australia, particularly concerning the importation of beef and the possible displacement of Irish produce? If Irish produce is to be displaced in Britain - even if it is not - live exports will assume a certain importance in Ireland. I do not know whether the Minister of State's Department has any update on that. I do not expect him to have the information off the top of his head. I appreciate the fact that I am able to ask the question. If the Minister does not have the information off the top of his head, he might provide an answer in writing to either or both of the supplementary questions, which arise from Britain's exit from the European Union.

**Deputy Martin Heydon:** It is not possible to touch on all the points raised here in the minute I have. The points Deputies McNamara and Durkan raised are valid. They relate to all the challenges Brexit presents. My Department has been preparing for this eventuality since before the people of Britain voted to leave. We have been working extensively on it since. Part of the work has involved examining our dependency on the UK market and reducing it. Previous Governments have been successful in reducing it. In my area, new market development, it is a matter of considering the opportunities. One such opportunity involves increasing our access to Japan's beef market, on which we had great success in recent months. We are continuing our work in areas such as South Korea and trying to get our beef back into China through ongoing diplomatic efforts on my part and that of the Minister, Deputy McConalogue. That is important.

Our trade with the UK, resulting in a proportion of 37%, is really important. In response to some of the concerns raised by both Deputies, we take great heart from the fact that the British consumer has very high regard for Irish food produce and trusts it as much as indigenous produce. It is regarded as being way ahead of the produce of others. There are threats and challenges in this regard but we are taking every step we can. The work of my officials is ongoing to make sure we are as prepared as possible.

On export certification, to which Deputy Durkan alluded, there is a new normal and businesses need to prepare for it. There will be a need for them to be aware of the changes that are coming. Most of them are aware. We encourage all of them to engage with our Department so they will be aware of the challenges they face.

## Common Agricultural Policy

8. **Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the measures he plans to include in the CSP in order to redistribute funding to smaller and poorer family farms; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38543/21]

**Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne:** My question is on the measures the Minister plans to include in the CSP to redistribute funding to smaller and poorer family farms.

**Deputy Charlie McConalogue:** I thank the Deputy for her question. The aim of the CAP is to all support farmers across the community to continue to produce top quality and sustainable food. The redistributive mechanisms currently in place under pillar I of the CAP seek to create a more even payment landscape and target funds where they are needed most. These redistributive mechanisms comprise a core EU policy and are set to continue into the new CAP from 2023. The development of Ireland's CSP involves several stages, including a strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats, SWOT, analysis, in addition to a needs assessment, intervention design, financial allocations, target setting and governance systems. The draft CSP will be subject to an *ex ante* evaluation, strategic environmental assessment and appropriate assessment, including public consultation on the draft CSP and draft environmental report. I continue to engage extensively with stakeholders on the future of CAP. Consultations on the development of the CSP will continue via the CAP consultative committee, which comprises representatives of the main stakeholders including farm bodies, NGOs, industry representatives and academia. This committee has met on 18 occasions and further meetings are planned.

The Presidency compromise package includes a suite of measures which will enable us to ensure the fair implementation of redistribution measures such as capping, convergence and complementary redistribution of income support for sustainability, CRISS, as it is known. The agreement strikes the right balance between ensuring a fair distribution of payments between farmers and achieving a higher level of environmental and climate ambition. It also provides member states with the flexibility required to implement the CAP in a way that best suits their national circumstances. This flexibility was one of my key objectives from the outset.

While agreement has been reached, further work remains on certain technical details of the proposed reforms. I expect to shortly bring a memo to Government and launch a public consultation on the draft interventions proposed for the CAP Strategic Plan. I will also continue to engage with stakeholders as we develop our CAP strategic plan 2023-2027.

**Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne:** Gabhaim buíochas for the information that the Minister has provided there. I refer to the flexibilities the Minister has held out for. These have left uncertainty as to what the final result will be, and most pressingly, whether it will abide by the *status quo* of favour to the bigger farmers or whether it will genuinely reallocate resources and do more to protect the small and medium-sized farmers. The 10% ring fence as a frontloaded payment, specifically with smaller farmers in mind, is one measure I know that has been mooted as a protection measure and I am aware that the Minister has referred to a few others there.

One would hope that there would be suite of measures being employed. The Clare farmers, in particular, have mentioned to me that access to and being able to avail of the eco schemes is of great importance to them and they are looking for clarity around that and a commitment that that will not impact on their single farm payment.

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**Deputy Charlie McConalogue:** I thank Deputy Wynne for her comments. I will certainly be engaging now very comprehensively with farmers right across the country on the flexibilities that I delivered and it is important that we have those flexibilities at national level so that farmers can participate in framing our national plan that works for our country and that they have a role in that. This is very important to their incomes for the coming years and it is important that we had national capacity to frame that as opposed to it being decided at European level.

One of the key things I achieved and on which I very much set the agenda both at national level here and at European level was ensuring the capacity to significantly reduce the maximum payment under CAP from €150,000 in the current CAP to bring it down as low as €66,000 in the next CAP. That is something on which I will also be engaging with stakeholders over the coming period.

It is important that we ensure that CAP works well for farmers particularly on the eco schemes and while these deliver additional benefits it must ultimately be money that ends up in farmers' pockets. That will certainly be a key objective of mine on framing the final plan and in working with everyone it has affected.

**Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne:** It is very important to implement a definitive set of upper limit payments to avoid what happened last year, for example. We know that obscene payments were received by some individuals during the last CAP cycle, which some have called criminal. While the average smallholding and farmer struggled to make their vocation viable, reform is well overdue. The fact that the Minister has avoided responding to the call for the CAP strategic review to come before the Dáil does not exactly inspire confidence. Sinn Féin has and will continue to call for 100% convergence. If it was in place for the upcoming CAP cycle, for example, there would be an additional sum of more than €3 million streamed into the county of Clare. Can the Minister now commit not to deviate from the 10% front-loaded payment and to resume convergence in 2022 on the understanding that it is an incremental process and that we will need several years to reach that target? The fact that last year just 20 farms and 20 enterprises received €3.6 million when we know wealthy businessmen received €414,000 of European money is astonishing.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I thank the Deputy and call Deputy McNamara who wanted to come in on this question.

**Deputy Michael McNamara:** I thank the Leas-Cheann Comhairle. Some of the Minister's responses to my constituency colleague have been a bit short on detail but that, in fairness, may well be because the detail is just being worked out. I also appreciate that the negotiations have only been concluded very recently.

One of the things that the negotiations will allow is more co-funding being put into Pillar 2 and that is one of the most essential measures that the Minister and the Government can undertake to support small farmers, the farmers I and my constituency colleague represent in Clare, most of whom practise a very environmentally sustainable type of farming. They need, however, to be rewarded and protected in doing that. Is the Minister able to give a commitment that his Government will give the maximum co-funding possible, which is a greater percentage of a greater sum of money, for Irish farmers going forward?

**Deputy Charlie McConalogue:** I thank both Deputies Wynne and McNamara. First, to address Deputy Wynne, as I said to Deputy Carthy earlier on, I find it ironic listening to Sinn Féin

being so insistent on Dáil involvement on the CAP strategic plan when it was its party's position that all of this should have been agreed at European level, that we would not have a role and that our hands would be tied on that. I fought hard to ensure that we would have the flexibilities to be able to frame our own national plan and to have farmer, stakeholder, and indeed Oireachtas involvement in shaping that and making those decisions.

On the issue of lowering the payment, that is something that I laid out at European level to ensure that we could bring it in. My objective was to bring it to €60,000 and €66,000 was the level achieved. I welcome the Sinn Féin support now for the position I had previously laid out on this.

On Deputy McNamara's point, he is completely correct. The co-funding on this is going to be very important and is something that I am engaging with my Government colleagues on and I will be doing everything I absolutely can to maximise this position. We also have the programme for Government commitment on the carbon tax which will be in addition to that.

### **Climate Action Plan**

9. **Deputy Seán Canney** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the increase in budget his Department will receive in 2021 to deal with the cost of implementing the Climate Action Plan; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37230/21]

**Deputy Seán Canney:** On the climate action plan and the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Bill 2021 that is going through the House at the moment, can the Minister inform us what ring-fenced budget he has to assist farming and all of the works they will have to carry out in order to start to comply with climate action, where that budget is coming from and is it separate from what is there at the moment?

**Deputy Charlie McConalogue:** The first all-of-Government Climate Action Plan 2019 established sectoral emissions reduction targets for the first time. The target for agriculture was to reduce emissions by 10% to 15% by 2030. The climate action plan 2021 is currently being developed. This plan is seen as the key mechanism to deliver on the programme for Government commitment of a 51% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions economy-wide by 2030.

All sectors will need to contribute to this step-up of ambition, including agriculture. The climate action plan is scheduled to be finalised in the coming weeks and preparations are running in parallel with the Climate Change Advisory Council deliberations on carbon budgets.

Annual revisions to the climate action plan will focus on the near and medium-term perspectives, be consistent with the adopted carbon budget programme and provide a roadmap of actions, including sectoral actions that are needed to comply with the carbon budgets and sectoral emission ceilings. To bridge the gap between the Climate Action Plan 2019 and the new climate action plan 2021, the Interim Climate Actions 2021 was prepared following a consultation process across Government Departments and bodies. This was published in February 2021 with over a total of 250 measures, of which 50 are led by the Department and its agencies.

The funding of the 2021 climate action plan will be determined based on the final agreement on the targets for the agriculture sector. It is clear that the targets will be challenging on the sector and that a multifaceted approach will be required.

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For my part, I secured additional funding of €79 million in the 2021 budget to support agriculture. I also maintained supports to the sector under the rural development programme continuing all the schemes in the transitional period in 2021. This is the first time that multi-annual contracts for GLAS and organics were continued in the transitional period.

In addition, the CAP strategic plan funding will be aligned to support the achievement of the targets. It is clear, however, that the CAP funding alone would not necessarily be sufficient to address the level of transformation we require.

**Deputy Seán Canney:** There is a lot in what the Minister has said, but the nub of the issue, or the question, is that we now face, as the Minister said, huge challenges in achieving the targets we have set out in the climate action Bill. Farmers want to be part of it. We have a huge amount of work to be done. We have a huge amount of research to be done as to how we will reach our targets. Underlining all that is the fact that there is a serious need to set out a separate, ring-fenced budget to make sure the farming communities are supported in achieving what we want to achieve nationally for climate action. I urge the Minister to make sure further funding is made available. While we are putting in place all these action plans and while a huge amount of paperwork is being thrown around the place, the fear is that, at the end of the day, the farmer will have to pay for a lot of it.

**Deputy Charlie McConalogue:** The point Deputy Canney makes is a good one in that while there will be increased ambition and asks made of farmers, it is important that this is done in a partnership approach and, in particular, that farmers are paid for the work and actions they are being offered to participate in. That has to be central to how we approach this. It will be an important part of the Common Agricultural Policy, CAP, strategic plan. We also have the commitment in the programme for Government for carbon tax funding to be allocated to the agriculture sector to support the new flagship agri-environment scheme from 2023 onwards. That is really important. A central theme running through how we approach this is that where there is increased ambition and increased opportunity for farmers to participate in measures which will deliver significant benefit to the environment, their income is central to that and they should be rewarded for the work they do. Farmers have shown their appetite and willingness to play their part and to take a leadership role, but it is important we do that together and recognise in financial terms the work they are carrying out.

**Deputy Seán Canney:** I agree with the Minister, but it is important to say that in micro-generation especially, as one example, there is huge potential, including the potential to create clean energy and to double back on the perception of agriculture as an offender in respect of carbon emissions. The problem is that at the moment supports are fragmented between the SEAI and all that goes on and getting connections to the national grid. There is, therefore, a need for a cross-departmental approach to this. Also, it is important that the farmer who wants to get involved is supported fully - and not in a tokenistic way or in such a way that he has to produce a lot of paperwork without getting the gain - because otherwise farmers will just turn their backs on this. They are frustrated by the huge amount of bureaucracy attached to every scheme. Can we just keep it simple?

**Deputy Charlie McConalogue:** I concur with a lot of Deputy Canney's sentiments as to how we approach this. As we go forward, we will identify the level of ambition that is required and then engage as to how that is supported financially and how farmers are supported in that work. There is undoubtedly real potential in respect of renewables. That is an area we are exploring and will continue to explore and that farmers are very keen to explore and get involved

in too. That work will continue.

### **Farm Safety**

10. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine his plans to further promote farm safety; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38474/21]

**Deputy Brendan Griffin:** The question relates to farm safety. It is a very important issue. I know it is an area the Minister and the Minister of State have prioritised so far during their Ministries. Will they update the Dáil not only on initiatives to date but also on initiatives that are planned in respect of this very important area?

**Deputy Martin Heydon:** I thank Deputy Griffin for raising what is a crucially important issue for us and a very timely one in light of the fact that next week is Farm Safety Week, when we bring an additional focus to the need for farm safety and for a change in the culture across how we operate on our farms and the unacceptably high level of farm fatalities on Irish farms.

To highlight the importance of farm safety, the Government, as part of my ministerial portfolio, assigned me specific responsibility for farm safety, and I am very proud to be the first Minister of State with such a responsibility. It is a key indication of the Government's determination that in our programme for Government we put a renewed focus on this area. As Deputy Griffin will be aware, over the past decade, 21 people on average have lost their lives on Irish farms every year. Recently, I attended the Embrace Farm service, and when you hear the individual stories and see the pictures of those who have lost their lives, from very young children all the way through the generations of farmers, it is absolutely heartbreaking and completely unacceptable. When you remember that 50% of workplace fatalities are attributed to agriculture, which makes up only 6% of the entire workforce, it is clear we are a complete outlier and that a change of culture is badly needed.

That is why my Department has a range of measures both in place and being put in place by me to incentivise and promote farm safety. First, there is the ongoing TAMS II scheme. Under the suite of seven TAMS measures, there is a wide range of farm safety-related investments available to be grant-aided. As part of the TAMS II schemes, health and safety guidelines are included in building specifications drawn up by the Department for the construction of agricultural buildings and structures. Additionally, it is a requirement for all applicants under the TAMS II schemes to complete a half day of farm safety training. We get really good feedback on that. Farmers may not be too enthusiastic going to the training but find great benefit in it afterwards. In my follow-up reply I will outline further some of the new measures we are bringing into place. This is about taking every opportunity, engaging with farmers, to continue to raise this really important issue.

**Deputy Brendan Griffin:** An approach that sees every death on Irish farms as one death too many is very important. The Minister of State rightly pointed out the disproportionate number of workplace fatalities that take place on farms versus the wider workplace. I commend him on how enthusiastic he has been and the approach he has taken to date to this matter. We can look at statistics over a long period but, thankfully, this year has seen a reduction in the number of deaths. However, that is no consolation whatsoever to the families who are bereaved.

Has the Minister of State considered being more proactive in how we move forward on this

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such as by linking farm safety promotion to CAP? Is that something he would consider in the future?

**Deputy Martin Heydon:** Absolutely. My general approach is to make sure that in everything we do, we do not talk about farm safety as a separate issue. Every engagement my Department has with farmers is an opportunity to drive home the message of farm safety and to support the work of the HSA and others. I have seen from the start the opportunity CAP provides for us to incorporate farm safety across all measures in CAP to make sure it is central to what we do. I acknowledge the support of my colleague, the Minister, Deputy McConalogue, in achieving the ambition that this CAP will be the most focused on farm safety, that we will take that opportunity in every engagement, including with livestock handling, which is a high-risk area, and that the new livestock schemes will have safety training elements to them such that in every involvement farmers have with CAP, farm safety will be central.

I am really conscious of the fine weather coming this weekend and that farmers in Kerry, in Deputy Griffin's constituency, will be making hay, kids will be off school, and all the risks will be there. We need every farmer to identify the risks on their farm, mitigate them and take steps to make sure we do not have further instances over the summer and into the year ahead.

**Deputy Brendan Griffin:** As someone who grew up surrounded by farms, I believe a focus on the wider community is important as well in order to emphasise to people that proximity to farms is a danger, particularly for small children. In those terrible conversations we have when we meet the bereaved and people who were lucky to survive farm accidents, the word "complacency" very often comes up in conversation. That seems to be one of the real dangers, that when you do something day in and day out all your life you sometimes drop your guard. A lot of the focus has to remain on that area.

*10 o'clock*

I would welcome a comprehensive, all-encompassing approach to farm safety. In everything the Department does in regard to agriculture, it should be central to all messaging. That constant reminder would help address that complacency.

**Deputy Martin Heydon:** The CAP is a fantastic opportunity for us to do that, but there are other measures I have introduced over the past year. My Department and I launched a call under the locally led innovation partnership model, specifically related to farm safety and a first for farm safety, at the end of 2020. It will see the provision of at least €1 million in funding support for farm safety initiatives. Initial project proposals were submitted in January and we were delighted to be overwhelmed with a large number of good-quality applications. Those projects that successfully progressed to stage 2 have submitted additional details and these are being assessed with a view to rolling out the final successful projects as soon as possible.

In addition, the Department and I, in conjunction with the Department of Finance, are finalising the accelerated capital allowance scheme for farm safety and disabilities adaptation equipment. When the scheme is up and running, relief will be available for eligible expenditure incurred since 1 January 2021. The scheme will provide for accelerated capital allowance at 50% per annum over two years for eligible specified farm safety and adaptive equipment. The Department and I will continue to work closely with our colleague the Minister of State, Deputy English, and the HSA on that important issue. There is also the initiative On Feirm Ground, regarding farmers' health and well-being, because the two issues are inextricably linked. I

guarantee the Deputy that my determination and that of the Minister and the Minister of State at the Department, Senator Hackett, is to drive on with changing the culture regarding farm safety.

*Question No. 11 replied to with Written Answers.*

### **Aquaculture Industry**

12. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if the role of the salmon farming sector and its impact on local ecology and tourism will be reviewed. [38149/21]

**Deputy Holly Cairns:** In the same week we found out about the granting of a licence for a large salmon farm in Bantry Bay, Argentina effectively banned the practice due to its serious environmental implications. Bantry Bay is the latest of several recent aquaculture projects that locals are deeply concerned about. Will the Minister conduct a review of salmon farming and its impact on biodiversity, ecology and industries dependent on the local environment, such as fishing and marine tourism? So often community groups in west Cork have had to raise huge sums and devote a great deal of time to seek judicial reviews to right questionable decisions about this in regard to the environment. We cannot ask them to do that again.

**Deputy Charlie McConalogue:** All applications for aquaculture licences for the cultivation of salmon are considered in accordance with an extensive suite of national and EU legislation, including the Fisheries (Amendment) Act 1997, the Foreshore Act 1993, the EU birds and habitats directives and the consolidated environmental impact assessment directives of 2014. This suite of legislation provides for stringent consideration and consultation in respect of the environmental and ecological impacts of the proposed activity, as well as extensive consultation opportunities with both the public and statutory bodies regarding all aspects of the application including tourism.

All applications for salmon farm licences must be accompanied by a detailed environmental impact assessment report. This report forms a key element of the deliberative process and is fully assessed by my Department's scientific and technical advisers. The reports are, furthermore, subject to scrutiny and assessment by a significant number of prescribed statutory consultees. The environmental impact assessment report and application form are also made available to the public as part of a public consultation process.

The statutory consultees include Bord Fáilte Ireland, whose role is to support long-term sustainable growth of the economic, social, cultural and environmental contribution of tourism to this country. The views of Bord Fáilte and of all statutory consultees, together with the views of the public as submitted as part of the public consultation process, are taken fully into account in arriving at a determination in respect of the aquaculture application. The consideration of the impacts on local ecology and tourism constitute an important element of my Department's consideration of any application for an aquaculture licence, and rightly so. It is a comprehensive and detailed assessment, with significant public consultation.

**Deputy Holly Cairns:** The granting of the salmon farm licence is against the wishes of a substantial number of local groups, including community organisations and fishing communities. The Minister referred to marine tourism but it is difficult to understand how this could ever benefit marine tourism. Campaigners, State agencies and businesses have repeatedly raised

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concerns about the impact of such an industrial farm. Sea lice from salmon farms can have a significant and detrimental impact on sea trout and wild salmon. Officials from the Department have identified issues with the company involved, including overstocking farms and harvesting higher quantities of fish than permitted under the licence. Moreover, one of the Minister's predecessor, Deputy Creed, discounted a licence for a farm in Kerry.

I appreciate what the Minister said about reports and so on but he and I both know the reality of farming. Given what other countries are doing, it is difficult to understand why we are going in this direction. What will the Minister do for communities such as that in west Cork, who are deeply concerned about the economic and environmental impact of this salmon farm? Their only hope seems to be an expensive judicial review, which we have had to do so many times.

**Deputy Charlie McConalogue:** It is important that every aspect of an application be taken into account, and an important part of that is the ecological and environmental impact be fully assessed. The application and assessment process is rigorous in that regard and goes through it in great detail. As I pointed out, the list of consultees that make submissions is extensive, while the legislation, which has to be complied and against which any application has to be benchmarked, is comprehensive as well. All those issues are considered.

Our aquaculture and salmon farming sector is one that delivers significantly for our local economy. It can be done sustainably and we can continue to develop it sustainably too. Obviously, any applications have to be rigorously assessed. They have to meet all the tests and they do. Different people may have different views and that is why the public consultation process is there and why the public consultees are involved in order that they can feed in to that, with a fair and rigorous assessment made of all submissions before a final decision is made. It will be approved only if the application meets the required standards and tests.

**Deputy Holly Cairns:** Local concern about Bantry Bay is only one case from west Cork. There was a strong campaign to oppose an oyster farm application for Clonakilty Bay, a special area of conservation, while groups in Kinsale are objecting to a planned mussel farm, an application about which there is confusion due to an error that took place regarding initial public notice regarding the aquaculture licence. I would appreciate if the Minister could examine whether the community has been left feeling unclear and disenfranchised. I hear what he said about the system, but these issues are symptomatic of a dysfunctional licence system. In 2017, a review recommended a complete reform of the system.

I accept that the Minister has to read out his prepared contribution about the system in place, but the system is leaving itself open to legal action and intervention from European authorities. This, as well as more than 20 salmon farms currently operating with expired licences and without environmental impact assessments, has not been addressed. I understand what the Minister said and that he has to make these points, but what is he doing to reform the system more broadly? The system is dysfunctional and cannot go on like this. The business in question is operating without licences or environmental impact statements and continuing to get licences at the expense of fishing communities, the environment and tourism in the area.

**Deputy Charlie McConalogue:** It is not a matter of me having to say anything. These systems were not dreamed up; they were put together after rigorous engagement and in full compliance with all European and national laws, particularly environmental law and those relating to habitats and ecological requirements. It is a comprehensive and rigorous assessment-----

**Deputy Holly Cairns:** A report in 2017 recommended complete reform of the licensing system.

**Deputy Charlie McConalogue:** A robust system is in place. There have been significant-----

**Deputy Holly Cairns:** Why then would there be a-----

**Deputy Charlie McConalogue:** The report in 2017 was significantly concerned with the delays and backlogs that had developed up to that point. That is being worked through-----

**Deputy Holly Cairns:** The recommendations-----

**Deputy Charlie McConalogue:** -----and licences are being dealt with in a timely fashion. It is important to have a balanced approach to this. While the Deputy outlined the views of those who are opposed to salmon and oyster farming, many people in her constituency and others are very much in favour of it. It can, and does, contribute very positively to the economy and to producing sustainable, healthy food. We have to take a balanced approach, which is why a comprehensive and detailed licence process is important in reaching equitable and reasonable decisions.

*Question No. 13 replied to with Written Answers.*

## **EU Directives**

14. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the current supports and information channels available for farmers impacted by EU Directive 2019/904 prohibiting products in Ireland used to cover maize grown and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38310/21]

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** I had a short conversation with the Minister about this issue. I have been inundated with messages from farmers and contractors. I suppose it is an unintended consequence of the European directive on single-use plastic, which will affect those involved in growing maize. Is there is anything the State intends to do to mitigate these difficulties?

**Deputy Charlie McConalogue:** I thank the Deputy for his question. As required under the provisions in EU Council Directive 2019/904, the Minister for Environment, Climate and Communications recently signed into force national regulations prohibiting the use of single-use plastics. This includes films of the type used to cover sown maize. I understand that the industry is developing alternative products for use in the sowing of maize that will comply with the new requirements set down by this EU directive.

In parallel, in terms of support for the sector, the Department recommenced value for cultivation and use, VCU, trials for uncovered maize in 2020 as a means to identify varieties better suited to Irish growing conditions that do not require plastic covering. This work will build on the 2015 uncovered recommended list in which a high-performing variety was identified and is currently available on the Irish market for growers.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** Alternative means need to be looked at but, like anything, we do not have the transition period we would like. I have spoken to a number of contractors and

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farmers who have invested in serious plants that can only be used with these types of plastic. We are talking about people who have made an outlay of approximately €80,000. There is a need to engage with the stakeholders. If there are alternatives that are fit for purpose, this discussion needs to be had very quickly. That is the significant issue. There needs to be engagement with stakeholders. They will state that they are not quite sure these alternatives are fit for purpose and ready to go. Again, the difficulty for some of them arises from the fact that they have put a serious amount of money into this plant and did not see this coming. It is an unintended consequence which relates to the fact that there is no distinction between oxo-degradable plastic and other oxo-degradable material. Can anything be done at European or national level? Could a derogation or mitigation be secured, even in the short term?

**Deputy Charlie McConalogue:** I understand the challenges this pose. As already stated, the Department is conducting the VCU supporting trials for uncovered maize. We will look at any means by which we can support the industry to adjust to this. The background to what is happening is the EU directive on single-use plastics that was adopted in June 2020. This directive aims to prevent and reduce the impact of certain plastic products on the environment, particularly on the aquatic environment and human health, and promote the transition to a circular economy with innovative and sustainable business models. The directive is required to be transposed into national law and applied as of 3 July last.

We can all agree that the directive is important because 80% of marine litter is composed of plastic items and plastic does accumulate in our oceans and on our beaches and has a significant impact of which we have all become increasingly aware and to which we must respond. Obviously, this can present challenges but we must be cognisant of the impact of what we do as well. I take on board the points made by the Deputy and will continue to engage with the sector in any way I can to support it to adjust to this.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** I agree with the Minister. Everybody accepts the difficulties that we face regarding plastic, waste and climate change. As a result, we all accept the necessary moves that must be made. It concerns the timeline. I welcome the fact that the Minister has spoken about supports and that the Department is looking at alternatives. I call on him to engage with those people who have contacted me. I would be only too willing to pass on their information. It is about reaching some sort of interim solution for them in order that maize production is not affected and we get to a better place with better alternatives. We would all be happier with that, including those people who have made contact with me. Again, the difficulty is that some of them have put a serious amount of money into new plant and were unaware that this was going to affect their business.

**Deputy Charlie McConalogue:** Approximately 14,500 ha of maize are grown in the country. As we have discussed, there are two types of system - the uncovered approach and the covered approach. The covered approach is a more expensive one. With the inputs, it is about €300 per hectare but the yields tend to be far more stable, higher and more weather-resistant. The evidence is that in the region of 90% of maize crops in the country are covered, while 10% are uncovered. It is, therefore, something that is posing a challenge and we must make every effort to find sustainable alternatives that do not have the negative impact of plastic. We all agree that this can be quite damaging. I am happy to engage with the sector in any way I can and to work with the particular constituency that has been in contact with the Deputy regarding these issues in order to try to address the challenge.

*Dáil Éireann*  
**Gender Equality**

15. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the articles of the new CAP he plans to avail of in order to increase the number of female farmers in Ireland, the additional measures he plans to put in place in order to address the low level of female farm ownership and the manner and type of supports that will be provided. [38159/21]

**Deputy Matt Carthy:** I am sure the Minister will agree that there are many female farmers across the country. The difficulty is that very few of them are recognised as such. The level of female farm ownership is pitifully low. I would like to hear the Minister's thoughts and proposals on how the next CAP plan and other measures can try to address that.

**Deputy Charlie McConalogue:** I thank the Deputy for this very important question. Gender equality is a key priority of my Department, one of the founding values of the European Union and a key objective of the United Nations sustainable development goals. The programme for Government includes commitments to develop and implement a new national strategy for women and girls and to act on the recommendations of the Citizens' Assembly on gender equality. The Department will represent the interests of the agrifood sector in policy development on these commitments. The recently published draft agrifood strategy to 2030 recognises the importance of gender balance to the long-term sustainable future for primary producers and includes actions to promote and improve gender balance at all levels, including at senior management and board level.

The Central Statistic Office, CSO, labour force survey 2019 showed that 13% of workers in the primary agriculture, forestry and fishing sector were female. For 2020, the figure was 15%, the highest since 2010. The CSO's 2016 farm structure survey recorded 71,700 women working on farms, of whom fewer than one quarter, or 16,100, were farm holders. In a European context, the number of women in farming has been slowly increasing and data from 2016 suggest that, on average, approximately 30% of farms across the EU are managed by women. That is significantly higher than the figure for Ireland, albeit with some considerable differences across countries.

The development of the CAP strategic plan, CSP, involves a number of stages, including a strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats, SWOT analysis and a needs assessment. The SWOT analysis in preparation for Ireland's CSP identified gender inequality and the low levels of female participation in the agri-food sector, especially in leadership roles, as weaknesses, while the economic benefits of increasing female participation were identified as an opportunity. The needs assessment for the CSP points to the need to increase opportunities for women in agriculture and business development. A number of interventions were identified for consideration. They are LEADER programme-----

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** The Minister will get a chance to come back in. We are over time.

**Deputy Matt Carthy:** I thank the Minister for his reply. I am glad to hear that he is considering this matter an important one that needs to be addressed. If we are to have a farm structure process across the country that is reflective of the reality on the ground, it must involve culture change and policy changes. A draft CAP plan was published on 11 June in terms of negotiations and contained two articles.

Article 72a states:

1. Member States shall adopt specific actions focused on promoting a greater inclusion of women in the rural economy, through interventions in line with the current regulation with the aim of contributing to the objectives... [and]

2. Member States may, in their CAP Strategic Plans, grant support to promote the involvement of women, *inter alia*, in knowledge transfer and information actions, advisory services, investments in physical assets, farm and rural business start-up and development, installation of digital technologies and co-operation.

They were removed from the final CAP agreement. The Minister may be able to shed some light as to why. Will he ensure that at a domestic level, those measures are included in our plan?

**Deputy Charlie McConalogue:** I again thank Deputy Carthy for putting this matter on the agenda. It is a matter we need to ensure is addressed as part of our CAP plan. Earlier, I outlined some of the interventions that were identified for consideration. The LEADER programme, CPD for advisers, knowledge transfer programme and national supports, including the ACORNS programme have been identified as opportunities here.

Under the rural innovation and development fund, the Department has provided funding support for the ACORNS programme for several years. This has been successful in supporting female entrepreneurs living in rural areas to start new businesses or who have recently started a business, through peer support and collaboration to develop and expand them.

I have continued to engage extensively with stakeholders on the future of CAP, including supports to promote gender equality. Consultations on that are ongoing and will continue. I welcome any ideas or initiatives anyone may have in this regard. We need to make significant progress on the matter on which we are underperforming to the detriment of our agriculture sector. I am very much open to working collaboratively on any suggestions to improve the situation.

**Deputy Matt Carthy:** I thank the Minister for his response. Just as we need more young people to enter farming, we also need more women, which will make farming a more successful endeavour and ensure it makes an even more positive contribution to our society. The evidence we have seen in other sectors is that statutory bodies such as Teagasc must be obliged to ensure that women enter training and education programmes, along with other measures. The CAP can play a role by providing financial supports and encouragement. We all have a role to play in encouraging farm families to move beyond the notion that it is the eldest son or another son who automatically takes over the farm. Farms can become richer and better places if a broad spectrum of young people and women are entering that process.

**Deputy Charlie McConalogue:** Thankfully we have seen improvement in recent years. It has been refreshing for the sector to see an increasing number of women take up leadership roles, including running and managing farms. Some of the most high-profile, innovative, productive and passionate farmers are women and are leading the charge in that regard. Much of the generational renewal that is happening now is bringing significant improvement in that regard. It is important to bring balance and more gender equality throughout the agrifood sector, particularly at primary producer level. I am very happy to work together to facilitate bringing about that cultural change which will bring real benefit for the agrifood sector.

## **Aquaculture Industry**

16. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the status of the public consultation in process relating to an aquaculture licence application by a company (details supplied) in County Cork. [38152/21]

**Deputy Holly Cairns:** I touched on this issue earlier. A company applied for a mussel farm licence in Kinsale Harbour in January 2019 after which a public information process followed. A few weeks ago, another public notice appeared in local publications stating that there was an error in the previous notice, including ambiguous language around people or groups resubmitting objections. I ask the Minister to clarify the status of the public consultation process for this application. He has talked about the process being foolproof and well thought out but on the application we discussed earlier, the Department rejected the application which was appealed and a licence granted based on assessments done by the company, not the Department.

**Deputy Charlie McConalogue:** The Department considers all applications for aquaculture licences in accordance with the provisions of the Fisheries (Amendment) Act 1997, the Foreshore Act 1933 and applicable national and EU legislation. The licensing process involves consultation with a wide range of scientific and technical advisers, as well as various statutory consultees. The legislation also provides for a period of public consultation.

In addition, the legislation governing aquaculture licensing provides for an appeals mechanism. Appeals against licence decisions are a matter for the Aquaculture Licences Appeals Board, which is an independent statutory body.

In accordance with the applicable legislation, the statutory and public consultation phase in respect of the application referred to is now concluded. Every effort is being made to expedite a determination in respect of this application having regard to the complexities involved. As this licence application is under active consideration as part of a statutory process, it would not be appropriate to comment further on the matter.

**Deputy Holly Cairns:** We have two interconnected issues here. First, we have another aquaculture project in a heavily used and important bay, this time adjacent to one of Ireland's premier tourist destinations. There is considerable concern over the environmental impact and the lack of clarity on the safeguards that may be put in place. Second, there is confusion over the second public notice. In particular the language about resubmitting objections was unclear to members of the public, who are the intended audience. With this in mind, the objection period should be reopened both to allow public consultation in the fullest sense and to remove uncertainty, which would inevitably lead to appeals on any decision. Those in the community have genuine issues with the potential impacts on their local environment. Crucially they have a right to be properly heard in these public consultations.

**Deputy Charlie McConalogue:** As Minister, my role is a policy one, that is, putting in place the legislation for this procedure. The process of dealing with the applications is one on which the independent Aquaculture Licences Appeals Board is statutorily independent. I cannot get involved in particular cases one way or another. Obviously, the Deputy can make her views known on that but it is a matter that should be addressed to ALAB, as opposed to the Minister. It is not appropriate for me to get involved a case that is under consideration by the appeals board.

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**Deputy Holly Cairns:** The application was first submitted in January 2019. A few weeks ago, they put in a new notice that was completely unclear. The language was ambiguous and nobody could understand what it meant. Therefore, I am asking the Minister to reconsider it. I have outlined the flawed process and echoed the concerns raised by constituents. I ask him to act in good faith and accept their request for another public consultation that is unambiguous in its call for any submissions. This also highlights my earlier comments about the dysfunctional licensing system, which needs significant reform.

We referenced the 2017 review of the aquaculture licensing system as identifying delays. It also identified the need for more stringent enforcement proceedings for non-compliance with licence conditions. What is the Minister doing to address this and to address the cases where licence conditions are being breached? The licensing system cannot be unclear and be allowed to change randomly to suit businesses. The one in Bantry was refused by the Department, appealed and granted based on assessments done by the company, not by the EPA or by the Department. There must be more consistency in the licensing process. I ask the Minister to act in good faith on these issues because there will be appeals, which is an expensive process. It is unfair on communities to have to take this up again.

**Deputy Charlie McConalogue:** The nature of an appeal process is that the appeals body can overturn as well as agree with the decision made initially. That is a matter for it to consider in accordance with the legislation. The legislation is comprehensive, taking into account all environmental considerations and the potential impacts of an application. The application the Deputy is referring to is under the consideration of the Aquaculture Licences Appeals Board. It is a matter entirely for it. It would be unfair to assume that an appeals body can only make a decision in one direction. It must look at every decision in detail in a way that fully assesses all the legal requirements on it and then come to a decision consistent with those laws and regulations. That is the approach that the Department in its initial decision and the Aquaculture Licences Appeals Board must follow.

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

### **Departmental Schemes**

80. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development if she will increase funding to the local improvement scheme to meet demand; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [38936/21]

**Deputy Claire Kerrane:** Events have now superseded this question. It was to ask the Minister about increasing funding for the local improvement scheme, LIS. I welcome the recent announcement that funding for this year will be doubled. This provides the Minister with an opportunity to tell us more about that doubling of investment.

**Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. The local improvement scheme supports the improvement of rural roads and laneways that are not normally maintained by local authorities but which represent vital infrastructure for rural residents. The scheme is funded by my Department and is administered through the local authorities. Nearly 2,400 roads have already been

funded for repair works since the scheme was relaunched in 2017. Prior to then there was no funding for this scheme for a number of years. I launched the 2021 LIS on 14 May with funding of €10.5 million. This represented a 5% increase compared with last year.

As part of Our Rural Future, the Government committed to ensuring that the local improvement scheme is funded in the future. This reflects the important contribution that the scheme makes to connectivity in rural Ireland. It is against this background that I am pleased to confirm that I recently announced the allocation of a further €10.5 million to the local improvement scheme in 2021 to bring the level of funding to €21 million. This means that the level of funding is being doubled this year compared with the original allocation. This increase will be funded from expected savings elsewhere in my Department.

I continue to engage with my colleague, the Minister, Deputy Ryan, to explore the potential for further financial support from his Department. My Department is currently ascertaining the capacity of each local authority to deliver this additional funding and to complete works on additional roads before the year's end. Following this engagement, I expect to announce the additional allocations to individual counties shortly. This announcement will mean that almost €80 million will have been allocated under the local improvement scheme since it was re-introduced in 2017. This demonstrates the Government's commitment to improving connectivity in rural Ireland as outlined in Our Rural Future.

**Deputy Claire Kerrane:** I thank the Minister for her reply. I welcome that new investment and increase in funding for the local improvement scheme because it is a vital scheme for access to homes and farms in rural areas via rural roads and laneways. A colleague in this House asked for the numbers of local authorities that had a waiting list until now but those figures were not available. Galway County Council has received 241 valid applications and the funding it has received up until now will allow 28 of those projects to proceed. It is clear that there is significant demand. That is just one local authority. I imagine that it is similar across the State. It is especially important for really rural counties such as Roscommon and Galway where there is a need and demand for the local improvement scheme. Will the newly announced funding cover the entire backlog?

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** I thank the Deputy. There was €10 million for the LIS in 2020, so I have more than doubled that this year, with funding of €21 million being made available. That is a 110% increase in funding, which is not bad going. I know the Deputy acknowledges that. I accept that the lists are long nationwide. That is why I have not been found wanting when it comes to providing additional funding. I am familiar with it. Like Deputy Kerrane, I am from a rural constituency and I know the benefit of this scheme. The Deputy will be aware that the LIS was previously funded by the Department of Transport and she will appreciate that that Department has a sizeable capital budget compared with my Department. I believe that the Department of Transport has a role to play here. If it started to provide matched funding, we could start to make inroads into these waiting lists. I have raised the matter with the Minister, Deputy Ryan, and I think he is open to the idea, but he has to discuss it with his own officials in the Department of Transport.

**Deputy Claire Kerrane:** Does the Minister know what the backlog is? She is doubling investment in the scheme. Galway County Council had 241 valid applications and 213 could not be moved. Will Galway County Council be able to cover those projects with this new funding? I welcome what the Minister said about matched funding. She has engaged with the Minister, Deputy Ryan, which is welcome. Does she see that engagement coming to fruition and provid-

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ing funding next year or ahead of the budget in October? I assume she intends to proceed with matched funding and that will be her intention in future for the local improvement scheme.

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** I do not have the details of every county but my officials have liaised with local authorities and asked how many lanes they can deliver. When I launched the scheme on 14 May, local authorities were given until 11 June to provide a list of roads to be completed. All of those have now been received and approved, with one exception, which is Westmeath, for some reason. We have shown flexibility for local authorities that required more time. Local authorities will now be able to claim up to 10% of the net cost. My officials have contacted local authorities again and asked them for another list for additional funding. They want to know that local authorities can give a clear commitment that they will be able to finish those roads by the end of the year. I do not want local authorities to submit applications for funding that they cannot deliver on. I want the money to be spent. We will distribute the funding across the different counties for those that are able to spend it on roads.

*Question No. 81 replied to with Written Answers.*

### **Men's Sheds**

82. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development if she will examine the possibility of establishing a funding stream under her Department for an organisation (details supplied) which is a lifeline for persons especially in rural communities; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [38937/21]

**Deputy Claire Kerrane:** I ask the Minister if she will examine re-introducing a funding stream in her Department for men's sheds across the State. There is a wonderful, growing organisation, but it is struggling since it does not have a funding stream. It applies for funding here, there and everywhere. Sometimes it gets funding and sometimes it does not. It would be great to see a definite and direct funding stream as was previously in place for our men's sheds, which do wonderful work across the State.

**Minister of State at the Department of Rural and Community Development (Deputy Joe O'Brien):** The emergence of men's sheds in recent years has been a positive development for communities across Ireland. They provide a safe, comfortable and inclusive environment where people of all ages can share skills, work on meaningful projects and connect with their communities. My Department is providing a range of supports which both men's and women's sheds can avail of, depending on the works being completed. For example, in May, I launched the 2021 community enhancement programme with funding of €4.5 million. The programme provides small grants to community groups to enhance their facilities and for the reopening of facilities.

The social inclusion and community activation programme, SICAP, has provided supports to more than 200 men's sheds since 2018, with small grants totalling over €80,000 being awarded to 69 men's sheds. This support will continue to be available throughout the current iteration of SICAP, which runs until 2023. Additionally, funding for men's sheds may be available through the €70 million LEADER transitional programme which was launched by the Minister, Deputy Humphreys, earlier this year. This programme, which will cover the period from 2021 to 2022, came into effect on 1 April for new project applications. Crucially, the scheme to support national organisations provides multi-annual core funding to national organisations

in the community and voluntary sector. The Irish Men's Sheds Association has been allocated €270,000 over the 36-month period of the scheme, which commenced in July 2019 and which will run to July 2022. These funding supports are available to all community groups, including men's and women's sheds, and I have no plans to establish a separate funding stream.

**Deputy Claire Kerrane:** As the Minister of State knows, a stream of funding under that very community enhancement programme was in place, which was extended to women's sheds in 2019. That funding has not been in place since. I am not speaking about the community enhancement programme, which I acknowledge the Minister of State referenced and is in place, but the direct stream of funding for men's sheds under that scheme that is no longer available. I acknowledge that there are many different grants and schemes across both rural and community development but it is very difficult for members of men's sheds to have to apply for this and that grant. They might get it this year and not get it the next. It is not sustainable and the funding available to them is not guaranteed. Many men's sheds have major overheads, for example, some are paying up to €1,500 in insurance. These men's sheds provide such a valuable and vital source of support in rural communities for many people who live alone and who otherwise may be isolated. I again ask the Minister of State to consider making available the direct funding stream under the community enhancement programme.

**Deputy Joe O'Brien:** While that was a one-off funding round, men's sheds are a testament to the vibrancy of the community and voluntary sector in continually identifying new areas of need. The men's shed movement has been one of the stand-out exceptional examples over the past few years. However, other Departments and agencies are funding men's sheds, which is a good thing and ensures their future growth. The Irish Men's Sheds Association, for example, also receive funding from other sources. In 2019, it received funding of €243,000 for core costs from the HSE under the healthy sheds programme and €43,000 from Sláintecare under the Sheds for Life programme. Sheds for Life is a community-based health promotion programme aimed at supporting the physical, mental and social well-being of men's sheds members. The programme has been designed by the Irish Men's Sheds Association, the HSE and men's health experts and developed in association with sheds' members and leading experts in the field of men's sheds.

**Deputy Claire Kerrane:** The vital work that men's sheds and the support they offer, especially in remote and rural areas, is very important. It will be even more important now as we emerge from the Covid pandemic. I had the pleasure of visiting the men's shed in Ballaghaderreen last week, which is a really wonderful support for men in the town and outside it. It is replicated in 460 sheds throughout the State. I met with the Irish Men's Sheds Association, which the Minister of State referenced, yesterday. Its members are putting together their pre-budget submission. I ask the Minister of State to look at that submission and consider it in light of the budget. The association has just seven paid staff members for 460 sheds throughout the State. It has been inundated with calls from men looking to get back into the sheds post Covid, which is something that is very positive. The association also runs a health and well-being programme that makes a real difference in the lives of men. We know that sometimes, going to the doctor or getting a health check is a big thing for a man. The fact that it is available in the likes of the men's sheds where they are comfortable and feel safe is so important. That mental health role is critical.

**Deputy Joe O'Brien:** I reiterate and double down on the Deputy's recognition of the value of the men's sheds programme. It is an extraordinary group. In the stability fund last year, we provided the national organisation with a €70,000 grant. As community groups go, it is very

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vibrant. Looking at how the number of member groups has grown in the past ten years, they went from 40 in 2011 and increased to 100, then to 160 and to 237 before reaching 435 in 2018 and, as the Deputy said, are up to 460 now. If not for the pandemic last year, I have no doubt but that they would be growing stronger again. It is a grassroots movement, which is very good and healthy and what will sustain it over time. Different funding streams will also help it in future. The scheme to support national organisations, SSNO, is core support we provide to the national organisation but having different funding streams will stand to men's sheds and will stand the test of time.

### Departmental Programmes

83. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the funding her Department makes available for the development and upgrading of playgrounds. [38168/21]

**Deputy Holly Cairns:** The past year has highlighted the significance of community facilities. Playgrounds are important for children as spaces for physical activity, development and socialisation. However, too many towns and villages do not have playgrounds. To be fair, most do, even if they are the bare minimum. However, most prominently in west Cork, Bandon, with a population of almost 7,000 and which is the most populated town in what is quite a large constituency, does not have a playground. What funding does the Minister's Department have in place to build playgrounds?

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** I thank Deputy Cairns for raising this issue. As she said, playgrounds are an important resource with positive impacts for communities. Funding provided by the community enhancement programme provides small grants to community groups to enhance facilities, including playgrounds, in disadvantaged areas. Funding is allocated by my Department to each local authority area, and the local community development committee, with support from their local authority, administers the funding in that area. In 2021, total funding of €4.5 million is available, with €156,299 of this allocated to the Cork County Council area, for example.

Additionally, funding for playgrounds may be available through the €70 million LEADER transitional programme, which I launched earlier this year. This funding supports locally-led projects, which focus on delivering on the key themes of Our Rural Future, the Government's ambitious plan for rural Ireland, such as building capacity and empowering local communities, supporting remote working, developing our outdoor amenities and creating jobs in rural areas. The LEADER programme is delivered through local action groups, LAGs, in each of the 28 LEADER sub-regional areas around the country.

Finally, the CLÁR programme, with an allocation of €5.5 million in funding in 2021, provides funding for small-scale projects in designated rural areas. Measure 2 of the 2021 CLÁR programme supports outdoor community recreation facilities, including the enhancement of existing, and-or the development of, new accessible outdoor community recreation facilities, including playgrounds, skateboard parks and multi-use games areas, MUGAs. The closing date for receipt of applications for 2021 has now passed. The assessment of the applications received is ongoing and I expect to make an announcement on the approved projects in the coming weeks.

**Deputy Holly Cairns:** I thank the Minister for her response and for outlining her support for playgrounds and other community facilities. I highlighted the case of Bandon due to the clear need for a playground there. It is thanks to massive work from volunteers that there is a plan for a fantastic inclusive space for children, including a sensory garden. The land has been donated by Cork Marts and the community has already raised an incredible €60,000, which includes money raised by a group of girls who ran a bake sale recently, money tins being distributed to all housing estates and local businesses making donations.

However, we all know they should not have to raise the money. They should have a playground and, given they do not, there should be an easily accessible fund for this vital infrastructure. They are working with me, other public representatives and the council to ensure the necessary funding to make this playground a reality. They have been looking for this funding going back to when I was on the council but it just has not materialised. As I said, Bandon is a big town with many children in it. When the applications come through the Department and the Minister is making that announcement, the people of Bandon would really appreciate her support.

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** The Deputy is right in stating that Bandon is a fine town and it should have good playground facilities. However, in many cases, applications have not been put in. That is often a problem as we must get quality applications. All of them are assessed when they come in. I do not know the specific reason Bandon has not received funding but there are many different sources of funding it should be looking for, such as the CLÁR programme. I am not too sure if Bandon is in a CLÁR area or not, but that programme is available and has funded numerous playgrounds for schools in the community. The funding available for that is up to €50,000. Many projects in Cork have benefited from the CLÁR programme. The community enhancement programme, through which small grants are distributed by local authorities, gives funding to upgrade equipment and, possibly, buy new equipment. It is a very useful fund. If people want to fund green spaces and family amenities in the town, we have also supported playgrounds through the town and village fund.

**Deputy Holly Cairns:** The people of Bandon and I also do not know why they have not received funding yet. As I said, they are very dedicated to acquiring the site by themselves and have raised €60,000 so I agree it does not make sense. A few weeks ago, I ran a consultation project with national schools throughout Cork South West, including those in Bandon, regarding the county development plan. Every school highlighted the need for more facilities for young people, with playgrounds being one of the most valued amenities. In addition to Bandon, Belgooly and other villages need playgrounds and places like Clonakilty need extensions to their facilities to cater for the growing population. Playgrounds are too often overlooked when it comes to important infrastructure for children, young people and parents. I encourage the Minister to bring a particular focus to these facilities in her consideration of the funding mechanisms. The recent rural development policy refers to a lack of tailored amenities for younger children. I appeal to the Minister specifically to ensure that playgrounds are funded as part of this approach.

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** I do not have specific information on the area the Deputy raised. Many playgrounds have been funded, however. I have had the pleasure to visit many of them and I have seen the benefits they bring to schools and communities. In addition to the funding that is provided through my Department, the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, Deputy O’Gorman, launched the summer of play initiative. The initiative will roll out grants, information resources and other supports over the summer months

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to early learning and childcare centres to improve their outdoor spaces for play, as well as funding local authorities to improve parks and playgrounds. Let's Play Ireland 2021 resources are available at [gov.ie/letsplayireland](http://gov.ie/letsplayireland). The initial announcement of the summer of play initiative included €6 million in funding for outdoor play areas and parks. This will support more families to get outside with their children. I encourage the group in question to apply for that source of funding, which is, I believe, open. Several streams are available and people should engage. I am happy to engage with Deputy Cairns on it.

### Voluntary Sector

84. **Deputy Paul Donnelly** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development if it will be ensured that a dedicated training and development strategy is developed and fully funded for the charitable, voluntary and community sectors in budget 2022. [38989/21]

**Deputy Paul Donnelly:** Will the Minister ensure that a dedicated training and development strategy is developed and fully funded for the charitable, voluntary and community sector in budget 2022? As we know, training is not a luxury. It is essential for all community, voluntary and charity sector projects to enable them to deliver a quality service.

**Deputy Joe O'Brien:** Building capacity and training opportunities for the community and voluntary sector is key to realising the intent of sustainable, inclusive and empowered communities, the Government's five-year strategy to support the sector. The strategy details clear commitments in respect of training. Action 2.1 commits to support community groups and organisations to identify and meet their training needs. It commits to implement a formal programme of training to meet these needs and support capacity in groups and organisations. Action 2.2 commits to design, promote and implement a comprehensive programme to support capacity among leaders, board members and volunteers of community and voluntary organisations, including voluntary board members of local and community development organisations. Action 2.3 commits to support capacity in public participation networks, in particular in respect of the social inclusion colleges. Action 2.4 commits to develop education and training mechanisms based on the all-Ireland standards for community work for those charged with implementing and monitoring community development.

The implementation plan agreed for 2021 includes a modular research project into the training needs of the sector and this is under way. There are three separate reports. The first will examine the training needs of the local community development committees in preparation for the local economic and community plan, LECP, reviews. The second will involve an assessment of the skills gap of voluntary boards of mid-sized organisations. The third will involve an assessment of skills gaps across smaller community and voluntary groups. I expect the recommendations arising from these research reports will feed in to further considerations across government on how best to support the training and development needs of the sector.

In the meantime, training for the sector is being addressed in a number of other ways across my Department and across government, with tailored supports as required that have been identified in collaboration with the relevant stakeholders.

**Deputy Paul Donnelly:** I appreciate the answer given by the Minister of State in respect of the training needs and proposals outlined. One major concern has been whether these schemes will be funded. We get copious reports, documents and proposals relating to many different

schemes, but the proof of the pudding will be in whether the funding will be available to deliver the quality training to which the Minister of State referred.

Some current projects have been unable to provide much-needed training for their workers during the past ten years to enable them to continue in their roles and prevent them from being poached by bigger organisations that have the capacity to deliver such training.

**Deputy Joe O'Brien:** I draw attention to some training programmes that are ongoing. The Charities Regulator launched its annual report today. The regulator provides a suite of free training options and free guidance that all charities can access. Community Work Ireland funding was provided last year to the All Ireland Endorsement Body for Community Work Education and Training to raise the standards of community development work throughout the country.

Public participation networks, PPNs, are a particularly important one on which to focus. I mention these because there is funding available for PPNs. Member groups are often small informal groups to start with but when they come into the PPN structure they get support. We are conducting a root and branch review of PPN structures to figure out the needs of the various organisations so that we can back them up with the training they need. Grassroots and small local groups are where the need for training and support is greatest. That is the area we are focusing on this year.

**Deputy Paul Donnelly:** I understand and acknowledge the Minister of State's comments on PPNs and other aspects of training. The focus is on community, voluntary and charity groups. I have been involved in projects over the years which have specific and ongoing training needs. One example involves supporting older drug users and others include community development projects supporting vulnerable communities. The training is ongoing. A budget awarded for a project at the beginning of the year enables them to provide that quality training. What is happening is that bigger organisations, such as Tusla and the HSE, can provide the training. People are going to them because of the professional development they need to ensure they, too, can provide the service.

**Deputy Joe O'Brien:** I am open to hearing where there are gaps. Our initial plans this year are based on agreement with the cross-sectoral group that oversees the national strategy. Various community and voluntary sectors are represented on that group. It has prioritised the three areas that I have mentioned. We are, therefore, taking our lead from it.

As the Deputy knows, the community and voluntary sector is wide and diverse. We are one Department in the mix. Often, the key relationship for many community and voluntary organisations is not with us but with the relevant lead Departments. Responsibilities arise in that regard as well. I am not passing the buck but making the point that there are opportunities. I would be happy to push the relevant Department if the key relationship is with another Department and training that should be provided is not being provided. I am happy for any such cases to be brought to my attention.

I outlined the three priorities we have agreed with the sector, broadly speaking. The PPNs are also a priority, as there is a clear need in that area also.

## **Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions**

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## Island Communities

85. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development further to Parliamentary Question No. 43 of 25 May 2021, to outline the status of the new policy for the islands; when she expects the new policy to be finalised; the position regarding the last meeting of the interdepartmental committee for the development of the islands which was scheduled for 30 June 2021; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [38316/21]

**Deputy Catherine Connolly:** I am taking the Minister on a tour of the islands again. There are 30 island communities, eight of which, in Gaeltacht areas, represent 70% of the island population. My questions are specific. Where is the promised policy? When will it be published? What happened at the most recent interdepartmental meeting, bearing in mind that a motion in respect of this matter was put almost two years ago? I will come back to the finer details.

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** The development of a new islands policy is one of the key elements of Our Rural Future, the Government's new rural development policy. The central objective of the islands policy will be to ensure that sustainable vibrant communities continue to live on the offshore islands. The consultation process undertaken by my Department has assisted in identifying the main challenges faced by communities living on the offshore islands.

*11 o'clock*

Issues highlighted by the island communities included education, health, housing, energy, employment, broadband and access to services. My officials are now engaging bilaterally with the relevant Departments and agencies to discuss the issues raised by island communities and to assess how they might be addressed. I was pleased to address the annual general meeting of the island representative group, Comhdháil Oileáin na hÉireann, last month and to reaffirm the Government's commitment to the sustainable development of our islands. I can also confirm that the scheduled meeting of the interdepartmental committee for the islands was held on 30 June at which Comhdháil Oileáin na hÉireann gave a very constructive presentation. Work has begun on preparing a first draft of the islands policy. While it was originally envisaged that the new policy would be published this year, I am conscious that getting it right is the real priority. This will be my guiding principle. Having said that, I expect that a final draft will be ready for my consideration by the end of the year.

**Deputy Catherine Connolly:** I am delighted that the Minister and Comhdháil Oileáin na hÉireann had an opportunity to give presentations. I welcome the fact that some progress has been made and that the Minister hopes for the draft policy to be published by the end of the year. It is important to put this in context. Some 24 years ago, there was an interdepartmental report which acknowledged what was needed and that those on the islands were leading the way but that we needed to back them. Notwithstanding the Herculean efforts of the islands to show us a sustainable way forward, 24 years later we have no policy and no underpinning legislation, unlike Scotland which has policy and underpinning legislation and where the population of the islands has increased. We need a policy. That is the most basic thing. We then need legislation to underpin that policy. Will the Minister comment on the issue of legislation?

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** I thank the Deputy. I agree with her. I come from a landlocked, inland county but I hope the Deputy accepts my bona fides in being absolutely committed to supporting island communities. It is my plan to visit a number of islands the week after next to meet the residents and to have conversations with them to see at first hand the issues,

challenges and opportunities they are presented with. As the Deputy knows, I have approved the business case for Inis Oírr. I am meeting with representatives of Tory Island next week. I have been out to Arranmore and Clare Island. The Deputy will know that there was a problem with the ferry in Clare Island. I got that sorted. This policy document is extremely important but I want to make sure we get it right. I want to listen to the stakeholders and to have continued engagement with them.

**Deputy Catherine Connolly:** I thank the Minister. I accept her bona fides. I hope she will visit Galway, where there are a number of islands including the Aran Islands and Inishbofin. Huge progress has been made on ecotourism and dark skies on Inishbofin but the island is struggling for something as basic as a primary care centre. That is just one example. The Minister has made progress on the business case for Inis Oírr, which I welcome, but there are many other problems on the ground. It is not bona fides that are missing, but a policy and legislation to underpin it. I have mentioned the interdepartmental report from 1996. We then had a report from an Oireachtas joint committee in 2014 and a study on the islands of west Cork which covered the period from 1998 to 2004. We have had any amount of reports and recommendations but we have had no action. That is the difficulty. We need policy underpinned by legislation. Perhaps, when the Covid restrictions allow, we might all take a little trip over to Scotland to hear a presentation on that country's policy and legislation and how it has managed to increase the population.

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** I am happy to look at the model employed in Scotland and to learn from the things that have worked there. I am absolutely committed to delivering this policy for the islands. A number of agencies are involved. It cuts across Departments. As the Deputy will know, it does not only involve my Department, but a number of Departments. We are consulting with them. The Deputy mentioned a healthcare centre. That would involve the Department of Health. I want commitments from these different Departments as to what they are going to do and as to how they are going to make a difference to the lives of the islanders. I am working on it and will ensure that we get it finished as quickly as possible. The Deputy is right to say that this has gone on too long. It has but at this stage, it is better to wait a little bit longer, to get it right and to have a meaningful policy that will make a difference to those living on the different islands right across the country. The week after next, I am going to visit three islands. An island in Galway is on the list.

### **Public Procurement Contracts**

86. **Deputy Brian Stanley** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development if her Department has considered the role that social and labour procurement clauses could play in the development of economies in rural Ireland. [38307/21]

**Acting Chairman (Deputy John Lahart):** This question, in the name of Deputy Stanley, is being taken by Deputy Mairéad Farrell.

**Deputy Mairéad Farrell:** In public procurement, social clauses are legal obligations which require contractors to create some form of added value as part of the contract. That can come in the form of labour activation, promoting the participation of SMEs, an obligation to provide a living wage and so on. What consideration has the Minister's Department given to the role that social and labour procurement clauses could play in the development of economies in rural Ireland?

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**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. As she will be aware, responsibility for public procurement lies with my colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy Ossian Smyth. However, socially responsible public procurement is a whole-of-government priority. It is critical that public funds are used for the maximum benefit of society. Social clauses can also play an important role in rural development.

Ireland's rural development policy, Our Rural Future, includes a commitment to "expand the use of socially responsible public procurement contracts, where feasible, which will incentivise the engagement of social enterprises and Circular Economy organisations". The Programme for Government: Our Shared Future also contains a number of commitments in this area including a commitment to optimise the community benefit of products and services procured by the State.

My Department is leading by example in the use of social clauses by, for instance, including such clauses in the procurement of sensory room facilities in public libraries. To fulfil one of the commitments of the national social enterprise policy, my Department also participates actively in the Office of Government Procurement's strategic procurement advisory group to help policy makers better understand how procurement can be used to advance social policy objectives. Finally, the Department of Justice's social enterprise and employment strategy, Working to Change, also sets a target for 10% of all criminal justice system procurement contracts to include social considerations by the end of 2023.

**Deputy Mairéad Farrell:** I am aware the Minister's Department has done work on social clauses. It is one of only seven Departments to have done so. The Minister has mentioned the involvement of social enterprises in the provision of sensory facilities and equipment in public libraries. I welcome and acknowledge that. I also acknowledge that a public body under the Minister's Department, Pobal, has also done work in this regard. The main problem is that the only reason I know this is because I gathered the data myself. I contacted 18 Departments, 184 public bodies and 31 local authorities to get that information. Information on social clauses really should be included in the annual reports of all Departments. As information on green procurement will appear in these annual reports, it makes sense to also collect information on social clauses and social procurement. As the Minister's Department is one of the seven to have led the way on this, will she commit to examining whether such information on social clauses could also be included in her Department's annual report?

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** I thank the Deputy. I absolutely agree with her on the benefit of including social clauses. It is important and, where possible, there should be social benefits. My Department is particularly focused on social enterprises. We have a strategy to promote these but it is a question of how to get that other aspect into the public procurement process. As the Deputy will know, the Minister of State, Deputy Ossian Smyth, has responsibility for this specific area. I am happy to raise the issue with him. I do not see any reason we cannot look at putting the impact of the social clauses into our report. I am happy to take the suggestion on board.

**Deputy Mairéad Farrell:** Hopefully, in the post-Covid world, we will try to rebuild the economy on a regionally balanced basis and people who have moved back into rural areas as a result of Covid-19 will contribute to that. Community wealth-building and the inclusion of social clauses would be key to that. It is something I have an interest in and, as the Minister said, if we spend public money, it should have a public benefit and help people in terms of labour activation, training, skills and that kind of thing. That will help on a rural and regionally

balanced basis.

I am delighted the Minister will speak to the Minister of State, Deputy Ossian Smyth. That would be good because we need a more strategic and co-ordinated approach to using public money to support the public good. I hope the Government takes a more co-ordinated approach. As I said, the Department of Rural and Community Development is one of only seven that uses social clauses.

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** Government policies include the national social enterprise policy, Our Rural Future, the new national rural development policy, A Waste Action Plan for a Circular Economy, and Working to Change: Social Enterprise and Employment Strategy 2021-2023. There is an emphasis in all those policies. The establishment of the strategic procurement advisory group under the auspices of the Office of Government Procurement is another strong indication of the Government's commitment to socially responsible public procurement. The Department of Rural and Community Development is an active member of the group and I will bring that issue up with the group. We are working on the supply side with social enterprises to equip them with the knowledge and skills to access public procurement and on the demand side to encourage greater use of social clauses across government. I agree with the Deputy on these issues.

### **Regional Development**

87. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development if progress has been made on establishing a community ownership fund to help communities groups purchase or take over local community assets for community use; if potential State-owned properties in rural towns and villages have been identified, as committed to in Our Rural Future; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [38458/21]

**Deputy Claire Kerrane:** This question asks the Minister about progress on a number of commitments in Our Rural Future. One is the establishment of a community ownership fund to help community groups purchase or take over local community assets for community use. It also asks if potential State-owned properties in rural towns and villages have been identified to date.

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** Our Rural Future aims at reimagining rural Ireland by revitalising towns and villages and getting more people to live in, work in and enjoy rural areas. It notes that Ireland's overall economic and social well-being depends on the strength of the recovery in rural areas. It also recognises the centrality of communities in delivering on this ambitious new vision. The policy commits to enhancing community benefit through building empowered communities, developing social enterprises to create jobs and generate community impact and exploring new approaches to community benefit such as community ownership.

Our Rural Future is a five-year policy, with measures to be delivered over its lifetime. As such, my Department's approach to implementation is based on a series of annual work programmes, with associated monitoring and reporting structures. My Department, in co-operation with other relevant Departments, plans to begin the examination of the potential for a specific community ownership fund as part of the 2022 work programme. However, a number of actions are already happening across government that support the ambition of this measure. Communities can already access some existing funding streams to bring vacant build-

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ings back into use as multipurpose or enterprise spaces and-or for residential occupancy, for instance, under the town and village renewal scheme, although this is not the only purpose of that scheme. Likewise, LEADER can, in specific cases, be leveraged to support the acquisition and repurposing of local community assets. As with all the measures contained in Our Rural Future, progress in relation to this recommendation will form part of our ongoing monitoring and implementation structures.

**Deputy Claire Kerrane:** Will the Minister outline how she envisages the community ownership fund will work? I appreciate it is in the work programme for 2022.

I speak in relation to vacant buildings in the possession of the likes of the Office of Public Works, OPW. There are 75 of them in the State that are currently vacant and many of them are former Garda stations. Some will be auctioned off this month. These vacant properties lie in rural towns and villages throughout the State. I know the OPW has made the list available to the Department. At what level has she examined that? Has she considered options for using the vacant properties? They should be used within the community as much as possible rather than being auctioned off to the highest bidder. What engagement has she had with the OPW on this? Would she consider using those vacant properties?

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** The Minister of State, Deputy O'Donovan, and the OPW are looking at how they can identify suitable State-owned properties which are no longer being used and could be passed over to the community. It could be, for example, an old Garda station lying idle. Rather than letting that property fall into disrepair, why not give it to the community? Through schemes like the town and village scheme, communities can get funding to renovate such properties for their own purposes. We need more joined-up thinking on this. I do not want to see buildings falling into disrepair when they could be used for good purposes.

Local authorities can be used. My local authority in Monaghan is good at working with communities to identify such properties. The local authority might buy the property and lease it back to the community. There could be a long-term lease. There are a number of options. I believe we can get the right solution. It is about stakeholders coming together at grassroots level and coming up with ideas. When such a property is identified, it is fine and well getting it but something is needed in it that washes its face in terms of running it.

**Deputy Claire Kerrane:** The list of 75 vacant properties in the possession of the OPW went to the Department. Has the Minister had any engagement with the Minister of State, Deputy O'Donovan, or the OPW on the use of those properties for community purposes in rural towns and villages? Some of them are going up for auction this month. That is regrettable, especially if some level of engagement between the Department and the OPW or the Minister of State has not taken place. A number of the vacant properties are under consideration by the local authorities, including some in Roscommon and Galway, but some in other areas are going up for auction. Has the Minister engaged with the Minister of State, Deputy O'Donovan, or the OPW on the list of 75 vacant buildings which, as the Minister of State indicated, has been sent to her Department?

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** I have had engagement and meetings with the Minister of State on the issue of properties. Some of these properties could be acquired for remote working hubs or a number of other uses. It is up to local communities and local authorities to work together. When they make propositions, I am never found wanting. Good projects always get funding and different streams of funding are available.

The Deputy raised an issue about the community ownership fund. The idea came from the UK, where a £150 million community ownership fund has been introduced. It allows communities to get grants of up to £250,000 in matched funding where they want to take over a facility at risk of being lost and run it as a social enterprise or co-operative model. Our Rural Future contains a five-year strategy so we cannot do everything in year one but we will look at this as part of our 2022 work programme.

*Question No. 88 replied to with Written Answers.*

### **Vacant Properties**

89. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the steps she is taking to address the issue of vacant and derelict buildings in towns and villages. [38173/21]

93. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development her plans to introduce new supports and incentives for the refurbishment of vacant properties to increase town centre living, following on from the pilot town centre living initiative; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [38461/21]

127. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the new supports and incentives that will be introduced for the refurbishment of vacant properties to increase town centre living, as committed to in Our Rural Future; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [38456/21]

**Deputy Holly Cairns:** Too many towns and villages have vacant and derelict buildings that, as well as being eyesores and potentially dangerous sites, are buildings that could support local businesses and provide housing. We need a whole-of-government approach to this issue, with local authorities and Departments working together. Will the Minister outline the measures she is putting in place to address vacant and derelict buildings?

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** I propose to take Questions Nos. 89, 93 and 127 together.

The refurbishment of vacant properties is being addressed by a number of initiatives delivered by my Department, in line with the commitments contained in Our Rural Future. In April, I announced investment of €81 million for 25 landmark projects for funding under category 1 of the rural regeneration and development fund, RRDF. The projects will combat dereliction, increase the vibrancy of rural towns and villages and regenerate town centre buildings. A call for RRDF category 2 projects opened in May.

I have also announced funding of €15 million under the 2021 town and village renewal scheme. A key focus of this year's scheme is to renovate derelict and vacant buildings in town centres, including for residential living. I have increased the maximum grant available under the scheme to €500,000 to permit projects of additional scale to be funded. In addition, I will shortly be announcing a new €2 million scheme to fund the development of town master plans, which I expect will identify strategic actions tailored to address vacancy and support town centre living in each town.

There is a range of other initiatives outlined in Our Rural Future that will contribute to addressing vacancy in our towns and villages. In particular, an interdepartmental group has been

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established to develop a town centre first approach and bring forward recommendations to Government. As part of its role, this group is considering the suggested actions set out in the report on my Department's town centre living initiative, which was published last year. As part of budget 2022, and in the context of the town centre first approach, we will examine the scope to introduce new supports and incentives for the refurbishment of vacant properties to increase town centre living.

There is a range of schemes that seek to deal with this issue. As I indicated, €81 million in funding is being made available for 25 flagship projects under the RRDF. The work will involve looking at old buildings, including cinemas, courthouses and convents. For example, we provided funding to Donegal County Council to convert a former department store into a wonderful new complex. We have given funding to refurbish a number of old convents, including one in Ballymahon. These buildings will be brought back into use as community facilities, such as libraries, remote working hubs and so on. Some will be multipurpose buildings. I want to see investment in bringing buildings back into use and conversion for 21st century living. The way we are living is changing and remote working, in particular, is a wonderful opportunity for rural Ireland. It makes sense to convert some of these properties and use them for that purpose.

**Deputy Holly Cairns:** We all acknowledge that this as an issue that needs intervention. We know how disheartening it is for local communities, including those in west Cork, to see buildings that formerly housed thriving family businesses or were homes fall into disrepair. In many cases, Tidy Towns committees and property owners take on the responsibility of cleaning them up. We also have cases like Mitchelstown in north Cork, however, where the facade of a building recently collapsed. My colleague, Councillor Ross O'Connell, has been working on these issues in Goleen and Bantry in west Cork, which are examples of how even one or two vacant buildings in a town or village can have a disproportionate impact and give the impression of a high street that is empty and derelict.

The Minister highlighted the town and village renewal scheme as a means of bringing vacant and derelict sites back into use. However, that is a multipurpose and competitive scheme that is vastly oversubscribed. What specific interventions is she proposing under that scheme?

**Deputy Claire Kerrane:** A pilot was done under the town centre living initiative and 15 suggested actions came out of it. Have those suggested actions been reviewed by the Minister's Department? One of them was to appoint town centre officers, perhaps in local authorities, who would assist property owners. We know there have been issues in this area and the pilot report also acknowledged legal issues in regard to ownership. The idea is that town centre officers would get in and engage with property owners where properties are being left in ruins in the centres of rural towns in particular. They are an eyesore and it is an unfortunate situation. While there are schemes in place, there is clearly a need for new initiatives and actions in this regard. In many towns, the situation is not getting much better and it is clear they are not seeing the funding that is available. That is why we need new initiatives based on the 15 suggestions.

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** Deputy Kerrane has submitted a question on town centre first officers, which we will get to presently. I will come back on that specific point when I answer that question.

The town centre first group has been set up under the chairmanship of the Minister of State, Deputy Peter Burke. My Department feeds into that interdepartmental group and much of its work is on the suggested actions set out in the report on the town centre living initiative. A

number of actions will take place as a result of the work of the group. It was established to consider the regeneration of our towns and villages, as I said. It has agreed four key pillar areas for development of a town centre first framework, namely, governance and enabling structures-----

**Acting Chairman (Deputy John Lahart):** The Minister is out of time but I will come back to her.

**Deputy Holly Cairns:** The latest rural development policy recognises the issues involved and proposes a number of measures in response. As well as the town and village renewal scheme, it mentions encouraging local authorities to use compulsory purchase orders, CPOs, to deal with derelict buildings. Will the Minister use her influence to prompt councils to take more action in this area? We all know there are tools available to local authorities that are underused. Encouragement from the Minister could lead to greater action on that front.

The policy also mentions providing financial support to local authorities to bring vacant properties back into use as remote working hubs. Will the Minister outline what sort of funding will be made available in this regard and the timescales involved? Vacant and derelict buildings are an ongoing issue that needs policies and funding from Government and local authorities. We need a carrot-and-stick approach to prevent owners from sitting on properties, help communities to bring sites back to life and, crucially, encourage councils to use the tools they have to address this issue.

**Deputy Claire Kerrane:** I welcome that an interdepartmental group has been established. I look forward to the Minister outlining the four pillars of action to which she referred.

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** Some of the specific actions that are being considered by the interdepartmental group include incentivising the use of vacant buildings through taxation strategies, exploring financial disincentives in respect of vacancy and underuse, examining alternative models for access to finance for the adaptive reuse of vacant buildings, resourcing and supporting local authorities to invest and demonstrate confidence in their town, and establishing a cross-cutting town centre first approach. There have been some really good examples of what can be done and I would like other local authorities to take note, especially where there is a large number of derelict buildings in particular towns.

Local authorities need to work with local communities. Some towns have already benefited from the available funding. In Kinsale, for instance, funding of €2.157 million from the first call of category 1 applications has been approved for a library project. The relocation of Kinsale library to a listed, council-owned heritage building will require a major restoration and fit-out. Deputy Kerrane will be very familiar with the Boyle regeneration initiative, to which funding of €2.137 million has been given for a series of linked projects, including the refurbishment of the vacant former Royal Hotel and its conversion into an enterprise hub. There is good work going on there and I want to see more of it because it is the right thing to do. A lady who recently wrote a book on how towns were planned many years ago was interviewed on radio yesterday. We can look back to what happened in the 1800s and how towns were planned then. We could take a leaf out of that book as well.

*Question No. 90 replied to with Written Answers*

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## Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

91. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development her ongoing proposals and initiatives required arising from the impact of Covid-19 in all areas of the country, urban and rural; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [38180/21]

**Deputy Bernard J. Durkan:** To what extent have the various schemes available to the Minister been made available throughout the country in connection with Covid? To what extent does she continue to review the progress of those schemes, with the possibility of intervention at a later stage if necessary?

**Deputy Joe O'Brien:** I thank the Deputy for his question. Given the role of my Department in supporting the economic and social development of rural Ireland, as well as community development throughout Ireland, all of our existing funding schemes support the response to, and recovery from, the pandemic in some way. However, several specific targeted measures are aimed at directly supporting the Covid response and recovery. The main focus has been on community development supports, as reflected in the increase in gross expenditure for that programme area from €149 million in 2019 to €202 million in 2020.

My Department continues to provide Covid-19 supports to communities right across the country. On 6 May, I launched the 2021 stability fund, with an allocation of €10 million targeting organisations that deliver critical services to vulnerable people within their community but now face closure or loss of service due to the impact of the pandemic. This €10 million investment builds on the €45 million stability fund 2020 which supported almost 600 organisations across the country.

The application process for the 2021 stability fund has now closed, with applications appraised and assessed in batches to facilitate timely drawdowns. Decisions will be released on an ongoing basis. I was pleased to announce tranche 1 of successful grantees under the 2021 stability fund on 9 July, supporting 180 organisations with close to €4.5 million in allocations. Further tranches will follow in due course.

The €4.5 million 2021 community enhancement programme will provide vital supports to assist local groups to reopen their facilities post Covid-19. Adjustments to programmes delivered by my Department, such as town and village renewal and CLÁR, have been made where required to further support communities during the pandemic.

**Deputy Bernard J. Durkan:** I thank the Minister of State. How are the various projects progressing and being taken up? Is there a further requirement to revisit these schemes in light of the impact of Covid? To what extent are the current proposals and provisions deemed sufficient to meet the requirements in full?

**Deputy Joe O'Brien:** I thank the Deputy for his concern for the sector at large. The stability fund last year offered us a unique opportunity to do a kind of health check or get a good snapshot of where the community and voluntary sector was and it allowed us to support the sector. The new stability fund offers additional support in that regard. Without going into detail, I am hopeful and satisfied that, by and large, the community and voluntary sector will bounce back. Obviously, some organisations will suffer more than others but, on the whole, in terms of the applications coming in and the amount of support we will provide, I am hopeful that the sector as a whole will prove its resilience.

I will provide figures that may be of interest to the Deputy in the context of Covid supports to County Kildare. Under the Covid-19 stability scheme last year, €490,000 was disbursed to projects in Kildare, as was €66,000 under the community enhancement programme, €181,000 through the community enhancement programme for community centres under the July stimulus package, and €94,000 under the emergency fund.

**Deputy Bernard J. Durkan:** Can the Minister of State indicate whether, based on his observations and ongoing dialogue with the various groups concerned in County Kildare and elsewhere in the country, there is a greater need for further intervention in specific areas?

**Deputy Joe O'Brien:** There is no single overarching area or geographical area that springs to mind in that regard but we are monitoring the situation very closely. The community enhancement programme was launched recently and we will be getting feedback from the local authorities that manage those schemes in terms of demand and the types of projects that were seeking supports. We keep an ear close to the ground in terms of feedback on the various schemes and closely monitor the applications that come in to help us to get a full and deep picture of the financial situation of the community and voluntary sector as a whole. We are looking closely at the matter. No decisions have been made yet but, on the whole, we are very hopeful that the sector will bounce back strongly.

### **Departmental Schemes**

92. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development if progress has been made as part of the town centre first approach to provide and resource dedicated staff within local authorities to support town centre renewal, as committed to in Our Rural Future; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [38459/21]

**Deputy Claire Kerrane:** Reference has already been made to the subject matter of this question. Has progress been made to provide and resource dedicated staff within local authorities to support town centre renewal, as committed to in Our Rural Future?

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. Our Rural Future sets out a blueprint for the development of rural Ireland over the next five years. It is supported by some 150 commitments based on the challenges and opportunities identified for rural communities.

A key element of Our Rural Future is the commitment to develop and deliver a collaborative town centre first approach to put the development and regeneration of rural town centres at the heart of decision-making. The Government has committed, as part of this overall approach, to provide and resource dedicated local authority staff to support town centre renewal. It is envisaged that such staff would assist the towns themselves to identify and deliver the key interventions required for the town.

My Department and the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage are jointly chairing an interdepartmental group established to progress these matters. The group has made good progress in identifying specific actions. As part of its work, the group is considering all of the suggested actions identified in the report on the town centre living Initiative published by my Department last year. That report suggested the appointment of town centre officers or management teams to support the regeneration of our towns.

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The work of the group is being supported by an advisory group which includes a wide range of stakeholders and is chaired by my colleague, the Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Deputy Peter Burke. Based on the work of both groups, I expect recommendations on the delivery of the town centre first approach to be presented to the Government in the coming months. This will include provisions in respect of dedicated staff for town centre renewal.

**Deputy Claire Kerrane:** I thank the Minister for her response. This is a good initiative and it will drive the town centre approach in a collaborative way. There is a real need for staff to be placed in local authorities. I presume the Minister is considering one such town centre officer per local authority. They will have a crucial role to play in developing rural town centres, many of which need a dedicated approach in respect of town centre development, which will be very important. The Minister stated these staff will be in place. The interdepartmental report will be produced in the coming months. When will these staff members fill the roles in local authorities?

As regards collaboration under the town centre approach, it is important that there is consultation with residents and business owners in the town centres at every stage.

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** As I stated, the working group chaired by the Minister of State, Deputy Peter Burke, will come forward with recommendations in the coming months. As part of budget 2021, I secured €2 million to help these towns develop master plans. It is very important that they have a plan in order to ensure there is joined-up thinking, which is part of making it a success. It is one thing to have the plan, but there is then a need for people to drive it and to work with the stakeholders, communities, businesses and all those involved, as the Deputy stated, to see what is the best approach to revitalising the town centres. The plan is for the town centre first officers to carry out that role. We will support local authorities in appointing an officer. However, we want to wait until we receive the report from the interdepartmental group. The plans are in place. We will drive it forward. In fairness to local authorities, they have taken on a lot of work.

**Deputy Claire Kerrane:** I hope we see the report from that interdepartmental group before the end of the year. I hope we see moves being made to hire these town centre officers and to put them in place in our local authorities across our rural counties to ensure that the town centre first approach works and is driven on by our local authorities in those local areas.

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** As I said, in fairness to local authorities, many different demands are being made of them. Many funding opportunities are available for schemes, whether it is the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and the Media's scheme for outdoor dining, the Minister for Transport's schemes for cycling and walking infrastructure or schemes from my own Department in town and village renewal, and rural regeneration. Of course, the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage has more schemes that are run through the local authorities.

Instead of following this *ad hoc* approach, the town centre officer can co-ordinate the different schemes and drive them forward. They can identify the best source of funding, which may perhaps include a mix of a number of different funding streams, to achieve their objectives and revitalise town centres. We have a great opportunity to do it. If Covid-19 has taught us one thing, it is to think outside the box. When we work together we get better results. I plan to support the local authorities in appointing a town centre officer. I hope it progresses very quickly.

*Question No. 93 answered with Question No. 89.*

*Questions Nos. 94 to 99, inclusive, replied to with Written Answers.*

### **Departmental Schemes**

100. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development if increased funding will be provided for local improvement scheme roads around the country; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [38520/21]

102. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development if additional funding will be provided in 2021 for the local improvement scheme in the event of a reallocation of capital funding during 2021; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [38483/21]

**Deputy Brendan Griffin:** I thank the Minister wholeheartedly for the fantastic news this week of the additional allocation of €10.5 million in funding for local improvement schemes. When I tabled this question, the funding had not been announced. The Minister effectively doubled the budget for this year with her announcement yesterday. It is great news. I would like to discuss the matter further with the Minister today.

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** I propose to take Questions Nos. 100 and 102 together.

The local improvement scheme provides funding for work on rural roads and laneways, as Deputy Griffin well knows. He has raised this matter with me on a number of occasions. These particular laneways are not normally maintained by local authorities. They are normally private and go into agricultural land and houses.

This funding is vital for rural residents and for improving connectivity for rural farm families, in particular. The scheme is funded by my Department and is administered through the local authorities. I launched the 2021 local improvement scheme on 14 May with an announcement of funding of €10.5 million, representing a 5% increase on last year's funding. As part of our rural future policy, the Government committed to ensuring that the local improvement scheme is funded into the future. This reflects the important contribution that the scheme makes to connectivity in rural Ireland. It is against this background that I am very pleased to confirm that I recently announced the allocation of a further €10.5 million to the local improvement scheme in 2021 to bring the level of funding to €21 million. That means that the level of funding has been doubled this year compared to the original allocation. The increase will be funded from expected savings elsewhere in my Department. I am also continuing to engage with my colleague, the Minister for Transport, to explore the potential for further financial support from his Department.

My Department is currently ascertaining the capacity of each local authority to deliver this additional funding and to complete works on additional roads before the end of the year. Following on from this engagement, I expect to shortly announce the exact additional allocation to each county. The announcement will mean that almost €80 million will have been allocated under the local improvement scheme since it was reintroduced by the former Minister, Deputy Ring, in 2017. This demonstrates the Government's commitment to improving connectivity in rural Ireland, as outlined in our rural future policy.

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**Deputy Brendan Griffin:** It certainly does emphasise the Government's commitment. I welcome the funding that the Minister has delivered. It is very rare for a Minister to deliver such a level of funding in an area such as this. She has played her part. However, I certainly feel, and I agree with the Minister, that it is time for other Departments to chip in, particularly large capital budget Departments like the Departments of Transport and Housing, Local Government and Heritage. Those Departments have a role to play. It cannot just be left to the Minister's Department. A huge burden is being placed on the Department of Rural and Social Development and there is a massive list.

I will be parochial and say that when it comes to distributing the extra €10.5 million in funding, County Kerry has one of the longest lists in the country. There are hundreds of worthy roads that are very valuable to the local communities and are awaiting repair and resurfacing. I ask the Minister to look kindly on the Kingdom when it comes to the local improvement scheme. Our roads are the worst in the country and we badly need that money.

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** There is a long list of roads that need repaired. I know there are many such roads in counties Kerry, Cavan and Monaghan, Mayo and all over the country.

We have contacted the local authorities. We have asked them to outline what they can deliver before the end of the year. I want the money allocated to be spent on the roads. The allocations will be looked at by my Department. We will be also looking at what local authorities can do themselves and if they can deliver. It is important that they submit realistic and achievable targets for the end of the year. If they do not meet the targets, we will take a very dim view of it. To be clear, they need not put in a list of roads to get the funding and then not spend it.

The Deputy is a former Minister in the Department of Transport. He will appreciate that roads are normally funded by that Department. This scheme is a specific commitment to rural Ireland. I have raised the matter with the Minister for Transport. In fairness, I think he is open to the idea of assisting in this particular area. Obviously, he will have to have discussions with his officials in the Department.

**Deputy Brendan Griffin:** I appreciate the efforts that have been made with the Department of Transport. I have been a long-time advocate of the Department of Transport supporting the local improvement scheme. The Department should not have abdicated all responsibility back in 2016. It should have retained its commitment to co-funding the scheme, as far as I am concerned. I wish to acknowledge the efforts that were made over those years by both the current Minister and her predecessor, the former Minister, Deputy Ring, to get the scheme moving again and to start clearing the lists.

From a Kerry perspective, any money that ever came into the county was rapidly spent. The local authority went through the previous list very quickly and showed that once it received the funding, it was spent and put to good use. I am sure that will happen again with any funding that is allocated in future. I ask the Minister to bear that in mind when she is making her decisions.

We will not get through the list, in any acceptable amount of time, without that level of cooperation from other Departments. I support the Minister in her efforts. The other Departments must step up to the plate and acknowledge the role that has to be played by the Department of Transport, in particular, in acknowledging the use of these roads for walking and cycling.

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** As the Deputy is aware, we try to be as fair as possible

when allocating the funds. The officials will come forward with recommended allocations in due course. They are currently engaging with the local authorities on the matter. In fairness to the Deputy, it will not be his fault if Kerry does not get a fair share of the cake, as it were. It is an issue the Deputy has raised with me previously. To be fair, I have more than doubled the budget this year, with funding of €21 million. It will be a help. I am aware there is a long list. There is no doubt about that.

I thank the Deputies who have raised this issue with me today. The LIS was previously under the Department of Transport but we have got it kick-started. I will be working with the Minister for Transport, Deputy Eamon Ryan, who is open to working with me. The Department just has to identify the funding streams.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy John Lahart):** I have some rural roads in Dublin South-West. The Minister should not forget Dublin when it comes to rural roads.

### **Community Development Projects**

101. **Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development if there is scope to expand the community enhancement scheme to offer financial supports to communities that wish to undertake renovations on community centres or, potentially, construct new community centres; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [38011/21]

131. **Deputy Steven Matthews** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development if there is scope to expand the community enhancement programme in order for it to offer more substantial financial supports to local communities wishing to undertake renovations to their community centre or perhaps build a new community centre; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [38017/21]

**Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh:** Is there scope to expand the community enhancement scheme to offer financial support to communities that wish to renovate community centres or, potentially, construct new ones?

**Deputy Joe O'Brien:** I propose to take Questions Nos. 101 and 131 together.

I thank the Deputy for his question. The community enhancement programme, CEP, provides small grants to community organisations, with a focus on those organisations in disadvantaged areas. The funding is provided to each local authority area and is distributed by the local community development committees, LCDCs, on the basis of local need. In 2020, the CEP received a total fund of €7.2 million, including €5 million as part of the Government's July stimulus package for repairs or upgrades to community centres and community buildings. This year, on 10 May, I launched the 2021 CEP, with an allocation of €4.5 million. The key theme of this year's programme is supporting groups as they reopen their facilities, which were closed because of Covid-19. To allow flexibility, each LCDC can set its own closing date to best suit its area, but all closing dates must be no later than 16 July 2021. Groups should check with their LCDC for further details.

It is important to note that, typically, the CEP provides smaller grants and does not fund substantial renovations or the construction of new community centres. While community centres are funded from many different sources across Departments, agencies and local authorities,

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there is no dedicated stand-alone funding stream for capital works for community centres at present.

There is a benefit to the introduction of a dedicated community centre capital programme to provide large-scale capital grants for significant refurbishment, retrofitting and modernisation works across the network of community centres. My officials are exploring whether it is possible to secure additional funding for my Department to deliver such a programme.

**Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh:** I thank the Minister of State for the response. He has touched on the fact that there are two issues at play. First, it is a matter of filling in the gaps where there may be no community centres. Tramore is peculiar in this regard. It has a community of some 12,000 people, yet it does not have a community centre to serve it. It does not really have a village hall or shared community space to facilitate a large-scale sharing of views, small theatre groups and so on.

The second issue is that running a community centre results in substantial running costs. There is a genuine opportunity in this regard. With retrofitting, particularly the installation of renewables, for example, it will be possible to switch from incurring a cost to having a revenue source as we get feed-in tariffs. Having a dedicated source of funding is good and well worth pursuing within the Department.

**Deputy Joe O'Brien:** There is a benefit to introducing a dedicated community centre capital programme to provide large-scale capital grants for significant refurbishment, retrofitting, modernisation and the construction of community centres. The need for more significant capital investment to support community infrastructure has become more evident during the pandemic.

A proposal for an increase in the level of capital funding provided for community development has been included in my Department's submission to the review of the national development plan, which is being undertaken by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform. Separately, my Department has developed a proposal for a community centre capital programme as part of a wider community-recovery investment fund. This was submitted to the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform for consideration for inclusion in Ireland's national recovery and resilience plan proposals. Programming is under way for the European Regional Development Fund, ERDF. My officials have completed a screening questionnaire on the proposed funding in respect of ERDF co-financing. This has been sent to the Northern and Western Regional Assembly. The development of a dedicated community centre capital programme will depend on the success of the proposals.

**Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh:** I thank the Minister of State. A dedicated funding source would be one of several steps in the right direction. Many communities have to develop their community facilities in dribs and drabs, and there are small groups of volunteers chasing every funding source available. We should bring the strands together and help put the facilities into the heart of the communities.

In my home town, Tramore, there is a significant site for sale. We could lose it to residential use unless it is taken on board. It was formerly a school site. It has a large hall and the potential to be developed into an outstanding community centre. In a growing town the size of Tramore, there is a need for the kinds of community services in question to be brought together into one space and for the site in question to be handed over for the good of the community. I would welcome the Minister of State's comments in this regard.

**Deputy Joe O'Brien:** There is strong interest in developing a programme like this. The Minister, Deputy Humphreys, is advocating it strongly. We hope there will be something in the revised national development plan to facilitate the need. There are gaps across the country. In deprived and lightly populated areas, there is a clear issue. Many community centre projects start and grow organically so we should match that community commitment to making improvements with some commitment from ourselves. It is certainly high on our agenda. A need has been identified and we need to act upon it.

*Question No. 102 answered with Question No. 100.*

### **Broadband Infrastructure**

103. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the status of the work programme of the mobile phone and broadband task force; the estimated timeframe for when the task force will be established; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [38308/21]

108. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development if her Department will primarily oversee and implement the work programme of the mobile phone and broadband taskforce; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [38309/21]

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** My question is about the mobile phone and broadband task force, which, on the basis of legacy, resides within the Minister's Department. It has been re-tasked. It is a matter of the timeline. Deputy O'Rourke and I recently met representatives of Telecommunications Industry Ireland. That would have included National Broadband Ireland, Eir and others. They really want the body up and running so as to have a clearing house to deal with issues. There are always planning permission and infrastructural issues with major infrastructural projects. We do not need hold-ups. We need a clearing house rather than an arrangement by which we deal with issues across this floor.

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** I propose to take Questions Nos. 103 and 108 together.

I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. The mobile phone and broadband task force was launched in July 2016 with the objective of improving access to high-quality mobile phone coverage and broadband services in rural Ireland. Since its inception, the task force has addressed more than 70 targeted actions, worked on removing structural barriers to telecommunications deployment and addressed mobile coverage deficits, particularly in rural areas. The completion of the task force's 2019 work programme marked the end of the task force as originally constituted. Attention has now turned towards its future orientation in line with the programme for Government commitment to continue to support the work of the group. Officials in my Department and the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications have prepared a report on the task force's achievements and are currently evaluating what issues should be addressed by it in the future. Significant progress has been made by the task force although I am aware that there remains a range of strategic issues whose solution will require multiple Departments and agencies working together.

Since its inception, the implementation and overseeing of the task force have involved a joint commitment of the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications and my Department. I will continue to work with my colleague, the Minister for the Environment,

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Climate and Communications, to agree a new direction for the task force that will build on the success and positive engagement across central and local government, statutory agencies and industry.

I was involved in the setting up of the task force in 2016. At the time, I set up broadband officers in every county in the country. Having spoken to the telecommunications operators, I have learned that the task force structure and broadband officers have been invaluable to them in sorting out problems they have encountered on the ground, be they associated with planning or infrastructure. The arrangement has been very successful.

*12 o'clock*

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** I welcome what the Minister stated to the effect that there will be a timeline for the evaluation and that the body in question, with its new tasks, will be back in operation. These organisations and companies are looking for a clearing house for dealing with the issues that exist. We know the situation in respect of National Broadband Ireland. There are two parts to that. One involves delays relating to Covid-19, which we expect to be dealt with in the first six months. Then there is the wider issue of accelerating the programme, which will probably involve years 6 and 7 being done in years 4 and 5. As already stated, we need a clearing house to deal with any issues that arise.

We recognise that section 254 guidelines have streamlined the matter of planning permissions across the State and for local authorities. There are still major issues, however, and local authorities are not fully structured from the point of view of delivering major strategic infrastructural projects across the State. We need this up and running as quickly as possible. We then need to be able to offer interim solutions for those people for whom the National Broadband Ireland roll-out will take a long time and the latter will be need to be done by that task force.

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** We have the task force and it has worked very well. We are looking at how we can repurpose it. A great deal of work is happening. I spoke to the task force only recently. It acknowledge the great work with the local authorities and local broadband officers, who have been able to bring a wide range of solutions there. I agree with the Deputy on the wider structure.

The Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications is certainly dealing with those issues on a national basis and is doing everything he can where he has engaged with National Broadband Ireland with a view to accelerating the roll-out of the national broadband programme on a contractual footing. Obviously, any changes to the contract will require detailed, technical, commercial and financial analysis by both parties. I understand that National Broadband Ireland has established a dedicated team to investigate the potential for acceleration of the roll-out of the fibre network. We are all on the same page here and want to get broadband rolled out as quickly as possible.

*Written Answers are published on the Oireachtas website.*

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

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Before we begin, rather than me coming in and out, I ask Members to kindly keep to the time limits.

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** Last week, we had data from the Personal Injuries Assessment Board, PIAB, showing that the average personal injury award has fallen by 50% as a result of the new personal injury guidelines which came in to effect on 24 April of this year. This has halved the cost of awards relating to personal injury claims by insurance companies. It is clear that the reduced cost in claims is not being passed on to consumers in the form of reduced premiums. A survey I conducted since the new personal injury guidelines came in to effect found that 58% of respondents had seen their premiums increase, while only 22% saw reduction fall in their premiums. This trend has been echoed in data from the Alliance for Insurance Reform. That can only mean that these savings are being pocketed by the insurance industry to prop up its profit margins. The Tánaiste knows only too well that that was not the purpose or the objective of the new personal injury guidelines.

Yesterday, the Central Bank published a report on the employer and public liability insurance market. It highlights the insurance crisis faced by small businesses and voluntary and community groups for far too long. It found that between 2013 and 2019, the average premium for employer and public liability insurance increased by 24%. For certain sectors, this increase is shocking and completely unworkable. The insurance costs in the arts, entertainment and recreational sectors have more than doubled. Unaffordable and unworkable, the dysfunction in the insurance market damages communities, jobs and local economies. The report also found that claim costs fell by 34% over the past decade, with the number of claims made falling by 47% during the same period. We can see the same pattern when we look at the Central Bank report on the motor insurance market published earlier this year which showed the same trends of claims falling but premiums increasing. That was before the new personal injury guidelines came into effect and awards were cut by 50%, with claims costs slashed for insurance companies.

In my view and that of my party, the insurance industry needs to be brought to heel. Premiums need to be reduced for motorists, businesses and all consumers and this needs to be done without delay. We must ensure that the reduced costs in claims are passed on, euro for euro, to consumers. I have no doubt that everybody in this House believes that is the way we need to proceed. There are ways to fix this.

In April, I introduced the Judicial Council (Amendment) Bill which would require the industry to report to the Central Bank on how it has or has not passed on these savings, euro for euro, to its customers. If it has not everybody would know about it and it would allow the Dáil to hold the industry to account and to put pressure on the insurance companies to do the right thing. Similar regulations were adopted in Britain last year in response to the reduction in whiplash awards. Insurance companies that operate here, such as Aviva, AXA, AIG, Allianz, Zurich and RSA are subject to these regulations in Britain and have to show that, pound for pound, the reduction in awards were passed on to their consumers. This has to be done in an audited way. I say to the Tánaiste that there should be no less oversight here.

The Government let the industry off the hook when it delayed my Bill which had passed Second Stage for nine months. That was an incorrect decision which was made for narrow party-political reasons and which, unfortunately, has served the interests of the industry and undermined the interests of consumers. Can the Tánaiste work with us? I urge him and the Government to reverse course and to stop delaying the Bill in question and provide the Dáil with a tool to hold this industry to account. The latter will ensure what we all want to see, namely, that the reduction in awards will be passed on to consumers without delay so that we can bring the costs involved to a more reasonable level?

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**The Tánaiste:** I thank the Deputy. We are making good progress in implementing the action plan for insurance reform, which is something I am personally committed to. As Tánaiste, I chair the ministerial committee which oversees its implementation and I am determined as the Minister responsible for business but responsible also for consumers to see the cost of insurance falls for businesses, motorists, homeowners and everyone else over the coming year.

The personal injury guidelines are in place, as acknowledged by the Deputy. The Criminal Justice (Perjury and Related Offences) Act 2021 has been passed and will be enacted soon. This legislation will help us to crack down on fraudulent and exaggerated claims. The National Claims Information Database is giving us a treasure trove of information that is helping us to understand in a much better way than we did before how insurance is priced.

The Central Bank report on employers' liability, EL, and public liability, PL, mentioned by the Deputy is an excellent piece of work. I encourage anyone interested in the issue of insurance to read it. I know that the Deputy has done so. It tells us a great deal more on how insurance is priced and how it works. It is interesting to see, which the Deputy will know from the report, that the average businessperson pays approximately €2,000 a year in EL and PL, and 90% or more of these individuals pay less than €5,000 per year. The profit margin for the companies is approximately 5%, and during some periods these companies are actually making losses. It is important to acknowledge that.

The insurance industry has to reduce its premiums and that is the message that it is hearing from me and from the Minister of State, Deputy Fleming. It is important, however, to acknowledge what was in the report. If one pays €100 in insurance, the profit margin for the company is approximately €5. That, perhaps, was not fully reflected in the Deputies earlier comments. It is interesting to know that profit margin figure for companies. The vast amount of what is paid in insurance used to pay people who have made claims, legal costs, reinsurance and administration costs. Approximately 5% is the margin taken by the company.

There has also been a reduction of approximately 50% in awards by the PIAB for minor injuries as opposed to those for catastrophic or severe injuries, which are different. That is, however, just in the context of two months of data taken from this year compared with an entire 12-month period prior to that. We have no data yet as to what is happening when these cases go to court. Are the judges upholding the amounts awarded by the PIAB or are they increasing these amounts? A little bit more time will be needed before we see that.

Do I expect to see premiums fall? Yes, I do. As the Deputy pointed out in the past, insurance companies work by making provisions for claims that they believe they will have to pay out. It is now reasonable to assume that they have made more provision than was necessary and that, therefore, they should be in a position to reduce premiums and to do so quickly, if not immediately.

As I have said previously, we are completely open to the Deputy's Bill. We are giving it consideration. As is the case with any legislation relating to the insurance industry, we are required to consult the Central Bank on it and we will do that.

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** I welcome the Tánaiste's comments on my legislation. He has said before that it was a sensible idea. We have translated that into legislation and it has passed Second Stage. Unfortunately, however, the process of putting a nine-month stay on it just does not make any sense and nor does it make any sense that we cannot look at the Bill or even, as

a committee, ask the Central Bank its views on it for nine months. This can serve only the insurance industry's interests. The Tánaiste talked about two months' data and no data from the courts and the profit margins of insurance companies and that was before awards were slashed dramatically. I heard him ask how much insurance premiums should come down because of the reduction. He was not able to answer and I could not answer that question either because we do not know. That is why that legislation is really important. It makes the insurance company satisfy the Central Bank that these rewards were completely passed on to the consumers and done in an audited way. I therefore ask the Tánaiste not to take a delaying approach, which is what has happened in this regard. We now have the same approach to motor insurance and public liability. The cost and the number of claims are going down but premiums have gone up. Let us lift the stay on this Bill, allow it to go to pre-legislative scrutiny, hold the industry to account and bring transparency to this area.

**The Tánaiste:** A nine-month timed amendment does not mean that nothing can be done for nine months. That is certainly not my interpretation of what a timed amendment means. It is prudent to ask the Central Bank for a view on the legislation. We have accepted legislation Deputy Doherty has proposed on consumer contracts and we are open to accepting the legislation he is proposing now. However, as is the case with any legislation that affects financial services or industries such as insurance, we are required to get the view of the Central Bank, and I will consult my colleagues to see if we can get that view over the summer. I do not see why we would be required to wait nine months to do that. I might be wrong but I undertake to check up on that and come back to the Deputy.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** We move on to Páirtí an Lucht Oibre. An Teachta Bacik, an ea? I dtús báire, ba mhaith liom comhghairdeas a dhéanamh leat, a Theachta. Ní bhfuair mé deis comhghairdeas a dhéanamh leat go hoifigiúil agus fáilte chroíúil don Dáil a chur romhat.

**Deputy Ivana Bacik:** Go raibh maith agat, a Leas-Cheann Comhairle, and I thank the Tánaiste for his warm words last week following my by-election result. I am deeply honoured to be here to represent Dublin Bay South in the Dáil. It is a great honour indeed.

Following yesterday's health committee meeting, I wish to raise the pressing matter of the proposed new national maternity hospital, which we might say is both a local and very much a national issue. During the by-election campaign the issue of women's health and maternity healthcare was raised with me many times. I heard from women who were due to give birth and who were deeply concerned about the ongoing unduly restrictive practices being adopted in many maternity hospitals and from partners of pregnant women anxious about their exclusion from labour wards. We urgently need to ensure better and more consistent provision for women's healthcare and maternity hospitals. In that context I also heard deep frustration from many people about the tortuous legal negotiations which have been ongoing for so many years surrounding the proposed new national maternity hospital. I heard about the many serious and valid concerns which remain about the ownership and the clinical independence of the proposed hospital. All of us absolutely accept the need for a new national maternity hospital. We agree it should be co-located with an adult acute service. However, without State ownership of the land on which the new hospital is to be built, valid concerns will remain about the clinical independence and the ethical governance of the hospital. We saw an all-party consensus emerge on this in the Dáil in the motion passed on 23 June. The key question I have is what the Government has done since 23 June to ensure that the hospital will be built on State-owned land and that these concerns will be met. We did not get an adequate answer on this at yesterday's health committee hearing.

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As someone who campaigned for many decades for repeal of the eighth amendment, I was so glad that in 2018, with repeal, we finally got to a situation whereby women here in Ireland could access the legal abortion and reproductive healthcare we need. However, that progress within our laws with repeal is not reflected in the negotiations on the new maternity hospital, especially, I fear, not in the structures around the Catholic successor company into which ownership of the site is to pass. I have called this syndrome whereby religious entities pass ownership of their assets into an ostensibly lay company the developer's wife syndrome, whereby we see male developers handing over ownership of assets to their wives or spouses in order that the legal liability will no longer attach to the person who holds the assets. My serious concern is that this legal device will be used in this transaction with the national maternity hospital and we will see a Catholic successor company continue to hold ownership even for a long lease. In the eyes of the church, 149 years is not a long time. I am deeply concerned, therefore, that without State ownership we will not have the clinical independence and guarantees that women will have access to all the services we need.

**The Tánaiste:** Once again, I congratulate the Deputy on her election to Dáil Éireann. Her arrival in this House is long overdue.

**Deputy Ivana Bacik:** I thank the Tánaiste.

**The Tánaiste:** It might be said that she played the long game, and sometimes that is the most successful strategy to adopt. I am also very pleased as a Trinity graduate to welcome her to the House and sorry to lose her from the Seanad's Trinity constituency. I am sure there will be an interesting contest for that by-election. I believe it has already begun.

As for the wider issues, as Minister for Health, one of the things I am very proud and privileged to have been able to do was to make sure that Ireland for the first time had a national maternity strategy to ensure we had the highest standards of care for pregnant women and neonates. That strategy is being implemented and funded. I am glad to see that is the case and I am determined to keep a watching eye over that as Tánaiste. We also have new guidelines on partners visiting maternity hospitals. It is the view of the Government and the HSE that partners should be able to attend a labour ward or ICU if their newborn is there and should be able to attend for important scans, such as anomaly scans. I understand that is not the case in a small number of maternity units for local reasons and I am disappointed that that is the case, but we need to allow local infection control managers and clinicians to make local decisions in certain circumstances.

As to what is happening with the national maternity hospital project, an engagement is, as I understand it, under way or at least about to be under way involving all the partners involved, that is, the HSE, the Department of Health, St. Vincent's and the National Maternity Hospital itself. What we seek to achieve is the co-location of the new national maternity hospital on the campus of St. Vincent's. This is the best option for women and children. I have no doubt about that. I know people talk about alternative sites. There is not a better alternative site that provides co-location with an adult hospital with the facilities and standards St. Vincent's has. Going down that route, I think, would cause a delay, and nobody can say how long that delay would be. It is therefore the right decision to co-locate the hospital with St. Vincent's, and I am determined we should go ahead with that. The Government has red lines and these have moved on since the Mulvey report. We are insisting that we own the hospital, that we own the building. We are insisting that there is a cast-iron legal guarantee that any service that is legal in this State should be provided in the hospital, whether gender reassignment surgery, termina-

tions or assisted human reproduction. These are absolute red lines. I think we have achieved that. There is still issues around the governance, representation by the State, by the people on the board and the lease. It is by far our preference that we own the land, but it is a little like Lesotho being surrounded by South Africa. It is not as straightforward as people may think. The site is a piece of land surrounded more or less on all sides by St. Vincent's Hospital and its campus. We need to make sure that any arrangement we have around any lease is one that we are satisfied with and that is long enough.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Táimid thar am.

**The Tánaiste:** Even the Catholic Church would consider it a long time.

**Deputy Ivana Bacik:** I thank the Tánaiste for the kind words and the response but it is simply not good enough to say the Government would prefer to own the land yet not be able to do something about it. We have a compulsory purchase order process. That should be used if St. Vincent's will not pass the land to the State. The question remains why St. Vincent's Holdings CLG will not simply gift the land to the State and why it is so anxious to retain ownership. Without a sufficient answer we risk simply sleepwalking into the default position we have had for so long with our education and health institutions in this State, whereby religious orders or Catholic successor companies continue to hold the long-term asset, the land, yet the State pays - in this case €800 million - to invest in a new building and the salaries and running costs of that new building, a building which will be on land which will ultimately revert into the ownership of religious entities or religious front companies. That is simply not good enough for women's healthcare in Ireland in the 21st century. That is why I am asking for clarity in regard to the State not simply preferring to own the land but that something urgent will be done by the Government to ensure the State will own the land on which the new hospital is to be built.

**The Tánaiste:** It is important to say that negotiations are still under way and are about to resume soon. We are not ruling out CPO as an option but we need to understand that the outcome of a CPO process is not guaranteed and would certainly result in delay, with additional costs, if it is successful, on top of those the Deputy mentioned. Sometimes the perfect is the enemy of the good, and we need to have an open mind as to what the best option is with regard to the governance arrangements, the lease arrangements around the land and the ownership of the land.

One issue that is probably not well understood in this State is that across the world, even in places where there is a strong public health service, such as in the UK, with the National Health Service, NHS, or in Germany or France, it is not unusual for hospitals to be owned by a voluntary body, a charity or a private company. It is the case that parts of the NHS are still governed by royal charter, private companies and charities. We need to ensure we do not lose the opportunity to build a world-class national maternity hospital because of issues such as this.

**Deputy Denis Naughten:** Last week, the Taoiseach told the Dáil the Government is committed to recognising the sacrifices that public sector workers, in particular front-line healthcare workers, have made. Twelve months ago, I raised with the Taoiseach the need to properly recognise the Trojan work of front-line healthcare workers, in particular all those across our hospital and community health services, from cleaners to consultants. I raised it again with him four months ago.

I have no doubt the Government is committed to providing recognition to staff but it seems, from reading between the lines, that the need to recognise front-line healthcare workers - doc-

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tors, nurses, healthcare assistants, cleaners, porters and others who place themselves at risk by going to work every day to keep us safe and to care for those who are seriously ill - is now caught up in some relativity battle across the public service. I remind the Tánaiste of what the Taoiseach said last week, namely, that the Government is committed to recognising the sacrifices that public sector workers have made. That, I believe, is the reason the HSE, when it sat down with the health unions last week, stated it had no mandate from the Government to negotiate any bonus payment.

Staff on the front line within our health service have been put in a unique position during this pandemic. Right across the public service, staff have worked in challenging circumstances, but no group of public sector workers have put their lives and those of their families at risk to a greater extent than our healthcare workers. Many of them have put their hands into their own pockets to do so, paying for alternative accommodation in order that they would not infect a vulnerable person in their home or for additional childcare, if it was available, in order that they could cover for sick colleagues. I could go on.

Many of these staff are physically and mentally exhausted, facing into the fourth wave of this virus, dealing with the significant impact of the cyberattack, covering staffing shortages due to Covid infection and long Covid and now facing a backlog in waiting times for appointments and procedures. These staff need time off to recover before they break down completely. As the Tánaiste will be well aware, exhausted healthcare staff are a recipe for mistakes, with potentially fatal consequences for patients and very significant financial consequences for the State. We must now - today - recognise that time off is imperative for their health and give proper recognition to staff on the front line, as the Scottish Government has done by paying every NHS worker a bonus of £500.

**The Tánaiste:** I think we will all agree our healthcare workers have done an amazing job throughout the pandemic so far. We can be very proud of our public health service. It is much maligned and has its imperfections, but the pandemic has proved to us that it is much better than many people believed it was, and it really stood up and scaled up in the way we asked it to during the pandemic. While all public servants, including healthcare workers, have received modest pay increases over the course of the pandemic, I do not think they are adequate to recognise the value of the work that was carried out during the pandemic, and I know the Deputy will agree with that too.

The Government wants to recognise the work that was done in a special way. That could be done through a financial bonus or additional leave taken over a number of years, but there are complications and factors we need to take into account. First, the pandemic is not over yet - I guarantee that - and that will become apparent to people over the next couple of weeks. It is not just healthcare workers who have put their shoulders to the wheel when it comes to the pandemic. Many other public servants have too, in the Department of Social Protection, Revenue, my Department - ensuring that businesses got the grants they needed - the private sector in areas such as retail, transport and GPs, for example, as well as the many volunteers I have met during my shifts at the vaccination centres, and they need to be recognised too. It would be a mistake not to look at this in the round, and that is what we need to do.

Even among healthcare workers, there has been significant variation, with some people having to do twice the work they would normally have done, some being redeployed and others actually having reduced workloads because their service was shut down or suspended through no fault of their own. This is not straightforward. It is something we are going to have to work

out and negotiate, and it is going to have to be fair and be funded.

As this might be my last opportunity to talk about Covid in the Chamber before the recess, there are a few things I would like to say. First, the pandemic is not over. We are entering a new phase of the pandemic. We have vaccines now, which has weakened the connection between cases and hospitalisations and deaths but has not broken it, and we have a virus that is more infectious than ever before. At the start of the pandemic, older people were the most vulnerable. We asked them to stay at home and that saved lives and prevented much illness, but things have changed.

Now unvaccinated people, that is, people who have not been fully vaccinated, are the most vulnerable. Over the course of the next few weeks, people who have not been fully vaccinated are at greater risk than ever before because this virus is so transmissible. Two hundred people have been in ICU in the past two months, 199 of whom had not been fully vaccinated. We are seeing a major surge in cases, almost entirely among younger people and people who have not been fully vaccinated, and we as a Government and a Parliament have a responsibility now to protect those who have not been fully vaccinated. I ask them over the summer, at least until they have been fully vaccinated, to please avoid socialising indoors, please keep their social contacts to a minimum, please avoid non-essential foreign travel and please wear a mask, even outdoors, in crowded scenarios. People who are unvaccinated are more at risk over the next few weeks than at any point during this pandemic. It is not over.

**Deputy Denis Naughten:** Fifty-two weeks ago, I said to the Taoiseach in Dáil Éireann that if it was not possible to reward healthcare workers with pay increases or some form of a bonus system, the minimum we should offer them is additional paid leave. It would be time to spend with their families, with whom they have sacrificed precious family time, and to recover from the physical and emotional tiredness they are undoubtedly feeling. The Taoiseach was generous in his response, stating that the Government would examine my suggestion and proposal.

In the spirit of the Taoiseach's response of last July, I sincerely ask the Government not to postpone the much-needed recognition until the end of the pandemic, not to incorporate it into some broader public service pay battle but instead to move on the need for recognition of healthcare workers now.

**The Tánaiste:** I agree with the Deputy's sentiments and will certainly discuss them with the Ministers for Public Expenditure and Reform and Health, but I will restate what I said earlier. This pandemic is not over. We are heading into a difficult couple of weeks when the number of cases will soar and those of hospitalisations, ICU admissions and deaths will increase, sadly. People who are unvaccinated are more at risk in the next few weeks than at any point since this pandemic began, and we need to get that message across to people. Our hospitals and health service are going to be busy again.

I think we can avoid, and we certainly want to avoid, any reintroduction of restrictions. Things are different now because of the vaccines, but still a huge number of people have not been fully vaccinated. Cases are increasing and they are at greater risk than they ever have been since this pandemic began, because of Delta. There is a risk that if they do not take care, they will overwhelm our hospitals and put those healthcare workers under enormous strain again.

The final message I have from this House before we rise for the recess is to say to unvaccinated people that they are at very high risk and should treat this pandemic as seriously as they

did at any point since it began.

**Deputy Carol Nolan:** I have raised the following issue a number of times in the House. It concerns the deep crisis facing our forestry sector. Almost a year ago, a forestry Bill was introduced by the Minister of State, Senator Hackett, in which she pledged to address the ongoing difficulties and backlog in respect of licences. Almost a year later, 6,000 licences are caught up in the backlog. It is unacceptable. Earlier this week, we met members of the IFA and all the stakeholders involved in forestry. Yet again, they are pleading with this Government to bring forward emergency legislation to address this issue once and for all and protect the 10,000 jobs that are at risk. This Government is well able to bring forward emergency legislation at the drop of a hat when it so wishes. The situation in forestry is putting livelihoods at risk. Forestry is very important in my constituency of Laois-Offaly. Many people are involved in it in terms of the sawmills, hauliers, foresters and farmers planting. It is an ongoing crisis and we need emergency legislation for both forestry and horticulture, where another 17,000 jobs are in jeopardy. What is very noticeable about this Government is that it seems to be totally disconnected from the reality, from the lives and from the hardship faced by working people. We need protections for these livelihoods yet the Government is dragging its feet.

From speaking to the real experts, I know there are lots of measures that could be brought forward. That is the mistake the Government is making. It does not speak to the people on the ground and consult with the real experts - the stakeholders. They are the people with the knowledge. From speaking to those stakeholders, it has been brought to my attention that many improvements could be made in addition to emergency legislation such as leaving out the thinning and management aspects involved in the process, which makes the process more cumbersome and more bureaucratic than it needs to be. We know there are issues in terms of the changes to appropriate assessment but there are other jurisdictions that do not face the issues and crisis we face. We are importing timber and the cost of building materials and building new homes have increased considerably. This is unacceptable. Everybody is paying the price for the Government's lack of action. We need urgent action. Once again, I ask the Government to bring forward the emergency legislation for the forestry and horticulture sectors where up to 27,000 jobs could be protected, which I think is significant.

**The Tánaiste:** I thank the Deputy for raising this important issue, about which she feels very sincerely. I know her passion for this issue, which she has raised previously. However, her comment about the Government was a bit unfair. We live in the same country as her, get elected by the same people as she does and talk to people on the ground every day just like she does. It is unfair to make comments about other people in this House in that way. We are all elected and we are only elected precisely because we engage with our constituents and talk to people on the ground all the time. That comment was very unfair.

**Deputy Carol Nolan:** It is not true.

**The Tánaiste:** The Government is very aware that there are serious issues with the licensing of forestry operations that are having a negative impact on the sector. This is as a result of necessary changes to the appropriate assessment procedure due to the European Court of Justice and Irish rulings relating to the protection of Natura sites. We are dealing with these issues robustly and a number of urgent steps have been taken to resolve them. These include the implementation of the Mackinnon report, which is well underway through Project Woodland. The project board and working groups have been meeting regularly since early March while a project manager and a business analyst have also been engaged. There is significant investment

in resources with more ecologists, forestry inspectors and additional administrative staff assigned to licensing. We saw improvements in licensing output during the first half of this year. June was the highest month to date. Over 1,770 licences have been issued so far this year. This is a 29% increase on the same period last year. While accepting that significant further gains are needed, we are at last moving in the right direction. The average output for the past seven weeks alone is 95 licences per week with farmers being the largest beneficiaries of this receiving 75% of licences. The Department received just over 3,000 applications to date this year. This includes a batch application for 1,800 new applications from Coillte to cover its output for the next two years.

Of course, licence output is only one measure of performance. The more realistic metric is the volume of material licensed, which is what really matters to the sector. In this regard, felling volumes are 77% higher than at the same point last year, the area for afforestation is 19% higher, roads licensed are 121%, Coillte's 2021 felling programme is fully licensed and it is working with the Department to ensure the availability of this supply to the market.

**Deputy Carol Nolan:** I made the point, which was factual, that this Government is disconnected. I have spoken to supporters of Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil and I am genuinely and honestly telling the Tánaiste that there is a serious level of disconnect and the Government is not reaching out to the stakeholders and listening to the experts. It is all very well and good having a tokenistic meeting but following through on this and the commitments on the programme for Government is another matter. The Government is missing its own climate action targets. It has committed to planting 8,000 hectares annually. It is missing its own targets. I am hearing from constituents. I represent everybody in the constituency. Like the Tánaiste, I was elected but unlike him, I listen to the people on the ground all the time and I carry through on my commitments.

It is very obvious that this Government cannot see the wood for the trees. Some 27,000 jobs in horticulture and forestry are at stake. This matter could be resolved easily if the Government had the political will to do so and if it listened to its own supporters, it would be done. However, it is because rural Ireland is neglected all of the time and is not top of the agenda for the Government. This neglect of rural Ireland is the real issue.

**The Tánaiste:** We could all engage in cheap shots in this House.

**Deputy Carol Nolan:** It is not. It is true. I am telling it like it is.

**The Tánaiste:** As I say, we can all engage in cheap shots in this House and question each other's motivation. I could point out that this morning, the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine and the Minister of State, Deputy Heydon, were here for an hour and a half and took questions on any issue people raised such as agriculture, farming, fishing and forestry yet not a single Rural Independent Group Deputy turned up to ask those Ministers any questions. I could say that this-----

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** On a point of order, we did not have any questions. That is unfair. I want the Tánaiste to withdraw that remark. He knows the process for parliamentary questions. That is scandalous.

**Deputy Carol Nolan:** That is incorrect. The Tánaiste is misleading the Dáil.

**The Tánaiste:** The list of submitted questions is there.

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**Deputy Carol Nolan:** We did not have the opportunity. The list rotated.

**The Tánaiste:** People had opportunities to intervene. As is often the case, I am being shouted down because the truth hurts.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** Because the Tánaiste is telling lies.

**The Tánaiste:** The truth hurts.

**Deputy Carol Nolan:** Could we have this corrected because this is not the way the procedures run? The Tánaiste is giving misleading information. We are just asking for it to be corrected. It is very unprofessional of the Tánaiste to make such a charge here. It is not factual.

**Deputy Brendan Griffin:** On a point of order-----

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** There is no point of order.

**Deputy Brendan Griffin:** The Question Paper for today has not a single oral question from the Rural Independent Group to the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine. It is black and white. I have in here in my hand.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** I think they want a row before the holidays again to make sure they are relevant. There is a list of questions from designated people. These are outrageous and scurrilous lies.

**Deputy Brendan Griffin:** I pointed out the truth to these Deputies.

**Deputy Michael Collins:** We are not allowed to have a question today. We certainly would have one if we were allowed.

**Deputy Brendan Griffin:** It is in black and white. I challenge any Deputy to look at the first five pages of this document. It is clearly there.

**Deputy Michael Collins:** Our names are not on that list.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** Fake news.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Could we have a little respect for the Chair? In response to Deputy Griffin, that was not a point of order. It was an abuse of process. I ask the other Deputies to show a little respect. I am moving on from Leaders' Questions. I have made a ruling. It was not a point of order and is not acceptable. Bhí mé chun rud dearfach a rá. Tiocfaidh mé ar ais go dtí Reachtaíocht a Gealladh. Seo, mar is eol don Teach, an lá deireanach den Dáil agus beidh sí ar ais i mí Mheán Fómhair. Ba mhaith liom an deis seo a thapú chun mo bhuíochas agus buíochas na dTeachtaí Dála uilig a chur in iúl don fhoireann uilig ó bhun go barr. Ní féidir leis an Dáil feidhmiú gan an obair iontach agus dheacair a dhéanann an fhoireann uilig. Gabhaim míle buíochas leo.

I was hoping we might end on a more positive note. The Dáil goes into recess today. In defence of all Deputies, I say we do not go on holidays but the Dáil is going into recess. I take this opportunity to wish us all the best during the summer. I particularly convey my thanks to Peter Finnegan and all the people who work here, from the top to the bottom. That might be the wrong expression; it is nicer in Irish, ó bhun go barr. I thank the ushers, the cameramen, the cleaners and everyone who works in the restaurant downstairs. The Dáil could not function

without working as a team. It has been very difficult not just because of the Covid pandemic but for many reasons including sitting late into the night with many of the staff not knowing what time they will get to go home. I convey my thanks on behalf of the Deputies here and I am sure they all agree with me.

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

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Iarraim ar Bhaill cloí leis na rialacha ama.

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** I echo the Leas-Cheann Comhairle's sentiments and thank everybody for their assistance over what was a challenging time for all workplaces but no less for the Dáil as we operate in two different sites. On behalf of Sinn Féin, I thank all the staff. I also thank the Leas-Cheann Comhairle and the Ceann Comhairle for keeping the show on the road. I am sure none of us will miss the convention centre, as the Dáil will reconvene in Leinster House in the autumn.

The mica and pyrite scandal has touched the hearts of people throughout the State. The Tánaiste is well aware of families seeing their homes crumbling around them as a result of light-touch regulation during the Celtic tiger era and knows of the campaign for justice and 100% redress. The motion passed by the Dáil on 15 June mandates the Government to deliver 100% redress. With the working group due to report in a fortnight's time, is it still the Government's intention to deliver on the express will of the Dáil and ensure 100% redress to these families?

**The Tánaiste:** I join the Leas-Cheann Comhairle in expressing my thanks on behalf of the Fine Gael Party and the Government to all the staff of the Houses of the Oireachtas and of the convention centre for their work over recent months in what have been unprecedented times, trying to operate across several different sites both virtually and in person. As the Leas-Cheann Comhairle said, the Dáil is going into recess but we are certainly not all going on holidays. The Oireachtas will continue to function. Offices and Departments will remain open. While some Members' constituency offices might close for two or three weeks to facilitate leave, they will be open for most of the recess. I wish all staff and all Members a decent and well-deserved break over the next two months, although I would not be surprised if we are required to come back here at some point over the next two months but hopefully that will not be necessary given the volume of legislation that was passed.

In response to Deputy Doherty's question, the working group is expected to report by the end of the month and the Government will respond to that with an enhanced scheme to assist people in Donegal and other counties whose homes are affected by mica. I am not yet in a position to say what that scheme will be, but it will be a significant improvement on what is currently in place.

**Deputy Ivana Bacik:** I join the Leas-Cheann Comhairle in expressing thanks to all the staff and on behalf of Labour I wish staff, Members and colleagues a well-earned break.

Last week the Oireachtas passed the Residential Tenancies (No. 2) Bill to provide for the linking of rent increases with the rate of inflation. Since then a number of cases have come to my attention and the attention of my colleague, our housing spokesperson, Senator Moynihan, of landlords issuing notices to tenants of rent reviews in advance of the new rules coming into effect. For example, a tenant has been given notice of a rent review to take place under previous

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rent-pressure zone, RPZ, limits and there are reports of landlords seeking to implement 4% rent increases, including from constituents in my home constituency in Dublin Bay South. Many renters have been in contact with me seeking clarity as to the legality of such a move. I ask the Tánaiste to confirm whether this practice is legal and whether guidance has been provided to the Residential Tendencies Board. Is it legal for landlords to serve notice for rent increases, which are not due to come in for months, above the rate of inflation to get around these measures?

**The Tánaiste:** It is a pleasure to be here, in Dublin Central. The convention centre is not quite in Dublin Bay South; it is just north of the Liffey.

**Deputy Ivana Bacik:** I am bilocating.

**The Tánaiste:** I know the feeling; it is hard to know where one is at times given the amount of changes we have had to make.

I will check up on that issue. As the House will be aware, the legislation links future rent increases to the consumer price index, CPI, but it is not retrospective. Legislation of this nature cannot be. I understand the point of the Deputy is raising and I will get advice from the Minister as to whether what she describes is legal.

**Deputy Holly Cairns:** On behalf of the Social Democrats, I join other Deputies in thanking all the amazing staff in the Houses.

I continue to hear from distraught expectant mothers and their families about ongoing restrictions in maternity hospitals. When I last raised this issue with the Tánaiste in early April, he said that bringing unvaccinated people into a hospital is a risk. Last week we learned that the HSE will not allow fully vaccinated partners to come in. The goalposts keep shifting. The Tánaiste and the Minister for Health assured me that this issue would be resolved, but it is not. Months have passed and society is reopening but many people must still endure labour and potentially tragic appointments alone. I ask the Tánaiste to help resolve this. Even back in December, the HSE reclassified partners as essential accompanying persons for the purposes of the 20-week scan. Therefore, the HSE could reclassify partners as essential accompanying persons for the entire maternity journey. That could happen immediately. I ask the Tánaiste to help.

**The Tánaiste:** Before we rise, I express my thanks to Deputy Cairns for facilitating the Minister, Deputy McEntee, through a pairing arrangement during her maternity leave. I know she is grateful for that, as we are too. Let us ensure in the next Dáil session we put in place some more permanent arrangements. In future I hope many more Cabinet Ministers will give birth while in office. I look forward to seeing the Minister, Deputy McEntee, return in October or November.

I will follow up the issue with the HSE and the Minister for Health. The national guidance is that partners should be able to attend the labour ward and the neonatal intensive care unit, NICU. They should be able to attend important scans such as the 20-week scan. As partners, fathers in the main, increasingly become fully vaccinated over the next few weeks, this really ought not be a problem anymore. Certainly, by the time we return after the summer recess, all partners should be fully vaccinated. Let us try to get this sorted over the next couple of weeks.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** I join in thanking all the staff for all the work that has been done over the past seven months in very difficult circumstances.

For years, People Before Profit has called for an end to Ireland's tax haven status. We have pointed out that not only is it immoral but it is completely unsustainable. The Government has continually responded over the years by saying that it cannot take action unilaterally and it cannot take action at a European level but it must be as part of a global process. We now have a global process to establish a 15% minimum corporation tax rate. In my opinion that is completely inadequate, but it is a global process. Where does the Irish Government find itself? It finds itself with Bermuda, the Cayman Islands and other tax havens in a small minority of countries opposed to it. Speaking on the radio this morning, the Minister, Deputy Donohoe, was fighting the corner for the 12.5% rate. Why should massive corporations pay taxes at a lower rate than that of workers?

**The Tánaiste:** I neglected to acknowledge the Labour Party for facilitating a pairing arrangement with Deputy Dillon. Deputy Dillon had a baby last week and I insisted that he take his two weeks paternity leave. I am grateful that the Labour Party is covering for that.

I point out to Deputy Paul Murphy that our low corporation profit tax rate is one of the reasons we receive so much in corporation profit tax. We take in about €10 billion a year in corporation profit tax, which is roughly double what the average European country takes. Some people are seized by a high tax ideology, who believe that higher taxes always mean higher revenues. That is not always the case. This is an example of where lower taxes mean higher revenues, which we use to invest in health, education, welfare and other things. We do not want to jeopardise that.

What is going on is not just about tax justice or big companies paying their fair share of tax, which they should. It is also about big countries trying to get a bigger slice of the pie at the expense of smaller countries. The United Kingdom has negotiated a carve-out to protect the City of London and the US has negotiated a carve-out so that the EU drops the digital tax. We need to defend our position too.

**Deputy Denis Naughten:** On behalf of the Regional Group, I echo the comments of the Leas-Cheann Comhairle regarding the staff working in the Houses.

My colleagues in the Regional Group and I worked closely with the Government to pass the Criminal Justice (Perjury and Related Offences) Act, which sends a clear message to anyone engaged in legal proceedings that they must tell the truth. When commenced, the legislation will mean fines of up to €100,000 or up to ten years' imprisonment for lying in court. It was signed into law by an Uachtarán last month but it still requires a commencement order from the Minister for Justice. When will this vital legislation be commenced?

**The Tánaiste:** I spoke to the Secretary General of the Department about that legislation last week and it is imminent. It will be commenced within a matter of weeks.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** On behalf of the Rural Independent Group, I too wish all the staff of the Houses well, from the Garda Síochána outside and inside through to Peter Finnegan. I also thank the Leas-Cheann Comhairle and Ceann Comhairle for their forbearance. It was not easy.

The Clonmel Garda station project is still languishing. We have a lovely site, planning permission and a wonderful design. Another Deputy raised the Sligo Garda station project during the week. Sligo, Clonakilty and Clonmel Garda station projects were in a public private partnership, PPP, package. Sligo has fallen off the partnership. We cannot allow Clonmel

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Garda station to fall off this public private partnership because we need to get a proper station for Superintendent William Leahy, former superintendent John Courtney and all the excellent gardaí. Clonmel is the biggest inland town in the country and has such a Dickensian Garda station. I believe the Tánaiste visited it. The project is badly needed. The problem is so bad that the issue has been raised here for 60 years. The station is not fit for purpose for gardaí to work in it or for the public. We have to get funding, get builders on site and get a new Garda station in Clonmel. It is badly needed.

**The Tánaiste:** I know the issue of Clonmel Garda station has been raised several times in this House. Senator Ahearn has raised it in the other House. I do not have an up-to-date briefing on it at the moment unfortunately but I will make sure that I get it and will pass it on to the Deputy.

**Deputy Michael McNamara:** I join the Leas-Cheann Comhairle in thanking the staff of the Oireachtas. I also thank the staff of my constituency office, who have worked hard over the past 12 months.

France is introducing similar legislation to Ireland with regard to access to indoor hospitality. I disagree with it here as I disagree with it there, but at least in France, non-vaccinated people will be able to access it through the use of antigen testing. I raised antigen testing with the Tánaiste several times before Christmas. We are still talking about commissioning reports and we are doing little. I raised indoor ventilation with the Tánaiste a couple of weeks ago. My question is about schools. Over the summer, will we introduce ventilation works in schools or will we have children returning to schools wearing masks and coats in poorly ventilated buildings, freezing in the middle of an Irish winter, with the windows wide open?

**The Tánaiste:** Greece is doing something similar to France. Two or three weeks ago, people were saying that Ireland was an outlier in not opening up indoor hospitality to everyone. As the weeks go by, we look like less of an outlier, as some countries reimpose restrictions and others are going down the route that we are going down with a health pass, because it will be the only way to stay open.

**Deputy Michael McNamara:** My question was about schools.

**The Tánaiste:** The matter regarding schools is under consideration. We accept that schools will need better ventilation in September and October. The issue of carbon dioxide monitors is part of that. We have asked the expert group on rapid testing to advise us on applying antigen testing both to indoor hospitality and to schools when they reopen in September.

**Deputy Neasa Hourigan:** On behalf of the Green Party, I echo the Leas-Cheann Comhairle's thanks to the staff, who have done incredible work in a difficult situation. The programme for Government contains a commitment to promote more physical exercise among all sections of the community. I have two queries about that. We are all aware of the positive physical and mental well-being benefits of support, as well as how it brings communities together. I have had numerous representations from groups here in Dublin Central about getting access to more space. As an example, Na Fianna GAA club is nearing the point where it may have to start limiting the number of children who can attend training due to the lack of space. Another example is the campaign to keep Tolka Park stadium as a sports facility. We need to get more girls and marginalised communities into sport. We heard from representatives of the Traveller community at the Joint Sub-Committee on Mental Health this week about the total lack of ac-

cess to green space and sporting facilities that our Traveller children are experiencing. We need funding and good planning. Will the Government provide additional funding?

**The Tánaiste:** I agree with the comments the Deputy has made. A new round of sports capital funding will open for applications later in the year. I am not sure of exactly when. It will probably be in September or October. That will provide grants to sports clubs and sporting organisations to improve their facilities. When we are working out the criteria for that, we should take account of what the Deputy has said about facilities in urban areas where land is scarce, including facilities for women, girls, Travellers and other people who may not have access to facilities in the way they should.

**Deputy Emer Higgins:** Children under the age of 12 will shortly be able to return home from holidays without a vaccine, PCR test or antigen test. They will soon be able to go for family dinners indoors in a restaurant without a vaccine, PCR test or antigen test, but they cannot go to summer classes, schools or camps, dancing classes, stage schools or coding workshops. They cannot be indoors with their friends who, just a few weeks ago, they shared classrooms with. It is mixed messaging for parents, children and this sector. What can we do to provide them with a roadmap to get children back to being happy with their friends, socialising and gaining the skills and confidence that they get through these summer camps?

**The Tánaiste:** The Deputy's point is well made. I always say that in a pandemic, the easiest thing to do is to shut the country down or to fully reopen it and the hardest thing to do is everything in between because it always involves anomalies and inconsistencies. We will ask NPHEC to review two things over the next two weeks. One is how we might safely provide for religious ceremonies over the summer, including christenings, confirmations and communions. We will also ask it to look again at the issue of indoor summer camps and whether they could be done in September with the same precautions as we apply in schools. We have asked NPHEC to consider both of those things and advise us on them within the next week or two. The difficulty that we face is that the virus has changed. The Delta variant is different and in the last week or two there has been a surge of cases among children, including secondary school children, teenagers and unvaccinated adults under 35. That is very different from the pandemic we experienced when it started in March 2019. We have to have regard to that too.

**Deputy Darren O'Rourke:** I raise the concern that taxi drivers have about the pandemic unemployment payment, PUP. They have heard directly from the Taoiseach and the Minister for Transport, Deputy Ryan, that the PUP will be extended until February 2022 and that self-employed people will continue to be able to earn €960 after expenses over an eight-week period while retaining their full PUP entitlement. The Minister for Social Protection, Deputy Humphreys, is telling them that a phased reduction will start on 7 September and as PUP recipients go onto the €203 rate in each phase, they will be transferred to standard jobseeker's terms. Many taxi drivers are already on the €203 rate, some of them because they invested in new cars in the weeks and months before Covid hit, for which they are suffering as a consequence. Others will move onto the €203 rate in the coming phases. They are not jobseekers. They are worried and concerned. Will the Tánaiste spell out how they will be treated in the weeks ahead? Will they stay on the PUP?

**The Tánaiste:** I will have to seek confirmation of this but I understand the Minister, Deputy Humphreys, is correct in this regard. I will double-check that and let the Deputy know for sure. The best thing we can do for taxi drivers is to reopen our economy and society safely.

*1 o'clock*

That is part of what we decided to do yesterday, in opening up indoor hospitality and, potentially, other events and activities down the line. In that context, using a health pass is probably the best thing we can do for taxi drivers so they are busy again, as they want to be.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** Gabhaim buíochas don fhoireann uilig as achan rud. I have brought up the issue of the crisis we are facing in public liability insurance with the Tánaiste previously. I welcome that he will work alongside Deputy Doherty on the Judicial Council (Amendment) Bill. While payouts and claims are down, premiums are up. I will mention Blackrock Community Centre, which was charged €11,000 for a single year's premium. A GoFundMe campaign sorted out this year's premium but that is not sustainable. We need to do much more work to get more underwriters back into the market but alongside that, when will the heads of Bill on dealing with the duty of care issue be sorted out? We need a timeline and delivery on that. I also welcome what is being done regarding the perjury Bill.

**The Tánaiste:** We expect heads of Bill to be published in the next session. The Minister for Justice is working very hard on that. This Bill could be particularly beneficial to sporting and community organisations in rebalancing the duty of care and in expecting a bit more personal responsibility from people not to put themselves at risk or injure themselves.

**Deputy Bernard J. Durkan:** Like others, I congratulate and thank the Leas-Cheann Comhairle, the Ceann Chomhairle, Oireachtas staff in the House, our office staff and members of An Garda Síochána, who were directing traffic outside the House when it was almost 3 a.m. It was a challenging time for everybody and everyone should take a bow on having successfully concluded the past 18 months.

I raise the issue of bullying, which I raised previously, in particular bullying through use of the Internet, whether it is targeted at children, women, vulnerable groups or whatever. There is still a need to update our legislation in line with requirements to stop bullying in cases where menaces are extended to various people, including vulnerable people, on a basis that is totally and absolutely unacceptable and that very often ends tragically.

**The Tánaiste:** I agree wholeheartedly with what the Deputy said on the issue of bullying, both traditional bullying and the new form of it that is online and can follow you everywhere. It is definitely an issue we will pay more attention to in the next session when the House returns in September.

**Deputy Martin Kenny:** I will raise the issue of school transport and the school transport scheme for rural schools in particular. Last year, there was a terrible situation where some children did not get a seat on the school bus until Christmas or after it. There has been a review and the interim report arising from it was published in the last three or four weeks. It has recommended that post-primary or secondary schools can look to the second nearest school. That needs to be extended to primary schools as well. We need clarity around all of that.

The portal where families can pay for the bus ticket is now open. It is closing at the end of July and I understand that will be a very firm closure. If people are late in paying, unlike other times in the past, they will not get a seat on the school bus. We need clarity on what exactly will be in place and how the scheme can be expanded to be inclusive. It should not be something that is about denying people a service, which has been the experience up to now, but trying to provide one. I welcome the review and I hope it will be published in time to provide people

with an adequate service this year.

**The Tánaiste:** I am afraid I do not have any information to hand on that matter. This is a major issue every year, particularly in constituency offices and for rural Deputies. I will let the Minister for Education, Deputy Norma Foley, know it was raised by the Deputy today and will ask her to talk to him directly.

**Deputy Marian Harkin:** I re-echo the Tánaiste's words in thanking Oireachtas staff and members of an Garda for all their work. I wish them and their colleagues well over the coming few weeks. Just over a year ago, a major landslide occurred at Shass Mountain, Drumkeeran, County Leitrim. Leitrim County Council did sterling work in ensuring that bridges and roads were secured. About two or three months ago, the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine, Deputy McConalogue, guaranteed that basic payments would continue for this year under *force majeure*.

However, that is only for this year. In a couple of months' time, I will be back in the House asking about the situation and that cannot continue. The long-term issue of compensation for land that is rendered useless, and we are talking about 170,000 tonnes of peat that was deposited across lands in Leitrim, is completely up in the air. There have been similar schemes previously when land was destroyed, for example, in Inishowen, but, so far, there has been nothing about the situation in Leitrim. I ask the Tánaiste to look into this matter.

**The Tánaiste:** I will certainly do that. I will be in touch with the Minister, Deputy McConalogue, next week about some other matters. I will raise this issue with him and let him know what the Deputy said in the Chamber.

**Deputy Pa Daly:** I was contacted by a man called James Sugrue, from Ballybunnion, and I will raise his story with the Tánaiste on his behalf. He and two of his brothers were boarded out at the mercy of the State and abandoned at the county home in Killarney where they suffered a horrendous experience. Mr. Sugrue spoke to An Taoiseach a few months ago and was promised that his case, and the cases of people like him, will be looked at. People who were boarded out were not part of the mother and baby inquiry and were not subject to the Ryan report or the Kennedy review, but the case for recognition and apology to them and for legislation that will, eventually, lead to redress is unanswerable. I ask the Tánaiste to look at this matter to see if he can progress it to redress the great injustice done to Mr. Sugrue and his brothers, one of whom is deceased.

**The Tánaiste:** We will look into that matter. I am sorry to hear about Mr. Sugrue's experiences. The mother and baby report has been much maligned but one of the things that really struck me as I read it was how much people who were boarded out during that time suffered, not just those who were boarded out as an exit path from mother and baby institutions but those boarded out for other reasons. Boys were often used as farm labour and girls as domestic servants. They were not cared for or looked after and often did not get their education. This is an issue that the Government cannot ignore. The Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, Deputy O'Gorman, feels the same.

**Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh:** I thank the Leas-Cheann Comhairle, her office and all the staff for their hard work during the year. I agree with the Tánaiste's statement that this is a very fragile moment in the reopening of our society. What is the public health advice that underpins the decision to reopen English-language schools, with in-person classes for 10,000 students?

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Most of the tutors and people participating in these classes will be under-35 years of age and, as the Tánaiste stated, this group is unvaccinated. I am concerned about the risks. What measures have been put in place to ensure tutors and students are secure and safe?

**The Tánaiste:** I am not sure if there is specific public health advice on the matter of English-language schools. I will certainly look into that and will come back to the Deputy with more information when I have it.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Unusually, we have concluded before time. I forgot to mention the Garda Síochána so I am glad other Deputies did so.

*Sitting suspended at 1.08 p.m and resumed at 1.55 p.m.*

### **Consumer Protection (Regulation of Retail Credit and Credit Servicing Firms) Bill 2021: Second Stage (Resumed)**

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

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Mattie McGrath):** We will hear first from Deputy Devlin.

**Deputy Cormac Devlin:** Could we have Deputy Murnane O’Connor first, please?

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Mattie McGrath):** Ladies first.

**Deputy Jennifer Murnane O’Connor:** This Bill is crucial. It is protection for consumers and it cannot come quickly enough. Bringing in additional regulation and consumer protections across newer and emerging credit products and companies is now more important than ever. We have seen an explosion in non-cash loans and credit being provided indirectly to the consumer, for example, in buy now, pay later agreements. In particular we have seen it with the surge in online activity during the pandemic.

I welcome the further consumer protections when it comes to personal contract plans, PCPs. I am not an expert but experts have expressed the opinion that many motorists really do not understand their liability. We must do all we can to ensure there is protection for them. We have to look at communication as well. We need to ensure there is good communication and I appeal to the Minister of State to look at this as well.

The Tutty report recommended that further consumer protections in respect of PCP agreements be introduced. We can see why. The Central Bank indicated in October 2020 that data for the total car finance market in Ireland, which includes Irish resident banks and non-banks, showed that as of September 2019 there were 76,153 PCP loans outstanding, representing a total outstanding stock of nearly €1.5 billion. At the end of February 2020, the data showed that the outstanding amount of car finance consumer credit advanced to households by Irish resident banks by way of PCP was over €1.5 billion in respect of 62,078 contracts. One quarter of all car financing is done through PCP agreements. Consequently, this legislation is important.

Spreading the cost of buying a car holds great appeal for most motorists. While conventional hire purchase divides the total amount into equal monthly payments over a period of years, the PCP involves a series of smaller monthly payments with a larger payment at the end of the agreement. That is important and we need to highlight it. Although some PCP products

are underwritten by regulated companies, PCP products are not specifically regulated by the Central Bank. These loan agreements are often sold by companies that are not obliged to carry out suitability or affordability checks on consumers. This can mean uncertainty for anyone who encounters a loss in income or change in circumstances.

The Bill would bring these companies within the scope of the consumer protection code and ensure consumers have the same protections as consumers who purchase traditional types of financial products, such as car loans and personal loans. This type of protection benefits the customer as he or she can make better informed decisions about financial products and avoid the unsustainable debt situations that lead to serious arrears and financial difficulty.

The Bill is welcome. I am delighted to be speaking about this today because I believe it has not been addressed for years. I welcome the legislation and I give it my full support.

**Deputy Cormac Devlin:** I thank the Minister of State, Deputy Fleming, for bringing the Bill forward and for listening to the observations of colleagues. My thanks to the Acting Chairman as well.

This is a great opportunity for me to speak about the Consumer Protection (Regulation of Retail Credit and Credit Servicing Firms) Bill 2021. As my colleague, Deputy Murnane O'Connor, stated, the Bill is long overdue. Certain changes in the regulations were required. The Bill is timely and necessary.

*2 o'clock*

The primary purpose of this legislation is to protect the consumer by ensuring that any person or firm carrying on a business of providing credit, hire purchase, personal contract plan, PCP, or consumer hire agreements to consumers or other relevant persons will fall within the regulatory remit of the Central Bank of Ireland. It will give the Central Bank the necessary legislative powers to apply its consumer protection code, or any other relevant code, to such firms.

The Bill facilitates the implementation of a key recommendation of the Tutty report, about which I will speak in a moment, on the operation of the personal contract plan, PCP, market. The report recommended that the Central Bank apply relevant provisions of the consumer protection code to all providers of hire purchase and PCP agreements where such financial products are being sold to consumers. It referred in particular to the code's obligations on financial service providers to assess, prior to entering into a credit agreement, the financial capacity of the consumer and the suitability of the product for the consumer. As all providers of PCP and other similar agreements to consumers will now have to be authorised by the Central Bank, the bank will then be able to apply its consumer protection code and other consumer protection powers to such firms. This will improve the level of protection available to the consumers of such agreements.

As has been widely reported, PCPs have become increasingly popular in recent years and now account for about 40% of car-related bank debt, having increased from about 15% in the middle of the last decade. PCPs generally offer lower monthly repayments to the buyer. They are particularly popular with car dealers as they increase the potential for repeat business. However, they are complex financial products involving a degree of risk. It is important people entering into such contracts are aware of what they may entail and the risks involved, particularly the significant balloon payments that can come as a nasty surprise at the end of some financing arrangements. The Competition and Consumer Protection Commission carried out a study of

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the PCP market in 2018 and determined that the complexity of the product, combined with the potential for softening car prices on the second-hand market, risked causing “significant consumer detriment”, a point that was emphasised by Frank Conway of the Irish Financial Review and Moneywhizz. While there has been a significant hardening in used car prices post-Brexit and during the Covid pandemic, this is still a medium to long-term concern.

As I referred to earlier, a review of these financial products was carried out by Michael Tutty in 2018. The review stated that further consumer protections were necessary, hence this Bill. This legislation will ensure that all providers of hire purchase and PCP agreements will come under the regulation of the Central Bank.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Mattie McGrath):** Cé atá ag caint ar son Sinn Féin? Who is speaking for Sinn Féin? Nobody is indicating. We will move on to the Labour Party slot. Cé atá ag caint ar son Pháirtí an Lucht Oibre? Níl éinne ann. We will move on to the seven-minute Government slot.

**Deputy Cormac Devlin:** May I resume?

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Mattie McGrath):** Yes.

**Deputy Cormac Devlin:** I have a few more remarks to make on the Bill. I thank the Acting Chairman. Section 2 is the key section. It amends section 28 of the Central Bank Act 1997. Section 28 sets out the various definitions for the purposes of Part V of the 1997 Act and defines the scope of the Central Bank authorisation responsibilities in respect of “regulated businesses” that are involved in the provision of certain types of financial services. The Bill provides for widening the regulatory scope of “retail credit firms” and “credit servicing firms” so as to include also the direct and indirect provision and servicing of credit, hire purchase, PCP and consumer hire agreements as those agreements are currently defined in the Consumer Credit Act 1995. Accordingly, any entity which provides these types of agreements to relevant persons will now come within the authorisation and regulatory scope of the Central Bank. This will then allow the Central Bank to apply its consumer protection code and other consumer protection and relevant regulatory measures to such firms and therefore facilitate the implementation of the key Tutty report recommendation on PCPs, about which I spoke earlier. I welcome this pro-consumer legislation and am happy to support it. I thank the Minister of State, Deputy Fleming, and his officials for bringing it forward.

I am not sure whether I will be able to get speaking time later on this afternoon but, as we conclude the term, a year into this Dáil, it is appropriate to thank the Cathaoirleach Gníomhach, the Ceann Comhairle, the Leas-Cheann Comhairle and all the staff as this may be the last time we sit here in the convention centre. I hear many people who are happy with that but it is thanks to the convention centre and to the facilities that have been offered to the House over recent months and during the pandemic that we have been able to conduct our business safely. I thank the staff of the Oireachtas for the assistance and support they have provided to all Members of the House over recent months and for facilitating us. I also thank the gardaí, the ushers and everybody else involved. I thank the Cathaoirleach Gníomhach for allowing me back in. I may touch on some other points if I have an opportunity to speak again later.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Mattie McGrath):** And so say all of us. We thank each and every person involved in keeping us in order and facilitating us here. We all associate ourselves with the Deputy’s remarks.

Níl éinne anseo ó Shinn Féin. An bhfuil aon Teachta de chuid the Social Democrats ann? Níl. There is then another Government slot. An bhfuil éinne eile ón Rialtas ag iarraidh labhairt? No. Táimid ar ais ag Sinn Féin arís agus, ina dhiaidh sin, Solidarity-People Before Profit. Níl éinne ón bpáirtí sin anseo. There is then another Government slot but níl éinne anseo. It is then Sinn Féin arís so we will move on to the Regional Group. I am delighted that rural Ireland is keeping the show on the road. Tá beirt Teachta ann, an Teachta Verona Murphy agus an Teachta Shanahan.

**Deputy Verona Murphy:** Where would we be without the Rural Independent Group and the Regional Group?

The Consumer Protection (Regulation of Retail Credit and Credit Servicing Firms) Bill 2021 brings in a number of different consumer protections which we broadly welcome. The first protection I will highlight is the setting of the maximum annual percentage rate for credit agreements and hire purchase agreements at 23%. Crucially, the Bill states that it is the responsibility of the lender to ensure compliance with this provision. Not all consumers or borrowers have the same understanding of how interest rates work. Some may have poorer numeracy skills than others and it is for reasons such as this that built-in protections, such as limits on interest rates, are necessary. I imagine most of us are familiar with being in a shop and looking at buying something reasonably expensive when the salesman says something along the lines of “This can be yours for a €300 deposit and €50 a week for the next two years.” That type of agreement may appeal to many people but how many are able to sit down and work out the annual percentage rate on the agreement or know whether the deal being offered is a rip-off? This is just one simple example of why the 23% limit is welcome.

The Bill says that this maximum rate of 23% will apply to credit agreements other than moneylending agreements. Moneylenders are licensed by the Central Bank and have to comply with certain conditions, including providing warnings and full information on costs to consumers before entering into any agreements. I fail to understand why this Bill does not, in the interests of consumer protection, include some type of cap on the annual percentage interest rate moneylenders may charge. It is often when in real financial difficulty that people turn to moneylenders. I refer to those struggling in low-paid jobs, those trying to support families on their own, those who have issues with substance abuse or those who are just poor at managing money, who do not have money management skills and who unnecessarily spend beyond their means. Surely those consumers who turn to the services of moneylenders, for whatever reason, also need protection from massive interest rates.

The Bill also requires the Minister to request the banks to collect and publish information on credit agreements, hire purchase agreements and consumer hire agreements. The Bill also says that this information may be required on a one-off basis or on an ongoing basis. It is worth noting that none of the regulations in the Bill is without consequence. While the regulations might be necessary, we must also recognise that every new regulation places an additional burden of work on financial institutions, meaning that their costs are likely to rise. We have seen banks leave the Irish market in recent times and we have seen how increased regulation has helped cause problems in our housing market. We need to consider the impact new regulations have on the organisations that must comply with them.

I would like to highlight the contents of an eye-opening press release I received earlier this week relating directly to consumer protection. It is from the Alliance for Insurance Reform and its headline is “Central Bank analysis shows society being held to ransom by lawyers and

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insurers". It makes the following four claims, each of which is concerning from a consumer protection point of view:

- Lawyers gouge clients as litigated claims for minor injuries cost up to 25 times ... in legal fees, [and they take] 2.7 years longer to settle and yield less for claimants than any PIAB award.
- Lawyers make an average of €22,792 in fees on employer liability claims for minor injuries.
- Insurers losses due to poor investment performance, increased broker commissions, increased reinsurance costs and reserves - not claim costs.
- Claims costs have been dropping since 2015, at [a] record low in 2019.

If a lawyer makes an average of €23,000 on employer liability claims for minor injuries and the average fees via PIAB for the same type of case are less than €1,000, we have a serious consumer protection issue which needs to be addressed. Issues like this should concern us more than a furniture shop selling a sofa on a credit basis of 24% interest. Overall, these consumer protections are welcome and I hope the Minister is listening to my last point on legal and insurance costs.

**Deputy Matt Shanahan:** I welcome the Bill, as I am sure most Deputies will. It is about giving full transparency to costs in terms of credit agreements and licensed credit intermediaries. We have heard a lot in the last year and more about economic challenges and the level of indebtedness. Credit agreements and different ways of buying goods and products, including hire purchase agreements and private contract agreements, are ubiquitous now. People do not always understand the terms of contracts they enter into. There has been, for many years, an issue about the annual percentage rate, APR, on credit agreements and how it is calculated. I am happy to see in the Bill a facility for the Central Bank to look at various credit arrangements companies have in place and to amend the APR calculation in contract agreements.

It is important that this legislation will ensure credit agreements cannot have an APR of more than 23%. To put that in context, the rate of international borrowing for EU countries is now between 0% and 0.5%. Credit intermediaries can get access to funds at 1.5% or 2%. Whatever they put into the marketplace after that gives them their gross margin. I worked in an area that used financial services and a figure of 3% was often given as a cost base in terms of credit supply. The cost of funds plus that 3% amounted to the operating costs and whatever was charged after that was the margin. That means we could and do have financial companies operating in this State which have a net margin rate of about 4%. Whatever they charge in APR after that is their gross margin, and nearly their net margin. This measure is timely.

This provision will apply to hire purchase agreements. Such agreements are treated differently from other types of credit agreement. It is about a legal definition of when the title of goods passes or does not pass. The Bill will hopefully also clear the large amount of small print from financial contracts. A large number of people in this country have found out about this to their cost, either because they did not read the contract fully or did not take advice or have the small print fully explained to them regarding add-on terms such as final payments and the calculation of final balloon payments.

In general, the Bill is to be welcomed. The car and retail industries have also been men-

tioned. Everybody wants transparency. This will facilitate more trade and business and ensure consumers have higher levels of protection in terms of these agreements.

I will mention moneylending. Deputy Verona Murphy highlighted some issues related to licensed moneylending, which appears to be outside the scope of this legislation. There is a lot of informal moneylending going on, much of it based in criminality. Anybody who has done work in the community has come across this and the exorbitant rates of interest charged, which can run to 100% or 200% in a short period for those who do not manage to make payments. It is important that people have an avenue.

I compliment the credit union service, which does a fantastic job in making credit available on generous and accommodating terms for those who are challenged in trying to access credit. Children will shortly return to school. This is one of the most expensive times of the year for families who face having to pay for books, school uniforms, shoes, travel and so on. Many of them try to access money and anybody with a poor credit rating will get very little hearing from the banks. The State needs to address this issue and find a way to filter people who have a poor credit rating to allow them to access reasonable finance and give them community support for longer terms of repayment. These are hard-pressed families and there is no spare money knocking around. Many of them are repaying debts at €5 and €10 per week and it is hard to clear any significant amounts of debt on those terms. We will have to look at that and, hopefully, legislate for it.

Overall, my colleagues and I welcome the Bill and the additional securities it will offer consumers. It is timely, particularly coming into the summer months with the economy opening up. We hope it will be enacted as soon as possible.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Mattie McGrath):** An bhfuil aon duine ann ón Rialtas? As no speaker from the Government side is here, we will move on to the Rural Independent Group. Deputy Michael Collins is sharing with Deputy Richard O'Donoghue.

**Deputy Michael Collins:** Deputy O'Donoghue is on the way. I hope he will arrive on time as the debate is running slightly ahead of time.

The Rural Independent Group welcomes the Consumer Protection (Regulation of Retail Credit and Credit Servicing Firms) Bill. The purpose of the Bill is to extend the Central Bank's "authorisation requirements to persons carrying on hire-purchase or consumer-hire business or providing credit indirectly and persons carrying on business relating to hire-purchase or consumer-hire agreements or the indirect provision of credit; to provide for the collection and publication of information on credit agreements, hire-purchase agreements and consumer-hire agreements; for those and other purposes to amend the Central Bank Act 1997; to provide for a limit on the interest rate that consumers may be charged under credit agreements and hire-purchase agreements; to provide for a requirement to include the annual percentage rate in a hire-purchase agreement; for those and other purposes to amend the Consumer Credit Act 1995 and to provide for related matters."

All this sounds good and we are supportive of it. However, we have banking institutions with meticulous procedures in place, including credit unions, which are stifled from doing serious business in the market. I know the Minister of State is looking into the area and a report is being drawn up but successive Governments have squeezed the credit unions out from competing with banks. This is an area in which we need the credit unions to compete and in which they

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want to compete but, because of dubious decisions made by successive Governments, it has not happened. This must end immediately.

Anyone who knows anything about the credit unions knows they have great relationships with the people who do business with them. It is one to one. You are not just a number; you are a highly respected customer. The managers of credit unions have meticulous and often incredible relationships with the people they know.

I met recently with representatives of credit unions in west Cork. Those businesses are in a healthy state. I met with management and board members from Skibereen, Clonakilty, Bandon, Dunmanway and Bantry. All of them, however, are facing a doomsday scenario if the Government does not allow them to do business. Why has the Minister of State, Deputy Fleming, like his predecessors, not allowed credit unions to provide proper mortgage facilities for people who want to get started in life? Why has this Government, like previous Governments, continuously stifled credit unions to the point where they are on the verge of going out of business? Are the larger banks wagging the tail in all of this? KBC Bank and Ulster Bank have waved goodbye to the Irish market and Bank of Ireland is closing branches throughout the country, including in Bantry and Dunmanway in west Cork. It is time for the Minister of State to wake up and smell the grass growing. The buddies the Government backed have let it down. If it does not look outside the box and encourage credit unions, as well as post offices, to compete in the banking sector, businesses will be in dire trouble in this country.

In fairness to the credit unions, they have been meticulous in the way they have looked after people down through the years, giving car loans, providing finance for people to do up their home and helping students to go to college. They build a relationship with people, often from the cradle to the grave. That type of relationship is not happening in the banking sector. When I go into a local bank, no matter where it is - sometimes I go into a branch in Dublin - I am pushed towards a machine. Customers are only a number and it is all about pressing buttons instead of the one-to-one relationship where you look the manager in the eye and do business with him or her. The men and women working in credit unions know their customers, their history and their family's history, and they know the customer will repay the loan.

There are great people in this country who are going through a difficult time at the moment. Great business people are going through incredible difficulties. A large number of publicans and restaurant owners, whose businesses have been closed now for 400 days, have told me they are in dire straits and finding it very difficult to get agreement from the banks that remain in the market. Those people are facing massive difficulties. My worry is that, in the coming years, their mortgages could be sold on to vulture funds because a word or two was changed in their agreement during this pandemic and they will not be covered. That will be brought to bear on them later on. The vulture funds in this country are well supported by the Government. We need to look seriously at this issue. Businesses that are in trouble through no fault of their own need a way to keep an honest cash flow going. I will be pushing very hard on this issue.

I do not want to take away from this Bill, because it is important and the Rural Independent Group is supporting it. The reality, however, is that I come from a community in west Cork, Schull, where we lost our bank and then, a year or so later, the local shop closed. Up to 30 jobs are gone. This shows what can happen in a community and the impact of it. It is the worry I have now for the people of Bantry and Dunmanway, who are losing their banks. What will be the outcome for those towns and their surrounds? People in rural areas always go to the town when they want to do a bit of banking and other business. It is hugely important that those

businesses are supported.

It saddens me that the Government is standing idly by and washing its hands of any of the decisions that are being made by banks. When the banks got into trouble, the Government had to come to their aid and prop them up. Surely be to God, as a shareholder in those banks, with the status or whatever that confers, the State can give some support to the towns and villages of rural Ireland to ensure the banks located there will survive. We need to build up the credit unions and look at the post offices and what they can do in terms of rolling out finances and financial aid. Postmasters and postmistresses are desperate to get business flowing into their post offices. It is vital for their survival in rural towns and villages. The Government, however, has sat idly by and failed to support them or facilitate new business for them.

A system whereby post offices could provide a range of banking services needs to be considered. In the previous Dáil, the Rural Independent Group looked at how this business is done in other countries. There are models operating elsewhere that could be adopted very simply for post offices. I could see them working in places like Drimoleague, Kilbrittain, Kinsale, Bantry, Skibereen, Castletownbere, Schull and Goleen. All of these places need investment and a better banking structure. Some are very lucky to have credit unions, most of them have post offices but, unfortunately, they do not have the banks that are needed. Those banks have walked away and moved to a computerised system where you have to press a button on your telephone to get service. Nobody in the banks knows any of the customers or their history. For business owners, it is all down to an engagement between their accountant and the bank. The personalities are gone out of it because the bank manager located closest to you is probably 50 or 60 miles away and does not know the person he or she is dealing with.

In fairness to the Minister of State, he has been trying to engage with the post offices. Please God that will yield some success. The Rural Independent Group supports the Bill and I thank the Minister of State for bringing these proposals to where they are. People have issues and concerns in regard to loans. They want to feel comfortable about the loan they have. They need to know there are rules and regulations around it and that they are not dealing with unscrupulous individuals. If there are no rules and regulation, people are in danger of having their lives destroyed.

Unfortunately, we are coming into a very dangerous time for our economy. While there is a bit of cash flowing around, mainly due to the pandemic unemployment payment, that is going to dry up. I have been contacted by a large number of business owners who are incensed by the increase in various costs, particularly of fuel. As I said in the House last night, in some parts of west Cork, fuel prices have gone from €1.17 a litre 12 months ago to between €1.42 and €1.50 now. That is insane. Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael are going to drive those costs up further because it is the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, who is wagging the tail. He is running the show and the other members of the Government are just saying, "Shove it on". They are shoving the costs onto the people of rural Ireland. People in rural Ireland are being attacked and they are feeling it. I spoke to a man last week who has 13 vans running as part of his business. He said he has plenty of business but he has to take some of the vans off the road because he cannot afford to keep them going. He has to fill them with fuel every week, even before he pays someone to drive them, and the price is getting higher all the time.

The Minister of State needs to wake up and smell the grass growing. He needs to go back out and engage with people in rural Ireland. He must invest in credit unions because they have the right people and the procedures and everything meticulously in place. I would appreciate if

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the Minister of State would concentrate on that. I have said it to him before and I will continue to say it. I am fighting for the ordinary people living in the communities in my constituency of Cork South-West.

**Deputy Richard O'Donoghue:** I welcome improved regulation of finance services, especially when it comes to helping young people to get finance for cars and other vehicles. The Consumer Credit Act needs to be amended to ensure transparency and facilitate the Central Bank to publish information around credit agreements. Until now, there was not proper regulation of the terms given to people who bought cars on credit. This Bill will ensure that the interest customers are charged is transparent and the APR is included in the paperwork. In addition, personal contract plans will have to be agreed by the Central Bank before each agreement is sanctioned. I am surprised, however, that it has taken so long for these changes to be implemented. As of February 2020, there were 62,078 PCPs in operation in Ireland, which was an increase of 527% since 2014. That is a shocking statistic in an unregulated market.

When Covid-19 hit, we saw clearly which organisations stood alongside people and kept our SMEs going. These were the organisations that came to people and said they would do what they could to keep them going. What of the banks that were bailed out by a previous Government and the vulture funds? What happened in our banking system this time was that the banks said they would extend the term of loans. They stopped people's payments but those customers will still have to pay off what they owe within the term of the loan. The banks did not, in fact, extend the term. They gave people a break of three or six months but they still have to pay back what they owe within the original term. This meant that when the businesses reopened, they had higher rates and repayments.

The only financial institutions to stand up for people in the rural area of County Limerick that I come from were the credit unions. They told their members to come in and speak to them. The credit unions were not among the five financial institutions the Government named when it stated that it was going to help all businesses. I asked about that in the Dáil and was told the Government was speaking to credit unions but it did not include credit unions among the five banking institutions it was going to help. The credit unions are the only ones that helped people. Why is that the case? Members who walk into their credit unions are greeted and asked how they are rather than being referred to by a number, as is the case in the banking system. The banks have taken away everything personal from their customers and are trying to move everything online. We know that in a pandemic the best way forward is for the banking sector to engage at a local level. It used to be the case that customers knew their local bank manager and the staff of the local branch but now everything has been centralised and the banks want everything to be tap this, tap that and enter your password. Nobody in the banking system knows their customers. That is being taken away from the people working in the banking sector. The hierarchy in the banking sector want this but the people who work in the banks and do the real work on the ground do not.

Credit unions went to their customers and invited them in to meet. They delayed payments and agreed to extend loans such that customers could take a break for three months or six months and then restart the loan. In that way, when businesses reopened the repayments were the same and they were not paying a higher interest rate and did not have to cover the business within the term of the loan. That is what credit unions around Ireland did. What is the Government doing to credit unions? It is over-regulating them.

The other thing credit unions do for this country is that the boards of all credit unions are

made up of volunteers from the locality in which a credit union is situated. They know the people around them. They know who is in trouble and who they can try to help. They have local knowledge, so their customers are not a number but, rather, are treated as people and as members of the credit union. Credit union members make up the volunteers on the boards of credit unions. That is why credit unions should be looked after, just as they have looked after their members. The history of the banking sector shows that at every chance the banks get, they close the door on their customers.

The Minister should consider which institutions have helped SMEs and young people to survive in a pandemic and which will future-proof SMEs coming out of the pandemic. The banks need to take a leaf out of the book of credit unions and make sure that the next generation can open their businesses and carry on banking locally. We need investment for all SMEs. Some 51% of people in Ireland are employed by SMEs. We saw the comical things that went on last night in respect of Covid passes into premises. That is fine for a business that has 20, 30, 40 or 50 employees but what about the person who has only one or two employees and now has to try to take on another employee? Small businesses such as that cannot find people to take jobs because people are already working. Those who are not working probably cannot go back to work because either they are not vaccinated due to the lack of vaccines or for some other reason.

This comes back to the those who are making a difference, namely, the self-employed who own the SMEs which employ 51% of people. Those employers go to their financial institutions which should be there to protect them. They should come to the Government. The Government should be there to protect SMEs and future-proof them. How did it future-proof them? It went to Europe, cap in hand, seeking €1 billion to restart the economy but only got €915 million, whereas other European countries with the same populations as Ireland asked for €10 billion and got €6.3 billion to future-proof their next generations and SMEs that were in trouble. What does that tell us? Maybe the Government needs to take a lesson from SMEs. They could let it know what it is really like to run a business.

I have been self-employed all my life. I am very lucky to have great employees and I consider them friends. They allow me to come to this House to fight the case for Limerick. We now have a voice that can counteract the bizarre stuff that is going on within the Government. I am fortunate to have a family that helps to run my business, which allows me to come to Dublin and give Limerick a true voice for the self-employed and other businesspeople. For generations, those people elected Deputies who they thought would represent the county but who, instead, came up here and signed documents and were told what to do. If a politician is being told what to do, he or she should not run for election. The only people who should tell Oireachtas Members what to do are those who elected us. We represent them to the best of our ability and that is what I am doing here.

I have been on the road since I was 15 years of age. I have an education of life. I have had hard years but I was surrounded by great people from financial institutions and SMEs who kept my business going through the hard times. I cannot say the same about the Government. Financial institutions such as credit unions, as well as hardware businesses and other SMEs that support all local business, are the only reason many SMEs are still operating.

I hope that all present listen to this. As things open up, I want people to remember who looked after them while Covid was here and to support local businesses. Revenue from online businesses does not come to one's local area; it goes to central parts. People should research

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where their money is going when they shop online. Creameries have closed down because although people thought they were supporting their local creameries, the money was going to a central fund outside the county. People need to look after SMEs and SMEs will look after them.

**Deputy Niamh Smyth:** Fianna Fáil supports the Bill and its primary purpose, that is, to provide that any person or firm carrying on a business of providing credit, hire purchase or consumer hire agreements to consumers and other relevant persons will fall within the authorisation and regulatory remit of the Central Bank of Ireland. This will give the Central Bank the necessary legislative basis to apply its consumer protection code, or any other relevant code, to such firms. The Bill facilitates the implementation of key recommendations of the Tutty report on the operation of the PCP market, which stated that the Central Bank should apply relevant provisions of its consumer protection code, particularly the obligations on financial service providers under the code to assess the financial capacity of the consumer and the suitability of the product for the consumer prior to entering into a credit agreement, to all providers of hire purchase or PCP agreements and to consumers. All providers of PCP and similar agreements to consumers will now have to be authorised by the Central Bank, which will be able to apply its consumer protection code and other consumer protection powers to such firms. This will improve the level of protection available to the consumers of such agreements. As part of the review of the regulation of personal contract plans, PCP, commissioned in 2018, Mr. Michael Tutty considered the contents and recommendations of an earlier Competition and Consumer Protection Commission study on personal contract plans, the Irish market, and separate Central Bank studies on the overview of the Irish PCP market. Following his considerations of the market and other considerations, the Tutty report recommended that further consumer protections in relation to PCP agreements be introduced. In particular, it recommended that the provision of the Central Bank consumer protection code, which requires lenders to assess the suitability of the product for the consumer and the availability and ability of the borrower to repay the debt over the duration of the credit agreement, should be extended to hire purchase and PCP agreements.

The implementation of that particular recommendation to all the providers of hire purchase and PCP agreements requires the legislation that is being brought forward now. It gives me the opportunity to state that it is a most welcome move by Government. In the past, we have seen people entering into PCP agreements, particularly with car companies when purchasing cars or vehicles, and not being so aware of the balloon payments due at the end of the contract. Often, it came as a nasty shock to consumers when that time came.

I have listened to some of the debate today. It is most disingenuous of Members of the Opposition to stand up in the House as though they are the only people that have come from the SME sector. There are many Members within Government and all three parties within Government who come from the SME sector and family-run businesses and who have the understanding. The Opposition Members do not have a monopoly in that. A very disingenuous account was given by the Opposition earlier.

Finally, I wish to state that I agree with the sentiment that our credit unions have been hugely important in providing personal contact with people in their local communities and financial support when others may not have been so willing to help people. Today's announcement and this legislation on consumer protection will ensure that people are protected and that they are granted loans that they have the capacity to repay. I thank the Minister for all of his work on the Bill.

Debate adjourned.

*Sitting suspended at 2.44 p.m. and resumed at 2.48 p.m.*

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

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Two groups of Topical Issue Matters will be taken because the issues from yesterday were deferred.

Regarding the deferred Topical Issue Matters from yesterday, 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 Eoin Ó Broin - to discuss an update on the working group on defective buildings; (2) Deputy John McGuinness - to discuss services for children with autism in Carlow and Kilkenny; (3) Deputy Richard Bruton - to discuss whether now is the time to accelerate the reform of the Leaving Certificate; (4) Deputy Mairéad Farrell - to discuss the estimated increased cost of €2.5 billion for the National Children's Hospital; (5) Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill - to ask the Minister for Education for an update on the review of the RSE curriculum in primary and secondary schools, announced in 2018; (6) Deputy Brendan Griffin - to discuss the need for a landing facility for the local fishing industry at Cromane, County Kerry; (7) Deputy Verona Murphy - to discuss the three year wait time for disability dental services in County Wexford alongside many difficulties family carers experience in securing essential medical appointments; (8) Deputies Michael McNamara and Marian Harkin - to discuss the extension of the pyrite scheme to counties Clare and Sligo; (9) Deputy Michael Moynihan - to discuss the availability of dental treatment to medical card holders under the dental treatment services scheme; (10) Deputy Matt Carthy - to discuss the challenges for businesses unable to secure affordable insurance cover; (11) Deputy Thomas Gould - to discuss the lack of greenways, cycle ways and parks on the northside of Cork City; (12) Deputy Kieran O'Donnell - to ask the Minister for Finance for an update on plans to review and expand the Living City Initiative scheme; (13) Deputy Joe Carey - to discuss funding the engineering solution identified in a report on flooding at Ballycar, Newmarket On Fergus, County Clare; (14) Deputies Paul Murphy, Richard Boyd Barrett, Gino Kenny and Bríd Smith - to discuss the planned work placement experience programme; and (15) Deputy Sorca Clarke - to ask the Minister regarding the provision of hospice and palliative care in Longford-Westmeath.

Regarding today's Topical Issue Matters, 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 John Brady - to discuss the US sanctioned economic blockade of Cuba, which has repressed Cuba's economy and society for over 60 years; (2) Deputies Mattie McGrath, Michael Collins, Michael Healy-Rae and Danny Healy Rae - to discuss a full financial review into the use of taxpayers' funding provided through various Departments and agencies to An Taisce; (3) Deputy Carol Nolan - to discuss the recommendations of the Joint Committee on Agriculture, Food and the Marine report on the proposed regulation of veterinary medicines in Ireland; (4) Deputy Michael McNamara - to discuss the extension of the pyrite scheme to counties Clare and Sligo; (5) Deputy Kieran O'Donnell - to discuss the need to streamline the Garda vetting process; (6) Deputy Marian Harkin - to discuss the issue of support for the taxi

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industry; and (7) Deputy Peadar Tóibín - to discuss the practice of discharging patients from hospitals into nursing homes during the start of the Covid-19 pandemic in the State.

The matters raised by Deputies Eoin Ó Broin, John McGuinness, Verona Murphy, Brendan Griffin, Carol Nolan, John Brady, Peadar Tóibín and Deputies Mattie McGrath, Michael Collins, Danny Healy-Rae and Michael Healy-Rae have been selected for discussion.

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

### **Defective Building Materials**

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** I wish to state at the outset, no disrespect to the Minister of State, Deputy Naughton, that it is deeply disappointing, given the seriousness of the issue that I am raising, that neither the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage nor the Minister of State, Deputy Noonan, is available for this discussion. I am aware that the Land Development Agency legislation is currently before the Seanad, but both the Minister and the Minister of State are not required for that. I would like to convey my dissatisfaction at the absence of a line Minister.

Across the State, thousands of homeowners - apartment, duplex and house owners - are living in defective properties. The properties were built during the Celtic tiger, and through no fault of the purchasers of the properties, they currently have significant fire safety and other structural defects. The programme for Government contained a clear commitment to examine the issue of defective housing in the first 12 months of Government, "having regard to the recommendations of the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Housing report, 'Safe as Houses'", which was published in 2018.

The Minister of Housing, Local Government and Heritage took action on that commitment. He announced a working group on defective buildings in September. It has been meeting since March but I have significant concerns about what we are hearing from it and its lack of progress to date. Before I detail those concerns, it is important to put on record what the unanimously endorsed report *Safe as Houses?*, produced by the Oireachtas housing committee, states about this matter, namely, "Government should establish a redress scheme to assist home owners with latent defects". It also states the mission statement of the scheme should be, "Ordinary owners who purchased in good faith should not be liable for the costs of remediation caused by the incompetence, negligence or deliberate non-compliance of others". The recommendations state such a redress scheme could be funded through an industry levy, Exchequer contributions, tax reliefs and long-term no-interest loans, for example.

The Minister has said that he wants to deal with this issue head-on. He has direct experience of it in his constituency, as do many others in theirs, particularly because of pyrite but also because of inadequate fire safety and water ingress in buildings. The problem, however, is that the year has come and gone and the working group has not completed its work. In fact, it has not even been able to agree terms of reference. There is genuine concern among representatives of homeowners on the group to the effect that its work is being interfered with by departmental officials. The working group is meant to be independent. It is chaired by the former chief executive of Donegal County Council and has representatives from various bodies, in addition to

home and apartment owners, yet it has not yet formally agreed its terms of reference. On the front page of the *Irish Examiner* on the Saturday before last, a significant report was published by Mick Clifford, who has been tracking this issue. According to the article, homeowners are saying departmental officials are deliberately narrowing the scope of the terms of reference in such a way as to prevent effective redress for homeowners but also in a way that runs contrary to the spirit of the Safe as Houses? report.

I would have liked to have asked the Minister four questions. In saying that, I mean no disrespect to the Minister of State who is present. The first of my questions is whether the Minister can tell us why the working group is not going to meet the clear programme for Government commitment to report within a year? Second, is he concerned about the views of homeowners to the effect that departmental officials are inappropriately interfering with the independence of the group? Third, can he tell us when the group will conclude and make its recommendations to the Government? Fourth, crucially, can he guarantee us that there will be a redress scheme in budget 2022, announced in October, to ensure 100% redress for all those apartment, house and duplex owners currently living in buildings built during the Celtic tiger era with fire safety and structural defects, caused not only by shoddy workmanship and bad oversight by developers and builders but also by a weak regulatory regime put in place by Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael?

**Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton):** I thank the Deputy for raising this matter. As he is aware, the programme for Government sets out several commitments in respect of the important policy area of building defects and provides for an examination of defects in housing, having regard to the recommendations in the Joint Committee on Housing's Safe as Houses? report. In that context, a working group to examine defects in housing was established. The Minister appointed Mr. Seamus Neely, former chief executive of Donegal County Council, as chair to the independent working group. The chair will oversee the effective implementation of the group's terms of reference, which have recently been adopted.

The membership of the working group includes representatives with relevant expertise and experience from Engineers Ireland, the Royal Institute of the Architects of Ireland, the Society of Chartered Surveyors of Ireland, the public sector, the local authority sector, the legal sector, the Department of Finance, the Construction Defects Alliance, and the Apartment Owners Network. The group's terms of reference, as set out in a response to a parliamentary question, include:

1. Examine defects in housing having regard to the recommendations in Item 4 "Addressing the legacy of bad building and poor regulation" in Chapter 4 of the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Housing, Planning and Local Government report - 'Safe as Houses? A Report on Building Standards, Building Controls and Consumer Protection'.

2. Establish the nature of significant, wide-spread fire safety, structural safety and water ingress defects in purpose built apartment buildings, including duplexes, constructed between 1991 - 2013 in Ireland through consultation with affected homeowners, homeowner representative organisations, owners' management companies, relevant managing agents, public representatives, local authorities, product manufacturers, building professionals, industry stakeholders, insurance providers, mortgage providers and other relevant parties. Including such matters as:

- Identification and description of defect,

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- Nature of defect — design, product, workmanship,
- Non-compliance with building regulations or actual damage,
- Severity/risk to life or serviceability of dwelling,
- Period of construction affected,
- Type of dwelling affected,
- Location of dwellings affected.

3. Establish the scale of the issue - estimate number of dwellings affected by the defects identified including those already remediated.

4. Consider a methodology for the categorisation of defects and the prioritisation of remedial action.

- In the case of defects with fire safety implications, consider how the framework for enhancing fire safety in dwellings can be applied to mitigate the risks arising from fire safety defects pending the remediation of defects and the Code of Practice for Fire Safety Assessment of Premises and Buildings, which is currently being developed by National Directorate of Fire and Emergency Management.

5. Suggest mechanisms for resolving defects, in the context of the legal rights, duties and obligations of developers, builders, building professionals, insurers, mortgage providers, building control authorities, fire authorities, owners' management companies, owner occupiers, renters and landlords, including:

- Technical options for the remediation of dwellings,
- Efficient means of carrying out work,
- individual dwellings or whole building approach,
- routine maintenance/refurbishment or remediation,
- Structures or delivery channels needed to facilitate resolution - advice and support.

6. Evaluate the potential cost of technical remediation options.

7. Pursue options on possible financial solutions to effect a resolution, in line with the Programme for Government commitment to identify options for those impacted by defects to access low-cost, long-term finance.

8. To report to the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage on the Examination of Defects in Housing.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** As the Ceann Comhairle will hear very often during the Topical Issue Debate, this is wholly inadequate. Again, I do not in any way blame the Minister of State, Deputy Hildegard Naughton, but for the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, or the Minister of State with responsibility for housing, Deputy Noonan, not to be here to answer questions on this issue is not only disrespectful to members of the Opposition but also to the thousands of homeowners who will sleep tonight in defective homes. This is the last opportunity Depu-

ties will have to ask these questions. The time allowed for producing the report, according to the programme for Government, was 12 months. The deadline has come and gone. There is genuine concern that the programme for Government commitment to have in place some form of redress for the homeowners may not now be honoured.

I urge the Minister of State to relay the four questions I have put today to the Minister. I appreciate that she will not be in a position to answer them. She should urge the Minister to respond to me formally in writing outlining the answers. First, why has the programme for Government commitment to examine this issue within 12 months not been met? Second, when will the report of the working group on defective homes be completed? Third, will the Minister intervene to prevent interference from his officials that is undermining the independence of the working group? Fourth, will he give us a cast-iron commitment that there will be in budget 2022, announced in October, a scheme that will provide genuine redress for the homeowners affected by Celtic tiger defects?

Thousands of people, from Donegal, Mayo, Sligo and elsewhere, rightly marched on the streets in Dublin recently, demanding 100% redress for those affected by defective blocks. They have my full support. The same principle must apply to all homeowners who bought homes during the Celtic tiger era in good faith but who now have defects in building standards and materials. They must get redress. The Minister must answer the questions before we break for the recess.

**Deputy Hildegarde Naughton:** The programme for Government sets out several commitments in respect of the important policy area of building defects and provides for an examination of defects in housing, having regard to the recommendations in the joint committee's Safe as Houses? report. The plenary working group has been meeting monthly since March 2021. In addition, there have been subgroup meetings.

With regard to the working group's deliberations, the group will seek to engage with a range of interested parties, including homeowners, public representatives, local authorities, product manufacturers, building professionals and industry stakeholders, among others, to examine the issues concerning defects in housing and report to the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage on the matter.

*3 o'clock*

Arrangements on the initial round of consultations are being put in place by the working group. The Minister is satisfied that the group is working effectively and efficiently on this complex matter and he looks forward to a report in due course following completion of the group's deliberation. Once the report is received, the Minister will give full consideration to its contents. Any further speculation or discussion on the output of the working of the group is premature at this stage.

## **Employment Schemes**

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** We are back to facing a significant crisis of unemployment continuing into next year. The Government's response is to roll out the old hits and the same old strategies. I am expecting the slogan, "Welfare cheats cheat us all", to be brought out and the individualisation of the problem of unemployment. An important part of that is the work placement

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experience programme. This is a new free labour scheme for bosses on which workers will get less than the pandemic unemployment payment and are expected to live below the poverty line while working. It is JobBridge 2.0 and I am confident that it will be widely known as such.

Workers on the scheme will get an extra €3.43 an hour for working 30 hours a week for six months without even a guaranteed job at the end of it. Employers will be able to employ up to ten workers on the scheme at the same time without having to pay a single penny for them. This actively discourages the creation of jobs. It is JobBridge all over again, except participants will receive €100 extra instead of €50 extra per week, work 30 hours instead of 40 hours a week and spend six months instead of nine months on the scheme. In every other respect, it is JobBridge all over again.

We need to go back and look at the record and experience of JobBridge. I was the organiser of a campaign known as ScamBridge which did exposés of the kind of gross exploitation that was happening with JobBridge. Some of the examples were renowned. We had people were being trained as sandwich artists working for nine months. We had multiple delicatessen assistants working for free for nine months. We had a national chain of garages which attempted to take on almost 40 JobBridge interns at the same time, saving itself €500,000 in wages.

The results of JobBridge were strikingly negative. The Government will argue that one in five of the people who did a JobBridge internship ended up working for the employer with which he or she did JobBridge. What it does not say, however, is that just over one in five employers who used JobBridge said that if JobBridge had not existed, they would have actually just employed somebody. We had real job displacement taking place. There was depression of wages because employers could ask why they would pay a person more wages if they could get somebody to work literally for free. There was a massaging of the unemployment figures because anyone on JobBridge or the work placement experience programme will not be counted as being on the live register. There was also the use of JobBridge to intimidate people who were unemployed.

When JobBridge came to an end, the scheme was widely discredited and hated. An internal audit came out and the Government commissioned a report from Indecon. It received a number of reports from the company but at the end of the scheme, the Government asked Indecon for a report on what it could do to make the scheme better and avoid the kind of deadweight that existed in it. Indecon gave the Government a report in which it stated that if the Government was to do another scheme, it would need to take on board the report's ten recommendations. Five or six years later, the Government has taken on board three of these recommendations and ignored the other seven.

One of the crucial recommendations was that employers should have to pay and should not be able to access free labour. The Government has simply ignored this. I do not know why the Government bothers commissioning these reports.

**Deputy Hildegard Naughton:** The new work placement experience programme is a key measure in our economic recovery plan and in the Government's new employment services strategy, Pathways to Work. Launched on Monday, the programme provides tangible evidence of the Government's strong commitment to providing quality work experience and training opportunities for jobseekers, in particular, those whose jobs were permanently lost due to the pandemic.

The Government is putting in place a wide range of measures to support people whose jobs will not return after Covid-19 to help them find new jobs in new sectors of the economy. This work placement experience programme is such one such measure.

Apprenticeships and work placement programmes are proven and recognised internationally to be very effective in providing an opportunity for unemployed people to get on-the-job experience, improve their employment prospects and to get new jobs. Such approaches are supported by the EU under its recommendation on post-Covid labour market recovery and its effective active support to employment, EASE, and by our labour market advisory council. These programmes give relevant on-the-job experience and the confidence to find future employment.

The work placement experience programme is an entirely new scheme and is much different from schemes which went before it. The focus of this programme is on quality placements, accredited training and development and a higher payment rate than previous schemes, at €10.20 per hour for 30 hours work per week. Importantly, participation in the scheme will be completely voluntary. The payment rate of €306 per week is equivalent to open labour market rates and will provide six months' work experience with in-built training opportunities to 10,000 people. Training opportunities will comprise 60 hours per placement and 20 of those hours will be accredited. Persons who have been unemployed for six months, including time spent on the pandemic unemployment payment, will be eligible to participate in this programme.

The personal weekly rate will make the offering very attractive for young people, for whom some 4,000 places have been ring-fenced. Many young people whose employment has been especially adversely affected by Covid-19 will see this new programme as an excellent opportunity to improve their skills, get on-the-job experience and give them the confidence to find new employment opportunities.

Stringent safeguards are being introduced with this programme to guard against any abuses. Each participant will have a case officer assigned to him or her. There will be monthly compliance checks and two review visits during the course of each placement. All roles will be quality-checked in advance to ensure there is a training and development aspect to the role. The work placement experience programme is a very positive initiative and I encourage jobseekers and businesses to engage with it.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** I thank the Minister for her answer, which is kind of funny. The funny bit is the claim that it is an entirely new scheme. It is as if the Government knows that the old JobBridge scheme was so widely hated and discredited that it is practically telling us not to worry because it is not JobBridge. If the Government knows how hated and rotten that scheme was, why did it not take on board the consultants' recommendations? Why did it ignore the vast majority of the recommendations made in the report it commissioned?

The Minister of State referred to the amount of training participants will receive. Twenty hours will be accredited for sector-specific training. This means that the person has to work for 780 hours, of which 20 hours will be accredited training. This does not fill me with any hope.

In the Pathways to Work document, there is a clear reference to increased outsourcing of so-called case workers. This will mean a greater involvement of companies such as Seetec, Turas Nua and other companies that are currently involved in JobPath. This is a dangerous road to go down from the point of view of the public sector and jobseekers.

There is an alternative to these kinds of free labour schemes that displace existing jobs and

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undermine wages and conditions for all. The alternative is to invest in real educational apprenticeship schemes where people end up with a qualification at the end of them. Instead of being able to put on a CV that they worked for free for six months, they would then receive a qualification that they could take with them. Most important is actually creating jobs. People will be paid an extra €3.50 per hour to go work for free for a private employer or, as happened with JobBridge, a public sector employer. Why do we not actually create some of the thousands of quality green, low-carbon jobs people need in bog rewetting, afforestation, home retrofitting, care, healthcare, nursing and education?

**Deputy Hildegard Naughton:** This strategy aims to get people back to work as the economy and the labour market recover from Covid-19. Pathways to Work 2021-2025 is a strategy that sets out 83 whole-of-government commitments aimed at reducing unemployment to or below pre-pandemic 2019 levels.

A key commitment under the strategy is the new work placement experience programme. This active labour market programme provides quality training and work experience opportunities for jobseekers out of work for six months or more to learn new skills in the workplace and to help them find new jobs. I have already outlined - I will do so again - that this work placement experience programme is different from earlier versions. It is positive that we can always strive to improve schemes and programmes. These will be quality placements involving accredited training and development and a higher payment rate than previous schemes of €10.20 per hour for 30 hours per week. Importantly, participation in the scheme will be completely voluntary and that point is very important. Nobody has to participate in this scheme. If you do not want to participate and decide not to do so, there will be no impact on your social welfare payments. I believe, however, that the programme will prove very attractive to many people. The payment rate of €306 per week is equivalent to open labour market rates. It equates to €10.20 per hour. The programme will provide six months' work experience with in-built training opportunities for 10,000 people. The training opportunities comprise 60 hours per placement, of which 20 hours will be accredited. Of course, there need to be appropriate safeguards such as stringent measures in place to include advance checks on placements, confirmation of training plans, monthly compliance checks and case officer engagement with the host and with the jobseeker over the six-month period. It is really important to say that apprenticeship programmes are proven internationally to be effective at helping people to get their foot in the door, to get on-the-job experience, to develop skill sets and, ultimately, to improve their chances of securing employment.

## Disability Services

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Our third matter is in the name of Deputy Verona Murphy, who wishes to discuss the three-year wait time for disability dental services in County Wexford alongside many difficulties family carers experience in securing essential medical appointments.

**Deputy Verona Murphy:** I will read into the record two representations made to me.

Dear Verona,

You will be aware from previous correspondence that I am a full time family carer to my sons Evan (21), who is non verbal and has diagnosis [of] ASD, ID, ADHD, Keracatonus

and complex medical needs, and Daniel (17), who has a diagnosis of ASD.

Like so many family carers across Wexford and the entire country, Covid and the necessary restrictions imposed during lockdowns were...[a] challenging time for families like mine. The challenge was no greater than when adult disability day services and special [needs] schools closed and the small amount of home support we had came to a sudden halt and our doors were closed behind us leaving us caring alone often with loved ones who did not have the capacity to understand Covid and suffered greatly from the absence of their much needed routines. Family Carers played a vital role in protecting our most vulnerable citizens and in suppressing the virus by caring for our loved ones in their own homes while keeping them safe and well at enormous personal sacrifice as there was no end to our shifts, there were no days off and for many of us there was rarely a night's sleep....

I am writing to you to bring to your attention the many difficulties I am currently experiencing in securing essential medical appointments for my son Evan. Evan has multiple profound disability and the pandemic and particularly the changes it brought to his life had a profound impact on him in terms of consistent disruptive sleep, serious hypertension and an increased obsession with food. In consultation with Psychiatry, Primary Care, HSE Disability Services and Wexford General Hospital, Evan was referred for urgent review to a Dublin Hospital for assessment of a possible additional diagnosis. His symptoms are persistent and I am therefore anxious for him to be assessed as a matter of urgency as [that] is also the medical advice. Following the Cyber attack experienced by the HSE, I was unable to make any contact with the hospital department to which Evan was referred. Having left multiple voice messages detailing my concern, my calls were not returned...

Evan also has a degenerative eye condition which has seriously impaired his vision and in the absence of care could result with further loss of vision. The medical advice is that Evan's vision is to be reviewed every six months to monitor any changes to his condition and as Evan is non verbal he is unable to tell us if he experiences further sight loss making it imperative that he is reviewed on a six monthly basis... Evan received his vaccine. As soon as he was vaccinated I requested an appointment for him. The appointment was offered for the week in which the cyber attack took place and I then received a phone call to say that it had been cancelled... I have attempted to contact the Dept... the voicemail box was full and no longer recording messages. There is no available email address in which to contact the office so I called the hospital switch where I was put through to an alternative extension and advised that the Secretary responsible for Evan's appointments was on leave and there was no information with regard to when she might return and no solutions offered as to how I might resolve the issue in the interim [to] provide Evan with the care he needs. ... it is not acceptable in my view to compromise the health and well being of our most vulnerable citizens by making it next to impossible to communicate with hospital outpatient departments...

I will move on to my next representation:

Peter is non verbal and has a number of complex medical issues. He attends St. Vincents Hospital for regular check ups. Peter presented at the Primary Health Care Centre in Grogans Road Wexford as an emergency with...[his mother] last week as he was experiencing difficulty with an abscess on his gums. It was determined by the dentist on the day that Peter was in need of an extraction and further treatment but his mother was informed they would have a 3 year wait...

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Peter had previously visited the dental clinic in Grogans Road a number of years ago... [with] his mother [and he] was told he would be in receipt of a follow up treatment appointment. This appointment never came. To the best of my memory this visit was perhaps 3 or 4 years ago but she could not recall the exact date.

The issue is as the Ceann Comhairle put it to the Minister.

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** I thank Deputy Murphy for her Topical Issue matter. The Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, has asked me to take it as she could not be here herself and I am glad to do so. The matter Deputy Murphy has submitted refers in particular to addressing the three-year wait time for disability dental services across County Wexford. She has raised specific cases in her contribution. I will relay those directly to the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, as well as the experience Deputy Murphy has had.

I will update the Deputy on the overall question of wait times for dental services and other difficulties that family carers are experiencing in securing essential medical appointments for people with a disability in County Wexford. Dental services for children up to 16 years of age and persons of all ages with special needs, including patients with a disability, are provided by the public dental service of the HSE through its dental clinics. Emergency care is also available daily. Previous surveys and research in Ireland have shown that dental care for many people with a disability can be provided in primary care and community settings by a dental workforce with the relevant skills and competencies. There are waiting lists for those for whom provision of care requires the use of either sedation or dental general anaesthesia. This treatment requires special facilities and staff with specific expertise. Furthermore, treatment under general anaesthesia requires hospitalisation. Treatment in hospital requires a referral from a primary care dentist and the HSE dental service and acute hospitals collaborate in this regard.

In line with other services, dental treatment, including treatment under general anaesthetic, has been curtailed during the pandemic and when provided has been at a reduced capacity. There is some capacity for dental surgery at Wexford General Hospital on Friday mornings. This is used mostly for paediatric dental extractions but, when possible, can be utilised for disability services clients. The HSE anticipates that the filling of vacancies - one full-time in special needs and one part-time in the public dental services in Wexford - and the gradual resumption of services phased down during Covid-19 will help to reduce waiting lists during 2021. The Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, has been informed by the HSE that most community health services such as disability services are operating as normal. The HSE's advice for families is to attend any appointments scheduled with disability services. If there is any change to a scheduled appointment, local HSE services will contact families directly. Families can see the latest position on the HSE website as well.

The Minister of State stresses the importance of mainstreaming. People with disabilities, like all of us, just want to live normal lives, in normal places, as much as possible. There is an obligation on all of us to ensure that the needs of people with disabilities are understood and vindicated in every policy. People with disabilities should have the same access to healthcare as everybody else in society. Their needs should be factored in as we design and deliver our health services to provide the best outcomes for all the people of this country.

Smile agus Sláinte, the national oral health policy published in 2019, provides a new framework for the delivery of oral health services. The ethos of the policy is to maximise the services

available in primary oral healthcare settings, with care provided by local family dentists and their teams. This means that children, adults and vulnerable people, including people with a disability, will be able to access oral healthcare in the local dental practice of the individual's choosing. To support the mainstreaming ethos, additional support, technology and time required to treat more vulnerable patients will be provided by the salaried service of the HSE. The HSE will also have a role in assessing the oral health status and needs of vulnerable people, particularly those in residential care.

**Deputy Verona Murphy:** I mean no disrespect to the Minister, whom I thank for coming to the Chamber to respond to the matter I have raised, but we all have to work towards something that is better. Nothing he said fills me with hope and it most certainly will not fill with hope those I am representing. It is unacceptable for someone with complex medical needs, who is non-verbal and has been taken in on an emergency appointment basis, to be told the waiting time is three years.

Nothing is improving in this regard. I appreciate everything the Minister had to say but it has been said for a long time and nothing is improving. The people I am representing with this matter are only two, but I know of about 42 others I could mention for the record. I am becoming very disillusioned because we are leaving vulnerable adults and vulnerable young children, with complicated medical needs, at the end of the queue just because they are in the minority and marginalised.

I appreciate that the Minister of State is doing her best - I know she is because we communicate regularly - but we have to start to walk the walk and not just talk the talk. If I were to take a non-verbal child into an emergency appointment such as this and walk out with the only answer being that we should wait for a further three years, I do not know how I would mentally cope with that. I do not know how the carers and parents cope with that, seeing their child in pain, unable to express it, and just seeming to get the same answers all the time. That is primarily why I raised this matter. I am not trying to harangue any Minister or to blame anybody, but something is wrong and the system is not working. We all need to work hard together to change this. All I have seen in the 17 months I have been a Deputy are longer and longer waiting lists. No matter what we do, it is not getting any better.

**Deputy Charlie McConalogue:** I will relay to the Minister of State, who is working to address this and make genuine progress, the Deputy's representations and the points she has made. Nationally, the public dental health service staff of the HSE comprise 260 dentists, 60 dental hygienists and 510 dental nurses and dental surgery assistants. Over the course of the pandemic, the number of available staff has reduced by 23% on an annualised basis due to staff redeployment for Covid-19-related work such as testing and tracing and vaccination, and that has had an impact.

As for Wexford, there are currently vacant posts in dental services. As I mentioned, the one whole-time equivalent special needs surgeon post was sent to the national recruitment service in February and it has advertised the post to be filled. The same is true of the part-time dental surgeon post, for which a recruitment campaign commenced last month. It is anticipated that when those posts have been filled, it will have an impact on addressing the waiting lists there for dental services. In Wexford, 150 persons, that is, 65 adults and 85 children, with special needs require dental treatment under general anaesthesia. Waiting times, as the Deputy pointed out, can range from six to 36 months, with a small number in excess of 36 months, which is obviously much too long and not acceptable.

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The issue is recognised. The two posts are being pursued with a view to having them filled. Undoubtedly, it has to be a priority because, as the Deputy outlined, it is not acceptable for all the families and children. I will convey the Deputy's points to the Minister of State for a further follow-up.

### **Fishing Communities**

**Deputy Brendan Griffin:** I thank the Ceann Comhairle for selecting this matter for discussion. It is important to the people of Cromane, County Kerry, on whose behalf I am speaking, that this matter is being discussed in Dáil Éireann. I thank also the Minister for being present to hear the case I am about to make and to discuss the matter.

Cromane is a small coastal community in mid-Kerry, overlooking Castlemaine Harbour on the Iveragh Peninsula. Other than for its natural beauty and vibrant mussel fishing industry, it is probably most famous in recent years for the likes of Donnchadh Walsh and Seán O'Sullivan and the great footballing tradition in the area. It is a beautiful part of the world, with great potential both from a tourism point of view and in regard to growing the mussel fishing industry to support local jobs and provide a future for the young people of the area. The people involved in the industry work hard and have been fishing for mussels for generations, although they have been doing it with virtually zero coastal infrastructure to help them do their work. I invite the Minister, if he is Kerry at some point, to come and see how the mussel fishermen operate and how they have to contend without support infrastructure.

The need for a pier or some form of landing facility has been a long-running saga over many decades. I recall it being talked about when I was in secondary school in the 1990s and it still has not happened. There are various reasons for that, but here we are in 2021 and it is still needed. I dearly want it to happen. We have examined various funding mechanisms and options, but one of the first steps that needs to be taken is to establish what the best solution for the location would be. To do that, feasibility and design funding is required, and that has been difficult to come by. Thereafter, of course, construction funding is required as well.

Prior to Covid, I was trying to bring together a stakeholder forum, with all the players in the locality, the State agencies and the local authorities around the one table to try to work out a roadmap. Will the Minister provide a representative from his Department, in an advisory and consultative capacity, to help with the work of such a forum? Separately, will he examine the local authority element of the fishery harbour and coastal infrastructure development programme? It is quite restrictive in that it is capped at €200,000. While it has been very beneficial - do not get me wrong - to many places in Kerry and throughout the country by providing funding, for places such as Cromane where there is existing economic activity within the industry but zero infrastructure, I would like exceptions to be made in order that there could be feasibility and design funding to build that necessary infrastructure. Just because it was never there in the first instance should not mean that places such as Cromane would be left. It is important that we reconsider the upper limit of €200,000, which is not what it used to be, not least with the level of inflation in construction costs. The 75% contribution element could be looked at. I am interested in hearing the Minister's thoughts.

**Deputy Charlie McConalogue:** I thank the Deputy for raising the matter. It is something on which he has done significant work in the past. The Minister for Education raised the issue with me as well. I know the Deputy has been engaged with this issue and has tried to progress

it so it is good to be able to update him today. I will take him up on his offer of a visit. I hope to be in Kerry in September and will certainly visit it with the Deputy then.

To clarify matters for the Deputy, my Department owns, operates and maintains six designated State-owned fishery harbour centres located at Castletownbere, Dingle, Dunmore East, Howth, Killybegs and Ros an Mhíl under statute. In addition, the Department also has responsibility for the upkeep and maintenance of the North Harbour at Cape Clear as well as the maintenance of a small number of specific piers, lights and beacons throughout Ireland, in accordance with the Marine Works (Ireland) Act 1902.

As the Deputy is aware, responsibility for the development and maintenance of local authority-owned piers, harbours and slipways rests with each local authority in the first instance and the parent Department, the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, thereafter. In that regard, I have no legislative remit for developments at Cromane. Responsibility for the development of the pier at Cromane rests with the county council, as the Deputy outlined. The mussel seed fishing in Castlemaine Harbour is regulated by the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine. In the case of Cromane, I am aware that the possibility of a project to develop a pier has been the subject of local interest for some years. However, any proposals for a potential future pier development project are solely a matter for Kerry County Council. That said, as part of my Department's annual fishery harbour and coastal infrastructure development programme, it provides funding to assist the 15 coastal local authorities in carrying out small-scale projects for the development and repair of piers, harbours and slipways in their ownership.

The local authority element of our capital programme co-funds up to 75% of the total cost of approved projects subject to a maximum overall project cost of €200,000 with the local authority providing the balance. Up to 2019, the cap was €150,000. I take the Deputy's point about the cap. The challenge for projects above that threshold is something on which I will reflect. Between 2010 and 2020, over €1.9 million in funding has been granted under this programme to Kerry County Council with approximately 25 harbours in the county benefiting over that period. Under this year's programme, funding of €4.2 million was made available nationally, meaning that 79 projects across the country could be supported. We have seen an allocation to Kerry of €213,000 in funding under this year's programme to undertake projects, two of which relate to harbour development while one relates to marine leisure and tourism.

Piers in Kerry benefiting under this year's programme include Dún Chaoin Pier, Knightstown Marina and Dúinín Pier in An Fheothanach. No application for funding was received under this year's programme with regard to Cromane Pier. Should any application be made for funding by Kerry County Council under any future programme in relation to capital works at Cromane Harbour, it will be given due consideration in line with available Exchequer funding.

I take the Deputy's request regarding support for a working group and the allocation of an official from my Department to facilitate and work with that. I will certainly do that to enable the Deputy to progress that work and work with the county council to see how the potential can be developed.

**Deputy Brendan Griffin:** I thank the Minister for his very positive answer. I very much welcome the fact that he will come to Cromane to see exactly what we are dealing with and what the people working in the industry must contend with. That is very proactive of him. It is a long journey from Donegal down to Kerry but I assure the Minister it is a very beautiful part of the world and he will enjoy the journey and will be well looked after by the people of Cro-

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mane. They might even bring him into Jack's Coastguard as well, which is always worth a visit.

Putting forward a representative from the Department is very helpful because it may not require a super-duper pier that would cost millions. There may be a very cost-effective and practical solution we could identify but having that expertise around the table is crucial. That is something that is very welcome. I appreciate the Minister's commitment in that regard. This is something that could accelerate that process and bring about a much speedier conclusion to this long-running saga.

A FLAG-funded socioeconomic plan for the area from 2018 to 2022 was launched. This was one of the central pillars of that plan. There is potential to support the local fishing industry, local marine tourism and leisure craft operators. Such a facility would be invaluable. Castlemaine Harbour is a very scenic area. I am looking straight across at Cromane and can see the boats from my house every day. It has significant potential and will be very close to the new greenway in south Kerry. It is on the Wild Atlantic Way and the Ring of Kerry effectively so there is significant potential in the area. For years and years, mussel fishermen have been crying out for assistance through this infrastructure. The Minister's assistance will be very important in finally getting this over the line.

**Deputy Charlie McConalogue:** I look forward to coming down to Kerry in September with the Deputy and the Minister for Education and in the meantime working with the Deputy regarding how we can move things forward and work together on this. There has been significant investment across the county over the past ten years. I know the Deputy very much values the impact of that assessment and how it makes a significant difference. In particular, funding from the Department working with the local authorities makes a massive difference throughout a county, particularly a county like Kerry, which is very similar to my own county with lots of smaller piers and harbours. They need maintenance and upkeep but they make a massive difference. They are very significant for inshore fishermen, the marine resource and marine leisure. It is important that we invest in them. Twenty-five projects across Kerry to the tune of €1.9 million have been supported over the past ten years. Cromane did not receive funding during that period. I know the approach under consideration here is more significant than many of the others that were funded. Let us continue to work together in terms of the potential and assess that. I will certainly ensure that an official is made available to work with the Deputy and the local authority in terms of advice.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Deputy Griffin will have the kettle on when the Minister gives him notice.

## Veterinary Medicines

**Deputy Michael McNamara:** This Topical Issue was originally put down by Deputy Nolan. I thank the Ceann Comhairle for allowing me to pursue this in her stead given she could not be here due to unforeseen circumstances. I thank the Minister for coming here in person. None of us are too reluctant to criticise the fact that a senior Minister does not come in to answer Topical Issues so when the Minister is here, I would like to thank him for the fact he is here.

Over a year ago, the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Agriculture, Food and the Marine looked at this issue and the changes that may or may not be required by EU law with regard to the prescription of veterinary medicines, in particular antiparasitics. Up to now, Ireland has en-

joyed a derogation, as did the UK, with regard to the prescription or sale of antiparasitics as opposed to antimicrobial medicines through merchants. A number of them are in operation across the country, including Clare, and play a vital role in the supply of animal medicines. There has been a particular need for antimicrobial medicines this year. I am not a veterinarian but I say as a farmer that there has been a problem with fluke and worms this year and this is something many farmers would acknowledge. The majority of farmers will have gotten medicines from a merchant until now. That avenue has been closed off, perhaps because of the European Union law. My understanding, based on the evidence given before the Joint Committee on Agriculture, Food, and the Marine, was that the European Union introduced a regulation on that matter, whereas the United Kingdom entered a derogation to that in 2014. For whatever reason, we did not enter a derogation. There are some who would suggest that was because veterinarians had a greater sway in the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine than, perhaps, merchants did. For whatever reason, we did not enter a derogation at that time. We could have done. It was the practice. A member state was allowed to enter a derogation, but we did not. Of course, it does not matter anymore in the United Kingdom, and I will come back to that in a minute. Up to 2018, we could have entered a derogation, but we did not. Now it seems that at the time the matter was before the Joint Committee on Agriculture, Food, and the Marine, the advice from the Attorney General was awaited. However, it seems that some clarification has been obtained that it is no longer possible to enter a derogation nor is it possible to retrospectively regularise the situation in Ireland for the purposes of entering that derogation. If possible, the Minister might provide some clarity on that. The fear is that we will see a potential monopoly of supply in veterinarians, in circumstances where there is an increasing number of veterinary practices being bought up by commercial entities, rather than operating separately. Two or three weeks ago, Deputy Jackie Cahill introduced a Private Members' Bill in the House on that matter.

This is a very real fear. The purpose of this is to ensure the separation of prescription and dispensing. By seeking to pursue that, we might achieve the exact opposite: a monopoly, where large conglomerates that own veterinary practices have a monopoly on both dispensing and prescription of animal medicines.

**Deputy Charlie McConalogue:** I thank Deputies Michael McNamara and Carol Nolan for tabling the Topical Issue. Certainly, this has exercised minds in the farming community across the country over the last number of months. I have been looking at it and trying to address it. It is good to have the opportunity today to update the House on the current position. I acknowledge and thank the Joint Committee on Agriculture, Food, and the Marine for its recommendations and observations on the EU Regulation 2019/6 on veterinary medicines which has, undoubtedly, a direct effect on all EU member states. The Deputy pointed out the responsible persons approach in the UK and the derogation it received. This is not available to us now. The UK, of course, is leaving. Obviously, Northern Ireland is in a different position, in terms of the cross-Border and one-island approach to animal health. All other EU member states issue medicines on prescription basis at the moment. The UK would have been the only one, as well as Ireland, that would have had the responsible persons. The difference was that our responsible persons were not issuing prescriptions but in the UK, they were. Indeed, they play and will continue to play an important role in our national set-up.

The EU Regulation 2019/6 legislates for the authorisation, use, and monitoring of veterinary medicine products in the EU. The legislation came into effect on 28 January 2019. It will apply to all EU member states from 28 January of this coming year. The regulation followed the adoption of a proposal in 2014 to develop fit-for-purpose veterinary legislation, which would

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no longer be based on the equivalent human medicines authorisation system. I confirm that all existing retailers of veterinary medicine, including licensed merchants and veterinary pharmacists, will continue to be legally permitted to sell antiparasitic medicines. I fully support the report by the Joint Committee on Agriculture, Food, and the Marine and the observation it made that licensed merchants and veterinary pharmacists provide an excellent service to farmers in rural Ireland. I fully concur with that. However, from 28 January 2022, antiparasitic medicines will become prescription-only medicines, in line with EU law. From then, antiparasitic medicines can only be supplied on foot of a veterinary prescription, issued by a registered professional practitioner.

My Department received comprehensive advice from the Office of the Attorney General on 12 April 2021. It confirmed that the derogation provided for in article 1054 of EU Regulation 2019/6 is not available in Ireland. The conclusion of the advices was shared with the stakeholders to provide final clarity in advance of the antiparasitic resistance stakeholder group meeting on 15 April 2021. In line with standard Government policy, it is not possible to share the detail of the Attorney General's advices. Legal advices confirm that regulation 2019/6 solely permits the prescribing of veterinary medicines to be a function undertaken by registered veterinary practitioners. Licensed merchants and veterinary farmers will continue to play a valuable role in dispensing veterinary medicines.

Separately, my Department has also availed as legal advices to assess Ireland's options for separating the prescribing and dispensing of veterinary medicines, known as decoupling. For such decoupling to be permissible, a sound evidential basis in veterinary medicine is required to justify any partial or full prohibition on veterinarians selling the veterinary medicines that they prescribe-----

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

**Deputy Charlie McConalogue:** Such decoupling is not solely for the purposes of economically assisting one sector of an industry over another.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I thank the Minister.

**Deputy Michael McNamara:** If we could take a step back, the purpose of all of this is to reduce the overuse of antibiotics, antimicrobials and antiparasitics so that we do not have a build-up of resistance and that we do not have antibiotic resistance or antiparasitic resistance. As a farmer and, maybe more importantly, as a consumer, I greatly welcome that. However, how do we achieve that end? The Minister's second point about the decoupling of prescriptions and dispensing was that it cannot be for the economic benefit of one group over another. I agree with that, but the purpose of all of this is not economics. It is about animal health and, by extension, human health, and making sure that we do not have antibiotic resistance either in animals or in humans as both would be equally worrying.

Rather than looking at the economics of the situation, we need to look at - I do not have this information but I am sure that the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine does - the extent of the use of antibiotics and antiparasitics in Ireland, as well as how that fits in with international, particularly European, trends. The use of medicines is far more prescribed in Europe and there is a greater consciousness of not overusing animal medicines than there might be, perhaps, in other parts of the world, such as South America or Australia. Hence, we hope to continue to be able to provide a higher-quality product.

On that basis, I ask that the Minister's Department continues to look at this decoupling of prescriptions from dispensing so that we do not have these large conglomerates that employ veterinarians, rather than the old way, where every village and large town had a family-run veterinary practice. This is also so that we do not end up with a corporate model that controls the prescription and the dispensing of medicines, which would be very negative for health, as opposed to the economy of our country.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I thank the Deputy and ask the Minister to conclude.

**Deputy Charlie McConalogue:** I thank Deputy McNamara. I will complete the points I was making. The Department's view was that there was an absence of a sound veterinary medicine evidential basis for a partial or full decoupling. As a result, decoupling does not currently appear to be a viable option. The Department shared the outcome of these advices with the members of the antiparasitic resistance stakeholders group. In response to concerns raised about prescribing particular branded veterinary medicines, I intend to permit substitute medicines to be dispensed, that contain the same active substances as the main prescribed medicine. This will sustain competition for all suppliers of veterinary medicines, to the benefit of Irish farmers and their livestock. Antimicrobial resistance and antiparasitic resistance both pose significant challenges to Irish farmers and, indeed, to human health, as a follow-on. It is an important issue and it is crucial that we address it in a serious manner that is required. Obviously, there is an EU regulation with which we have to be legally compliant. Our legal advice is clear that it requires prescription-based issuing. The key thing that I am trying to achieve is that it does not impact on the capacity for competition in the market and that we find a mechanism where we can have it on a prescription basis but that competition remains, with continuing availability of sources of the prescription for farmers. It is a significant issue for licensed merchants, for whom it is a key part of their business. We are cognisant of that concern. I am continuing to work through this and looking at the situation to try to find a way that ensures that we are compliant, that we address the issues of antimicrobial and antiparasitic resistance, that we ensure that there is competition in the market and that we do not add costs to farmers. I thank Deputy McNamara for raising it.

## **Foreign Policy**

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The next item, which was tabled initially by Deputy John Brady, is being raised by Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** Táim an-bhuíoch don Cheann Comhairle agus don fhoireann uilig as an obair agus as an gcabhair uilig. I thank the Minister of State, Deputy English, for taking this. I am sure that he will prove his revolutionary credentials soon. In all seriousness, we are dealing with the US economic blockade of Cuba. Many people in this Chamber and outside in Irish society see this as something that is cruel and has been a failure for 60 years. It has not even delivered what it was meant to do by the people who introduced it. It was not exactly JFK's finest hour. We are dealing with significant suffering that has impacted on many people for no real net gain other than internal American politics and keeping certain constituencies happy, especially in Florida. I want to put on the record my solidarity with the Cuban people and also address the unfairness and wrongness of this. We have a seat on the UN Security Council and we are a major player in the European Union. We have to play our part as ourselves and on an international basis in putting on the record the message that this is not

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working and is not good. We need a viable future for the Cuban people. The only way that that can be done is by lifting this utterly unfair and failed policy of an economic blockade.

At the beginning of the Covid-19 onslaught, harrowing pictures came from many of our European neighbours. People went through significant difficulties and tragedies. As has happened many times before, medical staff from Cuba were airlifted in to stand with front-line defenders, many of them at breaking points, in some of the worst-affected areas. Some of these people made the ultimate sacrifice. This shows significant courage and selflessness. It is how I see the Cuban Revolution and it shows the humanitarian instincts of the Cuban people. They were applauded globally but the United States continues with this absolutely failed and cruel policy. We need to deal with it.

The United Nations General Assembly recently had a resolution against this blockade. Some 184 countries voted to get rid of the blockade, three abstained and two voted in support of maintaining the blockade, namely, the US and Israel. There is no international support for this. It is wrong. We had the Obama regime and a normalisation of diplomatic contacts and lifting of sanctions. We then had the Trump regime and approximately 243 coercive measures were introduced, which were utterly wrong. Even in this pandemic, there is a situation where Cuba may have the vaccines but it cannot necessarily get the needles and other medical paraphernalia required. It is utterly wrong and we need to play our part. We need to put it on the record and to have this blockade lifted.

**Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Damien English):** On behalf of the Minister, Deputy Coveney, I thank Deputy Ó Murchú for raising this issue. As the House will be aware, the United States has maintained a comprehensive economic embargo on Cuba since 1962, which prevents US businesses or businesses with commercial activities in the US from trading with Cuban interests. Ireland's position on this embargo is long-standing and clear. Fundamentally, the embargo serves no constructive purpose and its lifting would facilitate an opening of Cuba's economy to the benefit of its people. The Minister for Foreign Affairs has expressed this view publicly on a number of occasions. In the context of the hardship caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, the injustice and severity of the US blockade has never been clearer. I assure the House on behalf of the Minister, Deputy Coveney, that this issue receives close attention in the Department of Foreign Affairs.

Officials in the Department closely follow developments with the US embargo on Cuba, especially in respect of the 1996 Helms–Burton Act. As the Deputy will be aware, it is a US federal law that strengthens and continues the economic embargo against Cuba. The Government was concerned by the decision taken in 2019 by the previous US Administration to suspend waivers under Title 3 of the Act, which had previously protected European parties and entities from its extraterritorial elements. Together with our EU partners, Ireland has firmly and continuously opposed extraterritorial measures that seek to extend the US embargo against Cuba to third countries. These measures are contrary to the commonly accepted rules of international trade.

Cuba also features regularly on the agenda of the EU working party on Latin America and the Caribbean, COLAC, at which Ireland is represented at an official level. The Minister for Foreign Affairs has echoed EU High Representative and Vice-President Borrell's statement following the EU-Cuba joint council in January this year, regretting the inclusion of Cuba on the list of state sponsors of terrorism by the previous US Administration. This decision will have a negative impact on foreign direct investment in Cuba and further aggravates the already dif-

difficult situation of the Cuban people in the midst of the pandemic. Ireland, along with its EU partners, has consistently supported the annual resolution put forward by Cuba at the UN General Assembly regarding the US economic blockade. This long-standing resolution has enjoyed the support of the majority of the international community. I confirm to the House that Ireland voted in favour of this resolution when it was brought before the General Assembly on 23 June.

Ireland will continue to support the lifting of the US embargo on Cuba. Officials in the Department of Foreign Affairs, including at the Embassy of Ireland in Mexico, which covers Cuba, will continue to monitor the situation in closely in liaison with our EU partners.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** I welcome what the Minister of State has said about support for lifting the embargo. I call on this State to do everything that it can to highlight this issue. In recent days and weeks, we have witnessed the efforts of what I can only call sinister forces attempting to subvert the combined efforts of the Cuban people and Government. It smacks of the old, 1980s, Reagan school of CIA dirty plays. It is of no benefit. We need to move into a new sphere. We have seen the abject failure of America when it has attempted to carry out regime change. We have even seen it try to extricate itself from some situations that it found itself in in recent days. There is a significant power differential, which needs to be accepted. It is America versus the tiny country of Cuba. It is stunting and forcing people into significant hardship. It is wrong and we have to do whatever we can about it.

I always compare Cuba with other countries in South and Central America, the Caribbean and Latin America, which America would consider its backyard.

*4 o'clock*

In fairness, we need to look at what Cuba did in wiping out illiteracy and innumeracy, and at the health system it put in place, compared to other countries that have been impacted by America and the major difference between those that have and those that have not in those places, to see why we continue to give support to the Cuban revolution. However, we need to give Cuba real support by playing our part in ensuring that this utterly wrong blockade is lifted and that there can be regular, proper economic activity in Cuba.

**Deputy Damien English:** I again thank Deputy Ó Murchú for his contribution and I welcome the opportunity to speak again on the issue. I acknowledge the severe impact the Covid-19 pandemic has had on Cuba, not least in leading to a collapse, essentially, of the international tourism industry on which the Cuban economy is hugely dependent. I note the Cuban authorities managed to contain the initial outbreak of Covid-19 very well but in recent weeks, as so many other countries have experienced, they are faced with rising case numbers and difficult decisions on measures to control the spread while seeking to protect a vulnerable economy.

A number of the restrictions introduced by the Trump administration that I referenced in my earlier reply have served to further exacerbate an already fragile situation for the people of Cuba in the midst of a severe health crisis. We have seen reports of severe shortages of medicines, medical equipment and fuel. I reiterate Ireland's firm support for the lifting of the US embargo, which will facilitate an opening of Cuba's economy to the benefit of its people. I am well aware of reports of recent protests across Cuba and the arrests in response to those demonstrations. We urge the Cuban authorities to respect the right to demonstrate peacefully, to listen to legitimate protests of discontent, to seek dialogue and to release any people detained for peaceful protest. Again, officials in the Department of Foreign Affairs continue to monitor

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the situation closely, including working with our colleagues in the American Embassy, which covers Cuba, and are always happy to engage.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The next matter is from Deputy Tóibín, who wishes to discuss the practice of discharging patients from hospitals into nursing homes during the start of the Covid-19 pandemic. Having put a stop to his gallop on this particular matter the other evening, I am happy to see we have been able to select it today.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** Yesterday, under freedom of information, FOI, a document was released to me from the National Treatment Purchase Fund, NTPF. The document was an email, which was issued to nursing homes by the contract manager of the NTPF shortly before 10 a.m. on 12 March 2020. I have already furnished the Minister of State at the Department of Health, Deputy Mary Butler, with a copy of this email, which states that the NTPF had been asked to establish capacity within the nursing home sector. It goes on to state that nursing homes will need: "...to have the ability to care for patients coming from [the] acute hospital setting..." and further states:

Facilities must be able to facilitate short term residents being discharged from [an] acute hospital. ...residents...may be nominated by the HSE [and] the Department of Health as applicable for receipt of appropriate funding.

Describing what will happen, the letter states that the individual facility would co-ordinate directly with the discharge unit within the hospital.

This is a damning document. In many ways, it is a smoking gun. We know that the Covid-19 nursing home expert panel found that 10,000 patients were discharged from hospitals into nursing homes in the first six months of 2020. Was it a Government decision to move elderly patients, wholesale, out of hospital beds and cram them into nursing homes? The major question is who instructed the NTPF to issue this email? The email states that nursing homes were asked to establish capacity. Who asked them? That is the first question.

We have also learned a pot of money was offered to nursing homes at this time. How much was offered to get older people out of hospitals? The context of this discussion is pivotal. In early March, nursing homes voluntarily closed their doors to visitors in an attempt to protect vulnerable residents. On 10 March, Dr. Holohan, the Chief Medical Officer, CMO, issued a statement stating that these restrictions were not necessary. This document shows that two days after telling nursing homes to reopen their doors, an email was issued to nursing homes instructing them to make way for a large influx of patients from hospitals. Further FOI documents released reveal that, throughout all of this, the Minister for Health at the time, Deputy Simon Harris, repeatedly ignored requests for meetings from the chief executive officer, CEO, of Nursing Homes Ireland, Tadhg Daly.

The Fianna Fáil Opposition spokesperson at the time was the Minister, Deputy Stephen Donnelly, and he revealed that the HSE "intercepted" supplies of oxygen, personal protective equipment, PPE, and staff that were meant for nursing homes. Was there a concerted effort by the Government or the HSE to take older people out of the safety of hospitals and cram them into nursing homes during the pandemic? How could this decision be made when the Minister

in charge was ignoring appeals from the sector to meet with him, when nursing homes were having their PPE, oxygen and staff taken from them by the HSE and when the CMO was telling nursing homes to keep their doors wide open to the public?

These were an incredible set of events at a period when there was an influx of Covid-19 in this country. It should be remembered, in all the conversations we have had about Covid, the majority of people who died with Covid were in a nursing home or hospital, two locations owned, or under the regulation of, this Government. Can the Minister answer these questions?

**Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegard Naughton):** The Minister of State, Deputy Butler, was due to take this question today but due to the change of time for Topical Issues, she cannot do so as she is bringing legislation through the Seanad. She sends her apologies for not being in the Chamber for this debate.

The Covid-19 pandemic has led to an unprecedented challenge across our health services and none more so than in our nursing homes. The National Public Health Emergency Team, 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. Quality care and patient safety is a priority and our continued focus is, and will always be, to deliver safe and high-quality services. From the start of the pandemic, the HSE, through the Health Protection Surveillance Centre, has developed an extensive body of guidance and support tools to assist in the management of Covid-19 cases, including in relation to decisions on transfer of patients and residents between care facilities, where appropriate.

The decision to discharge patients from hospitals to nursing home settings is always subject to clinical assessment. Discharges to nursing homes and other settings are a regular, daily feature of a functioning health system. The period from early March 2020 to mid-April 2020 saw an increase in the number of such discharged patients as the health system prepared itself for an expected surge in Covid-19 cases. From an older person's perspective, being admitted for longer than necessary increases the risk of a patient contracting a healthcare associated infection or deconditioning. The vast majority of these discharges took place from 10 March 2020 onwards, when clear public health guidance was in place across all acute hospitals.

On 10 March 2020, the HSE issued interim guidance on transfer between care facilities, which included preliminary guidance on the transfer of hospitalised patients from an acute hospital to a residential care facility in the context of the pandemic. This guidance was circulated to all acute hospitals, community healthcare organisations and residential care facilities accepting admissions of residents. In order to ensure sufficient acute hospital capacity to manage the anticipated surge in hospitals, emergency funding was made available to ensure patients who were clinically stable and appropriate for transfer could have their discharge facilitated, while adhering to the guidance.

There was also an emphasis on ensuring that those patients who had completed their acute medical treatment should be prioritised for such transfers, either to residential care or with some home support, so as to avoid their exposure to the anticipated surge and prevent hospital-acquired Covid-19. The protocols set out in the guidance, along with infection prevention and control advice and supports, were put in place to assist the nursing home sector, with a view to mitigating the level of risk and transfer of Covid-19.

It must be recognised that the pandemic has not concluded, and at this time a priority focus

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of Government remains on the ongoing management of Covid-19 and our response to it, to ensure that the positive gains now being experienced are preserved and that those most vulnerable to the virus continue to be safeguarded in the light of residual risk. The Department is continuing to look at options that may be available to the State in listening to the voices of those who have lost a loved one. I conclude by expressing my sincere condolences to those who have lost a loved one during this difficult time.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** In fairness, none of the questions I asked about accountability have been addressed by the Minister of State whatsoever. This is a serious problem. We need clarification with regard to who is behind these decisions. She mentioned that HSE support was provided to the nursing homes. That is not exactly true. Further freedom of information documents I have received show that on 19 October 2020, the Minister of State with responsibility for older persons and mental health, Deputy Mary Butler, wrote to the chief executive of the HSE, Mr. Paul Reid, seeking assurances that the HSE would continue to provide staffing support to homes. Paul Reid did not respond to the Minister of State for a month. When he did, he said that all was well and that the HSE would continue to provide funding for nursing home staffing and support for nursing homes. On 16 October 2020, a similar letter was sent to Mr. Phelim Quinn, the chief executive of HIQA. Paul Reid said he was disappointed that Mr. Quinn stated certain private nursing homes had not reported that they have received support from the HSE.

When Mr. Reid was telling HIQA and the Minister of State that all was well, I had people from nursing homes on the telephone to me crying for staff. I have in mind specifically a case in the Minister of State, Deputy Naughton's, county, Galway. It occurred almost at the same time that these letters were issued. All staff in a nursing home, bar two, tested positive and it was left without any support. This resulted in the two staff who had tested negative being unable to leave the nursing home because there were no replacement staff. That is an incredible situation. In case the Minister of State did not notice, the headlines in the newspapers at the time were screaming about staff shortages in nursing homes. All the while there were 75,000 people who had applied to Be On Call for Ireland but they were pretty much left untouched.

The Minister of State mentioned people being discharged under normal regulations. People were being discharged from these hospitals into nursing homes without being tested. It was an incredible situation. When will there be a full investigation? When will there be accountability? When can we be sure this will not happen again?

**Deputy Hildegarde Naughton:** The pandemic has been a particularly difficult time for all residents, relatives and staff of our nursing homes. As the House will be aware, the Covid-19 nursing home expert panel established last year provided a comprehensive report and package of recommendations in respect of the ongoing response to Covid-19 and longer-term strategic reform of the care of older persons. Many of the short and medium-term recommendations of the Covid-19 nursing home expert panel report have been implemented. Several of these relate to the delivery of a broad suite of supports provided to private nursing homes, including free personal protective equipment, 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 those recommendations. There has been significant and ongoing consideration of the impact of the pandemic. There have been various examinations and reports with a focus on Covid-19, its impact on nursing homes and the pandemic learnings that can inform future policy, regulation and the model of care for older people.

There has been a clear national commitment to continue to learn from the pandemic as the national and international understanding of the virus evolves. Where necessary we will ensure that the public health led approach evolves as evidence and learning materialises. The findings of these reports confirm that the infectious nature of Covid-19 makes it difficult to prevent and control in residential care settings. I look forward to supporting the significant work that is in train to further improve services for older persons.

### **An Taisce**

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** Thank you, a Cheann Comhairle. I wish you well as we break up this evening. I thank you for your co-operation and I thank the team, including Peter Finnegan and everyone else, for their help throughout this term. Thank you for selecting this Topical Issue matter, which is important.

An Taisce has done brilliant work in the schools competitions, Tidy Towns competitions, green flag competitions and in assisting people in many other ways as well as giving leadership in the country. However, serious issues have now arisen with An Taisce. Only recently I became aware of the funding. An Taisce has already received €4.5 million in taxpayers' money so far in 2021. In the past decade the organisation has received in excess of €30 million in taxpayers' funding. It is State funding but it is taxpayers' funding ultimately. As we know, it is a prescribed organisation and planning permission has to be referred to the organisation if the site is anywhere near a national heritage area or listed building.

I believe that it has gone into overreach. We have a situation involving a Glanbia plant in south Kilkenny. The group have been holding it up now for several years. Planning permission was granted by Kilkenny County Council and the Environmental Protection Agency, EPA. The applicants have the licence and An Bord Pleanála approved it. An Taisce has taken the board to the High Court three times. This is an abuse of its position. This is using taxpayers' funding to deny taxpayers. Farmers have invested millions of euro to upgrade and increase the national herd and to have milk supplied in the hope that it will be made into cheddar cheese that is so badly wanted. A Dutch company is pulling out. The Taoiseach was asked if the group would stop the claims or any more High Court appeals. There are rumours that they may even go to Europe.

I have asked the group how they are funding all these cases. The Rural Independent Group met them. They will not meet us again. We only had a short meeting for an hour. They insisted on having it recorded. I asked how they were funding these cases. They told me it was *pro bono*. Few lawyers will do *pro bono* cases that go to the High Court several times as well as the European court. It is simply not doable.

The tap must be turned off on the funding. I will bring forward an amendment in the autumn to have An Taisce unprescribed because the group have become a nuisance and an irritant now. They are too big for their boots and are doing significant damage.

There is a period house in Knocklofty owned by the late Earl of Donoughmore. It has been ruined but they will not even look at something like that. They will not look at issues they should be looking at but they are looking at issues where they have no business. They are stopping farmers from doing work that they need to do. It is total overreach.

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I hope the Minister of State will have some ideas about reining them in. The Taoiseach told the House his position but they ignored him and appealed again. We have to do something to get this group. They can do the valuable work they do, but they should allow business, farmers and people to produce food for us to eat in this country.

**Deputy Richard O'Donoghue:** I fully agree with all the sentiments from Deputy McGrath. There should be a full investigation into where the funding of An Taisce is going.

An Taisce should have made a submission on the fever hospital in Croom. Those involved never made any application on it. They were asked afterwards and they blamed Covid-19. They are funded for certain cases. Where An Taisce should be doing work, those involved are not doing it and in cases where they are not supposed to be doing work, they are doing it. We can see what they are doing with the cheese factory. We can see the whole country is changing around. We are trying to push everything to imports to the country. We have the facilities and resources to do it. We are closing things down. We are allowing An Taisce, with taxpayers' money, to stop this. The buck stops with the Government and with the funding. It should stop now if those involved are not willing to encourage and look after our industries and get involved in creating work for the country rather than taking it out of here.

**Deputy Hildegard Naughton:** I thank the Deputies for raising this issue. The Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications has no legal function in respect of An Taisce. The Department provides An Taisce with funding for a variety of initiatives, including the National Spring Clean, Irish Business Against Litter, national anti-litter league and green schools programme. All payments made to An Taisce are in line with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform circular 13/2014 regarding the management of grant funding provided from public money. Grant funding is paid on the basis of vouched expenditure only. An Taisce is required to provide supporting invoices stating that its claims relate to activities and services appropriate to the grant scheme objectives. The An Taisce green schools initiative, which Deputy Mattie McGrath outlined, is a whole-school programme and awards scheme comprising seven steps. It takes a thematic approach to environmental education. Key themes include litter and waste, energy, water, travel and biodiversity. Approximately 4,000 primary, secondary and special schools in Ireland are participating in the programme. This programme has been operating in Ireland since 1997 and is operated by the environmental education unit of An Taisce in partnership with local authorities and is supported by a number of Government Departments and agencies as well as corporate funders. The programme covers a wide range of thematic areas and impact measurements indicate substantial positive changes in knowledge, behaviour and opinion leadership among the participants. There are also substantial direct and indirect cost savings for schools in respect of waste, energy, water, and transport fuel with an associated reduction in greenhouse gases.

The national spring clean is Ireland's largest anti-litter initiative and has been operating since 1999. The programme encourages and supports individuals and groups across society to take part in their own clean-up events. In 2020, the national spring clean took place without incident during a pandemic. The number of events in 2020 was 5,413 and approximately 2,900 tonnes of litter was collected. In 2021, the national spring clean progressed under level 5 restrictions. Family or household bubble groups held their own clean-up within a 5 km radius of their homes. As the level of restrictions is lifted, the spring clean will be able to expand its scope and carry on through the summer and into autumn.

The estimated allocation to An Taisce for 2021 is in line with the 2020 allocation of €675,000.

Final details on payments in 2021 will not be available until the end of the year.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** I welcome the Leas-Cheann Comhairle and thank her for all of her co-operation over the past year. I know she differs with me ferociously on this issue. I have acknowledged all of the good work of An Taisce. I have been involved in the green schools campaign and have worked with Tidy Towns groups all of my life. I acknowledge the good work An Taisce has done but I believe we need to recalibrate its role. I told the Minister of State about the listed building formerly belonging to the Donoughmores at Knocklofty Demesne. It has been plundered, as have many other sites, but An Taisce does not seem to have any interest in it. However, when it comes to jobs and farmers trying to earn a living, it comes out with patent nonsense. Apparently, it has no issue with the plant. Its issue is with Government policy regarding milk production and dairy herd numbers. This is shocking. It always said that it is good for work. We need to work together. We need to rein in its funding and to have some debate. An Taisce will not talk to us or meet with us. This has to stop. We cannot keep throwing money at it for every invoice it gives us. It is wrong.

**Deputy Richard O'Donoghue:** I share Deputy Mattie McGrath's sentiments. We welcome the work An Taisce does with regard to the clean-up. I am been involved in the clean-ups in Limerick, as have all my family, neighbours and friends. That is a plus and a positive. The negative is what An Taisce is doing on the other side. The Minister of State has just said that it invoiced us for €675,000 during 2020. I want these invoices audited to ensure it is doing what it says on the tin. If it is not, then we will be able to get more out of that €675,000. It can be spent with more accountability so that we will be able to see where the money is going. We can get more work done out of it. I am a self-employed businessperson and may be audited. Let us audit An Taisce and see whether these invoices are legitimate and whether we can get the most possible for the funding it is getting.

**Deputy Hildegarde Naughton:** An Taisce is a non-governmental organisation active in the areas of the environment and built heritage in Ireland. The Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications has no statutory function in respect of this organisation. The Department provides An Taisce with funding for a variety of initiatives, including the national spring clean, Irish Business Against Litter, the national litter league and the green schools programme. A total of €5.4 million has been provided between 2012 and 2020 in respect of these environmental activities and public awareness initiatives. The estimated allocation for 2021 is in line with the 2020 allocation of €675,000. However, final details of the payments for 2021 will not be available until the end of the year. It is important to state that all payments made to An Taisce are in line with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform's Circular 13/2014 regarding the management of grant funding provided from public money. As I have stated, grant funding is paid on the basis of vouched expenditure only and An Taisce is required to provide supporting invoices stating that its claims relate to activities and services appropriate to the grant scheme's objectives.

### **Firearms and Offensive Weapons (Amendment) Bill 2021: Second Stage [Private Members]**

**Deputy Jim O'Callaghan:** I move: "That the Bill be now read a Second Time."

I will share my time with Deputy Devlin, who I believe is to speak for five minutes. I wel-

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come the opportunity to commence the Second Stage debate on the Firearms and Offensive Weapons (Amendment) Bill 2021. Fianna Fáil and I introduced this legislation last March because of the increasing concern of the parliamentary party regarding the increased use of knives in disputes and fights taking place in public areas. This is an issue of considerable concern not only to young people, but to their parents, because of a number of very high-profile and tragic cases of knife crime that resulted in the deaths of boys and young men.

Along with everyone in Fianna Fáil, I fully recognise that the issue of knife crime cannot be resolved through legislation alone. Simply enacting this legislation, or any other legislation, will not resolve the problem of knife crime. It is important to accept that there will always be an issue with, and an incidence of, knife crime in our society, just as there is in most other societies in the world. However, if we see the incidence of knife crime rising, we must, as policymakers, take steps to try to reduce that incidence. Legislation in one way whereby this can be achieved but there are many others. I will talk about those in due course. We need to look at issues such as educating men and young boys about the danger of carrying knives. We need to think about whether it may be necessary to introduce an amnesty for those persons who hold onto knives for the purpose of inflicting harm on others. We also need to reflect on whether we need to introduce legislation preventing the sale of knives to people under a certain age.

I commend the Minister of State, Deputy Browne, on the interest he has taken in this topic since assuming office ten months ago. I know it is an issue he is very concerned about and I commend him on driving the issue in his Department. He has spoken to me, Deputy Devlin and many other Fianna Fáil Deputies about this issue. He has a significant concern in this regard and I very much look forward to the speech he is to give in due course.

This Bill was introduced last March because of a number of very tragic killings of boys and young men with knives. Last January, not far from this convention centre, a boy called Josh Dunne was fatally stabbed as a result of a row. It was terrible not only for this family and friends, but for society in general, to see a young boy of such talent being lost so needlessly. Of course, a year prior to Josh Dunne's fatal stabbing, we saw the fatal stabbing of a young man in Cork, Cameron Blair. Again, this was a young man of tremendous potential with a great life to live who was needlessly killed as a result of a dispute arising on a night when everyone should have been enjoying themselves. Prior to that, not far from my constituency, another young man, Azzam Raguragui, was fatally stabbed in Finsbury Park in the summer of 2019. All of these deaths were terrible tragedies for the families of the boy and young men who died. However, they had another impact. They devastated the lives of the people involved in the disputes, including persons subsequently convicted of the manslaughter and-or killing of the individuals concerned.

We need to send a message to young men and boys in our society that it is not acceptable for them to carry knives. Some boys and young men seem to believe it is appropriate and necessary to carry knives to defend themselves. The carrying of knives for what may be perceived as self-defence purposes can lead to tragic outcomes. A fight or dispute develops, a knife is produced, a person is unintentionally killed and there are terminal and tragic consequences for the person killed, their family and the other individuals involved in the dispute.

We need to reflect upon the fact that knives are not just commonly used for violent purposes by boys and young men. I know from speaking to the Minister of State, Deputy Browne, that there is a high incidence of use of knives for violent purposes in domestic violence disputes. We need to tackle that issue, not just through legislation in respect of knife crime but predomi-

nantly through ensuring domestic violence is recognised as the scourge it is and tackled relentlessly in order that it be stamped out.

This Bill seeks to amend section 9 of the Firearms and Offensive Weapons Act 1990. That section provides that it shall be a criminal offence to carry a knife with the intent to inflict harm or injury upon another. The legislation we introduced last March and are debating today seeks to increase the maximum sentence that can apply for any person convicted of carrying a knife for the purpose of seeking to inflict harm upon another person. At present, the maximum sentence on indictment is five years. Under the terms of the Bill, that would increase to ten years.

People may ask why Fianna Fáil is putting this forward. It is because we think it is necessary to develop a debate and start a conversation about knife crime. It is important we send out a strong message that the carrying of knives for the purpose of seeking to inflict harm on others is something our society abhors and wants to challenge. For that reason, it is appropriate the sentencing available to a judge in respect of a person convicted of carrying a knife should be increased in the way we have outlined.

Legislation in itself is not the solution. We need to look at other factors. I mentioned that we need to look at education when it comes to boys and young men and the carrying of knives. We need to start looking in our schools and educate boys going through school on the danger caused and the harm inflicted by knives. People are not generally aware of the extent of the damage that can be inflicted by them. Boys and young men seem to think knives can be carried for the purpose of defending themselves or revealing the knife to deter somebody who may seek to attack them. Unfortunately, we know from experience that that is not what occurs. When a knife is produced in a fight or dispute, it can have tragic consequences.

We need to look at whether we need to create other offences relating to the age at which people are entitled to purchase knives from shops. We will never be able to remove knives from Irish society. They play an important and significant role in culinary matters. In every kitchen in Ireland, there will be knives. We are not talking about trying to remove those, but particular types of knives are manufactured not for culinary purposes but for those of combat. We need to ensure they are outlawed and that young people under a certain age cannot purchase them. If we introduce legislation around that as well as rolling out an information and education programme to young people throughout our society, it will improve the opportunity and increase societal discussion about violence and the use of knives.

We do not know the extent to which knives are used in domestic violence disputes. We do not know the number of times knives are used threateningly but not for inflicting physical harm on a partner. We do know the full statistics as to the number of times knives are used threateningly in a domestic environment. We need to ensure that when we seek to tackle, outlaw and target the scourge of domestic violence, we emphasise that it comes in many forms and the threat of violence is as significant as violence itself.

I will stop and give my colleague, Deputy Devlin, time to speak on the matter. Then I await with interest what the Minister of State has to say.

**Deputy Cormac Devlin:** Like my colleague, I welcome the opportunity to examine the Firearms and Offensive Weapons (Amendment) Bill 2021. I thank the Deputy for introducing this Bill last March. It seeks to increase the maximum prison sentence that can be imposed for the possession of knives.

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The Bill is a direct response to the increase in knife crime we have witnessed, unfortunately, in the capital and throughout Ireland. We have seen a spate of high-profile incidents, including Josh Dunne and others, in recent years. Physical or other types of assaults and knife crime constitute the worst nightmare of any parent of a teenage child or older.

Statistics from the Garda demonstrate the problem is getting worse. In 2016, gardaí seized 1,200 knives. This rose to 1,600 in 2017 and a staggering 2,000 in 2018. It is clear we have an ongoing problem with the possession and use of knives, particularly in Dublin. The solution is not exclusively through the criminal justice system. We also need to recognise the need to educate young men and boys in particular about the dangers of carrying knives. Many of them carry knives for the purpose of seeking to defend themselves, not intending to use them. Often the carriers of knives become the victims of same. We have seen far too often the tragic experience that, on a night when a knife is used, people can lose their lives through being fatally stabbed. Lives are being destroyed, especially young lives. Part of the solution is in education. We need to provide more public information about the use and dangers of knives and to warn young people about the consequences that can arise from carrying a knife.

It is not just young people. It is also men and women, as the Deputy alluded to in relation to domestic violence. We need to look at the criminal justice system. Fianna Fáil is of the opinion that the maximum sentence for carrying a knife for the purpose of trying to inflict harm on another person is far too low and should be increased to give a court greater discretion. This will not be the only solution but it sends a strong message to our community that it is unacceptable to carry knives.

This Bill will amend the existing legislation to increase, from five to ten years, the maximum prison sentence that can be imposed for possession of a knife likely to injure, incapacitate or intimidate any person. The Bill is essential. It sends that strong message and recognises that knives can be just as dangerous as other offensive weapons. I know the Minister of State, Deputy Browne, is working on that and I thank him for being in the House. I know he will engage and work constructively on this.

One aspect of Covid-19 was people reconnecting with their local open spaces. Anti-social behaviour, intimidation, racism and crime in these places is unacceptable and must be tackled. Everyone has the right to feel safe while enjoying public spaces in our cities, towns, villages and wider communities. In particular, we must feel safe here in our capital city of Dublin and it must be welcoming for everybody. Recent high-profile incidents have been unacceptable and more must be done to ensure communities are supported and streets and parks kept safe.

This Bill is one part of a solution to tackle knife crime. We also need increased support for organisations working with communities and a continued Garda presence to deter such incidents. I welcome efforts by the Government in this regard, particularly the introduction of local community safety partnerships. These partnerships grew out of the reform of the joint policing committees that were established to work in each local authority area. They will draw up local community safety plans to address issues of concern in their local area. Three pilot projects are currently being established, in Dublin's north inner city, Waterford and Longford, and will run for the next two years ahead of a national roll-out. Projects like these will ensure public spaces are safe and can be enjoyed by everyone. I commend the Bill to the House and thank Deputy Jim O'Callaghan for his work in bringing it forward.

I conclude by thanking the Leas-Cheann Comhairle for her assistance during our sittings in

the convention centre. This may be our last time talking in this space. I also thank the ushers and all the staff of the Houses of the Oireachtas and the convention centre for their help during the pandemic period.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Go raibh maith agat, a Theachta.

**Minister of State at the Department of Justice (Deputy James Browne):** I echo the sentiments of Deputy Devlin in thanking the Leas-Cheann Comhairle, the Ceann Comhairle, the ushers and other staff of the Houses of the Oireachtas, the staff in the convention centre and the members of An Garda Síochána who assisted us. They have done Trojan work over the recent period in keeping us all safe and effective as we did our work in the convention centre.

I acknowledge the great public concern, which the Government shares, arising from a number of serious knife crimes that have occurred in recent months and years. We are all conscious in this House of the serious impact violent crime, particularly attacks of a random nature, has on victims and families. I join all Deputies in condemning such crimes in the strongest possible terms. These offences pose serious questions of the criminal justice system. They raise questions of our society in terms of the conditions that exist to induce some of our citizens to engage in such crimes. They also raise particular challenges for Members in our role of reflecting the concerns of the people we represent.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan is to be commended for seeking to advance the legislative position in this area. His Bill gives us an opportunity to reflect on the appropriate policy and legislative response to the issue of knife crime. I have had an opportunity to discuss this issue with the Deputy on a number of occasions since my appointment as Minister of State, as well as with Deputies Devlin, McAuliffe, Pádraig O'Sullivan, Martin Kenny and others. I know the concern in regard to knife crime is shared right across the House. The overall picture on crimes involving the use of knives in this State is a mixed one. This is not in any way to downplay the traumatic effect of individual offences on victims and their families. I will seek to address this debate by placing it in the wider context of the available data on the extent of crimes involving knives and other offensive weapons, policy considerations on the most effective responses to such crime and some observations in regard to the provisions in the Bill.

Information on knife-related crime gathered by An Garda Síochána notes that such crime trends should be viewed in the context of the pandemic and the associated general decrease in criminality, but also the successful number of proactive seizures and interventions. While there was a decline in overall knife seizures in the period from 2010 to 2016, there has been an increase in the number of knives seized each year since then. This is due in large part to the introduction of new systems for the recording of all objects seized, including knives. More recently, there has also been an increase due to proactive policing operations, particularly during 2020, which saw an increased Garda presence due to the Covid-19 restrictions. This is reflected in the fact that knives, at 1.4%, accounted for the lowest ever proportion of all objects seized. The Government welcomes and supports the continued efforts of An Garda Síochána in this regard.

The most recent available HSE data, for 2005 to 2019, show a general decline in hospital discharges following an assault by knife since 2006. This is consistent with the trend shown by Garda data on crime incidents where a knife was involved. While there was a slight increase in hospital discharges following an assault by knife between 2018 and 2019, the numbers remain considerably lower than those seen up to 2011 and below the slight rises seen between 2013 and 2015. That is not in any way to lessen the seriousness of these crimes. Overall, while there is

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no strong evidence to suggest there has been any increase in crime incidents involving knives, any such incident is very serious and we must always be focused on lowering the incidence as much as possible. We should have regard to this mixed picture when considering the need for further measures.

I am aware that knives, given their accessibility in the home, may be used in domestic violence. This is a serious and deeply concerning issue. The use of a knife against a person in his or her home by a person he or she should be able to trust is a truly despicable act. I urge anybody who is in fear of his or her safety to reach out to An Garda Síochána and seek help.

Crime of any sort is not a phenomenon that exists in isolation. It is inevitably connected to significant and often complex underlying factors, including the insidious influence of criminal groups tempting young people into a life of crime, the effects of trauma and personal adversity, and the immediate effects of the misuse of alcohol or illegal drugs. All of these factors must be taken into account when considering policy and legislative options. There is a need for a more focused consideration of the factors that prompt people to carry knives in public places and any additional practical measures that might be useful, whether law enforcement or community engagement initiatives. There is international evidence to suggest that knife-carrying may be related to a perceived need for self-protection but we would need to validate those indications in an Irish context. The international evidence cautions against generic awareness campaigns, particularly if targeted at young people, as having a possible unintended consequence of increasing feelings of insecurity or creating the impression that knife-carrying is more widespread than it is. However, that does not negate the need for, or importance of, educating people on the dangers of carrying knives. It can be difficult to strike a balance in this regard but it is important to do so.

We need to develop an approach that addresses the specific circumstances in communities in this country and which can be pursued through our policing and public service frameworks. Nevertheless, examples in other jurisdictions may prove useful. In particular, we may have something to learn from the public health approach to knife crime that has been employed in Scotland. Previously, the approach there involved a focus on police enforcement. There was a change in focus in 2004 to looking at this type of violence as a public health problem. This was based on a recognition of the relationship between inequality and violence and the impact of adverse childhood experiences. Between 2008 and 2012, a strategy was put in place involving direct engagement with violent offenders, which provided an opportunity to break the cycle of offending. A range of projects to engage offenders and at-risk persons was put in place, with an emphasis on education, employment and self-improvement. In this State, current approaches such as the youth justice strategy, Garda diversion projects and probation schemes align with those taken in Scotland and will be further developed in the context of ongoing work.

To support a reasoned assessment of options to enhance responses to knife crime, I am convening a special subgroup of the forum on antisocial behaviour to examine this matter in the coming weeks. Some months ago, I convened a similar forum to address the issue of scramblers, out of which came reforming legislation and funding streams to provide social supports within the communities affected by the menace of scramblers. I established the forum on antisocial behaviour in October last year, in line with a commitment in the programme for Government. It draws together key agencies and expert representatives from community, business and academic backgrounds. The intention is that a subgroup of the forum will examine the various aspects of the knife crime phenomenon, including community-based programmes, areas for further research and how legislation might best be framed to support enforcement and

a reduction in the carrying of knives and their use in violent crime.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan's Bill will form an important part of that review and will be examined by the subgroup. This broad and considered approach will enable us to arrive at legislative proposals that are clearly aimed at producing effective results and putting plans in place to provide supports for communities. Issues relating to education and harm reduction will also form an important part of the subgroup's deliberations. It will carry out its work over a period of three months and will report as soon as possible thereafter on the proposed steps to be taken. I welcome the input of Deputy Jim O'Callaghan or any other Deputy into the work of the forum.

I turn now to the provisions of the Bill. The proposed removal of judicial discretion to impose a fine not exceeding €5,000 on summary conviction for possession of a knife or related articles may be problematic in certain technical aspects but that is something on which we can work with the Deputy prior to Committee Stage. Of course, in instances of assault where an offensive weapon is used, other charges may be brought that are more serious in nature and attract a higher sentence. For example, where a knife is used, charges may be brought for assault causing serious bodily harm, attempted murder or murder.

Notwithstanding these initial points, I support the absolute principle behind the Bill, namely, that the penalties for offences involving knife crime or similar related articles should be proportionate to the seriousness of the offence and the significant trauma inflicted on victims of crime. I acknowledge the number of fatalities and serious injuries arising from knife-related incidents and the Government sympathises with those families. I know several Deputies have voiced concerns with regard to such incidents. The question of how best to achieve a proportionate response is one I am happy to discuss both now and in the future with all Deputies. This is, of course, subject to the usual scrutiny of the Bill. The Joint Committee on Justice will assess and discuss the Bill in more detail. Of course, any Bill involving the possibility of a money message usually has to be considered by Cabinet.

Finally, the message needs to go out that it is never appropriate to carry a knife, even for defensive purposes. When a knife is produced, it can cause serious risk of tragic outcomes, very often for the person who pulls the knife. We have to ensure that message goes out clearly. I thank Deputies O'Callaghan and Devlin for their contributions, as well as Deputy Martin Kenny who is about to contribute to the debate.

**Deputy Martin Kenny:** I thank Deputy O'Callaghan, the proposer of the Bill. It is an important debate to have in the House. Much of this came from several incidents in the early part of the year. A woman from Mongolia who worked as a cleaner was stabbed not far from where the House is sitting. Such tragedies that are suffered by families really bring into sharp focus the need to do something on these issues. Deputy O'Callaghan referred to Cameron Blair and the situation in that regard. I noticed that the person recently sentenced in connection with that case was carrying a kitchen knife above his head at the time. Although the knives that are the primary focus of this legislation are offensive weapon-type knives in particular, the reality is that knives are everywhere in communities and societies. In that context, offensive weapons are lying around in the kitchens of most households. The point in respect of domestic violence is well made. Knives are a weapon that have been used, or threatened to be used, on many occasions in that context. We need to be cognisant of that as well.

On the Bill itself, I agree and Deputy O'Callaghan has acknowledged that this will not be the solution to the entire problem. It may be part of the solution and it is certainly good to have

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a debate on the issue. The current provision is for a sentence of up to five years. My understanding is that these cases rarely, if ever, go to the Circuit Court. The vast majority of the cases are dealt with in the District Court, where the person is charged with possession of a knife only and there are no mitigating circumstances or additional charges and the sentence can be quite light. However, there are cases in which knives or other offensive weapons, such as tools that are normally used for cutting hedges, are being carried around as offensive weapons. We need strong legislation to deal with such behaviour as there is a serious threat of serious injury in that context.

The Minister of State referred to the fact that there are ebbs and flows in the incidence of knife crime. I looked up the figures for 2006-11. There was an average of approximately 250 cases of knife attacks involving hospitalisation per annum in that five-year period. In the following five-year period, the yearly average decreased to approximately 180 such cases. The number of incidents goes up and down. There were a couple of months recently when there were many very serious incidents and murders in this city and that brought sharp focus onto the issue.

The reality is that we have to consider best practice elsewhere. Reference was made to Scotland in that regard but there are examples in other countries. In 1995 a model was introduced in Boston and, within five years, the number of serious knife crime attacks reduced by more than 60%. All of those models point to the use of other measures which really relate to education, training, offering opportunity to people, ensuring there are supports for communities, anti-poverty measures, youth work, drug addiction services and addiction services in general. One of the key things we should be considering is increasing funding for all of those services. It is a broader issue than the focus of the Bill, which is on knife crime. It goes to a range of criminal activity into which young people in particular can fall, leading to a very chaotic and turbulent lifestyle which usually ends in tragedy.

One of the key initiatives in many of the attempts to tackle this issue in other jurisdictions was to ensure that people who were convicted and ended up in prison as a result of knife crime were given adequate training and an adequate sense of hope. When they were released, protection and services were put in place for them and it was ensured that they had a place to live and the opportunity for training and work. Those people then became advocates and role models who went to speak to young people in danger of going down the same tragic path. That was found to be one of the best ways to address the issue. The importance of that peer group work stems from the fact it was not a person with a degree from some university who was telling the young people how to live, change or improve their lives but, rather, people from their community who had gone through the same type of chaotic lifestyle and, perhaps, early childhood they had experienced. There may be work such as that to be done here. It is certainly a common example of the approach taken in many of the jurisdictions where they had a lot of success tackling this problem. There have also been amnesties during which knives were handed in and so on, but that was only done when all of the other things were in place.

Tougher sentences alone will not resolve this issue. I do not think the individuals who are carrying a knife for whatever reason or are engaged in some kind of street battle will think for a moment about whether it is a five-year sentence or a ten-year sentence they will get. The reality is that they are in a different place. It is not about the sentence at that stage; it is about other things that are dominating their lives and it is dealing with those other things first that will resolve the issue.

I refer to the current problems and the possible ways of resolving them. I commend the Minister of State on the work to which he referred in the context of moving into that space and the work that was done on the issue of scramblers. A similar approach could be taken in respect of knife crime. We should be trying to extend local community safety partnerships, which are currently at pilot stage, to all areas as quickly as possible and particularly to areas where there are issues in respect of knife crime. It is usually the case that areas that have knife crime issues suffer from under-funding and have drug addiction issues and a range of other criminal and social issues. It all crosses over and there needs to be co-ordinated work between all the various agencies. Although criminal justice has a part to play, it is the failure and under-funding of all other agencies that leads to the criminal justice system being required.

I refer to the issue of mental health services in that regard. Many of those in prison are there as a result of mental health issues they may have developed due to the chaotic lifestyle they were leading or psychotic episodes while on drugs or recovering from drugs. If we had proper drug addiction services and youth services in particular in place, there would not be as much knife crime, addiction or mugging and all of the things that go with that.

Deputy O'Callaghan is to be commended on bringing forward the Bill. I think he acknowledges that it is not the end of the road and will not solve any problem initially, but it certainly puts a stronger deterrent in place. However, there is so much more work to do on the other side of the issue. I look forward to a full and comprehensive debate on Committee Stage of the Bill, when we can tease out and examine all of that and consider how we can come up with a solution. It is essential that a project similar to those that have worked in other jurisdictions is put in place. We need to look to best practice internationally, apply it and put the required funding in place because what cost can be put on one individual losing his or her life or undergoing a tragic and life-changing incident as a result of knife crime? A cost cannot be put on that.

*5 o'clock*

If we simply narrow it down to financial terms, where a person ends up in prison and is in Mountjoy, it involves a substantial cost to the State to keep them there for the length of the sentence. If those costs were put into services at the early stages to ensure that did not happen, it would be money well-spent. The old saying, "a stitch in time saves nine", is a model we need to consider when we look at the whole system of how we deal with the issue of juvenile crime in particular and how we can deal with it and resolve it.

The Bill is a start, and I commend Deputy O'Callaghan on bringing it forward. I commend the Minister of State on the work he is doing on the issue. However, I feel that we need to look at the issue in a broader context. I hope we can do that in the coming days.

**Deputy James Browne:** I take Deputy Kenny's comments on board. The broader piece is very important. In any instance where there is violent crime, education is critical, whatever the causes of the crime. Tackling socioeconomic problems and taking a wrap-around approach is also important. That is what we are doing with the antisocial behaviour forum. We are trying to find a way to look at the different causes of the issues around knife crime. It is not simply about legislation. Legislation is very important but we also need to look at the broader aspects around it.

**Deputy Jim O'Callaghan:** I thank the Minister of State and my colleagues, Deputies Devlin and Kenny, for their contributions. It has been most beneficial that we have had this debate.

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As all speakers have recognised, changing this law is not really going to resolve the problem. Legislation itself is a very blunt instrument. Therefore, when we introduce legislation into this House, sometimes it can generate a debate and a discussion about an important issue. Obviously, when it comes to legislation, it is very difficult to implement into that legislation the type of broader issues we have been discussing in the debate, such as education, training and trying to ensure we can attack the inequality that is behind so much criminal activity that takes place in our society.

I thank the Minister of State for providing some very important information and data in his speech. It is very important when we are having a discussion, whether on specifically amending law or policy issues, that we do so from a position of information and empirical evidence. It was interesting to note the Minister of State has acknowledged that, between 2010 and 2016, there was an increase in the number of knives seized each year in that period. That was alluded to by my colleague, Deputy Devlin. However, it is also important to note there was a reduction in the number of incidents where knives were involved, from 1,500 in 2019 to 1,300 in 2020. I do not have the up-to-date information in respect of the incidents of knife crime; the Minister of State does. It is very beneficial he is putting that information before the House today. It is also beneficial he has given us information in respect of the slight increase between 2018 and 2019 in hospital discharges following an assault by knife.

I am not suggesting, nor do I think anyone in the House is suggesting, that young people should be targeted with increased penalties and sentences if they are apprehended carrying a knife for the first time. Great discretion is given to our judiciary when it comes to imposing sentences on people who have been convicted of offences. I would not like to see a situation develop where boys, children or young men who are apprehended with knives immediately face prosecution or, indeed, the sanction of a criminal sentence. That is why I agree with the Minister of State that the youth justice strategy is so important in trying to divert young people away from a pathway of crime. We must recognise that in certain communities, young people are targeted and presented with opportunities, as it were, to engage in crime. We must ensure that no longer persists in those communities. We need to recognise that certain communities require further attention from the State to ensure young children - boys and girls - and young men and women who are facing difficult struggles and inequalities in their lives are not led down the pathway of crime that so many of them could go down unless they were deterred from it.

I welcome the Minister of State's point about the model that operated in Scotland. That seems to be working most effectively. I was also interested to hear what Deputy Kenny had to say in respect of the experience in Boston. These models show that if you implement changes in policy and take a holistic approach to a problem such as this, it can result in the reduction of dangerous incidents of knife crime. That is why it is important we try to put together, as the Minister of State is trying to do, a policy in respect of it.

I am fully aware the legislation itself, if it is enacted, is not going to be a major part of the solution. However, as I have said, the purpose of legislation, particularly in its early phases as it passes through the House, is to try to generate a debate on policy issues that we must seek to attain. That is why I welcome the response of the Minister of State and, indeed, Deputies Kenny and Devlin in respect of the proposal. When the Bill goes beyond Second Stage, we will have a further opportunity to look at a broader approach and to try to ensure we can put in place policies that will have an impact in reducing the incidence of knife crime and will also have an impact in reducing the number of people who get involved in carrying knives and, as a result, lead themselves down a path towards trouble.

I am conscious I may be the last Deputy to speak in the convention centre. I hope I am. It is to be hoped we will never be back here as Deputies discussing legislation. I am aware the Seanad also sat here. I wish to thank the Ceann Comhairle and Leas-Cheann Comhairle for the work they have done. I thank all the staff who have been here. We have been here since last May or June. It has been a difficult time for Members of the Oireachtas. Sometimes, politicians are not given any sympathy by the public. Indeed, we are not looking for sympathy. However, I am very conscious that colleagues who were elected for the first time in 2020 have not had the opportunity yet to settle into life in Leinster House, which is a lot easier to work with than having to come down to the convention centre.

I thank Leas-Cheann Comhairle and all the staff for all the great work that has been done in facilitating us to come down here. I hope we will not be back again, notwithstanding the fact we all did enjoy our time in the centre.

Question put and agreed to.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Before we finish, earlier today I noted that this is our final day of the session of this Dáil. It is also, as Deputy O'Callaghan has just pointed out, likely to be our final sitting here in the convention centre as it is expected we will make a full return to Leinster House in September. As many Deputies have said, there has been a significant disruption to the lives of Deputies and the staff in particular as well. It is important at this point to record our gratitude to the board and the staff of the convention centre for accommodating sittings of both Houses in this venue. I also acknowledge the very high standard of support afforded to us all by those who work here. We have given out and given out but I think we will actually miss it a little. Certainly, the staff have been very helpful and co-operative. Go raibh míle maith agaibh as ucht bhur dtacaíochta agus slán abhaile.

The Dáil adjourned at 5.08 p.m. until 2 p.m. on Wednesday, 15 September 2021.