



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

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

Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions	2
An tOrd Gnó - Order of Business	12
Health (Pricing and Supply of Medical Goods) (Amendment) Bill 2021: First Stage	22
Workplace Ventilation (Covid-19) Bill 2021: First Stage	24
Sittings and Business of Dáil: Motion	25
Rota for Leaders' Questions and Arrangements for Order of Business: Motion	28
Report of Joint Committee on the Environment and Climate Action: Motion	28
Registration of Wills Bill 2016 [Seanad]: Restoration to Order Paper	28
Health (Amendment) (No. 2) Act 2021: Motion	29
Childcare Services: Motion [Private Members]	56
Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters	87
Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions	88
Cúrsaí Gaeilge	88
Arts Policy	90
Sports Facilities	92
Covid-19 Pandemic Supports	94
Departmental Funding	96
Arts Policy	99
Arts Policy	101
Gaeltacht Policy	105
Arts Policy	107
Údarás na Gaeltachta	110
Culture Policy	111
Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate	112
Childcare Services	112
Coroners Service	115
Transport Infrastructure Ireland	117
Proposed Legislation	120

DÁIL ÉIREANN

Dé Máirt, 5 Deireadh Fómhair 2021

Tuesday, 5 October 2021

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

Paidir.

Prayer.

Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: Yesterday the Cabinet met at Páirc Uí Chaoimh in Cork to unveil the national development plan, NDP, to great fanfare. While the Government may have sought to distract the public with a dazzling performance in that hallowed stadium, the reality is the plan lacked any real substance. There was another glossy brochure filled with projects running years late, project that are running massively over cost and projects that have been announced and re-announced for decades. Regardless of whether it is roads, public transport or housing, there are a lot of promises that have never been delivered. When people read the NDP, they quickly see that “definitely” has become “maybe” or “not at all”. One of these maybes is the Cork to Limerick motorway. Comments from various Green Party Deputies, and the Minister for Transport, Deputy Eamon Ryan, already have cast serious doubt over whether this project will ever happen. The wording in the NDP begs the question of whether the Government is actually committed to a motorway between Cork and Limerick. The only sensible people who do not agree with a motorway between Cork and Limerick are those who have never been near the current road. It is unsafe, dangerous and it certainly will not drive economic growth in its current state. Almost half of the road is a single lane with no hard shoulder. The main link between the second and third cities in the State is in parts no better than a boreen. I am sure the Minister knows that himself. Then I looked at the metro plan for Cork. To attract investment into the region, it is essential that we transform our public transport system but that also seems to be a “maybe” and may meet the same fate as the Dublin metro, another perpetual promise, off in the distance.

The Minister has repeatedly stated that ensuring that Cork and Limerick and the surrounding region have the potential to grow, thrive and be a proper balance to Dublin is high on his agenda. It is also high on mine. There is unity in the region that there is huge potential for growth. This about balanced regional development but you simply cannot do that without modern quality links between the other southern cities or without a decent road between Cork and Limerick. You cannot do that without proper public transport either and you cannot do it without a national development plan that is sharply focused on delivery. We need a Govern-

ment that will be ambitious, that will modernise now and will enhance the connectivity between regional cities in a sustainable way.

We have had a few false dawns on the motorway between Limerick and Cork. Tá mise agus formhór na ndaoine i gCorcaigh, i Luimneach agus sa réigiún i bhfabhar an mhótarbhealaigh seo ach caithfear a rá go bhfuil amhras ann anois.

I ask the Minister not to squander another opportunity to get this done, as successive Governments have. The wording in the NDP raises very serious questions about whether the Government is committed to a motorway. I do not think it is unrealistic for people to expect that such cities would be connected by a quality motorway road. I hope he agrees that the days of short-term fixes and vague aspirations are gone. What we need is to move beyond promises and into specifics. I am seeking a commitment and reassurance. Is the Government going to build a motorway between Cork and Limerick? What is the timescale? Will we get funding commitments? Is the Government going to build a motorway?

Minister for Foreign Affairs(Deputy Simon Coveney): The Government has launched the most ambitious capital investment programme in the history of the State. It committed €165 billion of investment over the next ten years. This is a plan to deliver a sustainable development plan for the country. It is not just for the big cities; it is for rural Ireland as well. This plan is sustainable and focuses on the challenges of climate change as a priority, perhaps for the first time. This plan is consistent with the national planning framework that others in this House, particularly Deputy Kelly when he was in government, were involved in designing and the Government remains loyal to that. This plan provides funding certainty and policy certainty for the decade ahead, which is exactly what a national development plan is about.

Individual projects are named, of course. The city the Deputy and I both come from has been prioritised in this plan as one of the places where we can create a counterbalance to Dublin. As the Deputy is aware, the plan in Project Ireland 2040 is to facilitate 50% population growth in all the cities outside of Dublin to create proper urban centres of scale to create real counterbalance to an overcrowded capital city here in Dublin, while also investing heavily to deal with public transport deficits in and around the capital.

The plan announced yesterday is a continuation of the previous national development plan. It is committed to projects such as the project referred to by the Deputy. The Deputy has heard me speaking of the M20 project many times. I am absolutely committed to delivering a quality motorway between Cork and Limerick. I believe that Ireland's second and third city need to be linked with a proper road corridor but we also need to look at other alternatives such as a rail system that is fit for purpose and that will take people off the roads.

If we are to create the kind of counterbalance to the east coast and Dublin, which is overcrowded and needs counterbalance elsewhere around the country, then linking Cork and Limerick strategically makes a lot of sense, which is part of what the national planning framework talks about. In truth, this is an enormous project. It is going to take time to plan and it will need to go through the various permitting systems which is currently happening, and it will need to go through the necessary public consultation. While we currently see projects such as the Dunkettle interchange and the M22, as well as progress with regard to the M28 and many other projects in and around Cork city either happening in planning or taking shape, this is a huge project linking Ireland's second and third cities and it will take time. I believe the Government has been honest about that in the plans announced yesterday.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: This one of the most crucial pieces of infrastructure in the State, as the Minister has said, and I do not believe one could find another developed European country where one could say there is no motorway between the second and third cities. It is a crucial piece of infrastructure. It is about the region as a whole offering a counterbalance, as the Minister has identified, and the very clear need for it and the very clear objective for it.

There is an element of the Government speaking from both sides of its mouth. I have listened to Deputies and Ministers in the Government who have made comments within the past 24 hours that this project could be in doubt. Last year it was the Minister of State, Deputy Osian Smyth, and yesterday it was Deputy Leddin saying it was still to be decided and certainly was open to question, while the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan stated that while these projects are not a definite “No”, they might not be completed. It seems to me that the Green Party does not want the M20. I am sure the Minister will agree that a failure to commit to a Cork-Limerick motorway is not good enough. We have had too many false dawns when it comes to this project. The Minister is a senior Minister in this Government and is a Cork Deputy. Many times at Leaders’ Questions, questions are asked that are vague and aimless and go around the houses. Mine was a very straight question, namely, whether the Government is going to build a motorway between Cork and Limerick. Is the Government going to do that?

Deputy Simon Coveney: The Deputy is well aware that there is a strong commitment in this Government to build a motorway between Cork and Limerick. That has been confirmed by the Taoiseach many times, by the Tánaiste many times and by me and others. Any piece of infrastructure at that scale must go through a planning process, a permitting process, an environmental impact assessment and all of the other things that need to happen. Route selection has not even been finalised yet. Therefore, yes, we are committed to delivering on the much-needed improved road infrastructure between Cork and Limerick.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: It is a “Yes” or “No” question.

Deputy Simon Coveney: I have said “Yes” on many occasions with regard to this project-----

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: So, it is a “Yes”.

Deputy Simon Coveney: -----but I do not control a planning process and I should not. I also do not control public consultation processes or the other permitting that is necessary before an investment of this scale can take effect.

Deputy David Cullinane: It is the political block he is talking about.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: It is. The Minister is in government.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Minister, without interruption please.

Deputy Simon Coveney: The Deputy knows well the commitment that has been given to this project. In my view, it is an essential part of Cork’s and Limerick’s expansion and growth and economic prosperity in the future, as well as a plan that focuses on people’s quality of life. The Deputy will see additional commitments being made by the Government, however, in terms of sustainable transport systems also linking the second and third cities along with motorway infrastructure.

Deputy Alan Kelly: Before I begin, I wish my good friend, Vicky Phelan, all the best given

the news she gave us over the weekend. I am sure everybody in the House is thinking of her; I know I am.

Obviously, there was fanfare yesterday in Cork. It was a great local occasion for the Minister, the Taoiseach and the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform. I have been around when a number of these plans have been announced. I was probably involved in some of them. I have, however, never seen a launch of a national development plan, which aims to bring certainty to projects, actually create more uncertainty about their possibility than this one does. Even before it was announced, confusion abounded in the press conferences beforehand.

The Minister of State, Deputy Ossian Smyth, said this morning that none of the projects in the actual 160-odd pages are guaranteed but that it is more “a direction of travel”. As the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, said there will be healthy competition between projects, that obviously means that all the projects are not going ahead. In reality, as my colleague, Deputy Nash, who is sitting behind me, said, this is more like a work of fiction. It is a wish list with no clear delivery for a huge range of projects.

What this plan actually means, when you break it all down, is that many transport projects must go through not one but two proofs by the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan. The first is that they will have to be climate-proofed and that is fair enough. However, they will also have to go through the new national investment framework for transport in Ireland, or NIFTI for short. That would prioritise future investment in land transport projects. I, along with my colleagues, think NIFTI is going to be quite shifty for the Minister for Foreign Affairs and the Government, particularly for all the backbenchers present. When Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael backbenchers want to know when a bypass, road or the M20 is going to be built, therefore, they will suddenly be staring into the eyes of the Minister for Transport and he will be getting very shifty about NIFTI-----

Deputy Mattie McGrath: On a Honda 50.

Deputy Alan Kelly: -----because he will have to qualify on two levels whether these projects will go ahead. All the backbenchers will, therefore, be getting fairly shifty with him.

There are two flagship projects in the 2018 national development plan, which I looked through yesterday. They appear to have been abandoned. One is the M20 motorway, which the Minister has been questioned about and refused to answer, and the other is the MetroLink. In 2018, both of these projects were listed for completion in approximately five and a half years from now. People want to know what has changed. How was the M20 gone from an M20 to an N/M20? Why are there no dates for the MetroLink? I ask the Minister to please answer. Will the M20 actually be built and will it be built as a motorway? What are the timescales for the completion of the Dublin MetroLink?

Deputy Simon Coveney: I can confirm first of all to Deputy Mattie McGrath that he is very unlikely to see the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, on a Honda 50 at any point in the future.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: With an ashtray.

Deputy Simon Coveney: He generally pedals his own bikes.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: He will be paddling his own canoe soon.

Deputy Simon Coveney: The NIFTI process is simply good governance, ensuring value

for money and there is an environmental audit before hundreds of millions of euro are invested. The Deputy knows only too well why that is necessary, having served in Departments in the past. The truth is we are committing to significant expenditure each year. While people may say this is a wish list and there are not dates next to certain projects, this is a list the Government intends to pursue. It has committed to significant capital expenditure each year on roads, road maintenance, public transport systems, greenways and walkways and will need to deliver on that as otherwise, we will have a significant underspend each year.

I remember, during my time in government, a time when we were spending approximately €2 billion to €3 billion on capital investment. We are spending €10 billion per year now and growing. The idea this does not mean real investment in infrastructure is nonsense. We cannot put an exact date on certain projects because of their scale and the permitting system but that does not mean we are not looking to pursue them. If one looks at what has been achieved from 2018 to 2021, there is a significant list of achievements linked to the last national development plan, which is highlighted in the context of this one because it is a continuation of that plan with increased expenditure on capital projects.

We will move to deliver projects such as the N28, even though they have not happened yet, just as we will move to try to deliver on the N/M20, which I understand always has been called the N/M20, in the previous development plan and in this one. My view is that the road between Limerick and Cork should be a motorway. That is the view of the vast majority of people who look at this project and drive that road on a regular basis, as I do. The Government intends to commit a significant amount of money to deliver a project of that scale. Likewise, with the metro, which is an enormous project in terms of cost but is essential for a city the size and scale of Dublin and especially for those who live on its northside.

We have not given exact dates to certain projects. There are dates linked to other projects in the national development plan but anybody who thinks this is a wish list that will not result in significant increases in expenditure on the capital side, building new sustainable infrastructure for the State, has not read the document.

Deputy Alan Kelly: I read the document and I also looked at the one from 2018. Contrary to what the Minister said, it said the road between Cork and Limerick will be a M20 - not a N/M20. That qualification came in yesterday. That is a very big change for the people of Buttevant, Mallow and Charleville, from potential bypasses around their towns, about which the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, often talks, to having a motorway which will go from Cork to Limerick. The components of NIFTI, as the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, has brought in and which the Minister, Deputy Coveney, says is good practice, were always in that Department. I know; I was in that Department. This is a qualification criterion in order that the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, can potentially look at what projects he wishes to pursue as part of his agenda in government, as opposed to what the overall Government may wish. There are a number of projects which had defined schedules and timelines in 2018. Those have now disappeared. How can the Minister stand over the fact that in five and a half years' time, we were due to have metro north and the M20 but now that has gone out into never land?

Deputy Simon Coveney: It has not gone out into never land. Those projects are named and we have the funding now, which is a significant increase on the funding for the last national development plan because, the country can now afford to borrow into the future for strategic capital investment, which is exactly what is happening. One does not propose to spend €165 billion and not deliver significant projects, many of which are named, some of which are not,

in this development plan.

Deputy Alan Kelly: It was there a number of years ago. There was a timeline.

Deputy Simon Coveney: There was not a clear timeline-----

Deputy Alan Kelly: There was.

Deputy Simon Coveney: -----in relation to all projects----

Deputy Alan Kelly: The date given was 2027.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Minister, without interruption.

Deputy Simon Coveney: We will progress projects-----

Deputy Alan Kelly: Read the document.

Deputy Simon Coveney: -----as quickly as they can be progressed through the planning process. The Deputy knows as well as I do of the potential delays in projects of this size and scale that will come through planning systems, environmental impact studies, potential legal challenges and so on. We now have the resources to be able to deliver a significant scale of investment annually, every year for the next ten years-----

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Minister.

Deputy Simon Coveney: -----that will allow us to build strategic sustainable infrastructure. The latter will, in my view, include prioritising, over time, a motorway between Limerick and Cork.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Minister. We move now to Deputy Verona Murphy.

Deputy Verona Murphy: Last week, the Taoiseach visited Rosslare Europort and Rosslare. For the umpteenth time, an announcement was made regarding the allocation of €40 million to develop a customs post after Brexit. This money would have been spent in any event. The point is that the Government is not committing any money to Rosslare, other than that which has been necessitated as a result of Brexit. No investment was announced that would deliver an upgrade of the port, deepening the waters or providing a new pier and quayside in order to facilitate the cheaper movement of goods from Ireland to mainland EU. There has been no announcement to facilitate the creation of 2,000 jobs in the green wind energy sector, which Rosslare Europort is uniquely placed to accommodate.

The national development plan was announced yesterday. Astonishingly, there is no specific section to deal with post-Brexit infrastructural requirements or otherwise. There is recognition that Ireland is going through the most difficult of marriage break-ups. There is no consideration of this fact in the national development plan. There is nothing in the plan that would indicate the strategic importance of Rosslare Europort. The announcement for the umpteenth time of a customs post in Rosslare Europort is not an investment. It is part of our Government's obligation to the EU, paid for by the EU.

This is symptomatic of what Governments here do. This Government is not investing in the country's most strategic piece of infrastructure in order to: ensure sufficient capacity in our connectivity for commercial trade and tourism into the future; ensure Ireland's competitiveness

as a country on the periphery of the European mainland; and ensure that costs are kept to a minimum and within living wage rates.

Before Ireland finds itself in the same position as the UK, with empty shelves, foodstuffs not being delivered and dairy farmers letting milk run off down the drain because there are no drivers to collect it, I ask the Minister what commitment he can give that it will not find itself in such a position? When will the Department of Transport get the finger out and recognise that non-EU HGV driver licences must be recognised in order to issue work permits? How long will it take the Government to recognise that it must invest in Rosslare Europort, which is our most strategic piece of infrastructure, in order to ensure competitiveness? Are we waiting for inflation to rise to 8% or 9%, which will make dinners for lower-paid workers completely unaffordable? I would appreciate it if the Minister could respond.

Deputy Simon Coveney: In the context of the significant increase in shipping services from Rosslare Europort direct to the Continent as a result of Brexit and to enhance Rosslare Europort's trade competitiveness, Iarnród Éireann and Rosslare Europort have completed their strategic investment master plan for the port for the coming years. The master plan includes investment of €42 million over the period 2021 to 2026 in customer facilities, port infrastructure, freight facilities, port assets, new technology and linking the new entrance of the port with proposed new port access road. Additionally, to support the free flow of import and export trade through Rosslare Europort to Great Britain, there has been significant engagement, preparation and investment in the State agency facilities required in Rosslare. The Office of Public Works, OPW, constructed temporary customs, agriculture and health facilities in the lead-up to a possible no-deal Brexit in 2019. These facilities are located outside the port in Kilrane, which is located on the N25 on the approach to Rosslare town. These are intended as interim facilities pending the construction of permanent facilities within the port.

Rosslare Europort is unique among the State-owned ports as it is not a commercial company operating under the Harbours Act. Instead, it operates on a commercial basis as a division of Iarnród Éireann and all investments are funded from port revenues. The Department of Transport continues to liaise closely with other Departments and Government agencies, and with Rosslare Europort and Iarnród Éireann, in respect of the design and development of the permanent customs, agriculture and health facilities. In August, the OPW submitted a planning application to Wexford County Council of these proposed facilities. This investment, along with the master plan, will ensure that Rosslare Europort is fully capable of having in place the controls required by the UK becoming a third country and of meeting the needs of future shipping capacity growth. Rosslare Europort and Iarnród Éireann are working together with the OPW on the co-ordination of works required. The parallel plans will require close liaison to ensure that the port remains fully operational while construction works are ongoing.

Deputy Verona Murphy: The Minister has missed the point. The much lauded €40 million that will be spent by the OPW constructing another customs post - in addition to the €11 million that was spent outside the port - will only serve to take up room in an already congested facility. We can ill afford that in a port that has increased traffic throughput by 400% post Brexit. Does the Minister understand that the port needs urgent investment in order to ensure the countries imports and exports move freely, directly to mainland Europe? The capacity increase was nothing but discouraged by the Government. The shipping company, DFDS, was told it was not required, nor were those who facilitate it. The Irish Maritime Development Office report stated we would move as required. There are no ships and capacity has not increased to where it should be. Without the latter, our tourism will not return and commercial traffic will suffer

greatly. What will it take for the Minister to recognise this?

Deputy Simon Coveney: Is the Deputy saying she does not want the €40 million investment?

Deputy Verona Murphy: I am saying that it is taking up space. There is nothing wrong with where it is at present. All the Government has to do is ask the EU if we can extend the area of the port and keep what we have, which cost €11 million. The €40 million the Government is spending is to replace that which is in the port area and taking up space.

Deputy Simon Coveney: With respect, we need to work with the port authorities there and we are.

Deputy Verona Murphy: It is clear the Minister does not understand.

Deputy Simon Coveney: I have spoken with the port authorities. That is why the strategic investment is part of the master plan for the port that was put in place by the port authorities there. We need-----

Deputy Verona Murphy: It is a master plan that requires €200 million.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Minister, without interruption.

Deputy Simon Coveney: I do not disagree with the Deputy that this is a port in which there should be capital investment. It is a port that has shown extraordinary capacity since Brexit took effect. We saw a dramatic increase in the amount of freight traffic through Rosslare in terms of direct ferry links with mainland Europe. I have spoken to many of those ferry operators about the latter.

Deputy Verona Murphy: Where is the money? Where is the investment?

Deputy Simon Coveney: With respect, as is the case with any port, we need to plan for investment and drive and fund most of that investment through revenues that come through the port. It is not a case of simply looking for capital grant aid from the Government for this. The Government will, of course, work with the port authorities in Rosslare to do what we can.

Deputy Verona Murphy: I would have thought five years was enough time.

Deputy Simon Coveney: As is the case in every other port, these are commercial decisions that need to be planned for and are made in that context.

Deputy Thomas Pringle: Last week, we saw a major Government kite-flying exercise involving leaks from within on the issue of mica redress prior to the publication of the working-group report on the grant scheme. I can tell the Minister that they went down like the *Titanic* with people in Donegal. I am sure it was the same in Mayo, Sligo, Clare, Tipperary and other affected countries. What happened only served to enrage the people in my constituency who have sincerely engaged with the processes put in place by the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage. I agree with the mica group homeowners who have refused to sign off on Friday's report. It is a nothing report. It is a sham and a rehash of previous analysis. As Eileen Doherty, the campaigners' representative, said, "The objective of the working group was to make a number of recommendations to the Minister as to how these issues could be addressed. Nowhere in that document do I see recommendations". Ms Doherty is right. It appears that

this was just another disingenuous can-kicking exercise. It is disrespectful to my constituents in Donegal and others from around the country. Last night, the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, wrote to Members of the Opposition seeking our views in order "to help inform a political consensus on the matters involved". Neither he nor the Government have shown the slightest bit of interest in any of our ideas. The Government has treated ideas, proposals and suggestions from the Opposition on all topics with a belligerence and contempt that stems from an unfounded confidence bordering on arrogance. It was disingenuous bullshit to send that letter out to us.

I will cite an example of that to which I refer. During the recent pandemic, the biggest crisis our country has ever faced, the Government, after an initial flurry of cross-party briefings, failed to follow through or keep Opposition representatives properly informed. The approach of the Government was insincere then and this time is no different. It is a sickeningly transparent PR stunt, but no one is falling for it. My deepest regret and disappointment is that the Government would do this on the backs of people who are suffering. I refer to those who have seen their homes demolished and who are watching their life's savings and dreams crumble before their eyes. These people are living in a state of constant anxiety and fear regarding the safety of their children and what the future holds for them in mica-riddled homes, with no hope of a resolution. Does the Government understand the impact that the lack of hope has on people's mental health and well-being? Lives are being destroyed in Donegal. I have a question for the Minister and I ask that he keep his answer concise and to the point. Has the Government made provision for full mica redress in next week's budget?

An Ceann Comhairle: Before I call the Minister, and notwithstanding the fact that people can be angry and frustrated by events, we should try to adhere to the use of proper parliamentary language. I call the Minister.

Deputy Simon Coveney: I understand the anger and frustration felt by many families in respect of watching their homes literally crumble after having spent their life savings building them. The Government is going to respond to this issue. We do not have a final report from the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage yet, but we will have it in the coming weeks. It is a matter for the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputy Michael McGrath, the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage and the Government more generally to decide how we plan for that in the context of the budget. I am not going to speak in detail about the budget today because it would not be appropriate to do so.

We have gone through a process here as a Government. Many Ministers have visited Donegal and the other counties impacted by the mica issue. The Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage is taking this matter incredibly seriously. The financial package that will be put together and approved by the Government in time will be one of the largest financial support packages ever announced in respect of anything. We need to get it right and we need to listen to people. We have tried to listen and take on board different views. The letters sent to the Opposition spokespeople asking them for their input represent a genuine effort to try to get all-party consensus in terms of how we can provide a financial support package for the families involved.

The Deputy can dismiss that as a PR exercise if he wants. If you are going bring to Government a package involving the kind of expenditure that I expect we will see in the coming weeks, then you try to build consensus around that, if you can, in order that the issue involved does not become an unnecessary point of political contention. I have heard many Deputies speak about

mica - on both sides. There are equally strong feelings on both sides of this House in respect of this matter. Nobody here has a monopoly on wisdom or of compassion for the families that have had their lives turned upside down by the mica crisis they are facing in their homes.

My understanding is that it is unlikely that a package will be brought to Government in respect of this matter before the budget. I understand that it is probably a few weeks away yet. I assure the Deputy that this is something the Government has committed to dealing with head-on, working with the families, communities and the Opposition parties, in order to try to ensure that we will get what will be a hugely expensive but necessary support package for the families and individuals impacted by the mica crisis. I do not have an exact date for the Deputy, but we will approve that package in the next few weeks. However, people will not have to wait too much longer to see the detail of that package.

Deputy Thomas Pringle: Perhaps I have a lack of experience, but I thought the budget set out what the Government intends to spend money on in the coming year. Perhaps I am wrong in that regard. As I see it, the budget is the deadline for what is happening with the mica issue. What I can see is that the Government is kicking the can down the road. This email, which I printed off, arrived last night for us. The report of the working group on defective concrete blocks was published last week. It is basically pages and pages of nothing. It does not make any recommendations. It does not do anything. The mica homeowners were right not to sign off on it and not to agree to it because there is nothing in it to agree to.

Homeowners are coming down here again on Friday to have a march and to put their case once again to the Government. The working group has failed. This letter is now asking us to provide costings. The Government has said it cannot provide costings, yet we are expected to provide costings. The Government must put the minds of these families at rest and tell them that the issue will be dealt with. This is being kicked down the road and is dragging on for weeks. The working group was extended from the end of July to the beginning of September and then it was the end of September. Everything has now been put back even further. The Government must end this for the people and let them know that something will be done.

Deputy Simon Coveney: I hear Deputy Pringle on that. At the last meeting of the working group, which was held on 29 September, the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, thanked the working group for its engagement and involvement in the process in recent months. In particular, he acknowledged the stress and hardship which affected homeowners and assured them that enhancements would be made to the scheme. The working group submitted the final report to the Minister on 30 September. As the Deputy outlined, building on the motion in the Dáil in June 2021, the Minister has written to Opposition spokespeople to try to ensure that we fully understand their input as well.

The working group has not failed. The working group and the report it put together has informed the Minister and his Department as they finalised a proposal to bring to the Government. That is what is happening now. I can commit, as others from the Government have, to families, that in the next few weeks the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage will bring a comprehensive proposal to the Government for sign off, which will involve an enormous amount of public money to support families that have been impacted in a terrible way by mica. That is something the Government will deliver on. Regarding how that is dealt with in the context of the budget next week, that is a matter for the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform and the Minister for Finance.

An tOrd Gnó - Order of Business

An Ceann Comhairle: It has been agreed that the report of the Business Committee will be taken as read. Are the proposed arrangements for next week's business agreed to?

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: They are not agreed. Only three and a half hours have been set aside for the Official Languages (Amendment) Bill tomorrow evening. There are more than 300 amendments to the Bill. I understand that leaves 40 seconds for every amendment. My colleague, Deputy Ó Snodaigh, our spokesperson, has strenuously asked me to appeal again to the Government to set aside time this Wednesday and the following Wednesday to allow proper scrutiny of the Bill. Two three and a half hour sessions would allow proper time to debate the amendments. This is a very important piece of legislation and it should be given the necessary time over the next two weeks. I appeal again for that to happen.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: Ba mhaith liom mo dhíomá agus mo chuid feirge a chur in iúl go bhfuil sé leagtha amach go mbeidh díospóireacht srianta againn amárach ar feadh trí uair agus fiche nóiméad. Tá sé sin scannalach agus maslach agus nílimid chun glacadh leis. Níl sé féaráilte. Táimid ag fanacht leis an mBille le fada. Níl a fhios agam cé chomh fada agus atáimid ag fanacht - ag dul siar go dtí 2015 - agus fós, níl na leasuithe feicthe againn sa bhunpháipéar.

Níl sé foilsithe fós ag Oifig na mBillí agus níl locht ar bith uirthi. Tá an locht go huile is go hiomlán ar an Rialtas. Ní féidir leanúint ar aghaidh agus a rá go bhfuil sé dáiríre faoi Bhille nua agus an t-am chomh srianta agus atá sé.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: On No. 11, motion re Part 2 of the Health (Amendment) (No. 2) Act 2021, it is beyond comprehension that the Government would extend the emergency powers. Everybody's expectation is that we will be reopening everything on 22 January. The schools are back due to the heroic effort made by so many. To think the Government wants to hold onto this power grab for another three months and kill this Christmas as well, given communities, families and the business community have suffered so much. They are trying to get up off their knees and the Government wants to introduce this. My colleagues are complaining about having three and a half hours for the Official Languages (Amendment) Bill, and I agree, but we are only getting two hours and 20 minutes. Our group will have six and a half minutes to debate such an important and draconian measure. It just goes to show that something deeper is going on here about this whole Covid business than the health of the people and the welfare of the citizens of Ireland, the business people and the people trying to carry on their work and their duty. It is apartheid what is going on and we are objecting to that. I am not at all satisfied.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I have a problem with the use of the word "apartheid". I am against the Bill as well but to describe it as "apartheid" is not acceptable. It undermines the actual reality of apartheid.

Deputy Simon Coveney: I often disagree with my colleague across the way but, on this one, I do not. I think we need to be careful with the language we use here-----

Deputy Mattie McGrath: It is medical apartheid.

Deputy Simon Coveney: -----because, otherwise, we start undermining what are words

that describe issues that we need to be taking a very strong stand against.

There is not something deeper going on here. We have been debating in this House, both live and remotely, measures that the Government needs to put in place to protect people in the context of Covid for 18 months now, and that continues as we remove restrictions on society.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: They are keeping the powers.

Deputy Simon Coveney: I respectfully suggest that Deputy Mattie McGrath tries to work with us on that-----

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I did for a long time.

Deputy Simon Coveney: -----so we can safely move away from restrictions towards personal responsibility and, indeed, continue to take medical and scientific advice on how we do that.

In regard to the Official Languages (Amendment) Bill, I hear what colleagues are saying. My understanding is that 25 hours were given on Committee Stage to this legislation. My understanding also is that the Irish language community wants to see us moving on and passing this legislation now. We have a limited amount of time this week to do that. The proposal from the Government is that we get on and finalise this legislation, as opposed to committing many more hours to it, given the amount of time we have spent considering this legislation already on Committee Stage.

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

Deputy Catherine Connolly: Can I respond or is that out of order?

An Ceann Comhairle: If you wish to.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: Go raibh maith agat. The Minister's answer is totally unacceptable. The committee worked so hard for those hours because the Bill was so deficient. We forced a situation where we brought in amendments, the vast majority of which were ruled out of order. The Minister was to come back and discuss with us the new amendments to save time but that never happened. We are now in a position where we have not even seen which amendments are ruled in and which are ruled out, and we are supposed to make a final decision tomorrow night. It is simply unacceptable.

An Ceann Comhairle: In order to get clarification, is part of the problem here the lack of availability of the amendments at this stage?

Deputy Catherine Connolly: We know the amendments but we do not know which ones are in and which ones are out. The main problem, in addition to that, is the limited time of three hours and 20 minutes. We have two problems: we do not know which amendments have been ruled in or out, and there is limited time.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: My colleague, Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh, points out that the Minister has tabled 40 additional amendments. The Irish language community has waited nine years for this legislation, so I think one more week to get it right would not go amiss.

An Ceann Comhairle: Are the proposed arrangements agreed to?

Deputies: No.

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

<i>The Dáil divided: Tá, 25; Níl, 19; Staon, 0.</i>		
<i>Tá</i>	<i>Níl</i>	<i>Staon</i>
<i>Burke, Colm.</i>	<i>Boyd Barrett, Richard.</i>	
<i>Calleary, Dara.</i>	<i>Carthy, Matt.</i>	
<i>Chambers, Jack.</i>	<i>Connolly, Catherine.</i>	
<i>Crowe, Cathal.</i>	<i>Cronin, Réada.</i>	
<i>Devlin, Cormac.</i>	<i>Cullinane, David.</i>	
<i>Durkan, Bernard J.</i>	<i>Gannon, Gary.</i>	
<i>English, Damien.</i>	<i>Harkin, Marian.</i>	
<i>Farrell, Alan.</i>	<i>Kelly, Alan.</i>	
<i>Fitzpatrick, Peter.</i>	<i>Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.</i>	
<i>Flanagan, Charles.</i>	<i>McGrath, Mattie.</i>	
<i>Grealish, Noel.</i>	<i>Mitchell, Denise.</i>	
<i>Griffin, Brendan.</i>	<i>Munster, Imelda.</i>	
<i>Haughey, Seán.</i>	<i>O’Callaghan, Cian.</i>	
<i>Higgins, Emer.</i>	<i>O’Donoghue, Richard.</i>	
<i>Madigan, Josepha.</i>	<i>Ó Murchú, Ruairí.</i>	
<i>Moynihan, Aindrias.</i>	<i>Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.</i>	
<i>O’Brien, Darragh.</i>	<i>Ryan, Patricia.</i>	
<i>O’Brien, Joe.</i>	<i>Smith, Duncan.</i>	
<i>O’Callaghan, Jim.</i>	<i>Ward, Mark.</i>	
<i>O’Dea, Willie.</i>		
<i>O’Gorman, Roderic.</i>		
<i>O’Sullivan, Christopher.</i>		
<i>Ó Cathasaigh, Marc.</i>		
<i>Phelan, John Paul.</i>		
<i>Richmond, Neale.</i>		

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

Question declared carried.

3 o’clock

An Ceann Comhairle: Mention was made there of the role of the Bills Office in preparing this legislation. I should point out it was 5.10 a.m. this morning when the Bills Office and Rannóg an Aistriúcháin completed their work in preparation for dealing with this Bill this week,

having worked through the night.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: Except that was the whole point-----

An Ceann Comhairle: We will move to questions on promised legislation and I call Deputy Conway-Walsh.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: Yesterday was a day for bold, transformative decisions. We in the west waited with anticipation for our share of the €650 billion national development plan but there were no individual projects. The Minister for Foreign Affairs mentioned earlier individual projects had been named. County Mayo was not mentioned anywhere in the national development plan. There was no mention of the R312, the N26 or of Mayo University Hospital. There was one mention of the western rail corridor. It is not only me saying this. Fianna Fáil Oireachtas Members and Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael councillors are really angry at what has happened and at the way in which the Government turned its back on the west yesterday.

On the western rail corridor, comments made by the Taoiseach and the Minister for Transport, Deputy Eamon Ryan, after the publication of the NDP seem at odds with the absence of any commitment. Will the western rail corridor be delivered, as was promised?

Deputy Simon Coveney: First, the west of Ireland is not forgotten by this national development plan. It is quite the opposite. The whole point of this national development plan is to try to rebalance the country in the context of the over-reliance on the capital city and the east coast as an economic driver. As a result of that situation, we have people working in Dublin who live as far away as Portlaoise and further, who are commuting every day. This development plan is about changing that by focusing on quality of life, where people work, how they move around and being able to work from home. It is about investing in things like broadband, public transport systems, better rail systems, including commuter rail, light rail systems and so on, thus ensuring not only is the population growth outside Dublin in cities outpacing such growth in Dublin but also in rural towns and villages. It is in that context that infrastructure in the west of Ireland will be funded.

Deputy Alan Kelly: Three weeks ago I raised with the Taoiseach the lack of places available at the Central Mental Hospital, Dundrum, and the case of a young man who spent four and a half months in jail because there was no secure unit facility for him. I have raised it with the Taoiseach and with the Minister of State with responsibility for mental health, Deputy Butler. It is scandalous that the State is letting him down. It is also costing a fortune. He was sent to Ennis psychiatric services three weeks ago. I said on the floor of the House he would be leaving there and if a unit was not found for him he would be going back to jail. A few hours ago he was sent back to jail for another four and a half months, which will mean nine months in jail for a young man with a very severe, psychotic mental illness who should be in a secure unit. I ask the Minister to look into this because he cannot spend another four and a half months in jail. I also ask him to look into the provision of secure places for people across the country, particularly in Dundrum.

Deputy Simon Coveney: This is clearly a very sensitive and serious case. The note that I have on it says that the case is subject to legal proceedings and in that context, I must keep my comments on it very short. I will follow up on it on the Deputy's behalf with the Minister of State with responsibility for mental health, Deputy Butler. I know that the new national forensic mental health service facility at Portrane is due to open before the end of the year but in the

meantime, this particular case needs more attention. The idea that we have to use our Prison Service to accommodate very ill people seems substandard, despite the supports that are there. I will raise the matter with the Minister of State and will revert to the Deputy.

Deputy Gary Gannon: People on low incomes will be having their own blackouts this winter because they simply will not be able to afford to keep the lights on, according to a representative of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul at the launch of the society's report, Warm Housing for All, this week. The price of gas and other fuel has increased by 19.6% in the past year. The moratorium on disconnections finished on 1 June 2021 and while many of us would not have noticed because of the warm weather, that is changing. People are getting cold in their homes and are worried about being able to keep the lights on. I appreciate that the Minister will not be able to tell me the exact measures in this year's budget to alleviate fuel poverty but when does he expect those measures to kick in? They cannot wait until January. Will the Government consider reinstating the moratorium on disconnections because we cannot, in the middle of an energy crisis, have a scenario where power to homes is cut off.

Deputy Simon Coveney: Unfortunately, fuel prices are on the way up and this is being driven by external factors, predominantly the price of gas on international markets. We are a price-taker in that regard, despite the fact that we have competition in Ireland. Fuel poverty will be a focus of the Ministers for Finance and Public Expenditure and Reform in the budget next week but obviously I cannot give the Deputy any details on that. I take Deputy Gannon's point about the onset of winter and whether we can wait until some point next year to introduce improved supports. I will pass on his concerns to the Ministers involved.

Deputy Paul Murphy: We need answers from the Government about the quite incredible situation involving the Attorney General effectively double-jobbing, acting as legal adviser to the Government during the week while at the weekend, doing what appears to be a nixer for former Independent News & Media, INM, directors. This is the same Attorney General who provided legal advice against a ban on evictions and rent increases without following the legal requirement to submit, in writing, a declaration of a potential conflict of interest given that he has a property portfolio estimated to be worth up to €8.5 million. We know that the Attorney General was doing work for the INM directors just days before the Government said his private work had ceased.

I have a few questions for the Minister. First, when did Mr. Gallagher's private work cease? Second, can we see a full list of all of the private practice he engaged in while working as Attorney General? Third, on what basis did the Government agree to this arrangement?

Deputy Simon Coveney: I am not sure I will have time to answer all of those questions now but what I will say is that prior to his appointment in June 2020, the Attorney General disclosed to the Taoiseach that he had a few existing litigation commitments to complete, which he considered he had a professional obligation to discharge. The Taoiseach informed the other Government leaders prior to Mr. Gallagher's appointment. In the normal course of events, these private professional obligations would have been discharged in a short period following his appointment. However, due to the Covid-19 pandemic there were exceptional delays in hearings of those aspects of the litigation in which the Attorney General was involved and it was not possible to discharge those obligations as early as anticipated. The Attorney General has no continuing private professional obligations, the last of which was scheduled to cease and did cease on 25 September 2021, on which date he discharged the last of his outstanding private professional obligations.

Deputy Noel Grealish: Plans for the N6 Galway city ring road were lodged with An Bord Pleanála on 18 October 2018, 20 years after the initial application for the official application for the Galway outer-city bypass was lodged and five years after the original project was abandoned. Three years after the initial lodging of this project application there still has been no decision on whether this piece of infrastructure can go ahead. Five times, An Bord Pleanála has deferred making a final decision, the latest being last Friday. It says the case is now due to be decided by 19 November. That is not guaranteed and it could be extended again.

There are 54 householders whose homes are to be demolished or bought out to make way for this road. Their homes have been effectively frozen for the past five years. They cannot sell or renovate. These delays are causing enormous distress for these homeowners. Will the Government bring in legislation which provides that when the board sets a date for a decision, it be required to make a final determination on the application by that date?

Deputy Simon Coveney: As the Deputy stated, an oral hearing commenced on 18 February 2020 and concluded on 4 November 2020, including a seven-month gap in proceedings due to Covid-19 restrictions. Galway County Council is awaiting a decision from An Bord Pleanála, which has recently been pushed back to a new target date of 19 November. An Bord Pleanála makes decisions independently of the Government, as the Deputy is aware. I have been to Galway and have heard the concerns and frustrations in relation to this road infrastructure which, in my view, is essential in terms of traffic management of the city. To be honest, even if we wanted to introduce legislation, we would not be in a position to introduce legislation and have it passed before 19 November. I take the point the Deputy is making, however. There have been a lot of false dawns regarding decisions on this piece of road infrastructure. I hope we will see An Bord Pleanála finalise the decision to meet the target date that is now there.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: The National Ambulance Service is in paralysis. The paramedics and first responders are voting with their feet and leaving. Response to emergency calls is evaluated including response times. On one recent day, the Clonmel ambulance did not service a single 999 call-out in County Tipperary. It was sent as far away as the Aran Islands. This is crazy. The fleet is burning out, as well as the manpower. They are not getting their lift or their leave, they are not finishing on time and they are not getting respected for it. It is frustrating that they might get a call from anywhere, it could be 120 or 140 miles away and they have to respond to it while a poor patient on the ground or at home, with whatever injuries, thinks the ambulance is on the way. They are not told that the ambulance is two, three or four hours away. This is madness and it needs to be overhauled. The call centres do not understand the geography. It is just a face-saving exercise by the National Ambulance Service and it is totally unacceptable.

Deputy Simon Coveney: I am not sure that there is anywhere in the country where there is an ambulance that is two or three hours away.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: It happened.

Deputy Simon Coveney: If it happens, it should not be happening. If the Deputy has specific instances of significant delay times like that, I would certainly like to get the detail and I will pass it on directly to the Minister for Health.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: Tá seirbhísí faoisimh agus seirbhísí ionad lae á ardú agam. I am raising respite services and day centres, particularly in relation to Galway and the units in

Merlin Park. They are not functioning. There is no respite services. Níl Áras Mhic Dara, ar an gCeathrú Rua, ag feidhmiú fós agus tá na Proinsiasaigh i nGaillimh oscailte ach tá siad srianta.

I have to keep raising it because I have no understanding as to how we can let people drink and be merry and not open our essential services. If it is safe to drink and be merry, then it is surely safe to open our day services. Where is the leadership from the Government on essential services that remain closed in Galway?

Deputy Simon Coveney: I can read the Deputy a long note on essential services but I think that will irritate her more than anything else. If the Deputy could send me the details of the actual centres I will try and get her a direct answer from the Minister for Health, if that would be helpful.

Deputy Brendan Griffin: I want to raise the case of Theo Whelan, a five-month-old Killorglin boy who has spinal muscular atrophy. Theo's parents, Shane and Stephanie Whelan, have contacted me to try to get the HSE to give approval to the so-called miracle drug, Zolgensma. I understand that two children, Theo and little 17-month-old Kate Mynard in Cork are the only known suitable recipients in Ireland for this drug, which can dramatically improve the quality of life with children with the condition if the drug is administered before the age of two years. Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan raised the case of Kate with the Taoiseach very recently. Time is crucial. I recall from the Orkambi campaign that this process can take far too long. Ireland is in negotiations with the company, together with Holland and Belgium, but while those negotiations are ongoing, Holland is administering the drug to children who need it right now before a long-term arrangement can be put in place. Can we pursue that? Can the Minister contact the Taoiseach's office to pursue the matter?

Deputy Simon Coveney: This sounds like a very difficult case, particularly when there are time considerations in respect of the application of the drug. I can understand why parents would be at their wits' end trying to get access to a drug they believe can make a life-changing difference to their child. It is the first that I have heard of this case but I will follow up on it. If the Deputy sends me the details I will speak to both the Taoiseach and the Minister for Health on it. There is a process that needs to be followed for the approval of new drugs, even for very rare conditions. I do not know whether it is possible to look at interim treatment but I will ask that question for the Deputy.

Deputy Willie O'Dea: In view of yesterday's announcement, I want to ask about an essential piece of infrastructure, namely, the proposed Cork-Limerick or, as I prefer to say, Limerick-Cork, motorway. I am as wise today as I was yesterday. What I seek is an assurance that this will actually happen. If it is to happen, can the Minister give us a clue or his opinion as to what year it might start? I am inundated with queries from business organisations, communities etc. down in Limerick. Is it possible that this could be dropped entirely due to the inter-road competition we are hearing so much about now?

Deputy Simon Coveney: I do not think there is any chance of this being dropped for many of the reasons the Deputy outlined but also because many in the Government, myself included, have given strong commitment to delivering on a motorway between Ireland's second and third cities. There was a strong commitment in the last development plan to deliver the M20 and there is a strong commitment in this development plan to do it. The big difference between the two development plans is there is more time and a lot more money attached to this one. I cannot give the Deputy an exact date because the permissions and processes that need to be gone

through but certainly there is a very strong political commitment to the M20.

Deputy Matt Carthy: Many families are facing a cost of living crisis. They are burdened with the highest mortgage rates in the eurozone and among the highest rents, childcare, insurance and utility costs in the world. On top of this, there have been more than 30 price-hike announcements from Irish energy suppliers this year. The Government's proposed response is to add to the cost of living by increasing the carbon tax yet again in this year's budget, pushing an extra €1.50 on a fill of motor fuel, an extra €13 on the average gas bill and an extra €20 per tank of home heating oil. Does the Minister accept that many families simply cannot afford these price hikes, which in turn will be subject to VAT? Will the Government commit to scrapping the proposed carbon tax hike considering that many of those who will be impacted most have no alternative but to use their current car or heating system?

Deputy Simon Coveney: An increased price of living will be factored into our considerations when the Government announces a budget next week. The carbon tax measure, as the Deputy should know, is a climate action measure that is a medium-term measure, which is about giving a price signal over a ten-year period, not a one-year period or a six-month period-----

Deputy Matt Carthy: So you are pushing ahead with the carbon tax.

Deputy Simon Coveney: It is about giving a signal to people of the need to move to alternatives to fossil fuels and I think that is sound policy. Of course we have to look at ways by which we can support people through the transition particularly at a time when the price of carbon-based fuels, gas in particular, is increasing the way it is at the moment. We will factor in that, in terms of the supports that will be available next week.

Deputy Cormac Devlin: I believe it is safe to say that everyone across Ireland is eager for the further easing of restrictions on Friday, 22 October. While the Government is pressing ahead and making every effort possible to encourage and restore the night-time economy, workers and customers will need access to public transport to get home after midnight. Will the Minister provide an update to the House on the roll-out of 24-hour bus services, particularly here in Dublin, and on the resumption of the Nitelink services across the capital?

Deputy Simon Coveney: It is my understanding that the National Transport Authority plans to introduce further 24-hour services from the end of November between Dublin city centre and the Chapelizod, Palmerston, Lucan, Adamstown Leixlip, Celbridge and Maynooth areas to the west, as well as the Sandymount and Ringsend areas to the south east. These 24-hour services are part of phase 2 of the revised bus network that is being introduced under the BusConnects project. Branch E1 will continue to Bray and Ballywaltrim similar to the current route 145, and branch E2 to Dún Laoghaire will be similar to the current route 46A. It is planned to operate both routes E1 and E2 on a 24-hour basis. That is positive news.

Deputy Emer Higgins: Today I wish to raise the issue of Facebook whistleblower, Frances Haugen, who has accused the social media giant of prioritising profit over safety. She claims that Facebook has realised that if it changes its algorithms to be safer, people will spend less time on their app and will click on fewer adverts and ultimately, Facebook will make less money. Facebook's own internal report shows clearly that certain content promoting eating disorders on Instagram is leading to negative self-image and poor mental health among young girls. Instead of removing this content, it is claimed that Facebook has promoted pages that glorify eating disorders to get more clicks and more money.

Yesterday, for a very short while, all of us were reminded of what a world without Facebook and Instagram looks like. Many people were lost without the apps but others were relieved of the constant anxiety it causes them. I put it to the Minister that making social media safer might not be a priority of Facebook but it needs to be a priority of the Government. Will the Minister outline what is being done to tackle it?

Deputy Simon Coveney: I listened to that interview this morning and I suspect the Deputy also heard it. It made for very compelling listening on the impact and the power that Facebook and other platforms similar to Facebook have on young people's lives with regard to their sense of self-worth and their sense of the need to respond to peer pressure and social pressure, which often leads to eating disorders, mental health issues and negative self-worth consequences.

There is responsibility on us all. It is my understanding that there are hearings in Washington D.C. on this issue with Facebook and others. We should be very much part of this discussion as a country that hosts many of these platforms and of course that has a consumer base that uses them all. It is something we have not heard the end of.

Deputy Patricia Ryan: The programme for Government commits to investing in a new roads infrastructure to ensure that all parts of Ireland are connected to one another. Two parts of the country that are not very well connected are the north and south banks of the Liffey in Droichead Nua, that is, Newbridge, County Kildare. I scoured the national development plan that was launched yesterday but there is no mention of a new bridge for Newbridge. We need a second bridge to ensure there is sustainable development in the largest town by population in the county. There are three strategic housing developments in Newbridge, which comprise more than 1,100 homes. These homes are badly needed but we also need the infrastructure or we will see the same mistakes repeated. I ask that this does not happen. Will the Government prioritise a new bridge for Newbridge, County Kildare? It is a case of droichead nua do Dhroichead Nua.

An Ceann Comhairle: Hear, hear. Can the Minister help in this regard?

Deputy Patricia Ryan: I thank the Ceann Comhairle.

Deputy Simon Coveney: I do not want to overpromise to bridge that particular gap but a lot of people have asked whether, if their project is not in the national development plan, that means it will not be built or will not happen. The answer to this question is a very strong "No, that is not necessarily the case". There is a significant increase in capital expenditure within this programme. Obviously, when projects are prioritised by local authorities and by Departments, there is no reason they cannot be delivered. They do not necessarily have to be on a list of projects in the document that we launched yesterday.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Minister. There are three Deputies in the Chamber remaining. If they take 30 seconds each we can take those three questions. Deputy Collins will be first.

Deputy Michael Collins: I will make my question short. The Whiddy Island disaster took place 42 years ago, when a massive explosion occurred on a French oil tanker, taking the lives of 51 people. On Saturday night we heard the radio documentary "Fire in the Sky", which relived that night for quite a lot of people. It is well known now that no rescue took place because of catastrophic safety failures and that the regulatory system in place in the run-up to the disaster was appalling. The Irish, French and British families concerned have had to live with

this, together with the fallout afterwards, with no resolution.

Throughout this horrendous ordeal for the families over the past 42 years, the State has never apologised to these families for the appalling failures in the administration of justice and the failure to implement regulation. Will the Minister speak to the Taoiseach and the Tánaiste and issue an apology to the families of the Whiddy Island tragedy today? Will he meet the representatives of the French-Irish Association of Relatives and Friends of the Betelgeuse to help them in their goal to have the High Court change the victim's death certificates to unlawful deaths?

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Has the Government confirmed over the past weeks that we are actually trying to defend a tax haven status for big multinational corporations in this country? While the rest of the world has finally recognised that staggeringly profitable corporations making billions in profits should pay a greater contribution, a minimum effective corporate tax rate, Ireland is almost alone in trying to defend the pitiful levels of tax that these corporations pay. How can the Government possibly justify this when these multinationals are robbing citizens of this country and the world of billions in tax revenue that could be going into housing, health, infrastructure and education? The Government is trying to resist efforts to make them pay a little bit more corporate tax. How can the Government possibly justify this?

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: On the national childcare scheme, we all accept that it is a job activation scheme. The problem is that disadvantaged kids have been getting after-school care and such under the community childcare subvention programme, CCSP. A number of bodies may possibly close in the next while. I have dealt with the Minister, Deputy O’Gorman, in this regard. A review of this scheme is ongoing, as is a review of the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools, DEIS, funding but this will not happen until November. We need solutions now. Tusla is a possible referral service, which would be imperfect because not all parents want to deal with it. We now need a directive from the Government to Tusla and we need Tusla to set out a directive or a straightforward roadmap on how children can be referred into the services. Otherwise they will close and kids are going to miss out.

An Ceann Comhairle: I ask the Minister for a very brief response to each of those questions.

Deputy Simon Coveney: I will address the questions in reverse order. I am aware of the intention to introduce a DEIS-type scheme to ensure that people who are living in areas that are disadvantaged or who perhaps may have very low incomes can ensure that their children can access early learning and childcare services. I am aware that the Minister, Deputy O’Gorman, is working on this.

On Deputy Boyd Barrett’s question, from what I have seen and from conversations I have had, the Minister for Finance, Deputy Donohoe, is doing a very good job in defending Ireland’s interests, while at the same time recognising the reality of where this debate is moving. I hope the Minister will be able to bring a recommendation to the Government on Thursday on Ireland’s approach on international efforts to introduce-----

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: The French finance minister has said that the decision is already made, by the way. He just said it today.

Deputy Simon Coveney: The French finance minister can say whatever he wants but our Government has not had a recommendation yet as the basis for a decision.

With regard to Deputy Collins' question, I have met many of the families who were deeply impacted by the Whiddy Island disaster, which was an horrific tragedy. Perhaps I will speak with the Deputy offline on what the Deputy is looking for rather than give him a short curt answer here.

Health (Pricing and Supply of Medical Goods) (Amendment) Bill 2021: First Stage

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to amend the Health (Pricing and Supply of Medical Goods) Act 2013 to establish specific criteria applicable for orphan medicinal products for the purposes of the Health Service Executive making a relevant decision regarding adding an item to the Reimbursement List.

Before I begin, I want to acknowledge the work of former Deputy John Brassil in regard to the introduction of this Bill, which, in essence, is a reintroduction of the work he undertook a few years ago. I also acknowledge that the Minister for Health is here today and that he made an extra €50 million available in the drugs budget in the last year, which is also to be commended.

Under the existing legislation, there is no differentiation between orphan medicinal products and other products in Ireland. In recent years it has become clear that there is an issue in Ireland whereby orphan drugs continually struggle to secure reimbursement, often despite their wide ability elsewhere in Europe. It is well acknowledged that Ireland is lagging behind Romania, Hungary and other Eastern European countries in the provision of these drugs. This reimbursement processes is protracted, unnecessarily public and often antagonistic with patients in Ireland continually forced to protest publicly or engage with politicians to seek fairness and equity over the course of a two-year campaign from initial application to final decision.

I listened during Questions on Promised Legislation when Deputy Griffin mentioned the plight of people seeking approval for Zolgensma. Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan from west Cork raised the matter last week. Unfortunately, those families have the same journey to undertake as the sufferers of amyloidosis, who only recently got approval for the patisiran drug in the last couple of months. Unfortunately, that long journey awaits many of these families.

The issue of low availability of orphan drugs or treatments specifically designated for rare diseases is complex, with several factors contributing to the problem. These range from the appropriateness of the assessment mechanism to the current framework agreement between the State and pharmaceutical industry and industry pricing and prioritisation in Ireland.

This Bill is not a panacea to this complex issue. It does, however, seek to address one of the clear barriers to access in Ireland in how we apply a standardised assessment mechanism to medicines that are far from standard. Presently, the same health technology assessment, HTA, is carried out by the National Centre for Pharmacoeconomics, NCPE, for new medicines irrespective of their medicine type. This is a quality-adjusted life year, QALY, health technology assessment whereby quantitative data relating to the medicine and the disease it treats are used to assess its cost-effectiveness. In Ireland's case, this threshold is set at €45,000 per QALY. This mechanism presents several issues for orphan drugs, the quantitative data relating to which is often limited due to the low clinical data or the low epidemiology around a rare disease, given such a small patient population. As such, a QALY-based health technology assessment will re-

sult in huge uncertainty around an orphan drug. In the words of Professor Michael Barry, head of the NCPE, when he appeared before the previous Joint Committee on Health, “none of the drugs for rare diseases will reach the €45,000 euro per QALY [threshold]”. The current system is designed for orphan drugs to fail.

The consequence of using this form of health technology assessment is that commercial negotiations between the State and the industry commence from a poor position whereby the information available to the HSE is of limited value. This is directly contributing to the two-year process of protracted negotiations as both parties seek to reach a fair and accurate agreement of the true value of medicine.

I will now speak to the Bill. Responsibility for addressing this issue has fallen between two stools, with previous Ministers for Health stating at every opportunity that statutory responsibility for medicine, pricing and reimbursement decisions lies with the HSE in accordance with the Health (Pricing and Supply of Medical Goods) Act 2013. For its part, the HSE has informed Members of this House, through various health committees, that the 2013 Act does not make separate provision for orphan drugs and that, as a result, the processes and procedures do not make separate provision for distinct criteria on the assessment of orphan drugs. When challenged on whether it had any flexibility under the Act to allow for a tailored approach to assessing orphan drugs, the HSE stated that it had pushed legislation as far as it could.

The Bill seeks to resolve this issue by clarifying for the HSE the application of the health technology assessment for assessing orphan drugs as well as establishing set criteria to be considered when making a relevant decision on the reimbursement of an orphan drug. It clarifies that the HSE, when carrying out a HTA, should do so in a manner that does not rely on an incremental cost-effectiveness ratio threshold but should instead conduct a HTA that will provide a meaningful and credible assessment of an orphan drug. This is not to suggest we do not carefully consider an orphan drug but that we look to EU member states like Sweden that have adapted their HTA such manner.

The hardest thing I have had to do since I was elected was sit across a kitchen table from one of the families who have been seeking approval for orphan drugs and hear their individual story of being told that if they do not get medicine or a tablet by a certain date then the person will undoubtedly either die, suffer from severe mental trauma or whatever the case may be.

This Bill is costed and there are budgetary constraints on it. I again acknowledge John Brasil’s efforts with it. We are not asking for a magic money tree to provide medicines for these people. We are asking that orphan drugs for illnesses very few people in this country suffer from - they are, by their nature, rare diseases - be subject to the same assessment, in the context of qualitative data, as other drugs.

An Ceann Comhairle: Is the Bill opposed?

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

Question put and agreed to.

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

Deputy Pádraig O’Sullivan: I move: “That the Bill be taken in Private Members’ time.”

Question put and agreed to.

Workplace Ventilation (Covid-19) Bill 2021: First Stage

Deputy Paul Murphy: I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to amend the Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act 2005 to provide for a definition of fresh air based on CO₂ levels in the workplace as an emergency Covid-19 prevention measure; to provide for health and safety inspectors to take CO₂ measurements and issue improvement or prohibition notices; to provide for employees to request inspections; and to provide for related matters.

The People Before Profit Workplace Ventilation Bill is a very straightforward measure to give workers the right to fresh air at work and require bosses to ensure that there is proper ventilation. We have seen with Covid-19 just how important this is. The need for proper ventilation was there long before Covid, however, and will continue when Covid hopefully passes.

Poorly ventilated workplaces not only expose workers to many viruses and illnesses but poor air quality can also lead to drowsiness, headaches and fatigue. The Bill sets clear limits for CO₂ levels in the air above which bosses must take action to improve ventilation or face prohibition notices and other penalties. These are very basic issues of workers' rights and health and safety and it is long overdue.

For more than a year, we in people Before Profit have raised repeatedly the shocking lack of effort being put into ventilation in our schools, offices, bars and restaurants. For more than 18 months now, the Government has been burying its head in the sand. There are still no legally enforceable standards in respect of workplace air quality.

We have long known that Covid-19 is airborne and that proper ventilation can dramatically reduce the chances of it spreading. Still, however, as things reopen, as winter returns and as people move indoors, we have not taken action to ensure proper ventilation in workplaces. When I questioned the Tánaiste about this at a committee meeting in July, he initially tried to claim that there were standards for workplace air quality before finally admitting that he was "not sure there is any legal standard on ventilation". There is not.

In September 2020, I raised on Leaders' Questions the shocking lack of proper ventilation in our schools. Five out of every six schools reported inadequate ventilation at that stage. One year on, we still do not even have air quality monitors in every classroom. We do not have a plan for air quality monitors in every classroom, never mind proper high efficiency particulate air, HEPA, filters. The state of Victoria in Australia is installing air purifiers in every classroom, yet we cannot even provide €70 CO₂ monitors in classrooms here. Along with this Bill, we need to put the investment in now to provide every classroom with an air monitor and require all bars, restaurants and offices to have air monitors in order to ensure that workers are not forced to work in unsafe environments.

Our Bill effectively follows the example of Belgium in establishing minimum standards for air quality. Workers are empowered to request an inspection by the Health and Safety Authority, HSA. If air quality is found to be lacking, the HSA will issue rapid enforcement orders to

improve ventilation, and, in extreme cases, can close a workplace until proper ventilation or air filtration is put in place. In line with Belgian law, our Bill sets two limits on CO2 levels above 900 parts per million. If the latter is exceeded, HSA would issue an improvement notice that gives the company involved 24 hours to improve the situation. If, however, the levels are above 1,500 and present an immediate danger to people, then a prohibition order would be issued until the levels can be addressed. The Bill also allows for the rare cases where CO2 levels may be above 900 parts per million but other air filtration measures such as HEPA filters would be in place, which would make it relatively safe. To explain, CO2 monitoring effectively acts as a very useful proxy for air quality and ventilation in general. If one has proper ventilation, one's CO2 levels will be relatively low and viruses such as Covid cannot build up in the air. That is why it is used as the relevant proxy. We need to pass this legislation. It is vital for workers' health and safety, but, ultimately, what we need - and we saw this in the meat factories in particular - is strong workplace organisation and trade unions fighting to ensure the health and safety of people at work.

Our Bill should be seen as part of a whole series of proposals from People Before Profit, including our trade union recognition Bill and our call for unions to have full rights to inspect workplaces and meet workers on-site.

An Ceann Comhairle: Is the Bill being opposed?

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

Question put and agreed to.

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

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

Question put and agreed to.

Sittings and Business of Dáil: Motion

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

That, notwithstanding anything in Standing Orders, or in the weekly schedule agreed by the Dáil on 11th May, 2021, and unless the Dáil shall otherwise order, the following arrangements shall apply in relation to the sittings of the Dáil on 12th, 13th and 14th October, 2021:

(1) (i) the Dáil shall meet at 1 p.m. on Tuesday, and at 10.30 a.m. on Wednesday and Thursday;

(ii) on Wednesday, the Dáil shall adjourn not later than 9.30 p.m.;

(iii) on Thursday, the Dáil shall adjourn on the conclusion of topical issues;

(iv) Leaders' Questions within the meaning of Standing Order 36 shall not be taken on Tuesday, and on Wednesday and Thursday shall be taken as the second item of business

after Oral Questions taken pursuant to Standing Order 46(1)(b);

(v) there shall be no Order of Business on Tuesday within the meaning of Standing Order 35;

(vi) within the meaning of Standing Order 35, there shall be no Questions on Promised Legislation on Tuesday or Wednesday;

(vii) Oral Questions to a member of the Government under Standing Order 46(1)(b) shall be taken on Wednesday and Thursday at 10.30 a.m.; otherwise no Oral Questions under Standing Order 46(1) shall be taken: Provided that written questions under Standing Order 50(2) shall appear on the Order Paper and be answered in the normal way;

(viii) private members' business shall not be taken;

(ix) topical issues under Standing Order 37 shall not be taken on Tuesday or Wednesday and shall be taken on Thursday as the last item of business;

(x) leave may not be sought under Standing Order 42 to adjourn the Dáil on a specific and important matter of public interest;

(xi) no Committee report shall be taken on Thursday evening pursuant to Standing Order 159(2); (xii) any divisions demanded on Tuesday shall be taken immediately; and

(xiii) subject to there being deferred divisions on hand, the weekly division time shall be taken on Tuesday night, as outlined in paragraph (2)(iii);

(2) in relation to the sitting of the Dáil on Tuesday, 12th October, 2021, the following arrangements shall apply:

(i) the Dáil shall sit later than 10.30 p.m. and the motion for the General Financial Resolution shall be moved not later than 12 midnight;

(ii) subject to subparagraph (iii), the business to be transacted shall be the Budget Statements and Financial Motions by Deputy Pascal Donohoe, Minister for Finance, and Deputy Michael McGrath, Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, and statements made pursuant to subparagraph (b), and the following arrangements shall apply:

(a) the Budget statements of Minister Donohoe and Minister McGrath shall not exceed 45 minutes each;

(b) following the Budget statements of the Ministers, statements may be made by the spokespersons on Finance and Public Expenditure and Reform for the parties and groups in Opposition in the following order and in accordance with the following arrangements:

— Sinn Féin – not exceeding 60 minutes in the aggregate, and

— the Labour Party, Social Democrats, People Before Profit-Solidarity, the Regional Group, the Rural Independent Group, and the Independent Group – not exceeding 45 minutes in the aggregate each, and all members may share their time; and

(c) following the statements made pursuant to subparagraph (b), the sitting shall be suspended for 30 minutes, and on the resumption of the sitting, a Minister or Minister of

State shall move an allocation of time motion for the Financial Motions; and

(iii) upon the moving of the General Financial Resolution, the debate shall be adjourned and, subject to there being deferred divisions on hand, the weekly division time shall be taken immediately, and the Dáil shall adjourn forthwith on the conclusion of the weekly division time, or on the moving of the General Financial Resolution, as appropriate; and

(3) in relation to the sittings of the Dáil on Wednesday and Thursday, 13th October and 14th October, 2021, the business to be transacted shall be the business outlined in this Resolution along with the resumed debate on the General Financial Resolution, to which the following arrangements shall apply:

(i) on Wednesday—

(a) after Leaders' Questions, Leaders' speeches shall be taken, in the following order and in accordance with the following arrangements:

— Taoiseach and Tánaiste – not exceeding 30 minutes each;

— Green Party – not exceeding 20 minutes;

— Sinn Féin - not exceeding 30 minutes;

— the Labour Party, Social Democrats, People Before Profit-Solidarity, the Regional Group, the Rural Independent Group, and the Independent Group – not exceeding 15 minutes each, and all members may share time; and

(b) the sitting shall be suspended for an hour on the conclusion of Leaders' speeches and shall not be otherwise suspended pursuant to the weekly schedule agreed by the Dáil on 11th May, 2021;

(ii) on Wednesday and Thursday—

(a) apart from the Leaders' speeches, the resumed debate on the General Financial Resolution shall be conducted in 100-minute speaking rounds, in accordance with the arrangements contained in the report of the Committee on Standing Orders and Dáil Reform adopted by Order of the Dáil on 30th July, 2020; and

(b) when there are no further members offering, the debate shall adjourn, and, in any event, on Thursday 14th October, 2021, the debate shall adjourn not later than 6 p.m.; and

(iii) on Thursday—

(a) any member may move for leave to introduce a Bill in accordance with Standing Order 174, and

(b) the sitting shall be suspended for 40 minutes on the conclusion of Questions on Promised Legislation and shall not be otherwise suspended pursuant to the weekly schedule agreed by the Dáil on 11th May, 2021.

Question put and agreed to.

Rota for Leaders' Questions and Arrangements for Order of Business: Motion

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

That—

(a) notwithstanding the Order of the Dáil of 16th December, 2020, the sequence in which Leaders shall be called upon to put questions between 13th October, 2021, and 16th December, 2021, pursuant to Standing Order 36(*ca*), shall be in accordance with the rota contained in the report of the Committee on Standing Orders and Dáil Reform dated 29th September, 2021, entitled 'Rota for Leaders' Questions pursuant to Standing Order 36 for 13 October to 16 December 2021 incl.'; and

(b) the Resolution of the Dáil of 15th June, 2021, in relation to arrangements on the Order of Business be amended by the substitution of 'until further notice in the 33rd Dáil' for 'up to and including 28th September, 2021'.

Question put and agreed to.

Report of Joint Committee on the Environment and Climate Action: Motion

Deputy Brian Leddin: I move:

That Dáil Éireann:

(1) notes the agreed Report of the Joint Committee on Environment and Climate Action under Dáil Standing Order 133 on COM (2021) 551, 554, 555, 557, 558 and 568 – Legislative proposals of the EU 'Fit for 55' package, which was laid before Dáil Éireann on 28th September, 2021, in accordance with Standing Order 133(3)(b);

(2) having regard to the aforementioned Report, and in exercise of its functions under section 7(3) of the European Union Act 2009, is of the opinion that the proposals COM (2021) 551, 554, 555, 557, 558 and 568 do not comply with the principle of subsidiarity for the reasons set out in paragraph 3 of the Report; and

(3) notes that, pursuant to Standing Order 133(4), a copy of this Resolution together with the reasoned opinion and the aforementioned Report shall be sent to the Presidents of the European Parliament, the Council and the Commission.

Question put and agreed to.

Registration of Wills Bill 2016 [Seanad]: Restoration to Order Paper

Deputy Cormac Devlin: I move:

That, pursuant to Standing Order 198, the Registration of Wills Bill 2016 [Seanad],

5 October 2021

which lapsed on the dissolution of the 32nd Dáil, shall be restored to the Order Paper at Second Stage.

I rise to restore this important and eagerly awaited Bill, which has been in gestation since 2005. In restoring the Registration of Wills Bill 2016, I commend and thank former Senator Terry Leyden for all his hard work in trying to seek to get this Bill passed over the past 16 years. The Registration of Wills Bill 2016 passed all Stages in the Seanad during the previous term, with the support of my colleagues, Senators Clifford-Lee and Catherine Ardagh. The Bill tries to extend the civil registration to ensure that wills created are not lost and are easily accessible. Approximately 30,000 people die each year in Ireland and only 10,000 of their estates go to probate. This is an important Bill, and I ask the House to support it.

An Ceann Comhairle: If Deputy Devlin is determined to fill the shoes of former Senator Leyden, he will have large and interesting shoes to fill.

Question put and agreed to.

Health (Amendment) (No. 2) Act 2021: Motion

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I move:

That Dáil Éireann resolves that Part 2 of the Health (Amendment) (No. 2) Act 2021 (No. 24 of 2021) shall continue in operation for the period beginning on the 10th day of October, 2021 and ending on the 9th day of January, 2022.

The purpose of this motion is to extend the sunset clause of part 2 of the Health (Amendment) (No. 2) Act 2021, which is due to expire on 9 October and which provides that each House of the Oireachtas may, on or before, 9 October 2021, pass a resolution to continue part 2 in operation for a period not exceeding three months. Part 2 of the Health (Amendment) (No. 2) Act 2021 provides for the reopening of indoor hospitality under certain conditions. In essence, the Act gives effect to the Government's decision to enable access to relevant indoor premises for fully vaccinated persons and persons who are immune from Covid-19, on the basis they have recovered from Covid-19, as well as certain children and staff. It enabled the reopening of indoor hospitality premises such as pubs, cafés, restaurants and other licensed premises in a safe and sustainable manner and, importantly, in line with public health advice. The Act placed the reopening of indoor hospitality on a safer footing and path against the backdrop of the Delta variant, which has continued to circulate extensively, as we know all too well, especially among people who have either not yet been vaccinated or who are not fully protected by vaccination. The Act and the associated regulations were of vital importance in ensuring that hospitality businesses could reopen safely and begin to recover from a very difficult, but unfortunately necessary, period of closure for everyone working in that sector.

The decision to require proof of vaccination or recovery to access indoor hospitality arose in the context of advice from NPHET on 28 June last. That advice was that indoor activities “which, by their nature are high risk activities which will involve significant levels of social mixing in indoor environments, should only be permitted for those who have been fully protected by vaccination or who have had COVID-19 infection in the previous nine months”.

NPHET advised that easing of these measures should only proceed when supported by a robust, non-reproducible and enforceable system of verification of vaccination or immunity status. The Health (Amendment) (No. 2) Act 2021 embodies this system of verification.

In passing the legislation in July, the House recognised the intrinsic value of its provisions in getting indoor hospitality businesses open, while at the same time protecting public health from a variant that continues to be dangerous, unpredictable and virulent. The measures in the Health (Amendment) (No. 2) Act 2021 balance both of these requirements and have enabled and permitted indoor hospitality premises to continue trading while maximising the opportunity to protect public health.

We have lived through remarkable and somewhat unprecedented times. We cannot over-estimate the burden and serious threat Covid-19 has been up to now and that it continues to be to the health and well-being, first and foremost, of our society and, second, of our economy, particularly if we let our guard down. Recent public health advice is that the public health management of Covid-19 in Ireland should transition, in broad terms, from a focus on regulation and population-wide restrictions to a focus on public health advice, personal judgment and personal protective behaviours, subject to certain criteria.

I have highlighted previously the fact that Ireland is not alone in this crisis. Indeed, all across Europe and much of the rest of the world, Covid-19 has adversely impacted on societies and economies and has taken the most brutal of tolls. The Government agreed Ireland's next plan in its response to the pandemic, which is entitled Covid-19: Reframing the Challenge, Continuing Our Recovery and Reconnecting. This recognises that Covid-19 has had a global impact - sending shock waves around the world - with its effects felt in every corner of society. More than 5,000 people have lost their lives in Ireland during this pandemic and many more are living with the impact of the disease physically and mentally. We can only imagine the trauma of families and communities who have been directly affected. That is a matter for another day, but we need to be discussing and moving on long Covid as well. The latter will require significant focus.

Ireland has endured a profound shock to its social and economic life as we continue to deal with the impact of the disease at an individual, community and societal level. It has had an impact on almost all aspects of our lives and, for many people, their livelihoods. Our strategy to manage the adverse impacts of Covid-19 has been guided by an evolving understanding of the disease and its emerging variants, the impacts of restrictions on health and well-being and other aspects of society and the economy.

This House will be all too familiar with the fact that extraordinary measures to protect public health and the most vulnerable in our society from this disease and its effects have been introduced. These were difficult and challenging decisions made in a crisis scenario and with an evolving understanding of the disease, its impact, how best to manage it, what vaccines might offer in terms of protection and what variants might do to undermine our plans. As Covid-19: Reframing the Challenge, Continuing Our Recovery and Reconnecting recognises, the public health management of the Covid-19 pandemic has evolved and must continue to evolve in light of changing circumstances and risks.

Covid-19: Reframing the Challenge, Continuing Our Recovery and Reconnecting includes a series of planned measures, such as the transitioning of the public health response and interim arrangements pending transition. For indoor hospitality, the Government's agreed plan speci-

fies that “No further changes are proposed to the current arrangements in respect of the hospitality sector until the final transition point is reached”. The Government decided to remove further statutory restrictions in respect of events and activities from 22 October 2021 on the basis of meeting certain criteria. These include the achievement of, or close to, 90% of people aged 16 and over being fully vaccinated. In effect, the statutory regime in place to support the protection of public health is to be largely wound down in line with agreed removal of restrictions, as appropriate. The Chief Medical Officer, CMO, has advised that the future trajectory of the disease cannot be predicted with certainty. As a result, a response to the disease that is agile and flexible, with an ability to pivot rapidly and respond to any new emerging threats, needs to be ensured.

The Health (Amendment) (No. 2) Act 2021 is an important part of any response, should the potential for one arise in the future. While that is unlikely, it cannot be fully ruled out because of the uncertainty of the future trajectory of the virus in light of how novel it is. The following point is important. I want to assure the House and colleagues that existing regulations under the Act are due to be revoked with effect from 22 October, in line with the Government’s plan for this phase of Covid-19. Obviously, that is pending final Government approval and final analysis from our public health teams. However, the intention is that the restrictions on indoor hospitality will end on 22 October. We are not seeking, by means of this motion, to extend the timeline past 22 October. Rather, we are looking to extend the legal framework, should that be required, in the subsequent 12 weeks.

It is proposed to continue the provisions of the Health (Amendment) (No. 2) Act 2021 for a period of three months, without any regulations providing for restrictions on the indoor hospitality sector being imposed. The continuance in operation of the Act is solely to align with the public health advice that the possibility of the reintroduction of any given measure cannot be fully ruled out at this point. The purpose of the continuance is to enable us to respond to the disease and what challenges its transmission might pose. In effect, we must continue to ensure our response is agile and flexible, with an ability to pivot rapidly and respond to any emerging threat that might arise.

It is in this context that the motion to extend the operation of Part 2 of the Health (Amendment) (No. 2) Act 2021 has been presented to this House. The continuance in operation of the Act maintains the potential and flexibility to respond to an emerging Covid-19 threat that could jeopardise public health and safety were it to go unchecked. The Government, while working to reframe the challenge and reopen society, must also act cautiously and prudently to ensure that the most vulnerable continue to be protected to the best of our ability, should the need for that arise as a result of the behaviour of this unpredictable and virulent virus.

We are doing well in terms of the trajectory of this disease. Members will be aware that Government was presented with four potential scenarios, namely, optimistic, central 1, central 2, and pessimistic. Decisions taken at that time, including, for example, opening up hospitality in a safe way, were taken with a view to maximising the potential for the trajectory to meet the optimistic scenario in order to save as many lives as possible, to avoid as much serious illness as possible, to protect our healthcare system and to be able to reopen our schools, colleges and society. That has been the strategy. I am happy to be able to report to colleagues that we are broadly in line with the optimistic scenario as a result of having taken those policy decisions. We all welcomed Bloomberg’s recent ranking of Ireland in the context of its response to Covid-19. The measures that have been taken that over the past number of months - which we all debated before the summer recess - have done what they were meant to do.

The purpose of the motion before the House is simply to extend the legal framework. I cannot pre-empt a Government decision on public health advice. What I can say to colleagues is that so far, the trajectory of the disease as we come closer to 22 October, is broadly tracking the optimistic scenario. This is encouraging. We would all pay tribute to the fact that this has only happened because individuals, communities, families, schools and businesses have continued to adhere to the public health advice. That puts us in this position.

If the Government makes the decision coming up to 22 October to stick with that date, then the existing restrictions on the hospitality sector will be removed at that point. The motion does not seek to extend those restrictions at all; it simply seeks a 13-week extension of the legal framework in the event that something should happen during the winter. We are coming into a tough time. The legal framework is a safety net to be kept in place for 13 weeks in order to see us through November, December and the start of January. I am seeking agreement from the House that we would do that. I reiterate that I am asking this on the basis of the public health advice from the CMO.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Minister and call on Deputy Cullinane. Is the Deputy sharing with Deputy Ward?

Deputy David Cullinane: I am indeed. I have ten minutes and Deputy Ward will have 15.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Ward will have five minutes.

Deputy David Cullinane: Ten and five, apologies. It is 15 minutes in total.

Deputy Thomas Gould: That was optimistic.

Deputy David Cullinane: I thank the Ceann Comhairle. First, I want to say that it is important for us to reflect on what we have achieved over the past 20 months and on the difficult and traumatic experience that society and people have gone through. It is hard to believe that the first case of Covid-19 was reported 20 months ago. It has been more than 19 months since the first restrictions were imposed. We all remember that we were hopeful that the restrictions would be lifted in a matter of weeks, or maybe in a matter of months. At that point, I do not think anybody would have predicted that 19 months later we would still be sitting here in the Dáil, in limited circumstances, with restrictions put in place, albeit with a date of the 22 October for the lifting of the remaining restrictions.

All of this shows how agile we are as a people. We can respond and deal with all of this trauma in the best way we can. We have seen the best of many people right through this difficult period. I am also conscious that we are not yet fully through Covid. Many people might see 22 October as independence day, which, in many ways, it is. However, we will have to have to remain vigilant and ensure that we continue to monitor the trajectory of the disease. What we can say for certain is that the vaccine roll-out, as well as the almost unprecedented, incredible take-up of that vaccine in this State, has put us in this strong position.

I have said to the Minister numerous times that the political unity, by and large - although there have been differences - we have had throughout the past 19 or 20 months has, in and of itself, played a huge part. While we have had disagreements, we have all been able to get through the last 19 or 20 months in the best way we can. I remember that before a single dose of the vaccine arrived, opinion polls conducted by certain newspapers indicated that the vaccine uptake would be maybe 40%, 50% or 60%. It was also stated that there would be huge levels

of vaccine hesitancy. This has not happened. It has not happened because of the leadership that was given by the politicians but, more importantly, by the medical professionals and those who were able to stand up, speak clearly and communicate to people the benefits of getting vaccinated. It is tremendous to see what we have been able to do.

4 o'clock

I cannot support this motion and the Minister set out the reason in his opening remarks. The current regulations cease to exist on 9 October, and I get that, while the restrictions in this area and many other areas are due to be lifted on 22 October, and I get that also. There will, therefore, be a gap of a couple of weeks. However, the Minister is seeking a three-month extension to bring us up to 9 January 2022. That is a move I cannot support. On the first day the Minister's predecessor brought forward proposals for emergency powers, we all accepted that they could only be in place for as long as they were necessary and that we could not continue to extend these powers and the sunset clauses forever and a day because they had to come to an end at some point. People expect those emergency powers will come to an end. It is not that they expect every and any restriction to cease because there will continue to be some public health measures in place, for example, mask wearing, but the vast majority of restrictions will come to an end.

The Minister stated that the reason for extending the restrictions to January 2022 is that "the re-introduction of any given measure cannot be fully ruled out". That is a factual statement and I accept it. This, he continued, is "in order to enable us to respond to the disease and what challenges its transmission might pose for us. In effect, we must continue to ensure our response is agile and flexible." The Act, the Minister added, "maintains the potential and flexibility to respond to an emerging Covid-19 threat."

The Minister knows - I say this with sincerity - that if there were to be a change in the trajectory of the disease, Members would be capable, as they have done in the past, of coming into the House to agree new regulations, powers, laws or whatever else might be necessary at a given time and would respond in the agile way described by the Minister, without being required to keep powers which we agreed from the start would not be kept longer than necessary. This is important for people's public confidence, having come through all that they have and done what was asked of them. The majority of people abided by the restrictions most of the time, which is what got us through this. They will want to know that when restrictions come to an end on 22 October, emergency powers will, insofar as possible, also come to an end and we will not keep them on the Statute Book. That would not be the right way to do it. At any point in the future, we can come back to these measures if public health advice changes. We hope and expect it will not, but I am confident, given where we are and our extremely high vaccine uptake, we will not have to consider the reintroduction of new measures in January next year. That is my hope and while we cannot rule anything out, I am sincerely of that view, as are the public health experts and, I am sure, the Minister. We are all in a positive mindset around where we will be in the time ahead.

Maintaining the powers provided for in this Act is wrong. We explained why we voted against extensions in the past and I will repeat those reasons to the Minister directly. What the House did was unprecedented. We passed legislation to give the Minister emergency powers to make regulations. We asked that he bring the regulations before the Dáil and Seanad in order for us to scrutinise them and afford us proper democratic scrutiny of regulations. At times, there has been confusion. We went through some of that during the summer when this confu-

sion caused all sorts of unnecessary political turmoil, as the Minister will know. The confusion around regulations, guidelines and all of that arose because we did not have proper democratic debate in this House. Even Ministers, including the Tánaiste, were unaware of what was a guideline and what was a regulation, and what was right and what was wrong. It ended up creating unnecessary problems for everybody, including for the hospitality and entertainment sectors. We are being asked to do the same here. We may well see regulations in the future in which Members will have no hand, act or part. We will not be able to vote on them, debate them or respond to them in a democratic way, other than through the airwaves or if we are lucky enough to get an opportunity to converse with the Minister afterwards in the Chamber or through the media. That is not the way it should be done.

I would be remiss of me, in my last few minutes, not to mention the maternity restrictions. We know these restrictions are presenting a major difficulty and challenge for women and their partners. I was in Cork yesterday meeting the CEOs of hospitals and health campaigning groups as part of my role as Opposition health spokesperson. I met a number of women who have campaigned for these restrictions to be lifted. They are reasonable people and understand the practicality of infection control. They know there are issues in terms of unvaccinated pregnant women and possibly unvaccinated staff. They know there are infection control measures that will still need to be in place. However, they are looking towards 22 October, when restrictions will be lifted and people will be allowed to go to nightclubs, restaurants and bars unrestricted, yet there is absolutely no guarantee that we will have unrestricted access for partners of pregnant women at all stages of pregnancy. That is fundamentally wrong at this stage.

I am not an expert in infection control, and I understand we have to listen to experts, but we also have to listen to the experiences of women. My colleague, an Teachta Ó Laoghaire, recounted his personal experience of what he and his partner went through. Many other people have told their stories as well. This issue needs to be dealt with. When I met the women in Cork yesterday, they asked me who is in charge and who makes the decisions. The Minister says an easing is needed. The HSE clinical directors and others have said we can look at easing the restrictions. The entire political system seems to agree that it needs to be done, yet it has not happened and nor is there a date for it. We know what will happen on 22 October for the hospitality sector, including nightclubs, bars and restaurants. However, I cannot look a pregnant woman in the eye and say restrictions on her partner will also be lifted. That is wrong. There will be a protest tomorrow, as I am sure the Minister is aware, seeking common sense solutions. The Oireachtas and Minister should support these women and ensure those restrictions come to an end.

Deputy Mark Ward: As my colleague, Deputy Cullinane, said, when the Covid outbreak first began and restrictions were introduced in response to the emergency, there was a lot of political unity because we did not know what we were dealing with and we were all pulling in the same direction. We agreed with some measures introduced by the Government, but there were times when there were disagreements and we challenged that when debates were allowed. We challenged the Government the last time the emergency powers were extended. At the time, we debated the reasons some people in the hospitality sector could work in a restaurant but could not eat in the same restaurant. We have moved on since then.

Some 87% of the eligible population are fully vaccinated. We need to recognise and reflect on that because we are moving out of the emergency and people are becoming optimistic. One can sense from the atmosphere in the country that people's moods are lifting. As the Sinn Féin spokesperson on mental health, I deal with people all the time and they now see light at the end

of the tunnel. Extending these emergency powers sends out the wrong message. The Minister said he may not use these emergency powers and hopes he will not have to use them. It is as though we gave him a blank cheque the last time. This is a blank cheque that he will probably never have to cash.

We need to put our energy into how we will move out of Covid and into the next stage. We need to devise an exit plan for Covid. It should be for the 32 counties, on an all-island basis. We saw that having different restrictions and measures in both jurisdictions did not work. We need unity and an all-island approach to this matter.

We will also have to consider the long-term effects of Covid because we do not know how long Covid will impact on society and the Minister for Health's remit. I have a personal disclaimer to make on this because I have an interest in this topic as a person who recently had Covid. I visited my doctor yesterday and he told me we do not know what the long-term effects will be. I still have some lingering effects from Covid and hopefully, day by day, I will get better, but we do not know and that is the issue. We need to put in place a plan for how we will assist people and society to move on from the effects of Covid. We do not know its effects, as the Minister said, because it is a new virus.

In my last few minutes, I will comment on the extension of other emergency health legislation in respect of Part 5 of the Emergency Measures in the Public Interest (Covid-19) Act 2020 and its impact in respect of the Mental Health Act 2001. This provision was originally brought in to reduce the number of interactions that people were going to have in the context of Covid-19. It allows mental health tribunals to be reduced to a one-member paper-based tribunal and for minimum personal interaction between the relevant people. Since this measure was brought in, my understanding is that more than 800 tribunals have taken place and this emergency legislation has not been used once. It is, therefore, a power that has been extended but not used, so there is no point to it. It is proposed to extend the measure until 2022. I call for it to be repealed. It is not necessary and could have many unintended consequences. Representatives of Mental Health Reform stated at a recent meeting of the Joint Committee on Health that "the legislation in itself continues to be problematic in its removal of safeguards for service users and its infringements of service users' rights, [such as] [...] the right to a tribunal". I urge the Minister to look at that.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: That will be removed.

Deputy Mark Ward: It will be removed in October. That is fine. I appreciate the Minister responding to me on this point. If this measure is removed in October, the powers will still remain in place until February 2022. It is similar to the powers in this legislation in that there is no need for them.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: It is not necessarily in line with 22 October. Regarding the point made by the Deputy, however, great work has been done in this regard to ensure this provision did not have to be used. I will get a detailed note for the Deputy.

Deputy Mark Ward: This brings me back to the mood of people in the State and that they are feeling lifted. When we extend emergency powers like this, the fear that people have is that such powers are being extended because they are going to be used. This is why we will not support this proposal.

Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin: I can only assume the Government has learned from what

happened in December 2020 when decisions were made which were against public health advice. People may remember that we then had more cases of Covid-19 and more deaths from Covid in January 2021 than we did in all of 2020. I understand where the Government is coming from in this regard. It wants to end restrictions entirely on 22 October, while leaving the legal framework in place until early January 2022 in case anything happens. The Labour Party can understand where the Minister is coming from in this respect.

I advise some caution, however. Previous speakers mentioned the great vaccination rate we have, but we also have a level of vaccination hesitancy which must be tackled. I understand that 13% of young people are expressing vaccination hesitancy, with 8% of those aged between 18 and 24 years saying they have no intention of getting vaccinated, while another 5% state they are unsure. A recent survey showed that total of 13% overall. We must, therefore, move beyond this level of complacency. I am not necessarily saying the Minister is complacent but there may be a sense of complacency in wider society in respect of all of us being behind the vaccination drive and that everything is fine on that level. It is not, however. As late as last Saturday, I met a gentleman who proudly told me he was not vaccinated. While we have not had the same type of mass anti-vaccination protests in Ireland as in other European countries, it is an issue. We should not let up in stating why vaccination is important, particularly with regard to that cohort of young people who are more in touch with misinformation online concerning vaccination and campaigning videos and so on in the social media space. This is not something on which the Government or any of us in politics can take a complacent line.

Reflecting on the Minister's words about how far we have travelled, the last 20 months or so have possibly been the most traumatic period in any of our lives. It is having its effect. It is having a long-term effect, not just in the form of long Covid but also in the mental health strain being experienced by many families. Many Deputies will understand that. I spoke to the principal of a school on Thursday who referred to the number of suicide attempts he is encountering and dealing with in his school community. This is replicated throughout the country, with women in particular trying to kill themselves in recent months because of the level of strain and stress they were feeling. Children have been coming across these situations as well. Problematic, difficult and stressful situations in homes were exacerbated by the impact of Covid-19 and the feeling it was not possible to move outside the family space. People cracked as a result. I totally buy into the idea of having a feel-good factor. We are all going to football matches and restaurants again. We are all having coffee inside, meeting family and friends and hugging granny again. However, some people have cracked under the strain and we are still dealing with that.

Turning to my special area of interest, education, we spoke passionately in this House for months about the need for a catch-up fund. The Government delivered to a degree in that regard, but it is going to take years to repair the profound damage done to children, disadvantaged children in particular, in the education sector. Regarding a sector that has opened, the entertainment, restaurant and hospitality sector, we cannot return to the situation where workers in the sector, who are particularly vulnerable, were open to exploitation and receiving low pay. Statistics from the OECD suggest that 23% of Irish workers pre-Covid were on low pay. There is an epidemic of low pay across the very sector that was shut down for so long. We cannot ask those people now going back into the workforce to return to the vulnerability they felt in their workplaces before Covid struck.

We are minded to support what the Minister is doing based on him having learned the lesson from the catastrophic mistake made last year. The biggest criticism the Opposition can make

of the Government is that it does not learn. If the Government has learned from the decisions it made last December and is mindful not to repeat them, the Labour Party is minded to support what it is doing.

I make the point again that we cannot have any complacency when it comes to the vaccination roll-out. That is particularly the case with young people who are being bombarded with messages from bad actors trying to influence them in a particular way. I remind the Minister of the statistics I spoke of earlier in that regard.

If we are talking about hospitality and encouraging people to go out and meet again, we must examine the vulnerability of people working in those sectors. We must look at the impact of long Covid, as the Minister also identified. We must also be mindful, however, that people in Irish society cracked under the strain of the impact of Covid-19. It is completely legitimate for people to put their hands up and say they did not cope during Covid-19 and just did not make it. We must deal with this issue and fund and resource approaches to addressing it. We must reflect on it and build something much better in future. As Members across the House will know, while many people working in communities and on the front line were dealing with the physical health needs of people in respect of Covid or the restrictive measures within schools or the community, many were also dealing with the mental health strain. That is something we must all deal with collectively in future.

Deputy Alan Farrell: We have made significant progress in the fight against Covid-19. I do not think anyone here can deny that. Challenges remain, however. Thanks to the determination of the Irish people and our healthcare professionals and prudent action by the Government, we have managed to mitigate some of the worst scenarios outlined in March 2020. It is noteworthy that in the time since then, we have seen fantastic uptake of vaccines against Covid-19. This has allowed us to roll back many of the restrictions that had profound implications for so many people on this island but, in particular, the vulnerable, elderly and young. Many other countries are unfortunately not in the same position.

Given our success in tackling the spread of the virus and the fast and efficient roll-out of the vaccine programme, combined with the easing of restrictions, it is tempting to think the virus is defeated. Unfortunately, we must remain cautious in the months ahead. The virus has not been eradicated and much work remains to be done domestically and internationally.

In many respects, it is amazing that we have reached this point so quickly. As other speakers have outlined, an uptake of 40% or 50% was envisaged at one point. That we are now at 92% is a testament to the work of scientists in Ireland and globally and the resolve of the people. Prudent action by the Government helped limit the scale of the pandemic over the past 19 months. We must continue this approach if we are to secure and consolidate our success to date. This will include not only how we engage with the issue here in Ireland, but also how we engage with our partners and allies in supporting less fortunate countries in the world.

It is in our interest to see wide availability of vaccines in poorer countries, many of which have not yet begun administering vaccinations to large sections of their populations or even, in some cases, their healthcare workers. It is not for a lack of ambition on their part, but rather a lack of access to vaccine doses. I am pleased that EU programmes and pharmaceutical companies are increasing their efforts to address this problem. Ireland must continue to make a significant contribution to this effort. I commend the Minister for Health, Deputy Stephen Donnelly, and the Cabinet on making the decision to distribute excess vaccines to a number of countries,

including Uganda. We must lobby our partners in the European Union to donate surplus vaccines they currently hold.

I take the opportunity to plug the UNICEF campaign, Get a Vaccine, Give a Vaccine, which is a worthy endeavour. As I mentioned in the House in previous discussions about the overseas aid development fund, Irish people are, *per capita*, the most generous in the world, which is an extraordinary feat. This is one of the most worthy endeavours to engage with. The longer we allow the virus to spread among unvaccinated populations, the more likely it will be that we see new variants emerge. That is especially appropriate in the context of the global south. We cannot say whether the new variants will be more or less virulent than the ones we have experienced, but we must consider if this is a gamble worth taking.

We have seen with our own eyes just how quickly Covid-19 spread across the world, infecting country after country like falling dominos. The interconnectivity of our world has brought us wealth, both cultural and economic. It has brought us new experiences and new breakthroughs in technology and research, but it has also exposed us to new risks.

In recent weeks, discussions on booster shots have entered the public discourse. It is important that the Minister sets out a clear and phased roll-out plan for booster shots at the earliest opportunity. I accept that data are still being collected, analysed and formulated as we speak. However, booster vaccines will form a key part of the next phase of our emergence from this pandemic.

This week, *The Lancet* published a study from the United States showing that protection from Covid-19 diminished to 47% six months after receiving the second dose of an mRNA vaccine. While this may worry some, it is vital that we highlight that the same study shows that this decline in protection did not translate into serious illness resulting in hospitalisation. This is a crucial point in the study and underscores the importance of getting a vaccine. In light of the study and the growing evidence from Israeli studies, we should consider providing an mRNA booster to older or vulnerable people who may have received non-mRNA vaccines. As I have said many times in the past 19 months, we must ultimately be guided by the experts and the science in these decisions. I am confident the Government will continue this form of decision-making. I believe we can provide booster shots to those who will need them and also share vaccines with other nations.

I am encouraged by the proactive approaches the Government is taking, in particular in establishing pop-up vaccination clinics on nine university campuses and third level institutions, including Dublin City University in my local area, which many Fingal residents attend. This will provide anyone who has not yet availed of the vaccine with an opportunity to do so. Importantly, it will also cater for international students who may not yet be fully vaccinated. Moreover, the roll-out of the distribution of free face masks at more than 200 locations nationwide will be an example of the timely reminders society will need in the months ahead.

We must approach 22 October and the removal of further restrictions with caution and a preparedness to act should the situation deteriorate over the winter. As our society returns to more normal social interactions in the months ahead, ensuring that our hospitals are able to cope with what is traditionally a busy season should remain a key priority.

It is my hope that some good may emerge from what has been a deeply scarring and traumatic period for society and the families of those whose lives were tragically lost during the

pandemic. The rapid development of not one but several vaccines should inspire every person and government around the world. It should encourage us to pursue and build upon the progress we have made through our support for research and development apparatuses around the country and internationally. This week, we are talking about harmonised minimum taxation rates for corporate entities. In the process, we should also review our taxation on research and development to encourage pharmaceutical companies to locate and carry out research here.

The use of new technologies and methods of developing medicines, which has led to the development of mRNA vaccines, gives us a glimpse into what may be possible in the future. Encouraging and facilitating the medical and scientific communities to pursue these new avenues offers the potential to develop a wide range of new treatments and perhaps even cures for other illnesses and viruses, which have afflicted untold millions the world over.

The pandemic has shown us that with mobilisation of political and public will, we can make significant changes and progress in a relatively short period. I hope that in future this will help inspire new generations to tackle the biggest problems of the day and inspire us to achieve goals in other sectors of society.

I will conclude with this point, as Deputy Dillon has arrived in the Chamber. I respect the right of citizens to protest. In fact, I would encourage it because protest brings about change. In the 1990s, I remember being enraged because the third level institute that I attended did not have a library. We protested on a bridge and a couple of years later we got a library. I was also enraged at certain times in the mid-noughties when the economic crisis was taking hold and, like many thousands of others, I protested. However, there is a big difference between protesting in the case of a legitimate cause in a public place and protesting at a politician's or medic's home. That is disgraceful. It is demeaning to the individuals who are doing it and they need to cop on. People can protest outside Leinster House, the Department of Health or wherever they like, but they should not protest outside a politician's home. It is a disgrace. I do not say that because the Minister for Health, Deputy Donnelly, is present, but because it has happened to me and many other Members of this House over the years.

Deputy Alan Dillon: As the Minister, Deputy Stephen Donnelly, is well aware, the success of the vaccination programme has afforded us incredible flexibility in the reopening of society. The roll-out of the programme has been a fantastic success. As the Minister outlined, to have that recognised internationally, with Ireland in pole position in Bloomberg's Covid resilience ranking, shows how far we have come since the public health crisis emerged.

I thank the Minister for his recent visits to the vaccination centre in Breaffy and the test centre in MacHale Park, Castlebar. As he mentioned during his visit, we had important news regarding Mayo University Hospital, with more than €18 million allocated for an extension to the emergency department. I invite the Minister to visit the hospital and demonstrate the need for this important project to be progressed without delay.

The easing of public health restrictions and the reopening of sectors has made an incredible difference to the real economy, with people again on the streets, in shops and back at work. Later this month, we will see a significant reduction in the remaining restrictions. This is a result of human effort and sacrifice over the past 18 months and the benefits of the vaccine roll-out. I hope the sectors that have yet to feel the recovery will open. I highlight in particular the entertainment and events industry, as well as inbound tourism operators, which will continue to require ongoing support from the State, as their sector recovers and they get fully back on

their feet. However, Covid-19 remains a threat and should continue to be treated seriously. The possibility of variants means we need to achieve a balance between prudence and popularity. While some may oppose this mechanism to extend public health restrictions in the event they are required, I feel it would be irresponsible to block up the fire escape just because it looks like it may not be required. Until Covid-19 is well and truly in the rear mirror, I agree with the Minister and prefer to have a legal mechanism in place that, hopefully, will not be required. This is in stark contrast to a situation where its provisions may be required quickly and not be in existence.

One final item worth mentioning is that lessons must be learned on how we deal with and plan to prevent cross-contamination in our healthcare settings, particularly nursing homes and acute settings in hospitals. We need to ensure they are better prepared to combat this situation in the future. With over 5,200 deaths, we have to recognise that this has impacted every county, town and village the length and breadth of Ireland and has cast a long shadow on the many families who have suffered the most.

Deputy Sorca Clarke: I do not think anybody for one second is saying that Covid is gone or that Covid is defeated. It is nothing I have had said to me and it is certainly not something that I think. However, I am struck today by one question, a very short and pointed question, and that is: why? Why is it that if, as the Minister himself said, these restrictions will be lifted on 22 October, the Minister is looking for this legislation to be extended? I see no proper justification in his opening statement for this legislation to be extended.

The Minister should know that these discretionary powers would be much better utilised in sorting out the unjust and unequal discrepancies that exist in our health service. This is particularly the case in maternity services where, despite assurances by the Minister, the Tánaiste and the Taoiseach that there was no real reason for these restrictions to be in place, they remain in place today. While others here may talk of protesting about libraries, the women who will be protesting outside the gates of Leinster House again tomorrow are protesting for themselves, for their partners, for their husbands and for their unborn children, which is slightly more important than the lack of a library.

My constituency office has been inundated since the very beginning of restrictions with calls from women and partners about maternity restrictions. At the beginning, they understood. They did not like it but they understood as they could see the reasoning behind it. Those days are gone. To see those restrictions remain in place today is shocking. It truly is shocking, particularly when other services across the country have started to reopen. People can go to an open-air concert but they cannot go with their partner to a scan. There is no logic in that, no sense in that, no justification in that.

When women tell me they are dreading going into hospital by themselves to have their baby, I understand what they are saying. I have been lucky. I have brought four children into this world, not an easy feat at the best of times. I will sing the praises of the maternity services until I shed this mortal coil but there was one thing they could not provide and that was the emotional support that I needed at those times.

There is no uniformity across the hospital services despite the reassurance that has been given. For all that this emergency legislation was introduced, where was it used to ensure that these women were getting a fair and just service? I do not see it being used anywhere and it certainly has not been used in any hospital I am aware of. I know the Minister is aware of that

because I remember mentioning to him the point about doulas and at that time, he agreed it was not correct practice.

As the Government speaks of reframing the challenge, let us reframe that challenge. What is Covid going to look like for the next six or nine months? We have moved out of the emergency phase, thankfully, we have seen the end of lockdowns and we hope that cocooning is something that never comes back. Again, the question presents as to why we are even discussing the extension of this Bill. The powers of the Oireachtas need to be returned to the Oireachtas. There is no door closed to the Minister to come back into this House to reintroduce this Bill, should the situation arise over the coming months.

Where is the plan from the Minister to deal with the waiting lists in our hospitals or to deal with the mental health strategy? I see no emergency legislation to deal with them. I see no emergency legislation to deal with the chronic backlog of gynaecological appointments. At this point, when we speak of vaccinations, let us speak of the other vaccinations. Let us speak of the school-age vaccinations schedule that is due to take place in clinical settings. When we translate that lovely-worded sentence into the reality in my constituency of Longford-Westmeath, it means that parents are being asked to travel a 90-minute round-trip to get their child vaccinated with little to no public transport service. How is that going to affect them? What is going to be the fall-off from that when parents literally cannot get their children to the vaccination they want to get for them? That programme sounds lovely on paper but in reality, the barriers to that service are profound. The Minister spoke of balance. Where is the balance in that?

I will leave the Minister with this. He should please stop treating people like fools because they are not. They have endured and they have adhered to rules, even the ones that at the time made no sense, but they did it and they did it for the greater good. They said their last goodbyes to loved ones and their first hellos to loved ones through windowpanes because they were told it was for the greater good. Those days are gone. We have got to put our faith in people who have signed up to a vaccination programme, who have done all that is asked of them, because they are capable of making an educated decision.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: I move amendment No. 1:

“To delete the words ‘9th day of January, 2022’ and to substitute the words ‘22nd day of October, 2021’ therefor.”.

The purpose of the amendment is to try to reach a compromise in this regard. We are all very concerned about the extent of the emergency powers that the Government took upon itself over the past couple of years when responding to the pandemic. Many of us were very clear about expressing our concerns and certainly on the last occasion we debated this legislation, I and others expressed very strong concern about the approach that has been taken to requiring people to be vaccinated on entering hospitality and the discriminatory aspect of that. It really was a first that admission was going to be granted to people on the basis of health status, and we had not had anything like that before.

We are now in a situation where, thankfully, the omens are good, there has been a very high level of compliance among the public and enormous effort has been put in at the level of the public in terms of adhering to the advice, the public health advice in particular, notwithstanding the fact we had a very high mortality rate. It is important that we recognise those 5,200 people who sadly passed with Covid. It is important that we acknowledge all of the many thousands

of people who have been bereaved as a result of that and, in addition, of course, all of the many people, practically everybody in the country, who have been affected by Covid. The national effort was highly commendable. It is also, of course, important to recognise all of those who kept the show on the road in terms of health services, kept our supermarkets open, kept our public transport going and all of that. We should never forget that we owe all of those front-line people right across the board a huge debt of gratitude. We also, of course, have to recognise the incredible work of the HSE in implementing the vaccination programme. That was done very successfully. It has been our saviour and has got us to a point now where we are enjoying many of the normal aspects of life and, hopefully, we will do that to an even greater extent.

That is why all of the indications are that we are on track in terms of the roadmap. Hopefully, everything will go well up to 22 October and most of the outstanding restrictions will be lifted. For that reason, it is very hard to justify why the Government would be seeking to retain such far-reaching emergency powers beyond 22 October. As others have said, in the event that things go wrong - we all hope sincerely and all the indications are that this will not be the case - there is no difficulty with the Minister coming back in here looking for additional powers or looking to reimpose particular restrictions if the circumstances warrant that but as of now, that is not likely to be the case. It is wonderful that this is the situation.

As a compromise, I am proposing that the power to establish restrictions would only remain with the Government up until the point in the roadmap where most of those restrictions are due to be lifted, that is, 22 October. I ask the Minister to consider that. It is a reasonable proposal that we continue along the road of the roadmap - most people accept that and the vast majority of people are adhering to the requirements under the roadmap - but we expect that in less than three weeks' time, there will not be any need for legislation to underpin the restrictions. I put it to the Minister and ask him to consider this proposal on the clear undertaking that if things do go wrong and if there is a new variant or whatever, there would be full co-operation right across this House in responding to that in an appropriate manner. It is on that basis that I propose this amendment.

Other people have referred to the issue of ventilation. I have been talking about this for a very long time. An expert group was established under NPHET that produced two reports making clear recommendations on ventilation and I simply cannot understand why the Minister is not taking that expert advice. It is extraordinary how lax the whole situation is in relation to ventilation. There is a view taken that we are still talking about cleaning surfaces, washing hands etc. as being the primary way of reducing spread when we have known for a long time that Covid is airborne. For that reason, that should be the primary focus in relation to public health advice. I was flabbergasted that the recent new public health messaging going out in the media did not mention ventilation. It is extraordinary. I cannot understand why that is the case. It is a huge missed opportunity. There also is a lot of justified criticism in relation to the tardiness of being ready in the schools, delays with the CO2 monitors, them not being available to other than mainstream classes, and, of course, the lack of clear advice in relation to that. It is a very urgent matter and it should still be addressed at this point.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I am glad to have an opportunity to speak on this subject. In the first instance, I am one of those who would be reluctant to observe restrictions on persons travelling about their business and their enjoyment in the country. However, the call had to be made, and was made at the appropriate time. It was felt then that the restrictions were important in curtailing the degree to which the virus could spread. They served and will continue to serve their purpose. This is a matter of opinion and of argument. People will say "For" and

“Against”, and we have to wait until afterwards to find out. As the fellow said, “If we had the benefit of hindsight beforehand we would never make any mistakes.” It is an add-on that is a belt and braces to the campaign against the virus.

Deputy Shortall mentioned the point about air purification and ventilation - the two are somewhat related. I have raised this on a number of occasions in the past as well that there are provisions now whereby enclosed settings can be fitted out with air purification plants that can eliminate 100% of the virus. The availability of such technology nowadays is something that should be borne in mind because we are talking about an airborne virus and air purification has to be an element in dealing with it in certain circumstances. I acknowledge it is not in all circumstances but it certainly is a possibility that we should not ignore. To take it into account and to be able to rely on it is something that we should avail of, as required. The Minister, if he gets an opportunity, might make reference to such technology as a means of curtailing, in the event of there being particular sources of spreading identified in the future. It would be helpful. While scientists will argue as to whether it is possible to achieve 100% air purification, I believe it is. I believe that science has advanced to that extent now and given that it has, we should be happy to rely on it.

In general, I congratulate the Minister and the Government for their efforts in curtailing Covid-19. It was a difficult call. It was an appalling thing to have to do and to spend money just to stay in the same spot, to run faster, to employ more people and to put people in the front line at risk who came forward again and again, many of whom suffered loss of life - their own and their families' lives - by being in the front line. Whatever happens from here on in, one cannot quantify the extent to which we are obligated to those front-line operators. They did it willingly. They made their contribution. They put their shoulder to the wheel. They did the job that had to be done, which is a great commendation of their efforts, notwithstanding the fact that there was loss of life. More than 5,000 people lost their lives and that is not a small thing.

There are those also who deny that a virus ever existed. We have in the past couple of weeks seen situations whereby people have advised sufferers of the virus that they should go home, that they should not receive treatment, that it was all a farce, that it was all a game, all a conspiracy by Administrations to restrict their movement etc. It is sad that people take the advice from such quarters but, unfortunately, they do. As long as they do, we will have tragic consequences.

The Minister and the Government are to be complimented on the leadership they gave and NPHET has to be complimented on its leadership and the advice it, including the Chief Medical Officer, gave throughout. It was, very often, a lonely place to be telling people that they were sorry but they would have to restrict their activities, they could not go on holidays and they could not do what they normally do and go where they wanted to within their own country because of the existence of this virus. That was a difficult thing to do but they did it in the interests of the community at large. If they had not done so, we would find ourselves with numerous lockdowns, as they continue to have in other countries far from here, such as Australia and New Zealand, where it still goes on and, in fact, throughout Europe where emergencies are arising on a fairly regular basis and there then have to be introduced dramatic means of curtailing activity and containing the spread of the disease.

We have done it in this country. Everybody has co-operated. The public have co-operated as well. It has been done with the minimum of incursion on the rights and the lives of the people, but at the same time with sufficient emphasis on restrictions to ensure that the disease did not spread.

I will finish, if I might, on an attendant subject. Previous speakers made reference to the waiting lists in hospitals. It naturally follows it was never possible to keep waiting lists down and at the same time deal with Covid. It could not happen that way, notwithstanding the extra cost, the extra expenditure, the extra investment etc.

Insofar as hospital beds are concerned, however, I remember not so long ago when we were advised by experts that we had far too many hospital beds in this country, that we should close them down, that they were a drain on the health budget and that fewer of them would suffice. They were wrong, particularly in the context of an increasing population. It was totally contradictory to suggest that. With the population increasing to almost double what it was in the 1950s, we found ourselves in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s with people telling us that what we needed was fewer facilities. That is not what we needed, though. We needed a clear indication that we had to accommodate that increased population.

We must also increase the skills in our hospitals and the wider health services. That is being done. If we are to compete with all others and deal effectively and efficiently with our people throughout the country, we must be able to attend to our people quickly, effectively and efficiently. We must be able to compete with all others, not only throughout Europe, but globally. Health services are a more global issue now than they used to be. As we on the health committee have been told many times over the past five or seven years, we operate on New York, London or Sydney prices when we have to appoint people. I understand that but it is a fact of life that we now need to invest heavily in medical infrastructure in order to achieve the effective and efficient delivery of services to people when they want them, not in three months' time. We have all encountered instances of people attending hospital only to be told to come back in six months' time. That is incredible stuff and I cannot believe that we are still seeing that kind of thing. Can Deputies imagine a person who is suffering what could be a life-threatening illness being told that the hospital can do nothing for him or her for at least six months but will talk to the person then? Particularly given the pervasive nature of some of the illnesses in question and the degree to which they can progress rapidly, the person who is ill needs to be informed that the hospital can deal with his or her illness quickly, arrest its progress and, resultantly, improve the patient's chances. That is the way we must proceed in future. We have the wherewithal to do it effectively and efficiently. It would be an investment in the future if we made the provision for that now. Yesterday's announcement of a review of the economic plan is part and parcel of that in terms of recognising what we have to do now. If we do not do it now under normal conditions, we will have to do it under emergency conditions at a later stage. When we must respond to something in a manner akin to a fire brigade, it means we have not been making sufficient provision.

I compliment the Government on its work on Covid, as well as those in the health services throughout the public and private sectors on the manner in which they responded, the sacrifices they made, the risks they took and the commitment they gave for what has been almost two years. We must recognise that achievement and congratulate all and sundry. We must also recognise that we must look carefully and critically at future requirements in terms of infrastructural investment in order to ensure that we do not find ourselves saying that, had we done something X number of years ago, we would have been much better off.

My final point is on the children's hospital. It continues to progress and I am glad to see it is progressing satisfactorily. Concerns were expressed about cost overruns. Like the Minister, I was a member of the committee for a four-year period. I did not see any accurate costing undertaken before the €1.48 billion was identified. That was the first time there was a cost ac-

countant's *imprimatur* on it. That costing identified the cost at that stage. There will be situations where costs increase. That applies across the board of the economy, although not to the extent they should be allowed to go unbridled. Rather, cost increases should not stop progress or restrict us in our need to invest in hospital perfection and centres of excellence.

Deputy Thomas Gould: We are here today to pass even more legislation on indoor dining despite serious reservations from the Opposition. Meanwhile, we are failing to act on addiction recovery meetings undertaken, for example, by groups like Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous and SMART Recovery. When I first raised this issue last year when these groups were not able to meet, the Minister confirmed that they were providing an essential healthcare service. Having spoken to people in recovery and hearing about the vital work that these groups do, I could not agree more. Recovery is a difficult journey and the pandemic has made it much harder. Sadly, instead of being an ally to those in recovery, the Government has been a barrier. These groups are still extremely limited, in that they can only meet with a maximum of 20 people in a room with 2 m of social distancing between each. This means that they are still being forced to turn away people who are in recovery and need these vital meetings. At a time when indoor sports and events can see up to 100 people in a room, this is downright insulting to those in recovery. How can the Minister stand over this?

The Minister told me that he would resolve this issue by 9 September. A month later and I am now being told that it will all be sorted by 22 October, when most restrictions are lifted, but what I am hearing on the ground is that this might not be true and that these groups are still asking for specific guidelines to be published allowing them to return to normal meetings. Last week, I published Sinn Féin's recovery charter. I suggest that the Government read through it because I am not sure that the Government understands what recovery means and what people in recovery need. These are essential healthcare services and they are not asking for a lot. Can they please be given the guidelines they are requesting?

There is a healthcare crisis in Cork. Cork University Hospital, CUH, the Mercy hospital and other Cork hospitals are severely overcrowded, understaffed and on their knees owing to the pressure they are facing. Yesterday, the Government published the national development plan with the promise yet again of a new hospital for Cork. We still have no timeline or location for that hospital. We know that the planned hospital will not meet Cork's needs because it is not ambitious enough. I am asking that it be on the northside of the city because the people of the northside have no hospital. Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael closed down the old North Infirmery hospital and the orthopaedic hospital. I am asking that the area be given a full elective inpatient surgery hospital that is open 24-7, not the part-time 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. or 8 p.m., Monday to Friday hospital that has been planned. The latter would mean that the new hospital would not be able to perform operations like hip or knee replacements or any surgery that would require a patient to stay overnight. What good is that when we have a crisis? A full 24-7 hospital is urgent and needed now. It was needed three years ago when it was announced in the previous development plan. It was needed ten years ago when it was announced by the then Government. The people of Cork are sick of false promises from and failed deliveries by Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and now the Green Party. We need to take the pressure off the healthcare services in Cork because there are 75,000 people on waiting lists in the city and county. Those people and the doctors, nurses and other staff in the hospitals cannot wait any longer. Will the Minister deliver the 24-7 hospital that Cork needs on the northside?

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: People Before Profit has proactively supported the vaccination campaign and has encouraged people to get vaccinated as a critical measure to give us

a layer of protection against Covid-19. The vaccination programme undoubtedly has done this, putting us in a position whereby, fingers crossed, we can edge our way out of the grim period we have been through and the terrible hardships, mental stress and anguish that people have had to endure for the past year and a half.

5 o'clock

Our view and our record on this are both clear. We believe that vaccination was critical to respond to the Covid-19 crisis and that more than 90% of adults have been vaccinated is a tremendous show of solidarity and wisdom on the part of the people of this country in the face of a really horrendous society-wide and global threat. It would, however, be a mistake to imagine that that success has been achieved through coercion or mandatory measures. Overwhelmingly, the pressure on Government and politicians to take public health measures, which were, in some cases, very difficult, in the face of the pandemic quite often came as a result of people calling for them. They did so on a voluntary basis because they listened, reasoned out the information they were being given and concluded that compliance with public health measures and vaccination were the right things to do to address the threat that Covid represented, particularly to people who were vulnerable, the elderly and so on. In my view, coercion and legal requirements were not in any sense the significant factor in assuring the levels of compliance and support we have achieved for the public health campaign and the vaccination campaign. I do not accept some of the slightly inflammatory explanations with regard to extending the emergency powers contained in the legislation. I do not agree with some of the language that has been used around that. Such language is not helpful. I am of the opinion that what is proposed in the motion is not the right thing to do. We opposed previous legislation in this area because it has the potential to be counterproductive. I have great faith in the wisdom and common sense of ordinary people. That faith should have been reinforced as a result of what we witnessed the people of this country do over the past while.

The use of coercive or discriminatory measures to achieve compliance with measures that are necessary to protect public health gives succour to a small minority of forces that are trying to undermine the public health effort. It gives them ammunition that we do not need to give them. It also unnecessarily discriminates against people who have genuine worries which, in many cases, I do not share. We need education and information to try to address those concerns. We should not be seen in any way to persecute those people or discriminate against them. I am not saying that is the intention, but the problem is, sometimes, that ends up being the effect of these measures. That is counterproductive and, for that reason, we will oppose this proposed extension.

I will give an example. The other day, I met a man on the street who told me he wants to get vaccinated but he is terrified of needles. He is hoping that a pill or spray will be developed that will enable him to get vaccinated. I heard Luke O'Neill say that he is hopeful that such a spray will become available. I do not love needles, but some people are genuinely scared of them. For that reason, they may not get vaccinated. There are some who had bad reactions to vaccinations in the past and who are, therefore, genuinely afraid. They are not conspiracy theorists. They are not trying to whip up opposition to the vaccination campaign, they are genuinely concerned. Some people have concerns about the speed at which the vaccines were developed. I do not share them. The evidence is there, but I understand that some people may have not yet been convinced. I do not think the best approach is to, if you like, discriminate against those people when we have achieved the high levels of vaccination and compliance with public health measures on a voluntary basis through the enthusiasm and, often, endurance of hardship of or-

dinary people in compliance. This is a mistake and it is unnecessary.

The Opposition has always facilitated the Government. Where it is necessary to respond to particular stages in the development of the pandemic, we will facilitate any reasonable request by the Government, but I do not think this is necessary. What is proposed is potentially somewhat counterproductive. For that reason, we will oppose it. I ask the Minister to reconsider whether it is necessary.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: We are in a better position now as regards where we are from a health point of view. There have been very dark days. During some of those dark days, the Dáil could not meet in this setting and instead had to meet in the convention centre. While that might have suited me in that I am able to get up and walk around, it probably did not suit other Members who might be somewhat more normal. That has been said before. I will probably be dreadfully sorry about saying what I have just said.

An Ceann Comhairle: Are you sure we can be described as “more normal”?

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Yes. Everything is in context. We are in a better place. We have had huge buy-in from the community in regard to vaccination and adherence to guidelines and rules, although people were not always happy to do so. That was often uncomfortable for an awful lot of them and for many of us, but we are now at this particular place. On 22 October, we move to the next stage, which will bring us to whatever normality means in this day and age. As has been said by many of my Sinn Féin colleagues and by many Deputies across this House, into the future if the need arises for further legislation to deal with any particular issues that arise from the pandemic - touch wood that will not happen - hopefully we, as Dáil, can deal with them in this House. The Government will find the Opposition willing and able in that regard.

Earlier, Deputy Ward made the point that this measure is possibly a blank cheque that might never be cashed by the Minister. I hope that is the case. On that basis, we do not need this to happen, but we are where we are. I hope that the Minister and other members of Government will take on board what has been said by the Opposition on this matter. We still need to continue the conversation as regards how we secure ourselves by securing the rest of the world and those wider conversations in regard to vaccines. Many have said that a trade-related aspects of intellectual property rights, TRIPS, waiver was not necessary or that it was not needed in respect of bulking up capacity and production. As much as I may have believed that at the time, I was not ideologically wedded to it. I am open to anything that is shown to be a solution. I never for a moment accepted that pharmaceutical companies would not try to make a profit in this particular set of circumstances. We, the European Commission and the international community need to maintain a conversation on this and to ensure that we have a roadmap and a plan. I accept that there are logistical difficulties in regard to parts of the developing world and ensuring that we have a proper vaccine roll-out. That is the only means by which we can ensure we get to the next stage. As we move forward, we will also need extra capacity in terms of booster shots where vaccines wear-off or we do not get the same bang for buck after a period. We would all agree that our focus needs to be on the most vulnerable. We need to make sure all of that goes as smoothly as possible. I would think much has been learned in relation to how we have operated over the past while. We will not necessarily have the glitches and difficulties we had at the early stages. That is what needs to happen. However, this legislation is not the road map we need at this time. We must show people we are entering into changed circumstances. We want them to adhere to whatever guidelines must pertain at any particular time. If there is a need for something to be done, it could be done quite easily within this House on a cohesive, well-

planned and thought-out sort of way, and I know the Government will not find an Opposition that is wanting. Go raibh maith agaibh go léir. The first bit I said can be struck from the record.

Deputy Matt Shanahan: Covid-19 has challenged the country, our society and our economy like never before. With this disease, the country has travelled on a roller coaster journey. It has been a journey of high consequent mortality in the elderly, a hospital intensive care crisis that has tested staff to the limit, deferral of significant other health procedures and activity and lockdown of our population to suppress disease transmission. In addition we agreed to eye-watering economic measures to stabilise our economy and prevent a wholesale bankruptcy for a whole slew of businesses, large and small, in every economic sector of the State. Despite the naked populism decrying scientific analysis and promoting a herd immunity that could be possible only through widespread death and chronic illness, visited across all age groups in our population, science has, in the form of the vaccines, delivered a way out of the abyss. We must be forever grateful to the many scientists and health researchers who worked around the clock for many months to find solutions to some, if not all, of Covid's ravages. As many question the route Ireland took in fighting Covid, we might also note the current experience of New Zealand. After an extended period of operating a largely zero-Covid strategy, it has now decided to move to a vaccination strategy, given the increasing transmission rates of the Delta variant there.

Today we discuss the possible next round of further easing restrictions, while keeping monitoring and surveillance of potential disease resurgence in place, only because the people, as they have done previously, recognised the science and the vaccines' benefits and chose to put their trust in that science. I congratulate the people of my own constituency of Waterford, who have made it the county with the highest vaccination rate in the country. I believe it is also the highest rate in Europe for any administered county area. Thus, not only has County Waterford been recognised as the best place to live in the country, we now also carry the title of safest county in the country as a result of vaccine uptake.

The Minister has outlined that Government is looking to extend the powers of the present Act purely as a safety net. He says it is the Government's intention to fully open and lift all restrictions on indoor hospitality, subject to public health advice, on October 22. While the Government is looking at an extension of the sunset clause, I must voice some concerns about the extension of this legislation. Indeed, I am on the record of the House as supporting an amendment to the previous extension of powers which would shorten the sunset period and then review the data. That amendment was not accepted at the time. The Minister is asking Oireachtas Members to give their support to again extending significant powers to Government while also advising his best guesstimate is these powers will not require invoking beyond 22 October. I have concerns that the rate of transmission, though at low levels on that date, may be still a cause for concern. I have concerns we may not be totally out of the woods even then. That significant reason may describe why we must be able to implement significant infection control and disease-retarding initiatives, as required, by extending this period even further. Should that prove to be the case, the full appropriation of powers Government has been granted to severely limit the movement of people in our State, or designate what personal data they must offer as a result, is a power that cannot be extended again, beyond the Minister's new proposed deadline. Even with future compelling evidence to support ongoing restrictions, the Minister must return to the House with new legislation seeking a new mandate for its implementation past the three-month window he has now proposed.

It would be remiss of me, when given the opportunity, to not commend once more our scientific researchers and our national clinical and healthcare staff across so many of our health

services, who have taken the utmost risks with their lives and their health. They stayed at their posts to carry out the duties they were born to do. They represent the very best of what is cherished and desired in any country, people or society. They should feel justifiably proud of their contribution to contemporary Irish history.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Yesterday New Zealand admitted zero-Covid was not workable. Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern was big enough to admit she was wrong. Here, the supporters of zero-Covid have so far remained completely silent. The Social Democrats, People Before Profit-Solidarity, the Labour Party and even Sinn Féin, at some stage, were ardent supporters of the idea of zero-Covid. The Social Democrats went so far as to say everything should be shut down until we got lower than ten cases per day. On that logic, we would still be in full lockdown. The fact the majority of the opposition parties in this Dáil supported that policy gave the Government a blank cheque to implement the most severe and costly restrictions seen in the whole of Europe. The opposition parties offered no challenge to the Government and no critique of the extreme outlier policy pursued by the Government. Real opposition is critically important for a functioning democracy. If we do not have that there is a major chance of seeing big, extreme policy swings within the country.

The Minister has stated Ireland is not alone in this crisis but Ireland is alone in the way it managed this crisis. The Minister spoke about protecting public health but the majority of people who died of Covid caught it in a nursing home or hospital. These are the two areas that are either owned or managed by the Government. The major weakness in the battle against Covid was the lack of accident and emergency and ICU bed capacity. This was a political choice by Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael for generations. While the Minister's Government is trying to extend what is probably the most draconian legislation Europe has seen on the basis there is still an outstanding threat, his Department, his Government and his HSE are actually seeking to close ICU and accident and emergency beds in Our Lady's Hospital, Navan today. How can anybody get their heads around the fact there is a policy to close accident and emergency and ICU beds at this juncture in our battle against Covid?

Covid is a real illness and there is no doubt the management of it is a very difficult issue but no other country in Europe imposed restrictions as long or severe as Ireland did. The consequences have been massive for the country. Health waiting lists have surged from 741,000 people to 907,000 in that two-year period. Tens of thousands of patients have gone without diagnoses or treatment, many of them with life-threatening illnesses. Ireland, Saudi Arabia and North Korea were the three countries that banned public religious services in this period. For the first quarter of this year, 10,000 homes were not built. Ireland had the biggest housing crisis in Europe and was the only country that prohibited the building of houses in the first quarter of this year. Ireland has spent €41 billion on Covid-related costs over the past two years. This is a massive figure. It is comparable to the bank bailout. We saw a 21% increase in expenditure last year. The European average was 10%. Countries like France spent 5% extra. That massive difference in expenditure by the State was not down to Covid. If we were dealing with Covid in the same manner as other European countries, we would have been at the European average. We were double the European average when it came to that expenditure.

The extension of these radical and draconian restrictions is wrong but it also shows the Government and the Opposition have learned nothing with regard to this. We need a full, independent and public investigation into the Government's handling of Covid over these past two years.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Were the organisations representing the restaurateurs and publicans consulted about this extension? Was An Garda Síochána consulted? Where did the date of 22 October for the reopening of everything come from and where did it go? Why are we extending this legislation for a further three months?

We all see the waiting lists despite the additional €3.884 billion that was invested in the health service in 2020, never mind 2021. I want to know why the Government closed St. Brigid's District Hospital in Carrick-On-Suir in the middle of the so-called pandemic. If it was fit for patients at that time, why is it not fit now? I also demand an international inquiry, totally independent of Ireland, into how people were sent to nursing homes with Covid-19. So many died in places like Castlerea and we want to know what went on. Will the Minister meet Irish Nurses for Transparency and Openness, INfTO, who want to tell their stories of suppression, bullying and intimidation and what really went on inside nursing homes?

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: Emergency provisions need to remain in place until we are completely rid of Covid-19 permanently. However, there are aspects of this that need to be looked at. We are very aware of the people who contracted Covid-19 and who will get paid while they are out sick for the recommended number of days. We have a shortage across so many industries due to the PUP. I am talking here about construction, haulage, all aspects of healthcare and hospitality. Some people are on the payment for legitimate reasons but others are exploiting the situation. We now know that close contacts do not have to remain out of work but what is the policy with regard to people who are unable to get the vaccine because of underlying conditions or fear? Have provisions be made for them? I refer to healthcare workers, including nurses, who worked during the pandemic when there were no vaccines available who are now being pushed out. Is this part of a policy and is it correct?

Deputy Michael Collins: I do not agree with the continuation of the measures. Surely a better course of action would have been to allow the legislation to fall as planned and then, if an urgent necessity arose, the Dáil could consider new proposals at that stage as opposed to giving all of the power and authority to the Minister. As Deputies, we are acting in a reckless and undemocratic manner if we approve this motion. Instead Dáil Éireann, the people's Chamber, should be given the power to reintroduce any required extraordinary powers. To approve this motion means this Chamber once again delegates legislative power to the Minister for Health which raises very serious and valid human rights and equality concerns. People have suffered enough and business people in particular have suffered enough. People deserve the respect they have earned. The majority of the people in this country have done everything in their power to make sure to do the right thing. Churches have been closed. The accident and emergency unit in Bantry was closed. We talk about a pandemic but what happened in Bantry General Hospital during the summer was scandalous. Southdoc in Castletownbere is closed at the moment and all of this needs to be investigated further.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: First, it is wrong to discuss this without remembering all of the people who died and who were very sick; all of those lovely people who are gone. For us to be debating without first of all remembering those very important people would be wrong. I want to remember everybody that is gone from us or who was very sick during the pandemic. Having said that, I would not agree to extend the Minister's powers beyond nine o'clock tonight because I do not think the people of Ireland would agree with it. That is a fact; not beyond nine o'clock tonight would I agree. The majority of Deputies in here, including my colleagues on this side of the House, are saying the same thing, namely that enough is enough. The people want to be allowed to continue and be responsible for themselves and I rely on the people. I rely

on them, the people who elected us. They are the people I trust. They are the people I want to ensure will be in charge of their own destiny.

It is also very important to remember that people have suffered financially and business-wise. Of course, as I said, the people who lost loved ones suffered an awful lot but they want to try to get back to normal as well. What we want to do is ensure we do so in a safe fashion but we cannot give the Government a blank cheque. The people of Ireland will not thank any Deputy who votes to give the Minister a blank cheque for the next number of months. The people do not want that. They do not agree with it and they will not agree to it. Enough is enough.

There was an instance some months ago where three or four people on one of the largest construction jobs in Ireland got Covid. A Deputy stood up in the National Convention Centre and said we should send them all home and shut it down. There were 5,000 or 6,000 people working there and this man said he represented the working man but he never did a day's work in his life. He would not know what a day's work was if it came up and hit him in the face and he was talking about shutting down one of the finest and biggest construction jobs in Ireland. Any person talking that type of nonsense should be told enough is enough.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I am glad to have the opportunity to speak. The Minister got these powers when there was an exceptional need and we all accepted there was a need at that time. We extended them in the middle of the summer although I was against doing that at the time. However, it looked like that was going to be the one and only extension but here is the Minister again, barefaced and looking for another extension. I can tell him that I am not voting for it because there is no exceptional need now and no emergency at the present time. I will tell the Minister where there is an emergency, however. There is an emergency in Kerry, with more than 2,200 people waiting for elective surgery. Many more will not be accepted onto the waiting lists because consultants have written to GPs to tell them not to refer any more patients. I am appealing to the Deputy from Kerry who has a very powerful position in this Government. He is the Chief Whip and I ask him to talk to the Minister for Health about the problems in Kerry rather than going on local radio in Kerry to tell the people what they already know. People are suffering, they are in pain and agony. They need to be seen by consultants and to be operated on. Deputy Griffin should not be telling the people what they already know. I ask the Minister for Health to talk with Deputy Griffin who is the Government Chief Whip. We need a scheme to help the people who have been waiting for far too long. That is what I am asking the Minister to do.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: Just for clarification, Deputy Griffin is talking to me, as is Deputy Norma Foley.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: The Minister is not listening to them-----

An Ceann Comhairle: No, please Deputy-----

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: Otherwise the consultants would not have written to all of us last week telling us that they were coming together for the first time because-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Healy-Rae, contain yourself.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: -----the situation in the hospitals in Kerry is dire at the present. The Minister is not listening to the Deputies.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you Deputy Healy-Rae. You have made your point.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: I am listening very carefully.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I doubt that they are talking at all, that is the honest truth.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: We are.

An Ceann Comhairle: We are moving on to the Rural Independent Group. Sorry, we have had the Rural Independent Group. We had better not go back-----

Deputy Mattie McGrath: We will go again.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: We will go again and we will tell them the very same and more.

An Ceann Comhairle: Next is the Independent Group. Deputy Catherine Connolly is sharing time with Deputies McNamara and Fitzmaurice.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I will be as focused as I can. I will not be supporting this legislation. I did not support it initially. The only emergency legislation I supported was back in March of last year. I make my comments in the full knowledge that 5,249 people have died and that Covid-19 cases have risen again, with 1,124 new cases reported and 349 people in hospital. I make my comments fully aware of that and of the fact that the virus is still a major problem.

This legislation was passed in July. It was introduced on 13 July and passed by the Dáil on 14 July by 74 votes to 68. There was no pre-legislative scrutiny. The Government built in discrimination on the basis of health for the first time ever in Irish law. The Government built discrimination into the law on the basis of a person's health status. Discrimination was built in on every level. I have just checked the figures for those who were vaccinated earlier this year. By 1 April, an interesting date, a total of 22,988 people had been vaccinated. They are all now well over the six-month effectiveness threshold. We have heard Deputies refer to *The Lancet* and the reduction in effectiveness of the vaccine five months after the last dose. We are now discriminating against those who had the double dose as well as those who did not. Then we have the people, including a member of my own family, who contracted Covid-19 who have a certificate for six months. Interestingly, in the Minister's speech today he referred to nine months for such people. There is no clarity on anything. An all-party committee made recommendations that were absolutely ignored. I, among other Deputies, spoke out from the beginning on nursing homes and on the utter failure of the Government and NPHET to consider the vulnerability of nursing homes, meat plants and direct provision centres.

This legislation is not necessary and it should not be made part of our law. The Minister has come before us with a speech. He has not told us what report has been produced or whether there has been a review. The legislation from July provided that compliance officers could be appointed or designated. How many were designated? How many compliance notices were issued? How many cessation orders and appeals were issued? There has been no assessment, as required under EU regulation, of the impact on data retention, among other things, including discrimination.

The Minister is before us asking that we renew the legislation, almost on a whim. He tells us that the regulations will go but we are to leave the legislation in place. This is the most serious element of the draconian series of Acts we brought in, ostensibly because there was a crisis. There is at least an onus on the Government and its backbench Deputies, who did not turn up

today and avail of their time, to tell the House it has reviewed the legislation, outline what the review found, state the reasons it needs to be renewed and seek our assistance to do so. That is what a rational, reasonable Government would do. I thank the people who stood in solidarity, all of us together, until the Government split that solidarity by drawing a distinction and enshrining discrimination in the law.

Deputy Michael McNamara: I opposed this legislation when it was introduced in July and I am opposing it being rolled over again. In July, I predicted that it would be rolled over. Many Government Deputies said they found it unpalatable and they were concerned by it, but that it was for a limited period of time, so they would accept it. Now, they are accepting it because, well, it is a power that will not be used. I am suspicious of powers that will not be used being placed in the hands of civil servants or pliable Ministers who do whatever their civil servants want.

The Minister's speech referred to three different groups. Those who are vaccinated and those who have an immunity from recovery are two groups addressed in the law. However, when the legislation was introduced there was a third group, which the Minister may recall discussing, namely, those who were to have a certificate based on having tested negative for Covid-19. We were to see these certificates in the course of the summer. Where are they now? What happened to them?

The legislation provides for three different proofs of immunity. One is the EU digital Covid certificate. There was another certificate of a type prescribed by the Minister in regulations made under section 31AB.(4). It would have enabled the Minister to allow people who had a negative test to enter a bar. The silence now is as deafening as it was throughout the summer. We do not know what happened to that form of proof. The third proof of immunity was to be "any form of written information or proof verifying, in such manner as may be prescribed, in relation to the person to whom the document is issued, that the person has recovered from Covid-19." What happened to that? The Minister did not do anything with that either, notwithstanding that the recommendations from the start were that all those who had contracted Covid in the previous nine months would get an immunity certificate so that they could go about their lives. The reason was that the EU Covid certificate was those who had contracted Covid in the previous six months because at the time that certificate was introduced, the evidence was slightly different. It is still evolving. A recent study based on a considerable amount of data from the Maccabi Institute for Health Services Research in Israel showed that immunity acquired following recovery from Covid is far greater than the immunity acquired through the vaccine. That does not mean people should go out and get Covid because there are considerable risks involved in that and I am not suggesting people take that approach. You have to be careful to qualify everything because if you question any of this, you are labelled an anti-vaxxer for having legitimate questions.

I will raise the case of a constituent. All five members of her family had Covid in January. In May and August, two of children received a single dose of vaccine. In July, in response to a query, the HSE replied when a senior medical officer of the National Immunisation Office stated the children would be considered vaccination with a single dose. In September, the HSE issued immunisation guidelines based on the advice of the national immunisation advisory committee, NIAC, stating that a single dose would suffice for those who are under 50 and were immunocompetent. This family went looking for their certificates throughout August and September. The woman did not give a reason but it was presumably in order that they could travel and go about their lives. After calling three times a week for over four weeks, they got Covid

certificates which suggest that they were partially vaccinated, contrary to the scientific advice that the Minister received from NIAC and the evolving scientific information coming out of the international community.

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

Deputy Michael McNamara: If the Minister will not listen to the law passed by this Parliament, will he at least listen to the science? That is the mantra we have been listening to for over 18 months now.

Minister for Health(Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I will start by adding my voice to the words spoken from across the House on the vaccine programme, by giving thanks from Dáil Éireann to the women and men all over Ireland who worked so hard to create this extraordinary success for our nation. It really has been a national effort. The HSE was involved with the Department of Health, the Defence Forces, GPs, the private sector, community pharmacists, volunteers, people coming out of retirement, students, the Order of Malta, St. John's Ambulance and the Civil Defence. It has been a truly national effort and I want to add my voice to those of others across the House who acknowledged it.

As of yesterday, the percentage of those aged 18 years and over who have had at least one dose of vaccine, which I hope will translate into their becoming fully vaccinated, stands at 95%. That is fantastic. We all remember the discussions in December and January about what might happen by the end of September. We are now at the start of October. It has been fantastic. I also add my voice to those of colleagues who encouraged those remaining few who are still thinking of getting vaccinated to do so. Some have decided that under no circumstances will they get vaccinated. That is what it is. Some are still thinking about it, however. There are people who have a fear of needles, for instance, as has been pointed out to me in the vaccination centres. Vaccination is so important because vaccines are so effective and the consequences are so serious.

I have been in most of the vaccination centres around the country. One of the conversations that struck me most was a discussion with two ICU nurses, both of whom had decades of experience in intensive care units and have seen a lot. They are hardened, experienced professionals. They told me they were traumatised by what they saw Covid do to people. They spoke of the horrific way it attacks people and how it attacks multiple organs and the respiratory system. They spoke of how isolated these people were. Having spent decades treating people in intensive care, the sickest people in the country, they said they were traumatised by the horror that this disease brings to people. For anyone who is still thinking about getting vaccinated, I add my voice to those of colleagues by asking them to please do so. They will protect themselves and everyone around them. Unfortunately, there are breakthrough infections. They are real but the vaccines are incredibly effective.

I welcome this important debate. These are exceptional measures and whether they are temporary or not, this is an exceptional power.

Deputy Michael McNamara: Are they temporary or not?

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: It is imperative always that Members of the House take the opportunity-----

Deputy Mattie McGrath: How temporary is "temporary"?

An Ceann Comhairle: Please, Deputy.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: -----to debate this legislation because it is very serious.

I will try to address some of the questions Deputies asked. Deputy Ward asked a reasonable question about the mental health provisions. That power is due to expire on 9 November. The Mental Health Commission is not looking for it to be extended and I am not recommending that it be extended. That power will be extinguished on 9 November.

Deputy Gould asked a very important question on addiction services. We are on track for lifting restrictions on 22 October, although there will be final public health recommendations and a Government decision in that regard. Come that date, all of those services will go back to normal. Obviously, we all want to keep the basic measures in mind and in place but there would be no restrictions, other than that these services follow the good advice they should follow.

I have listened carefully to Deputies' comments on the resolution to extend one Part of this Act. It is important to note that we are only looking to extend Part 2. That Part is specifically around indoor hospitality. It is not about the ability to bring in many other wide-ranging powers but specifically related to hospitality. It is based on the advice of the Chief Medical Officer who has identified this, as have many other countries, as one of the higher risk measures for all of the reasons we understand. For those very reasons, countries around Europe are still imposing this restriction for indoor dining and indoor drinking.

I mentioned already how mindful we still need to be about the precariousness of this disease. It is not one that lends itself to being easily controlled or managed, as we know. The Chief Medical Officer has given his advice for this reason. I am disappointed that some Members of the Opposition will not support the extension. I accept that everyone is coming from the best possible place in trying to find the best balance as we respond. All I would say to those Members who may call a vote on this proposal or who may vote against it is that I imagine that most people, as per the amendment introduced by the Social Democrats, would be okay with extending the measure until 22 October, as it will otherwise fall within the next few days.

Deputy Michael McNamara: Not until 9 o'clock tonight. Did the Minister not hear the contributions?

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: We are talking about extending a safety net for about 11 weeks on the advice of Chief Medical Officer and I believe all of us will agree that he has advised us well. A reasonable argument has been made by colleagues that if this is needed, Deputies could come back to the House and legislate. I want to take us back to what happened in the week before Christmas last year to show how quickly this can move. It was on the Friday evening in the week before Christmas that the UK Government signalled that it had serious concerns about a variant of concern, namely, the Alpha variant. We worked right through the weekend, as one would expect, and the Government met the following Monday and Tuesday. We made very serious decisions so quickly because they were required quickly. If it had been necessary to draft new legislation, bring it before both Houses, have it debated, passed and then approved by the President, I believe all Deputies will accept that there is no way we could have done that by that Monday or Tuesday. With the best will in the world, that would not have been possible.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: There is no scrutiny.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: I ask Deputies to consider their position on the proposal. It is

a safety net.

Deputy Michael McNamara: Will the Minister consider his position?

An Ceann Comhairle: Allow the Minister to continue without interruption, please.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: It is a safety net lasting for about 11 weeks and it is being done on the advice of the Chief Medical Officer.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: It is belt and braces.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: If we had another situation, such as the one we had on the Friday evening of the week before Christmas, this would allow us to move quickly. That is all it is. The measure only applies to hospitality and indoor hospitality were it to be invoked.

I ask Deputies to reflect on that. If the majority of us were to vote for and support this proposal, it would send another message of political unity. I acknowledge the political unity there has been on vaccines. While it has not been 100% across the House, it has included the vast majority of colleagues in the House. I believe this is one of the reasons vaccine take-up has been so high in Ireland. In both Houses of the Oireachtas, there has been a very strong message of unity. Nobody has tried to play politics with this, unlike in some other countries and that has been really damaging. I fully respect the positions of Deputies and fully acknowledge that everyone, or nearly everyone, is here with the right intent with regard to doing what is right. I ask colleagues to reflect on that, send another message of unity backing the Chief Medical Officer's advice and leave this safety net in place for 11 weeks.

Amendment put.

In accordance with Standing Order 80(2), the division is postponed until the weekly division time on Wednesday, 6 October 2021.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank Members for their co-operation on that business.

Childcare Services: Motion [Private Members]

An Ceann Comhairle: I welcome the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, Deputy Roderic O’Gorman, to the House.

Deputy Kathleen Funchion: I move:

“That Dáil Éireann:

notes that:

- childcare fees for parents in this State remain amongst the highest in the world;

- one of the largest financial expenses for parents is childcare fees, forcing many families into debt and financial crisis or out of their current employment;

1699

5 October 2021

- a recent United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund survey found that some families can spend up to one half of a salary to pay for two children in childcare;

- parents, particularly women, are not supported with an adequate childcare infrastructure to facilitate their return to work after childbirth;

- early years workers, who are highly qualified professionals, are paid some of the lowest wages of any sector, with many employed on or just above the minimum wage;

and

- Covid-19 has intensified the pressure on providers, launching them into a new world of regulations, which has resulted in acute staffing pressures and has played a significant factor in staff retention;

calls on the Government to commit to delivering a State childcare system in Budget 2022 which:

- reduces centre-based childcare fees for parents by at least one-third of current average fees next year and two-thirds thereafter;

- improves the pay and conditions of workers in the sector to ensure that entry-level positions provide for that of a living wage;

- implements pay scales and full continuous professional development for all staff which properly values childcare as a viable long-term career choice; and

- ensures all children and their families have access to good quality and affordable childcare; and

furthermore calls on the Government, within Budget 2022 parameters, to:

- develop a network of Child Contact Centres across the State;

- reinstate the Childminder Advisory Officer Service including the appointment of Childminder Advisory Officers in each Child Contact Centre; and

- increase the Childminder Development Grant by 50 per cent from €1,000 to €1,500."

I thank the Minister for being here. I am delighted to introduce this motion for debate in Dáil Éireann. I must first acknowledge the early years educators who assembled outside Leinster House this morning to highlight the serious issues with the national childcare scheme. The Minister is aware that I have raised this matter with him previously. I acknowledge his statement that a review is under way. I sincerely hope he can guarantee that the under-allocation of hours through the national childcare scheme and the provision of after-school care will be looked at, and that he and his Department will take on board the serious concerns highlighted and discussed at a meeting of the Joint Committee on Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth just before this debate. I also acknowledge that the Minister went outside to meet and speak with the group today. That is important and should be acknowledged, in fairness.

I am very disappointed but not surprised that amendments to the motion are to be tabled. This is a case of kicking the can even further down the road. Ireland does not have a great track record on investment in early years education. That point was acknowledged by members of some Government parties over the weekend. We continue to facilitate a piecemeal approach to the early years sector.

Despite all of the commitments and policies that are unveiled, we are still faced with a situation where some parents are paying the equivalent of a second mortgage or rent for childcare. A recent UNICEF survey ranked Ireland among the world's most expensive countries for early years education and childcare.

We know that the repercussions of exorbitant fees create significant barriers, particularly to women's employment. Women are adversely affected by higher fees, with many forced to stay out of the workforce while their children are small. I have always believed it is disingenuous for us to encourage women to go back to work and, given that we are in a political forum, for us to encourage women into politics, when often we do not have the services and infrastructure to support their return to work. I regularly have to deal with this type of juggling. I will continue to raise this issue as often as I can in this Chamber until we see some changes.

The motion is about providing families with a high-quality early years education system that is affordable, accessible and sustainable. It is obvious to everyone here this evening, and the wider public, that the early years sector is in crisis. We heard comments to that effect from some of the witnesses appearing before the committee earlier today. It goes without saying that early years education and childcare were in crisis before and during the Covid-19 pandemic and will remain in crisis after Covid if we do not see the serious commitment to sustainable investment that is needed, starting with next week's budget.

I am constantly contacted by parents and early years educators and providers who want to share their experiences as users operating in a broken system. I know I am not the only Deputy who has witnessed the failings of the current funding model. It affects my constituency and all the other constituencies. Early years education and childcare must be resourced adequately to provide lower fees for parents and stability for highly-qualified professionals. It must also deliver a sustainable future for providers. The three key issues are that fees are far too high for parents, wages are far too low for workers and there is a serious issue for providers trying to keep their doors open. The current funding model is failing children, their families, their educators and early years providers.

I was struck that in yesterday's national development plan only one page was dedicated to early years education and childcare. With projections of growth in Ireland's population of nearly 1 million over the next decade, I would like to have seen real commitment to capital expenditure and a plan for how we propose to cater for this sector into the future.

I am conscious the clock has not moved so I have no idea how much speaking time I have left. I was reluctant to raise that but must do so in fairness to my colleagues.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy is being carefully observed.

Deputy Kathleen Funchion: Thank you, a Cheann Comhairle.

I have spoken many times about those working in the sector and I acknowledge that again this evening. It is such a difficult job and I genuinely do not know how people who work in the

early years sector do it. The commitment and dedication they show are incredible. For the most part, it is degree led at this stage. People spend years in college studying and furthering their professional development and they are extremely experienced and qualified educators. After a lifetime in the sector, in a lot of cases, many are still earning less than the minimum wage and there is very little sick leave.

I always try to give the example that much of the time during the summer, people have to sign on for social welfare. Sometimes people do not believe that still happens but we all know it is the reality. It is, therefore, nearly impossible to stay working in the sector. A recent SIPTU survey showed 81% of all workers in the sector are unable to meet unexpected expenses and 38% are actively looking for work in another sector due to low pay. That will obviously affect the consistency which is going to affect quality. We need, therefore, to see this being addressed.

As educators and parents are squeezed at one end of the system, early years services, which are mainly small businesses predominantly managed and owned by women, are being squeezed at the other. I will finish on this point. The issues are fees, wages and sustainability for providers, all of which are covered by the motion. I, therefore, commend the motion to the House.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: I commend my colleague, Deputy Funchion, on bringing forward this very important motion. One thing on which we can probably all agree is that childcare costs are out of control, particularly in areas of high demand. The average cost of childcare for working families is astronomical in my constituency and it will be the same in the Minister's because we share a similar part of the city.

The average cost of childcare for a single year can be €11,000, and, in some instances, families could be paying as much as €15,000 for a single child. That same single person or couple could be also renting. Their average rent could be €22,000 per year and, of course, we have recently seen the rising costs of heating and petrol, and many other aspects of life where the cost of living crisis is just heaping huge burdens on working people.

What are the consequences of that? Increasingly, young people are putting off family formation. They are putting off moving out on their own with their partners or by themselves and having their own children, not because they do not want to have children but because the costs are simply too great. We must, therefore, accept that our childcare model is broken and we must move towards a fully public model, just as we have with primary and secondary education and just as other European jurisdictions have done.

Our over-reliance on the private sector model exclusively to provide people's childcare needs has to end. The kinds of practical, credible and fully costed solutions put forward by my colleague, Deputy Funchion, would mean the cost of childcare would start to fall. People would have greater access to childcare where the workers are better paid and the quality of the early years education is better for everybody. I urge the Minister to listen to the practical alternatives we are putting forward and help working families get access to affordable childcare in order that people can have the quality of life they require and, where they are working, their children can have the quality of early years education they rightly deserve.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I commend my colleague, an Teachta Funchion, not just on this motion but on all the work she has done and continues to do with regard to childcare. The cost of childcare has come up often in my time in this Chamber. It is one of the most recurring issues we discuss week after week. The crisis across the childcare sector has been raised in this

House and, indeed, across the airwaves. It is a crisis that affects workers, parents and providers.

Childcare costs in this State are among the highest in the world. They are driving up the cost of living for families who are also struggling with rising rents and rocketing energy prices, to which the Government seems to be completely oblivious. Action must be taken because the cost of inaction is wrecking people's lives and it will damage society. The model of childcare we have is broken and we need to move towards a publicly funded model.

While average monthly full-time childcare fees are approximately €750 per child, some families in my area are paying €1,200 plus per month for their childcare needs. If they have more than one child in full-time care, however, the cost is even more again. One can see the way it adds up and people get very little by way of a discount for additional kids just in case the Minister thinks there is a bargain there; there is not. It is not sustainable. These extreme costs are causing parents to drop out of the workforce and to undertake full-time childcare duties. This disproportionately affects women and the Minister will be aware of that as well. It is predominantly women who will put their careers on hold and leave good jobs to reduce their hours to part-time to be able to care for their children.

When I was a significantly younger woman than I am today, I had access to subsidised childcare, without which I would not have been able to go to work. At the time, childcare fees were relatively manageable for most people but where I was working and with what I was earning, without that subsidised childcare, I would not have been able to go to work and neither would I have been able to go to college. It would have been too much for us as a family to be able to afford. I had the conversation with my husband about which of us was going to give up work if we could not access subsidised childcare. That is what happens. It leaves people with no choices. The Minister needs to accept that the model is broken, take on board the suggestions an Teachta Funchion has been making repeatedly and move towards a model that will work for parents because they are being creased.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: I do not believe this issue gets the attention it deserves, whether it is in this House, the media or in discussion generally. This is one of the biggest issues out there, certainly in my constituency when I talk to young families in particular.

Childcare costs are absolutely crippling people. It is a second mortgage for so many families. It is a weight around their necks that prevents them from having any kind of quality of life for years on end. It means that a couple can be slow to start a family. One parent can be held back from returning to work or, very often, one parent might be effectively working just to pay for the childcare and breaking even or perhaps less than breaking even in order to be in a position to continue their career. All that time, they are paying €800, €900 or €1,00 per child and more on top of that if there are multiple children. It is absolutely crippling. It is very frustrating for parents out there who are trying to do their best and raise their families. They want to make that contribution to society and they want to work but they are not getting the support they deserve. We do not treat this as a public service like other countries do and we can see that in terms of the per head spend compared to the rest of the OECD. We do not spend enough on childcare. We do not subsidise it enough, especially compared to other countries across Europe.

That is the solution. We have to treat this as a public good and a public service. What Sinn Féin is proposing to do to drive down the cost of childcare is take on the cost of staff wages in order that fees will go down for parents. It will reduce fees by one third within the first year and then by two thirds over five years. None of this is impossible. This is about political choices.

I hope the Minister takes this on board. A large part of this is the unsustainability of the sector, and the fact that wages are too low and providers can barely break even themselves. Fundamentally, however, it is about underinvestment and about what we decide to value. This is about early years education and supporting young families. It is about ensuring that the decision to have a family and to work at the same time is not crippling or putting families into absolute penury and denying them of so many other things. Many of these families are broken in other ways too with children going back to school, energy prices, insurance fees and all the rest of it. It needs, therefore, to be addressed.

Deputy Claire Kerrane: I recently met with early years educators working in counties Roscommon and Galway on their new deal for early years and budget submission for 2022. I met with so many young women, in particular, in early years education doing a job they absolutely love. You can tell that as soon as you meet them. They are really struggling to get by, however.

I recall during the previous general election meeting one early years educator in Ballinasloe who was in the middle of moving back home because she could no longer afford to rent. These people are highly educated professionals and should be paid as such. The reality for young people who leave secondary school and go on to college to study to become an early years educator is that they may not be able to afford to remain in that job. It does not make any sense and it should not be the reality in Ireland in 2021.

The issues around pay, of course, have many other repercussions. We know there is a major recruitment crisis. I know of one provider in particular in County Roscommon that is having a terrible time in filling a vacancy. It is turning parents away because it cannot fill that vacancy. We also have a major issue with retention, of course, because so many workers simply cannot afford to remain in the profession.

This motion, therefore, calls for an entry level living wage and for the pay scales to be introduced. That is really important if we are going to attract people into this sector and retain them in doing a job they love to do. As has been said, the cost for parents is crippling. A UNICEF report published earlier this year found that, on average, households with an average income in Ireland spend up to one half of the salary of a double income household to put two children through childcare.

6 o'clock

A UNICEF report published earlier this year found that, on average, households in Ireland with an average income are spending up to one half of a two-earning household salary to put two children through childcare. This cannot continue. As a State, we are failing the early years sector including the professionals who work in the sector and those who rely on it. We have to get this right and take steps in this budget to ensure we support and invest in early years for those who work in and rely on it. I hope we will see the steps outlined in this motion taken next week.

Deputy Chris Andrews: I commend my colleague, Deputy Funchion, on all the work she has done on this Bill. This Bill is of vital importance to society and will have a meaningful impact on the lives of a significant number of workers and their families. Year after year, the cost of childcare in Ireland is among the highest in the world. These sky-high prices are having a huge impact on young families and add stress, concern and worry. Moreover, on top of

the high cost of childcare, families are seeing rents skyrocket. The chances of them becoming homeowners is diminishing and household bills are rising sharply.

We now live in a society in which those who wish to have children are being severely penalised as a result. Let us not forget that having children is necessary for the development of a healthy society. In Dublin, the cost of childcare for just one child is upwards of €1,000 per month, with many parents struggling to even find a place available to them. This enormous cost is not just having a detrimental impact on working families; it is also having a disproportionately negative impact on women and is preventing thousands of women from returning to employment and is reinforcing gender inequality.

Affordable childcare is not just an economic necessity, it is vital for improving the quality of life of working families, for getting people back into the workforce and for fostering a healthy development of society. Let us be clear that childcare needs to be affordable and accessible locally in the community. Community childcare such as that in the Ringsend community centre and St. Andrew's Resource Centre is what we need, namely, childcare rooted in the community.

Childcare is not just where one sends children for a few hours while their parents are out working. It is a place that is key to the development and growth of each child in respect of how to learn and how to interact with other children. That is a very important part of their formative years and it is vital it is done right. Thankfully, those working in Irish childcare are highly skilled professionals we are fortunate to have. It is essential they are treated as such, with pay and conditions that reflect the impact they have on so many young people.

Deputy Matt Carthy: I apologise in advance to the Minister that I will not be here to hear his contribution. However, having seen the Government amendment, I am disappointed because Deputy Funchion has provided a route that will ensure we can deliver affordable childcare. This is crucially important in a State in which many families are already facing a cost-of-living crisis and we are dealing with the highest mortgage rates in the eurozone and possibly the highest rents in the western world. We couple that with the experience of many families who either decide not to have the children they would desperately love to have, as has happened in some instances of which I am aware, or remove themselves from the workforce because of the cost of childcare. That is another crisis to add to the list of crises over which the Government is presiding.

In many areas of the cost-of-living crisis, the Government can say there is nothing it can do. It says there is nothing it can do about high insurance costs, the cost of sending children to school or transport costs, which it says have to increase due to our global climate obligations. It says it cannot build houses overnight. Deputy Funchion has provided a route through which we can tackle the costs of childcare overnight. All it takes is the political will and the investment. Next week will provide a huge litmus test for the Government because we will either see another budget that fails to address childcare at all, as was the case last year, or we will see a start to the Government beginning to recognise the emerging crisis and how we can deal with it. Dealing with that crisis must be about ensuring families see the net result in that the week after the budget, their childcare costs will start to come down. We need to bring them down to approximately one third of their current rate.

When our children go into childcare settings, they are cared for by some of the most professional individuals one could meet. They work in our childcare services, one of the few sectors in which those who operate it continue their education and development. They continue to

learn and ensure the care they provide is world class and yet, they come home at the end of the week on a pittance in comparison to other people who have equivalent educational levels. All that needs to change. My appeal to the Minister is to read the proposals with which Deputy Funchion and Sinn Féin have provided him and, more importantly, to start to implement them.

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman): I move amendment No. 1:

To delete all words after “Dáil Éireann” and substitute the following:

“acknowledges:

— the challenges faced by the early learning and childcare sector;

— the particular challenges presented by Covid-19 for the sector and the tremendous efforts by early learning and childcare professionals and service providers during this period to keep services open and safe;

notes that investment in the sector has increased by 141 per cent since 2015 and welcomes the commitment by Government to build on this by at least doubling investment in early learning and childcare by 2028;

recognises:

— the substantial State supports that have been provided to the sector throughout the pandemic that have enabled services to operate safely and ensured that the increased costs associated with public health requirements and with lower demand were not passed on to parents, the supports provided include:

— a continuation of the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth subsidy schemes on an *ex-gratia* basis (12th March – 5th April, 2020);

— the Temporary Wage Subsidy Childcare Scheme (TWSCS) (6th April – 28th June, 2020) which cost approximately €50 million;

— the Reopening Funding Package for Childcare Services (29th June – 23rd August, 2020) that included a €14.2 million capital grant, an €18 million Reopening Support Payment, in addition to the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme and resumption of the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth subsidy schemes;

— the July Jobs Stimulus package that included the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme (EWSS) (which cost approximately €22 million per month at standard rates and €34 million per month at enhanced rates), a Sustainability Support Fund and a full resumption of the Early Childhood Care and Education Programme (from 24th August to end of December 2020); and

— tailored funding arrangements to respond to Level 5 restrictions in the post-Christmas period, that included a new €12 million Covid-19 Operating Support Payment and a new Covid-19 strand of the Sustainability Support Fund, in addition to the EWSS, that allowed services to continue to operate on a sustainable basis for children of essential workers and vulnerable children, while not charging parents

who were not accessing services during this period;

— that early learning and childcare employers continue to be entitled to access the EWSS with an exemption to having to demonstrate the drop in turnover that applies to other sectors and since October 2020, EWSS has been paid at enhanced rates and these rates are estimated to cover, on average, 80 per cent of staff costs in the sector, or 50 per cent of total operating costs; and the cost of this measure is €34 million per month;

— that there is strong evidence of the effectiveness of these supports, including:

— the data on services that have closed and opened in 2020 are directly comparable to 2019 so there has been no loss of capacity;

— data from the Office of the Revenue Commissioners indicates that the number of employees in the sector has not changed substantially over the course of the pandemic; and

— data from the Annual Early Years Sector Profile Survey reveals there have been no significant increase in fees charged to parents;

welcomes the commitments in the Programme for Government to:

— establish an agency, Childcare Ireland, to assist in the expansion of high quality childcare, spearheading leadership, best practice and innovation, and professional development in community and private settings;

— continue to invest in the National Childcare Scheme, reducing costs for parents and introducing greater parental choice and flexibility;

— reform the childcare system to create one that brings together the best of community and private childcare provision, is focused on children's rights and quality outcomes, reduces inequalities, supports staff retention, and substantially reduces costs to parents, in consultation with providers, staff, and parents;

— ensure sustainability within the Early Learning and Care and School-Age Care sector, by fast-tracking the work of the Expert Group in considering a new funding model;

— examine the approach of other European countries to set a cap on parental fees, irrespective of income;

— support the establishment of a Joint Labour Committee in the childcare sector and the drawing up of an Employment Regulation Order, which would determine minimum rates of pay for childcare workers, as well as terms and conditions of employment; and

— extend paid parental leave for parents, to allow them to spend more time with their baby during the first year;

further acknowledges and welcomes the significant progress made to deliver on these commitments, including:

— the introduction and roll out of the National Childcare Scheme to provide subsidies to 80,000 children and reduce costs to parents as well as the review of the Scheme

which has recently been completed and will be shortly laid before the Oireachtas;

— the development of a new funding model by end 2021 that will ensure additional investment committed by Government will reduce the costs to parents, ensure additional supports can be provided to children from disadvantaged backgrounds, compensate providers so that they can deliver early learning and childcare on a sustainable and high-quality basis, and attract and retain a well-qualified workforce;

— the development of a workforce development plan for the sector by the end of 2021 that will ensure appropriate numbers of early learning and childcare professionals, support the achievement of qualification targets for the workforce, establish role profiles and a career framework and set out plans to develop a national system of continuing professional development;

— the launch and initial implementation of a National Action Plan for Childminding, that sets out a phased approach to bringing childminders within the scope of State funded supports and regulation over the period 2021-2028, with regional Childminding Development Officers already working with city and county Childcare Committees to provide local-level supports to childminders and commitments to review and reform financial supports for childminding such as the Childminder Development Grant;

— the introduction of regulations for School-Age Childcare, and the publication in September 2020 of National Quality Guidelines for School-Age Childcare Services;

— the recent establishment of a Joint Labour Committee in the early learning and childcare sector to draw up an Employment Regulation Order, which would determine minimum rates of pay for early learning and childcare professionals, as well as terms and conditions of employment; and

— the recognition of early learning and childcare as a strategic investment priority in the revised National Development Plan with significant funding earmarked to increase capacity in the sector in the coming four years;

further notes that the European Commission has welcomed ‘the major efforts and targeted investments in early childhood education and care, which have clear milestones and a plan for evaluation and follow-up’ and encouraged Ireland to ‘maintain the momentum of reforms in improving affordability, access and quality of ECEC’; and

while noting that further developments and investment are required, recognises that there are many positive and progressive elements to the current early learning and childcare sector and acknowledges the planning and preparation that have been undertaken to progress reforms in the sector in the coming years.”

I welcome this timely opportunity to debate the important issue of early learning and childcare. Before speaking to the substance of the motion, I will briefly reflect on the 18 months gone by. I agree with what was said by Deputy Funchion and other speakers, in that Covid-19 has posed huge challenges to the early learning and childcare sector and the people working in this sector and primarily the women working in it, have shown incredible resilience.

I always think back to the dark days of January this year in particular, during which childcare providers and professionals stepped up. They kept their services open for the children and

their parents and especially for the most vulnerable children and those whose parents were essential workers and they continued to deliver an incredibly high standard of learning and care. People throughout the country are very grateful for their actions. Whenever I visit a childcare facility, I am always struck by the absolute commitment of childcare providers and professionals to doing what is in the best interest of the children in their care.

I also understand that people working in this sector want more than just words of praise. They want to see action. Across the Dáil, we all share the same goals of affordability, accessibility and high-quality early learning and care; pay and conditions commensurate with the dedication of staff and the demands of this job and providers who are able to operate in a safe and sustainable manner. We would all acknowledge this area was neglected for far too long and for decades, the State failed to invest in childcare and left women to juggle their own childcare needs and careers. We know that Ireland can do better than that and the Government is committed to doing so.

I have tabled an amendment to this motion as while the Government accepts there is a need to continue to develop and reform the early learning and childcare sector, the programme for Government makes extensive commitments in this regard and, more importantly, we have already begun work on delivering those commitments, bringing real and lasting development and reform that will benefit children, parents and early learning and childcare professionals and providers.

We all recognise the complexity of this issue and its seriousness for children, parents, providers and childcare professionals. That degree of seriousness requires detail and I note we have not been presented with any costings on the measures proposed in this motion and nor have any costings been addressed in any of the presentations we have received so far. Stating that one third of the costs of childcare will be paid this year and two thirds thereafter, without any reference to the figures, does not speak to the seriousness of the issue about which Members are speaking today. In the amendment I have tabled, I set out the costings and investment the Government has put into the childcare sector over the past year. I am always happy to talk about and debate this issue but it must be on foot of detail and on foot of recognising the cost and value of childcare to our State, parents and children.

The past 18 months have been profoundly difficult for many sectors of our society and economy and the early learning and childcare sector is no exception. Since coming into office, I have sought to ensure services remain open, have been supported and could retain staff. The July stimulus package of 2020 included the employment wage subsidy scheme, EWSS, sustainability funding and full resumption of the early childhood care and education, ECCE, programme.

In August 2020, we provided the reopening support package, which included a €14.2 million capital grant for childcare providers and an €18 million reopening support package. Last Christmas and in the following January of this year, we created tailored funding arrangements in response to the level 5 restrictions that were reintroduced, including a €12 million Covid operating support payment and a new strand of Covid sustainability funding, in addition to payment of the EWSS to providers. With regard to the EWSS, last July I negotiated a sector-specific exemption in order that childcare providers did not have to demonstrate the drop in turnover that applies to all other sectors. Since October 2020, the EWSS has been paid at enhanced rates. Those rates are estimated to cover an average of 80% of the staff costs in the sector and an average of 50% of total operating costs of childcare providers. This amounts to

€34 million invested every month in childcare providers around this country.

There is strong evidence that this level of investment is paying dividends. The data on services that closed and opened in 2020 are directly comparable with 2019. There has not been a loss of capacity despite Covid-19. Data from the Office of the Revenue Commissioners indicate that the number of employees in the sector has not changed substantially over the course of the pandemic. Data from the annual early years sector profile survey reveal that in 2020, unlike in previous years, we did not see sharp increases in the fees that parents were being forced to pay across the sector. I am proud of the work my Department has done across the pandemic. In particular, I thank the childcare advisory group, which has been invaluable in co-ordinating with my Department throughout.

Rapid Government responses were required by the sector in response to the challenges posed by Covid-19. While they were successfully delivered, the importance of long-term and long-lasting development and reform is now even more significant. A number of related challenges face the childcare sector. Parents are faced with fees that are beyond their ability to pay. Pay and conditions of staff are not commensurate with the job that they do and many providers are struggling with sustainability. It is not enough to make fees affordable for parents if staff still are not paid enough. It is not enough to increase the pay of staff if services end up struggling to survive. It is not enough to support providers if parents and staff are left behind. All three elements must be addressed together.

We have put in place a reform agenda that recognises the scale and complexity, that is, the interlinked elements of each of these three factors. To reduce fees for parents, we already have rolled out the national childcare scheme, NCS. It now provides subsidies to 80,000 children, reducing the costs of early learning and care. While progress has been made, I understand and recognise the substantial stress still placed on too many parents by the costs of childcare. It is for this reason that we are developing a new funding model. It will ensure the additional investment committed by the Government will further reduce the costs for parents. Beyond that, it will ensure that additional supports can be provided to children from disadvantaged backgrounds. It will compensate providers in order that they can deliver early learning and childcare on a sustainable and high-quality basis. It will attract and retain a well-qualified workforce.

To improve staff paying conditions, we have established a joint labour committee in the early learning and childcare sector. It will draw up an employment regulation order, ERO, which will determine minimum rates of pay for early learning and childcare professionals, as well as terms and conditions of employment. We are creating a workforce development plan for the sector, which will be published by the end of this year. It will ensure appropriate numbers of early learning and childcare professionals; will support the achievement of qualification targets for the workforce; will establish role profiles and career frameworks; and will set out plans to develop a national system of continuing professional development, CPD. Of course, earlier this year we launched the National Action Plan for Childminding 2021-2028, which sets out a phased approach to bringing childminders, who are so important to so many families, into the scope of State-funded supports and regulation. The national development plan launched yesterday recognises early learning and care as a strategic investment priority, with significant funding earmarked to increase capacity in the sector in the coming years.

Deputy Funchion referred to the protest outside the Dáil today. I was pleased to be able to go out and speak to providers, many of whom I have met over the past year. I have listened to the issues they have raised in respect of the NCS. I have heard those issues. We are undertaking

research about how we can address those issues in a targeted manner. I look forward to bringing back proposals to address that specific issue in order that no children, particularly the most disadvantaged children, are left behind.

To conclude, it is important to recognise the scale of the challenges we face in this sector, as well as the complexity of the solutions. It is important to state, which is why we are putting forward this counter-amendment, that substantial work already is under way. Early learning and childcare are a public good. They benefit all society. This has become even more evident in the context of the pandemic we have just undergone. Work is being progressed by the Government that will deliver needed and long-lasting reform to this essential sector. The Government has supported the sector, as the sector rose to the challenge posed by Covid-19. As the pandemic abates, the Government will work to continue those supports. Through the new funding model, through the joint labour committee, through the childminding action plan, through the workforce development plan and through additional investment, we will deliver a better deal for parents, providers, childcare professionals and most importantly, for children.

Deputy Pauline Tully: First, I commend my colleague, Deputy Funchion, on bringing forward this important motion. She and Sinn Féin have consistently called for immediate investment in the childcare sector in Ireland in order to ensure its viability, reduce the burden on parents, acknowledge and properly pay professionals within the childcare sector and to keep facilities open, as many are finding it hard to do so.

Childcare fees in Ireland are the highest in Europe and they continue to rise. While there was a commitment in the programme for Government last year, they have continued to rise since then. When that is coupled with the high cost of living, it is impossible for the ordinary working family to make ends meet. According to a UNICEF report from June gone by, Ireland, New Zealand and Switzerland have the least affordable childcare for the middle classes. Couples on an average wage pay between a third and a half of their wages for two children in childcare.

I can recall how, when my own two children were young and in a crèche, I was paying €300 a week at that time towards the cost of their care in order that I could go to work. Luckily, this was only for a few months because the way they were spaced meant my eldest could go into the early childhood care and education, ECCE, scheme, which was at that time only a one-year programme. Even with that scheme, the cost of sending the two children to be cared for in what was an excellent facility about which I had no complaints, was my biggest outgoing at the time. Fees have increased since then, along with the cost of everything else, but wages have not. This has to be addressed as otherwise, many people will have no choice but to give up their work and abandon pursuing career choices. We know that this will predominately affect women.

Within the sector itself, highly qualified professionals are being paid a pittance. Most professionals in this sector are earning less than a living wage and yet, many of them have level 7 or level 8 qualifications. They feel strongly that they not being treated right. They are not being treated with respect and they are not being acknowledged as educators. The turnover of staff is extremely high as the work is hard, it can be stressful and the pay is dreadful. It is not fair to the childcare professionals and nor is it fair to the children, who develop attachments to staff. There is a capacity issue in some sectors, which I have raised with the Minister previously. Childcare providers are now unable to cope with the demand because staff turnover is so high.

I also will highlight a fact that was brought to my attention, which is that there is no pre-

school in all of west Cavan that has autism spectrum disorder, ASD, facilities for children with additional needs. Cavan is a large county. This means people have to travel long distances to get the assistance that they need. It is good that Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte is present as well in order that I can raise the issue with her.

I support the motion.

Deputy Denise Mitchell: Childcare fees have become a second mortgage for families. People are struggling to meet these crazy costs. There are parents in Dublin who are paying around €800 to €1,000 per month for one child. Working families simply cannot afford this and it cannot continue. The situation for struggling families has only got worse in recent years and will continue to get worse unless the Minister does something about it.

The sector needs intervention from the Government. We need a publicly-funded childcare system that is accessible to all. The current approach to childcare has failed miserably. We have seen in the last few budgets that the Government is not committed to making the changes that are required. I hope that next week will be different. We have to start paying childcare professionals a proper wage and must start treating them as professionals. They are leaving the sector in their droves at the minute because they cannot make ends meet after a week's work due to the terrible pay. They must be paid a proper wage that reflects the important work they do. Their current rate of pay is insulting.

We are way off the European average when it comes to the amount of money we invest in childcare in this State. The programme for Government made any amount of promises when it came to dealing with childcare reform but the fees have continued to rise. We need the Minister to act now. He needs to reduce childcare fees by one third next year and by two thirds the year after. That is what we in Sinn Féin would do but we all must do better for parents, for children, for the sector and for the childcare professionals involved. The recent years have been wasted and we cannot afford to wait any longer.

Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne: Childcare desperately needs reform in this country; the dogs on the street know this fact. It is expensive, inaccessible and has become akin to a luxury item. It is a service many families struggle to pay for and refer to it as being similar to a second rent or mortgage and that is absolute madness. We know Ireland has one of the highest childcare costs in the world. The European Commission's research put us behind only the likes of Switzerland and England and we have some of the lowest-paid professionals, with 60% of them earning less than the living wage. UNICEF research published in June of this year stated that Ireland ranked among the world's most expensive countries for childcare.

Ireland's childcare system has been in crisis for a long time. Our current allocation of 0.3% of GDP lags far behind the OECD average of 0.8% of GDP and the UNICEF 1% benchmark. We know families are suffering. Early years and childcare professionals are suffering. Ultimately, children are suffering as the sector struggles to retain highly skilled professionals because it has consistently undervalued them.

This motion, which I am proud to stand behind, received unreserved support from a broad church of representative networks such as Early Childhood Ireland, SIPTU and the Association of Childhood Professionals. The motion seeks to address the main issues. First, for parents, it seeks to cut the costs of childcare by up to one third. Second, for professionals, we will introduce a proper wage scale starting at the living wage; and third, for providers we will extend a

sustainability fund to all childcare providers thereby ensuring sustainability in the sector. Having done outreach work with Big Start campaigners and professionals working in this sector, during the recess, I was appalled to hear the depth of the ongoing challenges they and everyone in their sector face. They raised three points with me. First, 94% of educators struggle to make ends week. Second, 84% are unable to cope with an unexpected expense, such as replacing a washing machine, which is absolutely shocking. Third, the sector is 98% female and one of the lowest paid in the country.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: Good childcare is an essential cog in the social and economic structure of a country and is essential for a proper functioning society and economy. Proper childcare facilities allow parents to pursue employment, for example, with the knowledge that their child or children are being safely looked after. People need an income to pay for bills, rent, mortgage and healthcare etc. Without the facility of childcare, many parents would not be able to work, would be dependent on the State for support and would not be in a position to pay their bills. In many instances, childcare in Ireland is not affordable for parents and costs can be prohibitive, thereby putting childcare out of the reach of many parents.

According to figures released by the then Department of Children and Youth Affairs at the end of 2019, the average rate for a crèche place in Ireland was approximately €800 per month per child. Monthly costs, however, can exceed €1,000 in some areas of Dublin. These figures show that those who can afford to pay for childcare, pay the equivalent of a mortgage in fees and parents are often left with no expendable income. It is also the case when two parents are working that one parent's wage goes almost entirely on childcare fees. Lone parents find the high cost of childcare to be a disincentive to returning to work. Childcare providers are struggling with increasing costs and recruitment issues and find it difficult to recruit qualified childcare professionals.

These are some of the problems relating childcare in Ireland. Sinn Féin is putting forward solutions to these problems some of which, as outlined in this motion, seek to implement proper pay scales for childcare professionals, to reduce centre-based childcare fees, and to raise the childminding grant to €1,500. Parents entrust their children at an important point of the child's development into the care of these professionals, who are expected to socialise and educate these young children. It is time we gave childcare professionals, who do an incredibly difficult job, the proper pay and conditions they deserve.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I am glad to speak for the Labour Party to support this motion and to have the opportunity to discuss this important issue. I have just come, as has Deputy Funchion, from the hearings of the committee on children, where we heard from a number of witnesses about childcare and issues facing workers in the early years sector. We heard from representatives of SIPTU and its Big Start campaign, and about how changes in the funding structures under the national childcare scheme has had an impact on after-school services. We were glad to hear from representatives from the Dublin 8 After School Alliance and Urlingford Community Childcare. One thing that all speakers had in common was that they all referred to childcare as being in a crisis situation. They all said that, through our lack of proper coherent vision for childcare, we are currently failing parents, staff, providers and, of course, children too. They said we are failing because we are not providing an equal service to all children, adequate rates of pay for professionals working in the sector, and, indeed, security for the provider.

As other Members have said, we know parents face enormous costs in childcare. In my constituency of Dublin Bay South, high rates of fees are the norm. Approximately €1,000 a

month is the norm for child and that is really difficult for parents to pay, as anyone can appreciate. We have heard witnesses say that Irish childcare policy for too long has been characterised by creative ways of stretching inadequate funding further. We heard there is a real danger that we will build on the current piecemeal provision. One representative from SIPTU described the occurrence of the financialisation of childcare and it struck me that we do not want our childcare system becoming financialised and commercialised in the same way we have seen happen in housing, with housing provision dominated by a number of big investors. There is a real risk in childcare, where there is a reliance on the private sector and piecemeal provision, that it will become financialised to the same extent and then it will cease to be seen as a public service. That is a real concern where we have a system held together by subsidies to private providers, where parents can barely afford fees and where there are such low rates of pay in the sector. We have the second highest OECD household childcare costs with couples spending an average of 24% of income, and single parents spending as much as 29%, on childcare costs. We know this has an impact on women, in particular. In Ireland, we have the lowest rate of participation of mothers in the workforce within the EU.

We need to move to a different system of childcare in Ireland. On Saturday, I was pleased to launch with Labour Women a childcare policy calling for equal early years and a universal public childcare system based on three key criteria, namely, equality for children to ensure that each child in Ireland is guaranteed a place in early-years education and childcare; affordability for families whereby we move to a system with investment to ensure parents find crèches and childcare affordable; and fairness for professionals. The Big Start campaign has made it clear that early-years educators need to be paid a living wage. We very much welcome initiatives like the joint labour committee, but not enough is being done. I have received testimonials from SIPTU, from early-years educators. One described themselves as a single parent of two teenagers. They state:

The low pay in my job has left me wondering how much longer I can stay in this sector. ... I presently work for 10.20 per hour, 25 hours per [week] ... I just finished my Level 6 in childcare and wondering now why did I bother.

Rightly, we introduced higher levels of qualification requirements in the sector but we have not introduced higher levels of pay commensurate with those professional requirements.

We must change that aspect. It is a crucial change addressed in this motion and one that we are also addressing in our policy in this regard.

On a broader level, we need to move to what I have described elsewhere as a Donogh O'Malley moment. Just as when in 1966, some 55 years ago now, Donogh O'Malley, the then Minister for Education, introduced free secondary places for all children, we must now move to see early years education and childcare as a right for each child. We must move to a position where we can guarantee each child a place in early years education. I looked again at the visionary speech given in 1966 by Donogh O'Malley wherein he stated, "We will be judged by future generations on what we did for the children of our time". We will be judged for not having made sufficient provision for children of preschool age and for children of school age in respect of after-school childcare and support.

We are again out of step in this regard. If we look elsewhere in the EU, there is much bigger spending nationally. Sweden, France, Denmark and Finland all invest more than 1% of GNI, which is the international target set by UNICEF, in the early years education sector. In Ireland,

we are investing just 0.3% into the sector and this places us far behind the European average. We will be launching our Labour Party alternative budget tomorrow. It will seek to address the discrepancy relating to our low rate of spending in this regard. We ask that the run-up to this budget will see the Government outline how it will use this opportunity to move Ireland towards a universal public childcare system with a level of spending in keeping with the European norm. We ask the Government to replace the for-profit, market-driven, piecemeal model currently that currently characterises our childcare system with one that is State-led, universal and guarantees each child a place. We need a Donogh O'Malley moment or a National Health Service, NHS, moment in order to ensure that we move towards such a model and away from the existing type of provision in this area.

Unfortunately, some Government innovations have had unforeseen consequences. This predates the Minister's time in office. I refer to the national childcare scheme introduced in 2019. We had powerful testimony concerning this scheme from witnesses who appeared before a meeting of the Joint Committee on Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth. That meeting was chaired by Deputy Funchion. We heard that some of the unforeseen consequences of the scheme have been a move to a work activation model from a child-centred model and from enrolment to hourly rates as the basis for funding. Serious consequences have resulted for community childcare providers and for children in those services. There is a real concern that equality of access is being hampered in that way. My colleague, Senator Marie Sherlock, took the lead on this issue and instigated the event held outside Leinster House earlier. I acknowledge that the Minister met with the community childcare providers. That was welcome.

This issue is fixable. The providers that we spoke with at the committee meeting this afternoon asked all the members of that committee to ensure that this issue is fixed and that targeted interventions are reintroduced, if necessary, to ensure that children from particularly disadvantaged backgrounds are not adversely impacted by the changes to the national childcare scheme. Those consequences seem to have been somewhat unanticipated or unforeseen outcomes of the change to the funding model. The Minister addressed this aspect to some extent when he stated that the Government is moving to a new funding model. This is urgently required because we heard the community childcare providers saying that it is simply not sustainable to continue with the current model.

We in the Labour party are supporting this motion because we believe in the need for a radical revision of childcare services and a move to a State-led, public and universal system. We must move towards such a system in other areas of care because we believe that there should be a continuum of care. As the term "NHS moment" suggests, there should be a continuum of care and we should have supports in place for all those who need them from the cradle to the grave.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: I thank Deputy Funchion for bringing forward this important motion. It is important and timely. It would also have been timely a year ago or two years ago, because this issue has been with us for so long. Many parents and families have struggled through the current system. I have found that when parents are able to pay for their childcare, they put their heads down and spend. They know that they will have two or three difficult years. Usually, it is the mother who ends up not being paid because her salary goes straight towards meeting childcare costs. When parents get through that difficult period, they look forward to finally having some money that they will be able to put into either their home or their family life. However, that is not the way we should be operating. We must start taking this issue seriously.

I reiterate my support for calls for a renewed commitment in the national early years strat-

egy. Investment in childcare should be doubled by 2028 and a plan showing how this will be achieved should be published as part of budget 2022. We have been saying for far too long that the costs are too high, quality and pay for childcare staff is too low and Government spending on childcare is insufficient. This is a failing of not just this Government but of previous Governments as well. It is a systemic failure. Part of the problem is that successive Governments, essentially for the entire history of the State, have been primarily led by men. Men have never been and still are not impacted as much by childcare issues as women.

When one looks at the OECD, one finds that parents in Ireland are already paying the third highest proportion of their incomes to meet the costs of childcare. This is a direct result of the lack of spending over generations by successive Governments. For staff, the situation is also grim. Representatives of Early Childhood Ireland have stated that most early years educators are earning less than the living wage and can no longer afford to remain in the profession. Officials from SIPTU indicated at today's meeting of the Joint Committee on Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth that there will be a mass exodus of workers from the childcare sector unless significant new funding is allocated in the budget. It was also noted that Ireland's spending on early years services and education, at just 0.3% of GPD, falls far below the European average of 0.8% and the benchmark recommended by UNICEF of 1%.

There is also a recruitment and retention crisis in the sector. All parents putting their children into early years services or childcare understand the importance of having staff in the sector who are happy and secure in their jobs. Staff should also be able to build relationships with children and the children, in turn, should be able to get to know the staff, trust them and feel safe. The parents must also have trust as well. The system we have now is undermining children's ability to form such bonds with people who are very important in their lives. According to a recent survey, those running crèches and other childcare settings are reporting challenges in attracting new people to the sector. Some 71% said that it has been extremely difficult to recruit new staff in the past 12 months, with low pay cited as the biggest obstacle by 55% of respondents. Some 97% of managers and owner-managers, an incredibly high figure, are concerned that problems being experienced in recruiting and retaining staff will have a negative impact on service provision.

A survey of early childcare workers in Ireland carried out by Early Childhood Ireland found that eight in ten, or 80%, plan to leave the sector within a year if things stay as they are now. I do not know if such findings have been recorded in other sectors, but that is an incredibly high figure. It highlights that there is a real crisis in this sector. Slightly more than 40% of childcare workers are looking for work in other areas, with three quarters citing low pay as their reason for seeking to leave the sector. The situation is so bad that Early Childhood Ireland has warned that we could soon see childcare services collapse, just as we are set to reopen the economy, parents will be returning to work and wage supports will be winding down. My experience, and what I am hearing from people in my constituency of Wicklow, is that many childcare services are at maximum capacity. People are finding it difficult to find places for their children. It is particularly impacting on areas like Wicklow that are commuter counties with a major need for childcare provision.

Interestingly, the Department of Education monitors changes in population and projects future demand when it comes to building schools. My understanding, however, is that the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, however, does not. Pobal looks at things at a national level, but a specific county-by-county projection is not undertaken. That is a big gap and it could, potentially, be something that the childcare committees could

take responsibility for. The Minister is reviewing their remit and this could be an area that those committees could examine. I say that because we see fluctuations in population, with some areas experiencing major population changes. We must be able to predict what is going to happen in that regard and to provide the requisite supports where they are needed and before they are needed as part of planning for the future.

Early Childhood Ireland and other advocacy groups have been calling for a five-year plan or budget to help the sector to adapt to a rising demand for places. This is a responsible approach. We must look at this from a long-term planning perspective. A five-year plan or budget would provide the necessary security.

As we come out of Covid, there will be much more flexibility in how people work, which is welcome. It is very positive that the Government has been pushing for flexible work arrangements as parents return to work after the pandemic. It will have many benefits for family life and for communities if people have more time to spend at home with their families and in their communities. That will be a very positive change. Unfortunately, I do not think the flexibility we expect or hope for in our working arrangements will be translated into the flexibility that is needed in response in the childcare sector. What I find is that childcare providers are not in a position to provide flexible childcare, so families must take the full five days or they get nothing. They cannot pick or choose days or times. As we move to more remote working environments, that is the kind of flexibility we need. That would be beneficial for children and families. The Government must examine how it can create a more flexible childcare model that will support remote working opportunities.

Childcare providers are not inflexible by choice. It is an inflexibility imposed by the funding models that successive Governments have put in place. The childcare model must adapt to a post-Covid working structure. In Scandinavian countries, a provider is not punished if parents are in a position to reduce their child's hours or days, and the parents are not punished financially either. Here, parents are forced to pay a flat rate even if their hours are reduced. This rigid system was designed by previous Governments which did not see childcare as a public system, but as a strictly private domestic matter, the burden of which has mainly landed squarely on women. We are all aware of the impact this has on women entering and remaining in the workforce. Studies have shown the impact that the high cost of childcare and the inflexible system have on women in the workplace and their earning capacity.

The Minister and Deputy Funchion met the Association of Childhood Professionals at the protest outside Leinster House this morning. As Deputy Funchion says, it was very welcome to see him out there talking and listening to what was being said.

While the scheme has been positive for many families, it has impacted negatively on thousands of children from disadvantaged and marginalised families who were previously supported under targeted schemes that recognised that some families need additional supports. It also helped those wonderful children access safe, stimulated child-centred environments, including the hot meals and emotional supports that are all vital to a child's development when living with disadvantage.

When the schemes were amalgamated into the national childcare scheme, the supports available were substantially less. Unemployed parents are now entitled to far fewer hours, or no subsidised hours at all. Instead of the scheme being about the child and child-centred development, care and education, it has become a labour activation measure. It is not about the child

at all, but about the Government's drive to get parents back to work. The balance has been lost in that regard. Early education cannot be about getting people out of social welfare, it must be about the child and supporting families around the needs of the child. The shift in Government childcare policy could widen the gap of inequality between children and push disadvantaged children into more vulnerable situations.

The Association of Childhood Professionals states that access to formative education and care should be a universal right, not conditional on compliance with a wider Government agenda of activating vulnerable parents into work. We must start to see access to childcare as a right in this country not as a private, domestic decision, a business or a labour-activation measure, but as a right built around the needs of the child.

Deputy Seán Canney: I wish to share time with my colleague, Deputy Tóibín. We will have five minutes each.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Is that agreed? Agreed.

Deputy Seán Canney: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this issue, which is important to all of us. I compliment Sinn Féin on introducing the motion and giving us an opportunity to discuss and debate it.

I listened to the Minister's opening address. He pointed out that there are three different sections that need to be dealt with in order for the service to work right. I will give my thoughts on the three separate parts of the service. One of these relates to early educators. What we need to do for them is give them recognition. I spent nearly ten years lecturing in the Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology, GMIT. When you see students come into first year and go out four years later with a degree, you expect that they will get an income that is reasonable and that there is a career path for them, continuing professional development, and that they can aspire to go wherever they want. There should be no limits to what they can do in terms of the choices they make. In educating people, we sold them a pup by telling them that they would have great careers, particularly when they have ended up getting less than the minimum wage. They are leaving the industry. I know people in my constituency who have done that. The reason they are leaving is because they are totally demoralised and have decided to follow another path. We have done a disservice to the young people who were brave enough to take on the challenge after their leaving certificate and to become educated. We have not shown them the respect they deserve for what they have done. It is important that we calibrate our minds in terms of what we need to do in that regard.

The Minister mentioned sustainability in the context of the early years providers. Again, what they need to know is how the service will be funded and supported by central government. The sector faces lots of challenges, but the biggest is trying to get staff. Costs, including those relating to insurance, are out of control at times. In my constituency, a childcare service has closed. It did not reopen in September for the simple reason that the owners could not afford to run it and were better off doing something else. The service is a huge loss to the rural community where it was located.

We talk about the affordability of the childcare service for families in a glib way, but the cost of childcare is outside the bounds of most working people. How can we encourage parents, men and women, to go to work, to provide a basis for our economy? We have been encouraging women in particular to get educated, go to school and third level, get a degree and get a

career. Parents find that they are fighting fires all the time between trying to look after their children and trying to work. The stress of what they are going through sometimes outweighs the benefits. Parents should be enjoying life and the fact that they have children. It should be the happiest days of their lives with their young children. I am afraid that with the bundling we do in lots of cases in terms of the fast track of life, we have forgotten that children need to be cared for and that parents need to know this is being done properly.

When thinking about this issue, it strikes me that when I was growing up, my mother was at home. She did not get past sixth class in her education. She raised the family while my father went out to work. There were seven children in the family and there were no childminding services at that time. Times have changed and society has changed. The work ethic has changed, but the only thing that has not changed is that we have not been able to provide the services to back up the changes. I look forward the opportunity to do that in the upcoming budget.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Ireland is simply an outlier in terms of how little State funding is spent on childcare. UNICEF recommends that at least 1% of GDP be invested in childcare. The OECD average is 0.7%. The optimal amount is 2%. Ireland invests a mere 0.3% in childcare. We cannot simply provide high-quality childcare if we are not prepared to fund high-quality childcare. It is not rocket science.

I have spoken to many parents and providers over the past number of years in this regard. The sector can be boiled down as follows: providers want sustainability and parents want affordability. The providers do not want to be charging parents additional fees to make up for the inadequate Government supports yet in most cases they have no option if they want to sustain the sector. There is a huge turnover of staff within the sector, as the Minister knows, and even though it is a degree-led sector, many people are getting the lowest wages that could possibly be given.

It is very simple to tell what is a Government's priority. We do it by looking at the amount of money it spends on a sector and the amount of money it pays people working within that sector. Whether it is looking after older people or educating and looking after the youngest, typically, people involved in that sector in this State get the minimum wage. I find that incredible. It shows that the Government affords minimum value to people working in this sector.

The wage subsidy during Covid was the most stability that childcare workers have had for years. The low level of Government funding means that sustainability of wages in this sector falls upon the parents to pay. Meanwhile, the suspension of income during the pandemic and the inadequacy of Government supports has put many providers out of business. In the first year of the pandemic, 193 childcare providers were forced to shut their doors, adding further pressure to the supply of childcare places. We in Aontú were the first to bring this to the knowledge of the Dáil at that time and we put significant pressure on the Government to ensure that the sector, which was in danger of collapse, was protected. We still do not know how many of those childcare facilities have closed in the intervening time. In the words of one childcare provider we spoke to, it could take a decade for the sector to get back to where it was pre Covid.

All of this Government-induced mess has led to a sector that is broken and incapable of meeting the needs of children or parents. I spoke to one Montessori school which said it is getting calls from parents who are trying to get children as young 12 to 18 months in because they cannot afford other opportunities for them. In many ways, the child's early years development is actually being determined or dictated by the level of funding that is happening in this State.

I know of another self-employed parent who has to bring her newborn child to work with her because childcare is unaffordable for the family. Another family living in the city centre pays €1,000 per month to bring their child to a childcare facility in Swords. They have a commute to bring their child to a particular location. Parents of children with additional needs are currently faced with even more difficult prospects.

What is in place? We have the universal child subsidy, which is 50 cent an hour for up to 45 hours a week per child aged six months or older. This works out at a maximum of €22.50 per week, or €90 per month. How in the name of God is that adequate? The lowest available rate for part-time childcare is €109, rising to over €250 for a child in full-time care. ECCE capitation grants need to be increased, access and inclusion model, AIM, funding needs to be increased, the universal childcare subsidy is wholly inadequate and the percentage of our GDP investment is totally out of sync with the rest of the developed world. Budget 2022 needs to include a radical increase in funding for this suffering sector. If it does not, we are simply going to see this pain, suffering and instability continue for another year.

This is not rocket science. It should be a matter of priority. The Government has, in my view, shown the lack of priority, first, for children and, second, for early years educators, childcare professionals and struggling parents by not prioritising funding. It has created a contractor model. We would like to see a situation where there is increased funding to providers, but also where parents are given a tax break so they can choose whether to send their child to a childcare provider or take time off work to be able to look after their children themselves.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Next is the Rural Independent Group. There are four speakers sharing time. I call Deputy Carol Nolan.

Deputy Carol Nolan: We have fantastic workers in our childcare sector who we should be immensely proud of, but I feel they do not get the credit they deserve. That is why I am starting on this point. We have these workers who do so much for so little, and who prepare children so well for their school life. I have seen this first-hand as a school principal, particularly the preparation by the preschools and what they put into the work. For example, Aistear is one programme where a lot of preparation and meticulous planning is involved. I want to put on record that the work these childcare workers are doing is second to none. They need to be valued and respected. We can all utter nice words here but if that is not matched by properly financing and assisting them, then it is no good.

I sincerely hope that we support the childcare sector - the workers and the providers - and parents, who need assistance as well, in the forthcoming budget. We all know that childcare costs have risen to an all-time high and, for many parents, they can be like another mortgage. There are many issues that need to be addressed within the childcare sector. I am hopeful that we can get to grips with these because I feel we will be failing our children and the State if we do not. We need to ensure that everybody is looked after and that we have true equality and true inclusion in that our children are able to attend a childcare facility.

We know that, at the minute, there is very little incentive for childcare providers to continue. Hopefully, there will be changes. I will end on that note.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: The hospital waiting lists for children are unthinkable. Many of the children on these waiting lists are just waiting for treatment for minor ailments. If they do not get an early diagnosis, there will be lifetime effects. Some 106,000 children are

waiting for tests in the public system, Some 8,000 are waiting for CT scans and 2,700 children and young people are waiting for access to mental health services. There is an incredible shortage of neurological nurses throughout the country, but particularly in Sligo and Limerick. We need to look at the support these nurses would be for the families of patients suffering from epilepsy, Parkinson's, multiple sclerosis and many other conditions. Diabetes is being missed and there is no development test for babies. There are so many issues. I am talking about basic speech therapy, eye and ear treatment and mobility, all issues where early intervention would prevent a lot of problems.

I spoke to the Minister last week and called for an audit of the hospitals. I want to go on the record again. I ask whether the Government knows that the consultants in the hospitals in Limerick and other areas are clocking out in the evening and also clocking out on a Friday evening. The Government is wondering why there are waiting lists. It is not the front-line services or the doctors in the hospitals; it is the consultants who we need to make a diagnosis, whether it be an X-ray or whatever is needed to deal with the problem.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The motion is on childcare.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: This is on childcare. Children are coming into the hospitals for diagnosis, and to have their needs catered for.

Look at this House. There is a roster here. Everyone knows who is here, what time they are due to be here, what time they will be speaking and what people are in their offices, but that is not the case with the hospital system. We need to get this right. We need to tackle it. If the managers and CEOs of the hospital cannot manage this, it is our children, our parents, our brothers and our sisters who are going to suffer. Let us get it right. If the management cannot do their job, get rid of them and put in management that can. We must start with the children and get the basic services they need. We need to stop the lists. It is the Government that is going to have to stand up. It is going to have to make those hard decisions. It is going to have to stand up and tell the management, if they cannot manage, to please leave, and to give us something. The private sector is doing it for young children and adults throughout the country, but our public system is letting us down. Why? There is no roster and no accountability. I am asking the Government to please get it right.

7 o'clock

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I thank Sinn Féin for giving us an opportunity to talk about childcare services. Many childcare workers have contacted me in recent weeks pleading that we ask the Government to do something about their pay and conditions because they are not being properly looked after. That is the truth of it. Providers are under pressure as well, as are parents. Parents are being asked to pay more than they can afford for childcare to allow them go out to do a bit of work and make a bit of money to keep the roof over their heads.

There can be no functioning economy without a functioning care economy. We must invest in the care economy, both in those caring for the ill and elderly and those caring for our nation's children. We must raise the pay and improve the working conditions of care workers, including the many women on which the sector depends. As we count down to the budget next week, much depends on what the Government does for these workers.

As we all know, many parents have to work to pay the bills, keep a roof over their heads and pay their mortgages. Ireland has one of the most poorly funded childcare systems in Europe.

The system locks women out of the labour market and wider participation in society and traps the childcare workforce in low-paid employment.

I mention briefly elderly parents who are trying to look after children who have physical and intellectual disabilities. Those people need to get recognition in the budget.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: I am grateful to Sinn Féin for bringing this important Private Members' motion before the House as it provides an opportunity before the budget to speak about the crucial role of all carers in Ireland, from childcare carers to carers for our elderly and people with intellectual and physical disabilities.

The problem with childcare has a number of different elements. First, if the people providing childcare are in the private sector, they are charged with paying additional costs such as energy bills, wages and rent for the premises. They are struggling to make a profit and keep their doors open. Today, I dealt with a person who is opening up a new facility and is facing insurmountable difficulties. All this person is doing is seeking to provide an excellent service in the community for parents who want to put their children in a safe and happy environment.

I am grateful to all those, whether in the public or private sector, who provide this very important care for our children. Nurturing and helping our young children to develop and become little individuals is one of the most wonderful roles that anybody can play. However, we have to make it profitable to do so and, at the other end, it must be affordable for the parents who pay for it. Young parents go out to work every day, have large mortgages and car loans and face various other types of pressure. They then have childcare costs and they find it very difficult to survive.

That is one aspect of the motion Sinn Féin has brought before the House tonight but there are also other carers, those who care for people in their homes. We all know and believe, and it is right to think, that the best place an older person can be is in his or her own home. It is probably the most cost-effective place for them to be but, what is more important than any money, it is the happiest place for them to be. They need assistance and care and need people to come in to their homes. I am grateful to all the carers I know in County Kerry who provide an excellent service, day and night. In bad weather and despite all kinds of problems and difficulties, they go into people's homes and take care of them.

I must mention congregated settings. Barring people from going into congregated settings puts further pressure on people who are keeping at home someone who might benefit more from being in a congregated setting. I ask the Government to reverse that rule which was brought in back to 2011. We all know that one shoe will not fit all sizes. I ask the Government to look at that rule.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh): We now have the Independent Group. Deputy Connolly is sharing time with Deputies Harkin and Fitzmaurice.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I thank Sinn Féin, in particular Deputy Funchion, for using its Private Members' time to introduce this motion, which I fully support.

In the past 11 years, I have stood in three general elections - in 2011, 2016 and 2020 - and on two occasions, I had the privilege of being successful. I mention that because on each occasion the issues of housing, public health, public transport and childcare were raised. I see the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, nodding. At every pre-election meeting, the astronomical costs of childcare were raised. This problem did not arise overnight. Here we are, in 2021, with

another motion and I very much welcome it.

The Minister, Deputy O’Gorman, tabled an amendment. I know his heart is in the right place and he set out the good that he has done. However, the fundamental change required is completely absent. We have a piecemeal, profit-driven childcare system.

We have had many television programmes and I often think that we have democracy here by “Prime Time”, “RTÉ Investigates” or other investigative programmes. Does the Minister remember the programme about childcare in Dublin? We seem to have learned nothing.

In all of those elections to which I referred, the constant theme for me was that the people were way ahead of us. They wanted honesty, action on climate change and coherent thinking that everything is interlinked. We cannot have a thriving economy if we are underpaying the predominantly female workforce. It is simply not possible to have a thriving economy. It is thriving on the backs of abuse of those who are in that workforce. Of course, there is a role for the private market in everything - in housing, absolutely - but the State must be the primary mover.

Having reached my age, I have had the privilege of working in different careers. I despair sometimes, but I keep saying I will not give in to despair because I am paid to do a job here, as my colleagues are, to articulate a different vision and different way of doing things.

It makes absolute sense to have a public childcare model. I am disappointed the Minister did not address that aspect. I do not expect him to change things overnight but I expect him to commit to a public childcare model because it is the best in the end. How do we know that? Let us look at what we know. In its recommendations published on 24 April, the Citizens’ Assembly on Gender Equality asked us to “Move to a publicly funded, accessible and regulated model of childcare over the next decade.” It did not ask the Minister to do it overnight. It pointed out, as all Deputies have done, the small percentage of GDP we spend on childcare, and asked us to raise it to 1%. It asked us to slowly raise that figure up.

If we take the countries that are successful in the area of childcare, the introduction of universal early childcare in Germany in 2013 was associated with a significant reduction in cases of child abuse and neglect, an increase in birth rates, an improvement in children’s social and emotional development and an increase in maternal life satisfaction. In the Nordic countries, the position was similar.

My experience, when I worked as a psychologist many years ago, confirmed that public access to childcare makes a phenomenal difference. All of the research has confirmed that. Three elections later - it has been much longer for other Deputies - we are still talking about public childcare. It seems childcare should be top of the list. I am a university graduate. I am absolutely supportive of universities but I would put childcare top of the list. The reason that has not happened, of course, is that childcare is dominated by the female gender and we have never once put an emphasis or a value on women’s work in this country.

I believe that we should build into that choice and make it much easier for mothers or fathers to stay at home and mind their children. I would describe myself as a radical feminist. We must have choices for people and within those choices, we must have public care as an essential ingredient.

The Opposition can table another motion. When it comes to our turn, we will table one. We

will keep tinkering and the Government will keep making speeches telling us about the money it is investing. Ultimately, however, the Government is supporting the private market using the exact same model as it does for housing. Until the Government changes that model, we will not improve matters.

I thank Sinn Féin for tabling this motion.

Deputy Marian Harkin: I also thank Sinn Féin for tabling this motion on childcare.

We all agree that, for too long, childcare and care in general were seen as women's work - work that was carried out behind closed doors, necessary but without much value. That view has been changing in recent years, but that context shaped how we supported, recognised and financed the provision of childcare and how we ensured access to childcare facilities for parents. Our record in the provision of childcare is dismal compared to our European partners. For example, the salary paid to early years educators in Germany is approximately €18 per hour. In France, it is approximately €20. In the Netherlands, it is €26. Here, it is between €12 and €13. During a Topical Issue debate three weeks ago, I asked the Minister for an extra allocation of €150 million in next year's budget, including €75 million to help ensure those working in the childcare sector earned the living wage. We are not talking about moving them up the European scale. Rather, we are asking that the Minister lift them from the bottom of the pile.

We know that 40% of people in the sector are looking for work elsewhere. They are being poached into other sectors. After all that training to provide quality childcare, we are losing committed and dedicated workers. The majority of the workers love their jobs and look forward to their work. It is a vocation for most of them.

The crazy thing is that, on top of everything, Irish parents pay the highest fees in the EU at approximately €180 per week. That is way above countries like Sweden, Denmark and France. In that context, and as I have told the Minister previously, there is a need for a further €75 million investment in next year's budget in order to ensure that parents can afford to access high-quality childcare.

To be honest, I prefer to use the term "early years education" rather than "childcare" and the term "early years educators" instead of "childcare workers". My reason for this is the context. While we have moved on, there are still too many people who view care as a secondary matter. It does not appear when we are calculating our balance of payments or feature when we assess our GDP, but it is central to how we organise our society. We believe we have moved on, and we have to some extent, but we still have such a long way to go. The value we place on childcare is reflected in the value we place on those who work in the sector. Too many people think of childcare as minding children. Of course, children need to be looked after, but early years education is so much more than that. It provides high-quality, play-based early years learning, supports families to manage their work-life balance, and provides a positive transition to primary education, as the Minister knows. However, our childcare system can do none of that because it is not properly resourced. It is the poor relation.

Childcare providers are at the end of their tether, with many of them holding on by their fingernails, knowing that another year like the past one will sink them. Many of them do not know whether they will still be around in six or nine months' time. Equally, those who work in the sector - 98% are women, which is the most telling element - are among the lowest paid people in the country. We cannot expect them to continue working for a salary that is below the

living wage. The childcare sector is looking to next week's budget for an indication from the Government that, one year into its term, it is serious about supporting the sector.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh): The Minister of State, Deputy Madigan, Deputies Dillon and Richmond, and the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, are sharing time.

Minister of State at the Department of Education (Deputy Josepha Madigan): I welcome this opportunity to discuss the importance of early learning and childcare. I support the Government's amendment. As public representatives and family members, we all know the importance of early learning and childcare. The early years are the most formative period in any child's life. Quality childcare is important in ensuring that parents and guardians can return to work if they wish. After both of my sons, I returned to work after eight weeks. I appreciated the value of good childcare. It is important. From this debate so far, it is clear that we are all agreed that reform is necessary. We need to reduce the cost for parents, improve pay and working conditions, reduce the regulatory and administrative burden on providers and ensure that children get the best possible start in life.

I wish to highlight the work of my party in developing a comprehensive report on the care of the child, focusing on parents, providers and staff, following an extensive consultation process. The report is in line with Government commitments and focuses on areas such as accessibility of services, affordability, support for providers, pay, training and apprenticeships.

The Government is not claiming there are not challenges in the sector, but rather that we have the strategy and drive to address those challenges and have already made significant progress. The introduction of the national childcare scheme in 2019 has gone a considerable way towards addressing the affordability of early learning and childcare. Most importantly, the number of families now eligible for support has been significantly increased and we are moving towards a progressive system of universal and income-based subsidies where eligibility is no longer based on medical card and social protection entitlements.

As the Minister of State with responsibility for special education, I am aware of the importance of inclusion of all children in early learning and childcare services. That is why I welcome in particular the work under way by the expert group to develop a DEIS-type model for early learning and childcare. This model will ensure greater levels of affordability, accessibility and quality.

The expert group's terms of reference also include improving pay and working conditions for early learning and childcare professionals. The Government accepts that the level of pay in the sector does not reflect the value of the work these professionals do for society. We have pledged to address this issue. The recent establishment of the joint labour committee, JLC, for the sector is a significant and welcome development.

The closure of services due to Covid-19 has brought home to us all how much we as a society rely on early learning and childcare to allow the economy and society to function and how valuable the sector is for children and their families, including the peace of mind it gives their parents. This is why the Government has implemented a substantial package of supports for the sector since March 2020. These have proven to be effective and have allowed services to continue operating safely in unprecedented times.

The excitement and happiness shown by children when returning to services in June 2020 demonstrated the importance to children and society of learning as well as care outside the

home. The programme for Government sets out the best way to strengthen early learning and childcare, which is why I am supporting the amendment.

Deputy Alan Dillon: I welcome this debate on the important issues around the early learning and childcare sector. I am acutely aware of the challenges facing many parents, childhood professionals, childcare providers and childminders. There is an immediate need for a major reprioritisation of early childhood in our national ambitions. Its importance must be embedded in the goals of the Government and the strategy statement of every Department. I welcome the programme for Government commitment with regard to continued investment in the national childcare scheme, reducing the costs for parents and introducing greater parental choice and flexibility, and to reform of the childcare systems to create one that brings together the best of community and private childcare provision. I have engaged locally with childcare workers. Time and again, they have highlighted the issues they face and their needs which must be met head-on without delay.

I call on the Minister to support childcare workers in the challenges they face and to respond in a meaningful manner to recognise their qualifications and the important and enormous contribution they make to our society. Their professionalism came to the fore in the worst of the pandemic to ensure our essential front-line workers could work to protect our families. I acknowledge the published research which indicates that workers employed in the early care sector in Ireland are paid less than their counterparts in other countries. Early years professionals are struggling to make ends meet. This is driving them out of the profession they love dearly and leading to a huge issue for childcare providers in finding staff.

The contributors to the Fine Gael policy lab on the care of the child told us that the care of the child should be embedded in the strategy of all Departments and form an essential pillar in our national, social, economic, cultural and spatial strategy. This must be represented in a major policy shift. I hope the Minister will make good on his earlier promise to address the issues of low pay in the early years sector, accessibility and affordability for parents and pay and conditions for staff while also protecting the sustainability of providers.

Deputy Neale Richmond: I thank Deputy Funchion for bringing forth this motion on an issue that she and I have discussed many times at length outside this Chamber. I also thank the Minister, Deputy O’Gorman, and the Ministers of State, Deputies Madigan and Rabbitte, for their contributions this evening and for the work they have been doing in this area. I say that not as a Government backbencher, but as a man who, unlike Deputy Dillon, has only one child at home. Regardless of what decision is taken on this motion, I will hear about it as I am married to a Montessori teacher who reminds me every day and night of the issues facing the sector.

It must be noted that the report by the European Commission on what Ireland is doing in early years education commended the targeted investment by this Government and the previous Government to address the real challenges. I would like to refer to three of those challenges which came up in the Fine Gael policy lab’s discussion on care of the child, and which need to be at the heart of this issue. First, we need to address the challenges for parents and make sure that the national childcare scheme is delivered upon. Second, we need to address the gap for providers to ensure they have access to State facilities and, third, we must ensure that staff in this sector have a real and genuine pathway to a full-time, sustainable career in this area.

Minister of State at the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth(Deputy Anne Rabbitte): I thank Deputy Funchion for bringing forward this Private

Members' motion. I was on the children's committee of which Deputy Funchion was also a member and I know how dedicated she is to this area. The Minister, Deputy O'Gorman, and I are equally committed to it. I thank our childcare workers and providers for their commitment and work throughout the pandemic.

I welcome the opportunity to debate this motion on the early care sector. I will be supporting the amendment put forward by the Minister. I will explain why. During the negotiations on the programme for Government, the Minister, Deputy O'Gorman, and I put childcare at the front and centre of our proposals. The programme for Government commitment puts childcare front and centre in terms of delivery. The work of the Minister since taking office has, I hope, shown the childcare providers, staff and organisations his commitment to engage and to ensuring that families, providers and staff are front and centre. In creating that pathway, which Deputy Funchion and I talked about during lengthy discussions in the committee, we need to ensure we appreciate and acknowledge the professionalism of the childcare and early years sector. We are committed to doing that. I am supporting the amendment because I see the vision in terms of where we want to get to.

I agree with colleagues on this side of the House on the need to put the funding with the sector. That was demonstrated as well. On 13 March 2020, one week after Covid hit, funding was increased by €11 million per month. The Minister has now increased funding to €34 million per month. This time last year, he secured the support of the Minister for Finance, Deputy Donohoe, for a special sectorial arrangement for the childcare sector. The EWSS remains in place in the sector. In all but name, it is a public childcare sector. I have every faith in the Minister in terms of the work he has put in with regard to the budget for next year. I support the amendment he has put forward.

Deputy Seán Crowe: There is common agreement that our childcare system is not fit for purpose. Fees are too high and wages are too low. Childcare in my constituency costs, on average, €217 per week or €870 per month, but costs can be higher or lower in one part of the constituency as compared with another. As stated, childcare costs are equal to that of a mortgage.

This motion is about giving families a break. Childcare fees for parents in this State are among the highest in the world. However, early years workers, who are highly qualified professionals with degrees, are paid some of the lowest wages of any sector, with many working on or just above the minimum wage. Some parents cannot even find a childcare place for their children. Centres across the State are full to capacity because of a lack of staff or crippling costs. Many parents rely on grandparents. This is probably not ideal, but increasingly it is the Irish solution. Grandparents do not retire. They are expected to keep giving.

Childcare needs to be dealt with comprehensively, not in a piecemeal manner. The collapse of the Government's childcare scheme for front-line workers during Covid was entirely predictable and inevitable. The Government did not seem to realise that a press release from a Minister is not a magic wand that can mend fundamental problems in service delivery. Clapping and goodwill speeches wear thin when you are working long hours and putting your health and life on the line. We need a State childcare system. The market has shown that it is incapable of providing a service that is either affordable to parents or fair to workers. The Sinn Féin plan would reduce childcare fees for parents by at least one third of the current cost for this year and next year and by two thirds the following year. Sinn Féin has long advocated for a publicly funded childcare sector that works for families, early years professionals and providers. Sinn Féin in government would ensure all children and their families have access to good quality and

affordable childcare.

Deputy Imelda Munster: The Minister will be aware that the childcare crisis has been ongoing for years. It has been ignored by successive Governments, which have been more than happy to leave the enormous burden of paying for childcare to parents while the sector struggles with low pay for childcare professionals and providers struggle. Fine Gael has been in power for ten years now and nothing has changed. With all due respect to the Minister, Deputy O’Gorman, and the Ministers of State, Deputies Madigan and Rabbitte, I do not have much hope that anything will change.

The burden of childcare costs on couples is enormous. We have the highest childcare fees in the world, which in itself is damning. In Louth, in 2019 and 2020, the average weekly fee for one child was over €175. Families also have astronomical housing and energy costs to contend with. It is hard to see how parents, especially those with more than one child in full-time childcare, can be expected to manage this financially. We know that people, usually women, are being forced to drop out of the workforce owing to childcare costs and that many couples are putting off having children owing to the housing crisis and the cost of childcare. Despite the cost of childcare, childcare and early years professionals are paid among the lowest wages in any sector. Many work for minimum wage despite being qualified professionals. They deserve so much more than this. If only the Government would recognise that we would all benefit from providing decent pay and conditions for childcare professionals.

This Government needs to change its attitude and to value childcare and early years education as a long-term, stable career choice. Its response this week was to increase funding through the national childcare scheme, which is wholly ineffective. It is not the solution to the childcare crisis, as stated by every Deputy who spoke in favour of this motion. Sinn Fein’s plan is to reduce childcare fees for parents by at least one third of the current average fees in 2022, reducing by two thirds thereafter. My colleague, Deputy Funchion, also has a plan to improve the pay and conditions of early years and childcare professionals, including the introduction of payscales and full continuous professional development for all staff. We need a seismic change in how we address childcare in this State. The Government must step up and play its part. Its budget next week will tell us whether it is listening to the people or not.

Deputy Kathleen Funchion: I thank everybody for their contributions, including the Minister and Minister of State. They will be aware it is an issue I have been talking about for a long time. I welcome some aspects because we seem to be largely in agreement but it would not be the first time we have been in a debate where people are saying they are in agreement, yet their actions perhaps do not always match that. I like to see people talking about the workers and the wages in the sector, the providers and the sustainability issue, and the issue of fees. They have always been the three key issues. Looking at the positives, I feel that message is at least getting out there.

I first brought forward a motion on this issue in 2017. That was after a committee report. Deputy Rabbitte, now a Minister of State, was on that committee. There was unanimous support both for that report and the motion that night in the Dáil. Despite that we did not really see any changes. I appreciate neither the Minister nor the Minister of State were in their posts then but in July 2020, shortly after the Government was formed, one of the first motions we brought was on early years childcare, and here we are a year and three months later. When the Minister and Minister of State say they have a new funding model and a new vision, many people are wondering when that is actually going to kick in. I think the Minister saw for himself how

welcoming people from the sector actually were when he went out and spoke to them. Nobody expects this to happen overnight. Everybody knows it is going to take time and significant investment. That is where we must get to. We must get to a publicly funded early years sector and it will take time but we must see some action. We must see the start of that. You cannot have a plan on paper and expect people to constantly have trust and faith in you if they do not see any actions coming out of that. That is one of the keys.

I am really hopeful we will see the start of that investment in next week's budget, in terms of the workers, providers and fees for parents. We can all tell countless stories, all day and all night, about the various issues. We heard some examples at the committee today from those working in the sector who cannot afford unexpected expenses. To actually go and be qualified and do a degree and be working for years and to still be in that situation is very disheartening. Providers, who are largely women and who possibly started out with this service in their home and it perhaps grew from there, are now all of a sudden totally bogged down in paperwork and regulation. Nobody has an issue with rules and regulations, particularly when it comes to children, but there must be a commonsense approach to that as well. I always try to focus on the three issues of fees, sustainability and wages but obviously there are other issues too, including around the inspections and perhaps having one body to do them. I always keep to those issues to try to focus the mind.

I will finish with a quote from someone who works in the early years sector and who was in contact with me over the weekend. What he said was very simple:

We cannot continue as we are. We need a new, fairer way for everyone.

That sums it up. It really is that simple. As I said, no-one expects this to be done overnight but they do expect something they can actually hold on to. Somebody at committee today said they need that hope, that level of hope. There needs to be something in the budget next week and I really hope there will be. As I said, we cannot support the amendment. I do not support it and I am disappointed. It is coming up on six years now since 2016 and that is how long I have been raising this issue. Some people in here will say that is not very long but to me it seems like a very long time to be constantly raising the same issue. The message is perhaps getting across a little bit more but we still have to do something tangible and something people can see and hold on to. We will not be supporting the amendment. I look forward to the budget next week. I really hope there is something in it for those working in the sector, those providing in it, for the parents who rely on it and ultimately for our children, who benefit from this. Sometimes, in the middle of it all, we forget the benefits the early years sector offers children.

Amendment put.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh): A division has been called. In accordance with Standing Order 80(2), it is postponed until the weekly division time tomorrow evening, Wednesday, 6 October 2021.

Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters

Acting Chairman (Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh): I wish to advise the House of the following matters in respect of which notice has been given under Standing Order 27A and the name of the Member in each case: (1) Deputies Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire and Thomas Gould - to discuss significant staff and resource shortages and delays in completing inquests at Cork Coroner's Court; (2) Deputies Cormac Devlin and Paul McAuliffe - to discuss public transport in Dublin, particularly Metrolink and upgrades to the DART, Luas and active mobility routes; (3) Deputy Joan Collins - to discuss the legal lacuna since 2018 in relation to the control of horse-drawn carriages in Dublin; (4) Deputy Brendan Griffin - to discuss the need for additional funding to help meet the unprecedented demand under the sports capital and equipment fund; (5) Deputies Louise O'Reilly, Aengus Ó Snodaigh, Seán Crowe, Paul Donnelly, Denise Mitchell and Eoin Ó Broin - to discuss staff and equipment shortages in the Dublin Fire Brigade service; (6) Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan - to discuss the tendering process for a County Cork school (details supplied) building project; (7) Deputy John Paul Phelan - to discuss how some children in counties Carlow and Kilkenny do not have allocated social workers; (8) Deputy Chris Andrews - to discuss the timeframe for the roll-out of a package to support Thalidomide sufferers; (9) Deputy John McGuinness - to discuss the need to reduce waiting lists across the health service; (10) Deputy Marc MacSharry - to discuss understaffing and under-resourcing of the ambulance service in the north west and north midlands region; (11) Deputy John Lahart - to discuss improvements to the BreastCheck programme, including a reduction in the age for breast screening to 40 years; (12) Deputy Dessie Ellis - to discuss transport proposals in the national development plan; (13) Deputy Pat Buckley - to discuss the Mental Health Commission report into conditions at the Owenacurra Mental Health Centre, Midleton, County Cork; (14) Deputy Claire Kerrane - to discuss the need for emergency action to support families affected by flooding at Lough Funshinagh, County Roscommon; (15) Deputy Joe McHugh - to discuss the devastation caused to a family (detailed supplied) forced to leave their home seven years ago due to mica; (16) Deputy David Stanton - to discuss further supports for young people with disabilities with respect to transport to services or centres; (17) Deputy Holly Cairns - to discuss two accident black spots in west County Cork; (18) Deputy Réada Cronin - to discuss the issue of essential funding for T-Joe braces of the chest, neck, or both, for children awaiting scoliosis operations; (19) Deputy Mairéad Farrell - to discuss the inability of the cargo boat landing on Inis Meáin due to weather, and the serious impact on indigenous island industry; (20) Deputy Maurice Quinlivan - to discuss progress to reduce the number of patients being treated on hospital trolleys at the University Hospital Limerick; (21) Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan - to discuss autism places in primary schools in west County Cork; (22) Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív - to discuss the need to proceed with the bypass of Galway to remove project logjams; (23) Deputy Joe Carey - to discuss a State apology to workers and rescue services and residents of Whiddy Island, due to breaches of maritime safety; (24) Deputy Thomas Pringle - to discuss the recently published Government mica working group report; (25) Deputy Matt Carthy - to discuss current plans for ensuring the opening of the group home in Carrickmacross for people with physical and sensory disabilities; (26) Deputy Jackie Cahill - to discuss numerous crises facing the pig farming industry resulting in a perfect storm for pig farmers; (27) Deputy Catherine Connolly - to discuss crises in the temporary accident and emergency department at University College Hospital Galway; (28) Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin - to discuss the appalling conditions in Gaelcholáiste Reachrainn, Dublin 13; (29) Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor - to discuss Department plans to provide Carlow with a design 2 ambulance base.

The matters raised by Deputies Phelan, Ó Laoghaire and Gould, Devlin and McAuliffe and Joan Collins have been selected for discussion.

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Acting Chairman (Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh): Question Nos. 1 and 4 have been reversed so we will commence with Deputy Ó Snodaigh.

Cúrsaí Gaeilge

4. D'fhiafraigh **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** den an Aire Turasóireachta, Cultúir, Ealaíon, Gaeltachta, Spóirt agus Meán an bhfaca sí an moladh atá déanta ag Comhchoiste Oireachtais na Gaeilge, na Gaeltachta agus Phobal Labhartha na Gaeilge ina thuairisc maidir le 'Todhchaí na gColáistí Samhraidh agus an tacaíocht atá á hiarraidh ina leith', go háirithe moladh a trí, a éilíonn ciste cobhsaíochta láithreach chun tacú le cobhsaíocht na hearnála le linn phaindéim an choróinvíris, mar a soláthraíodh anuraidh; agus cén fáth nár soláthraíodh ciste cobhsaíochta nó cúitimh don earnáil go fóill nó le linn an tsamhraidh atá díreach thart. [48284/21]

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Baineann an cheist seo leis an tuairisc ó mo choiste féin, an Comhchoiste Oireachtais na Gaeilge, na Gaeltachta agus Phobal Labhartha na Gaeilge, dar teideal Todhchaí na gColáistí Samhraidh agus an Tacaíocht atá á hIarraidh ina Leith. Seoladh an tuairisc seo chuig gach uile Comhalta an tseachtain seo caite. Tamall de sheachtainí ó shin, sheol muid na moltaí chuig an Aire, chuig an Aire Airgeadais agus chuig an Aire Stáit, an Teachta Chambers, chun cinnte a dhéanamh go raibh siad ar an eolas faoi na moltaí ionas go mbeidh siad curtha san áireamh sa bhuiséad. Tá súil agam go mbeidh an tAire Stáit ábalta freagra a thabhairt dom ar an gceist seo.

Minister of State at the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Jack Chambers): Ar dtús báire, ba mhaith liom buíochas a ghabháil leis an Teachta agus leis an gComhchoiste as an tuarascáil chuimsitheach seo a chuir i dtoll a chéile.

Is cinnte go bhfuil tábhacht ar leith le hearnáil na gcoláistí samhraidh sa Ghaeltacht, idir na deiseanna foghlama agus saibhrithe teanga a thugann siad do dhaoine óga, agus an teacht isteach luachmhar do na teaghlaigh agus pobail Ghaeltachta atá ag brath ar an ioncam sin. Mar aitheantas praiticiúil ar thábhacht na hearnála beidh a fhios ag an Teach go ndéanann mo Roinn infheistíocht bhliantúil ar fiú os cionn €4 milliún é ar leas na hearnála via scéim na bh-foghlaimoirí Gaeilge de chuid mo Roinne. Ina theannta sin, cuireadh tús roinnt blianta ó shin le bearta breise faoi leith ar leas na hearnála ar nós DEIS Gaeltachta agus ERASMUS Gaeltachta. Tá tuilleadh eolais ar fáil faoin raon oibre seo ar fad ar shuíomh mo Roinne.

Ós rud é go mbaineann sé le gnóthaí Covid-19, mar is eol don Teachta, d'fhógair mé cheana pacáiste maoinithe méadaithe ar fiú €2.2 milliún é do na mná tí agus na teaghlaigh Ghaeltachta i mbliana mar aitheantas ar an mbealach tábhachtach a chuireann siad leis an earnáil. Ina theannta sin, d'fhógair mé ciste faoi leith le gairid ar fiú thart ar €240,000 do na hallaí pobail Ghaeltachta a úsáideann na coláistí samhraidh de ghnáth. Is maoiniú tábhachtach breise é seo mar aitheantas ar an obair fhónta a dhéanann lucht na hallaí go deonach den chuid is mó agus

an tábhacht atá leo don earnáil.

Maidir leis na coláistí iad féin, tá go leor oibre déanta ag feidhmeannaigh mo Roinne le roinnt míonna anuas i gcomhar le scáthghrúpa na gcoláistí, Comhchoiste Náisiúnta na gColáistí Samhraidh, CONCOS, agus leis na coláistí féin ar mhaithe le scéim chúí a fhorbairt chun earnáil na gcoláistí samhraidh a chobhsú. Chun go mbeifí in ann an cur chuige is fearr is féidir a aimsiú, tugadh faoi roinnt taighde faoi leith faoinar scaipeadh ceistneoir faoin ábhar ar gach coláiste atá bainteach leis an gcóras.

Tá an cheist níos casta i mbliana de bharr ioncam a bheith ag cuid de na coláistí ó fhoinsí eile nach raibh ar fáil dóibh anuraidh. San áireamh seo, tá ioncam ó scéimeanna eile de chuid an Stáit a bunaíodh de bharr na paindéime agus ioncam ó chúrsaí ar líne, go háirithe cúrsaí dírithe ar ábhar oidí. Mar sin féin, tá an obair thaighde agus anailíse réamhluaite beagnach críochnaithe agus tá súil agam an tréimh beart a fhógairt go foirmiúil gan rómhoill eile ar mhaithe le leas foriomlán an chórais agus cheantair na Gaeltachta. Is féidir leis an Teachta a bheith cinnte de go leanfaidh mo Roinn ag faire amach ar na bealaí a bhféadfaí cabhrú leis an earnáil, mar atá déanta ag an Roinn ó bunaíodh córas na gcoláistí Gaeilge.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Tá aitheantas ag dul leis an Aire Stáit, dar ndóigh, agus leis an Rialtas as an mbeartas a rinne siad maidir le hallaí pobail agus mná tí tar éis feachtas uathu sin ag lorg cuidithe. Sa chás seo, is iad na coláistí samhraidh féin atá, i roinnt cásanna, i ngé-archéim toisc gur gá dóibh airgead a chaitheamh bliain i ndiaidh bliana agus gan aon teacht isteach acu. Is éarlais a bhí in aon airgead a bhí acu agus bhí orthu é a íoc ar ais. Tugadh roinnt cuidithe dóibh in 2020 ach in 2021, ní raibh aon ioncam ann. Má tá rúnaíocht nó fógraíocht i gceist nó má tá duine ag freagairt an fhóin agus ag glacadh le bookings ar áit sna coláistí samhraidh, tá gá le hairgead. Ní suim mhór atá i gceist i gcomparáid leis na hearnálacha eile a bhfuair cuidiú le linn na paindéime. Is ceann de na heagrais iad na coláistí samhraidh agus ba chóir go mbeadh cuidiú éigin ar fáil do na heagrais seo.

Deputy Jack Chambers: Bhí teagmháil rialta ag mo Roinn leis na hionadaithe ó na coláistí agus go háirithe leis an scátheagraíocht, Comhchoiste Náisiúnta na gColáistí Samhraidh, CONCOS. Cuireann mo Roinn deontas reáchtála ar fáil do CONCOS gach bliain ar mhaithe le cabhrú tuilleadh le hearnáil na gcoláistí samhraidh. Tuigim go maith na deacrachtaí atá ag cuid de na coláistí i mbliana de bharr nach bhféadfaí cúrsaí samhraidh dul ar aghaidh don dara bliain as a chéile. Tá go leor oibre déanta ag feidhmeanna Roinne le roinnt bliana anuas, i gcomhar leis na coláistí, ar mhaithe le scéim chúí a fhorbairt chun earnáil na gcoláistí samhraidh a chosaint. Táimid ag iarraidh an próiseas seo a chríochnú anois agus beidh an t-eolas ag teacht amach ina dhiaidh sin.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Is blianta as an ngnáth atá ann ach bhí CONCOS agus Gael Linn os comhair an chomhchoiste agus bhí eolas eile curtha isteach. Tháinig 22 moladh as an méid a bhí le rá acu. Ina measc sin, bhí gá cúnaimh a thabhairt dóibh toisc go raibh roinnt acu i mbaol dúnadh toisc nach raibh aon ioncam ceart acu le dhá bhliain anuas. Ba mhór an trua é sin. Tá a lán eile gur féidir linn a dhéanamh. Ba chóir go mbeimis ag ardú na ndeontas atá ar fáil i bhfad oiread níos mó ná mar atá. Caithfidimid aitheantas a thabhairt don obair atá déanta acu agus seasamh isteach agus cuidiú, má tá cuidiú de dhíth. Sin a dúirt CONCOS leis an gcoiste nuair a bhí sé os ár gcomhair níos luaithe i mbliana. Tá súil agam go dtabharfaidh an tAire Stáit éisteacht leis an méid atá sa tuairisc sin agus leis an méid a bhí le rá agus an méid atá á rá ag CONCOS agus go mbeidh toradh maith an tseachtain seo chugainn nuair a bheidh an buiséad ann.

Deputy Jack Chambers: Tá próiseas agus struchtúr ann idir an Roinn agus CONCOS chun an fhadhb seo a chríochnú, agus beidh réiteach ann idir gach páirtí. Mar a thuigfeadh an Teachta, tá an cheist níos casta i mbliana do na coláistí de bharr ioncam a bheith ag cuid de na coláistí ó fhoinsí eile nach raibh ar fáil anuraidh. Mar chuid den taighde a tugadh faoi le tamall anuas, chuir an Roinn ceistneoir faoin ábhar chuig gach coláiste atá bainteach leis an gcóras. Tá an obair thaighde agus anailíse beagnach críochnaithe, agus tá súil agam an tríú beart a fhógairt go foirmiúil gan rómhoill eile ar mhaithe le leas foriomlán an chórais agus cheantair na Gaeltachta.

Arts Policy

2. **Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if her attention has been drawn to the recommendations of an organisation (details supplied) in its pre-budget 2022 submission; the recommendations from the submission she would support; the recommendations that are deliverable within the term of Thirty-third Dáil; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [47786/21]

Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin: The National Campaign for the Arts, NCFA, has put together quite a substantial document which it is hoping the Minister will consider in the budgetary process. I am interested in hearing the Minister's reflections on that budgetary submission and her vision for the future of the arts which, as she will appreciate, has gone through a hellish 20 months.

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): I wish to advise the Deputy that the organisation to which he refers has sent copies of its pre-budget submission for 2022 to me and to my officials. I am familiar with the recommendations made by the organisation. Budget 2022 will be announced on 12 October 2021.

A number of the recommendations listed in the pre-budget submission that come within the remit of my Department are also contained in the arts and culture recovery task force report, *Life Worth Living*, published in November 2020, which outlined a vision for the arts and culture sector which I firmly support. The recommendations included a proposal to pilot a basic income scheme for a three-year period in the arts, culture, audiovisual, live performance and events sectors. Other recommendations relate to increased funding to existing programmes and agencies.

As part of the Economic Recovery Plan launched on 1 June 2021, the Government committed to bringing forward a proposal in response to the task force recommendation for a basic guaranteed income pilot scheme for artists. I established an oversight group with the remit of addressing the outstanding recommendations of the *Life Worth Living* report. The oversight group was asked to prioritise the manner in which a basic guaranteed income pilot scheme for artists could be delivered, and I am currently considering the optimal mechanism to take this important measure forward.

As the Deputy will be aware, the programme for Government committed to continue to reform and improve the budgetary process to enhance Ireland's budgetary framework. The budgetary reforms introduced in recent years, including performance budgeting and equality budgeting, are focused on providing the evidence base to support the efficient and effective delivery of services that have a positive impact on people's lives. This work is being further enhanced with the development of the well-being framework for Ireland.

As we emerge from the pandemic, I am committed to supporting the long-term sustainability of the arts and culture sectors, and that remains my focus during the ongoing budget negotiations. We have a unique opportunity to achieve such sustainability in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. The arts have been and continue to be among the most negatively impacted sectors, and in this context I am focused on the recovery and future of the culture sector. I can inform the Deputy that both I and my Department's officials meet regularly with representatives of the organisation to which he refers, and I am meeting them tomorrow to discuss these exact matters.

Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin: I am delighted to hear that and know they will impress on the Minister the stark findings contained in their report. The latest analysis indicates that two thirds of workers in the sector are earning less than €20,000 per year, 60% of artists and arts workers have neither health insurance nor private pensions, and 74% of performing artists and creative practitioners are reliant on another source of income. The Arts Council reports that 48% of professional artists have considered abandoning their career in the arts over the past year, with lack of income and financial pressures being cited by 70% of them as the main reason.

Another stark finding which I am sure the Minister will be discussing tomorrow is that, a decade on from the financial crisis, Government investment in the bodies that underwrite the artistic output of the nation, including the Arts Council, Culture Ireland, Creative Ireland and others, has barely recovered. Ireland continues to languish on the bottom rung in terms of investment in culture in Europe. When does the Minister envisage we can move on from the firefighting and the recovery from disaster of the past 20 months and reach the level of funding that used to be in place prior to the economic crash of ten years ago?

Deputy Catherine Martin: I acknowledge it has been an incredibly tough time for all those who work in the arts and culture sector. Effectively, they have been unable to do what they do best, to do what they love and to earn a living. The Deputy may argue that they languish on the bottom rung, but the fact I secured a commitment from Government for a basic guaranteed income pilot scheme, which was the number one recommendation of the arts recovery task force, shows my commitment as Minister with responsibility for arts and culture. I have a vision and I understand that, by its very nature, work in this sector means there are lull periods when artists need to create, and the pilot scheme is a recognition of that. I would also point out that in 2021 I allocated a record €130 million to the Arts Council to provide for the sector. The council is the agency through which Government support for the arts sector is delivered. Building on this record allocation, increased funding for the Arts Council will be considered in the context of the budget Estimates, and negotiations are ongoing in that regard.

Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin: I appreciate what the Minister is saying, but the NCFI document argues that it could take until 2024 to recover from the past 20 months in what is already a particularly precarious sector. I am seeking a commitment from the Minister not just to deal with what has happened in the past year and a half but to deal with the long-term situation. It is a source of frustration to the arts community that whenever Ireland is marketed abroad as a tourist destination, the icons put forward from our history are always from the arts community - the poets, musicians and dancers - but funding for the arts has been especially weak. Yes, the Minister has been engaging with the National Campaign for the Arts and that is to her credit, and she is meeting its representatives tomorrow, but it is not just about recovering from the past 20 months. It is about the underlying under-funding issues that have always been prevalent, and a vision to restore that into the future.

Deputy Catherine Martin: There is where we are in absolute agreement. On numerous

occasions in just over a year since becoming Minister, I have pointed out that my focus is not only on sustaining artists during this very difficult time. We are a nation which talks so much about valuing the arts and now is the time for us to put our money where our mouth is. If there was one lesson to be learned during the pandemic of the past 18 months, it was how the arts go to the very core of our being as a nation and I deeply value that. It will not just be words from me. That is why I fought to get that commitment in the basic income guarantee pilot because it is about the vision for beyond Covid and beyond the supports that I am putting in place. I am absolutely determined to support them beyond Covid. That is where my focus is.

Sports Facilities

3. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media her views on the situation in relation to a stadium (details supplied); and if she will consider providing the necessary funds to redevelop the stadium. [48382/21]

Deputy Gary Gannon: As I hope the Minister of State is aware, there is a dearth of quality stadiums not only in the country but in Dublin and, from my perspective, particularly on the north side of the capital. I am asking for the Minister of State's views on the retention of Tolka Park as a stadium and on its redevelopment. Can we save it from the sword of Damocles under which it stands, where it is in the position of being sold by Dublin City Council?

(Deputy Jack Chambers): Future development plans for the facility referred to by the Deputy are a matter in the first instance for Dublin City Council as the owners of the stadium. In terms of my role, my Department provides grant assistance for sporting facilities through the sports capital and equipment programme, SCEP, and the large scale sport infrastructure fund, LSSIF.

Under the SCEP, grants of up to €300,000 are available to community organisations, sports clubs, national governing bodies of sport and local authorities. The stadium referred to by the Deputy received a provisional allocation of €71,000 under the 2018 round of the programme but this has yet to be drawn down.

The latest round of the SCEP closed for applications on 1 March. Assessment work is continuing on other grants. The national sports policy published in 2018 provided for the establishment of the LSSIF. The aim of the fund is to provide support for larger sports facilities where the Exchequer investment is greater than the maximum amount available under the SCEP. The national development plan provided a capital allocation of at least €100 million and approximately €86 million has been allocated of which €918,750 was awarded to Dublin City Council towards the design cost for the redevelopment of Dalymount stadium. It is proposed that the redeveloped Dalymount Park will be home to both Bohemian FC and Shelbourne FC. As the Deputy will be aware, Shelbourne FC are the current main users of the Tolka Park facility.

While it is not proposed to open the LSSIF for new applications at present, we are undertaking a review of the LSSIF which is expected to be complete in the near future. This will look to progress on all existing grants and the timing of a new call for proposals will also be considered.

Among the key considerations in the assessment of any applications is the likelihood of increasing participation including female participation, how projects will cater for disadvantaged users and whether the proposed facility will be shared with other users or sports. I am commit-

ted to continued investment in our sport infrastructure in the years ahead and any future application for funding for the stadium referred to by the Deputy under either the SCEP or LSSIF will be considered on its own merits in line with the relevant assessment criteria.

Deputy Gary Gannon: I fully appreciate that the owner of this stadium is Dublin City Council but I was also a member of Dublin City Council for over six years and I recognise that we stripped Dublin City Council of all local government funding to the point that all it sees in its assets is how it can sell them off in order to raise funds. In this Chamber, we talk about issues of national importance. High-quality stadiums are something that every person, whether in Dublin or elsewhere in the country, can benefit from. The game of soccer is something that is so important to so many lives and brings positivity. This issue is one of such importance that we can intervene here. We need to take ownership of soccer's viability. There are two stadiums on the north side of the city, as the Minister of State will know well, which are used by Bohemians and Shelbourne. The two clubs deserve to have more than one stadium between both of only 6,500 capacity. There are four quality teams there. Bohemians now have a women's team and Shelbourne has a highly competent women's team. It is unrealistic to expect four teams to play in one stadium. I think we can intervene and provide national leadership, to ask Dublin City Council to halt the same and provide a pathway forward by which we can keep both stadiums.

Deputy Jack Chambers: We are absolutely committed to the development of football, particularly grassroots football, and strengthening the League of Ireland. That is something I am very ambitious for.

Tolka Park is owned by Dublin City Council so any future plans are a matter for the council and the councillors. Dublin City Council is also the lead applicant for the redevelopment of Dalymount stadium and the design work is at an advanced stage. In a previous proposal it was understood that Dublin City Council planned to fund some of the construction costs with Tolka Park, however as the Deputy is very well aware, as am I, the proposal has met with opposition locally with a high profile campaign to keep the Tolka Park facility for sporting use. From my perspective and that of the Department there would be no objection to keeping Tolka Park in sporting use and any future proposal for the development work could be considered like any other application under the sports capital and equipment programme and to the large scale sports infrastructure fund. That would be a matter for the council around any funding implication for its plans around the redevelopment of stadiums but we are committed. The national development plan just published includes continuity of the large scale sports infrastructure fund and the sports capital and equipment programme to strengthen our league and our grassroots. However, this is a matter around ownership on which the council will have to make a decision.

Deputy Gary Gannon: In my last years on the council the controlling group committed to not selling off any more public land. The council management, which is unelected, does not have the same vision for the city and certainly does not have the same vision for League of Ireland football as maybe the Minister of State, myself and others in the Chamber. The Minister of State's comment that no there would be no objection to an application for the large scale sporting infrastructure fund is welcome. Maybe we can find unity between the Government and Opposition and say that it would be a welcome development for us that a stadium such as Tolka Park, with all its historical importance, should be retained. It should be a stadium for Shelbourne Football Club and as a local amenity for the area. The Minister of State's remark is one that we can see as a form of quasi-commitment and one that we can build a path forward from because League of Ireland football is too important to be neglected. Shelbourne and Bohemians have each have histories and futures in their own rights and they deserve stadiums

worthy of their achievements. Let us save Tolka Park and build it as a football stadium worthy of its place in the country.

Deputy Jack Chambers: I acknowledge what the Deputy said. As I mentioned, there must be prioritisation within both the FAI and the council around sport. We are ambitious for growing the league and our grassroots. That is why if any application came in, we would look at it on its merits. That is the same for any stadium in north Dublin, south Dublin or anywhere around the country. Plenty of people here have ambitions for their areas. We have tried to progress the stadium for Finn Harps that has been sitting there for years, for example. A big area by which to grow the league ensuring that the sporting infrastructure which facilitates the matches is modernised. That is something that is in the current large scale sports infrastructure fund and I am sure will feature in further iterations. The primary issue here is that Dublin City Council needs to decide on the future of the stadium. As far as any future application is concerned, we treat every application on its merits and that is really important and any sporting organisation or club can apply and they are assessed fairly as per the published criteria.

8 o'clock

Acting Chairman (Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh): I will now return to Question No. 1 in the name of Deputy Munster.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

1. **Deputy Imelda Munster** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media her views on the current situation in which tour operators whose businesses are based in Ireland and offer day trips to tourist destinations in the north of Ireland have not been eligible for State supports despite the facts that northern tourist attractions generate international tourism to Ireland given the importance of cross-Border co-operation in terms of attracting tourists to Ireland; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [47914/21]

Deputy Imelda Munster: I ask the Minister for her views on the current situation in which tour operators whose businesses are based in Ireland and who offer day trips to tourist destinations up North have not been eligible for State supports despite the fact that Northern Ireland tourist attractions generate international tourism to Ireland, and given the importance of cross-Border co-operation in terms of attracting tourists to Ireland; and if she will make a statement on the matter.

Deputy Catherine Martin: My Department's role in relation to tourism lies in the area of national tourism policy development. It does not have any role in the administration of tourism business support schemes including the setting of eligibility criteria. These are operational matters for Fáilte Ireland.

In 2020 Fáilte Ireland established the Ireland-based inbound agents business continuity scheme, which has provided business continuity funding of more than €10 million to a total of 97 businesses. Last year Fáilte Ireland also established the coach tourism operators business continuity scheme, which has provided business continuity funding of just over €10 million to 1,372 coach tourism businesses. In addition to these supports, phase 1 and phase 1+ of Fáilte Ireland's 2021 tourism business continuity scheme supported hop-on hop-off tourism bus tour operators, cruise hire companies and tourism boat tour operators.

Fáilte Ireland is legally precluded from providing funding to businesses in respect of tourism activity taking place outside the State. This position is set out in section 8(1)(e) of the National Tourism Development Authority Act 2003 which states that the authority, Fáilte Ireland, shall:

... support ... such enterprises and projects relating to -

(i) the development of tourist traffic within or to the State, and

(ii) the development and marketing of tourist facilities and services in the State

as it considers appropriate.

Accordingly, applications for funding related to tourism activity outside the State are ineligible under Fáilte Ireland's capital and business continuity schemes.

Ireland is marketed as a single destination in overseas markets. Tourism Ireland, which operates on a North-South basis, does an excellent job in promoting Ireland in overseas markets, in co-operation with both Fáilte Ireland and Tourism Northern Ireland. I had first-hand experience of this recently when I supported Tourism Ireland on trade missions overseas in London and the United States. This arrangement benefits the tourism sector both here and in Northern Ireland. Many tourists who come to Ireland also include Northern Ireland as part of their trip and the opposite is also true.

I am acutely conscious of the ongoing challenges faced by tourism businesses, including tour operators. Informed by the recommendations in the latest report from the recovery oversight group, and in the context of budget 2022, I am working with officials and Government colleagues to establish what further supports can be put in place for the tourism sector.

Deputy Imelda Munster: We recognise that the issue relates to eligibility, and particularly under the scheme, but it seems to me that Fáilte Ireland has decided that this particular business does not drive tourist traffic into the State. We need to look at tourism on an all-island basis. As the Minister has said, Tourism Ireland has done a great job and the island is marketed abroad as one country. These inbound tour operators operate from this State - from the South. They offer packages of seven to ten days. The people who go on these tours would travel all over Ireland. They might go to Killarney, to Clare and they might even go to Louth, but they might also want to spend a night up in the Glens of Antrim. That these companies based in the South do not qualify for any supports, given all that they have gone through with the pandemic, seems like something that is not insurmountable. I am asking if the Minister could sit down with Tourism Ireland and Fáilte Ireland, and if between them they could see if they can give something and if some support can be arranged.

Deputy Catherine Martin: I thank the Deputy. I do not believe it is accurate to say that Fáilte Ireland has made a decision against any specific business. The facts are that under the National Tourism Development Authority Act 2003, Fáilte Ireland is not permitted to assist businesses in respect of activities outside the State. Accordingly, Fáilte Ireland has provided business continuity funding to businesses such as inbound tour operators and coach tour operators in respect of their activities within the State. As I have said, Tourism Ireland does a fantastic job, on a North-South basis, in promoting Ireland to the overseas market as the island of Ireland.

I suggest that it may be worth bringing this up with the Deputy's colleagues to facilitate a

discussion with Tourism Northern Ireland on supports for businesses, including the business the Deputy is referring to, which brings tourists to Northern Ireland. That may be an angle from which to approach it.

Deputy Imelda Munster: The Minister will be aware that Tourism Ireland was set up under the Good Friday Agreement. I have said already that these tour operator companies are based in the South. The only wrongdoing they might do is to go across the Border for a night or two during a tour of seven to ten days. I will certainly see what we can do from our end. The Minister has said that it is in the Act but Acts can be amended. Given that in the Good Friday Agreement we want to market the country as a whole and invite people to go North, South, east and west, it is not insurmountable if the political will is there. All I am asking is that the Minister would take an interest in it and sit down with Fáilte Ireland and Tourism Ireland to see if a way can be found.

The Minister does not need me to tell her how the tourism sector has suffered through the pandemic. While some sectors such as hotels and restaurants are starting to come out of it, international tourism was hit worst of all and they will not see any comeback at all until spring or summer of next year. For those tour operators who are operating in the South and bringing tourists into the State, the only sin they commit is to travel up to Armagh or Antrim. That is all they do. If there is a will there is a way, and I ask that the Minister would take an interest in it to see what can be done.

Deputy Catherine Martin: I thank the Deputy. If the Deputy wants, she can forward the details to me of the specific business, but I do feel that the agencies are prohibited from funding these businesses because of the 2003 Act. Perhaps Tourism Northern Ireland should be approached and not Tourism Ireland, which the Deputy is aware is a separate body. Maybe this is the angle from which to approach it.

Departmental Funding

5. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media her plans to commission research or analysis into the way the €15 million provided by her Department to Galway 2020 was spent; her plans to publish any such analysis; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [47905/21]

Deputy Catherine Connolly: Baineann mo cheist le Gaillimh 2020. An bhfuil sé beartaíthe aon anailís a dhéanamh ar an €15 milliún atá caite? My question relates to Galway 2020. Does the Department intend to carry out any analysis off its own bat with regard to the €15 million, given the recent chapter from the Comptroller and Auditor General?

Deputy Catherine Martin: To date, €14 million has been drawn down from the total commitment of €15 million from my Department to the European Capital of Culture. Of this €14 million drawn down, €13 million has been spent on the development, production and delivery of the key projects under the Galway 2020 cultural programme, most of which were set out in the original winning bid book.

From the date of signing in November 2018 of the performance delivery agreement between my Department and Galway 2020, and as per the terms of the agreement, my Department has and continues to be in regular receipt of detailed information on how funding from my De-

partment is spent. This information includes comprehensive quarterly management reports providing progress updates on all aspects of the Galway 2020 project, including the cultural programme, as well as a breakdown of project income and expenditure, which is confirmed through quarterly checks by an independent auditor. Relevant quarterly reports are reviewed by my Department as part of the controls in place in advance of the approval of funding draw-downs.

Furthermore, under the terms of my approval in July 2020 of the restructured cultural programme for Galway 2020, which was developed in the wake of the impact of the pandemic on activity, my Department meets with Galway 2020 on a fortnightly basis to discuss and review project progress. Also under the terms of the approval, my Department received a monthly written report from September 2020 to April this year on all cultural programme projects supported by Department funding. This monthly report provided information on events planned and delivered, health and safety measures in place, identified risks and mitigation, communications and audience development measures.

In addition, the cultural partners supported from Department funding are completing post-project evaluations with Galway 2020. These evaluations provide information on the numbers employed in each project, the number of events held, partnerships developed, audience numbers, volunteers engaged and income and expenditure. My Department receives and reviews the reports as they are completed. Finally, and as advised to the Deputy on the floor on 22 June last, the overall monitoring and evaluation programme of Galway 2020 is now at an advanced stage. The final report from this programme, scheduled for delivery before year end, will include results on the number of cultural organisations supported, the jobs created to deliver the programme, new projects commissioned, events held, audience numbers and a breakdown of the total income and expenditure.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: The advantage of being Leas-Cheann Comhairle is that I have read the answer. Forgive me, therefore, for being a little impatient because the Minister has not addressed my question. Does the Department intend to carry out an analysis, bearing in mind the 12 very succinct pages from the Comptroller and Auditor General, who pointed out that the Department had a nominee on the board of directors but that nominee never received any minutes and had no role? The report stated that there was a nominee on the board with no role and that “the Department did not receive the terms of reference of the sub-committees of the Board, minutes of Board meetings ... [and so on]”.

There has been a high turnover of personnel. Of the 28 original people, there are only two left. In addition, a declaration that was necessary regarding co-funding was never forthcoming. Where the funding was conditional on money coming from the private sector, that was not included. The performance delivery agreement did not include that it was conditional. There are serious questions here for the Department. I say that reluctantly because I sit on the Committee of Public Accounts. I drew to the Department’s attention what happened regarding the pictiúrlann in Galway where the cost escalated. The Department was to learn from that.

Deputy Catherine Martin: The Deputy raised a number of questions to answer in one minute. All European Capital of Culture designations carry with them a wide range of challenges in delivering on their broad objectives, and, in the case of Galway 2020, these challenges have been made more acute by the global pandemic.

Nonetheless, even against this challenging background, much was achieved. Some 350

Irish-based artists and other cultural professionals completed their projects and delivered commissioned original work with more than 500 events delivered online or to live audiences.

I am completely supportive of the highest levels of transparency and accountability in the use of public funds. That is why my Department continues to meet with Galway 2020 to assess outcomes as part of its ongoing monitoring role. In addition, I welcome the scrutiny that my Department's expenditure received by the Comptroller and Auditor General and note that my Department is committed to the implementation of the recommendations set out in his report.

I look forward the report of the Audience Agency, which is carrying out the evaluation under the Galway 2020 monitoring evaluation framework. This exercise, which will capture feedback from a wide range of stakeholders, will inform decisions on the purpose to which the remaining legacy funding will be applied. This is my principal focus at present.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: The analysis being undertaken is costing €200,000. I asked about the Department. Let us consider what the Comptroller and Auditor General said. Recommendation 7.1 states that, "The Department should put in place robust controls to ensure compliance of future grantees with relevant grant management and reporting requirements". We have a situation where the Department is a nominee on the board of directors but is unaware of anything, which begs the question: why is there a nominee at all on the board?

The second matter is the 50% of funding being conditional on private funding. It was not included in the performance delivery agreement nor could it be explained to the Comptroller and Auditor General. I am paraphrasing from the report as to why that was not done. I welcome that there was a new Secretary General and a hands-on approach regarding this but somewhere along the line, we got deflected with Covid-19 and the bad weather. I agree they have been particularly difficult but that does not take from the absence of robust controls.

Deputy Catherine Martin: With regard to the reference to 50%, in the 2014 decision by Government to exercise Ireland's right to nominate a city to be Ireland's 2020 European Capital of Culture, it was noted by Government that Exchequer funding would not exceed 50% of its overall financial costs. The €15 million in funding for the Department was subsequently included by the Government in Project Ireland 2040, the national planning framework without a provision to limit percentages in respect of overall costs.

Notwithstanding this, the impact of Covid-19 on Galway 2020 activity and funding resulted in significant anticipated funding not materialising. This included in excess of €1 million in local authority funding, partnership funding and box receipts. This directly and substantially contributed to the Department funding exceeding 50% of its overall costs.

My clear focus for Galway 2020 has been to maximise the potential for culture and creativity in Galway and the surrounding region. It would be unconscionable to withdraw support at a time projects had been years in development and were days, weeks or months from delivery. I am aware that the Deputy brought up other issues regarding the Comptroller and Auditor General's report. The time has run out but I am quite happy to follow up in writing with the officials.

Deputy Acting Chairman: I thank the Minister. I do not see Deputy Colm Burke so I propose to move to Question No. 7, which will be put by Deputy Devlin.

Question No. 6 replied to Written Answers.

Arts Policy

7. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the plans in place or proposed to encourage diversity within the arts; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [47924/21]

Deputy Cormac Devlin: I will ask this question on behalf of my colleague, Deputy Niamh Smyth. What plans exist to encourage diversity within the arts? I believe it is fair to say that all of us in this Chamber have missed the arts over the past 18 months. The artists were creative in every way they could be to try to engage with the public, however, be it virtually or otherwise. I commend the support of the Department but I would like to hear the Minister's plans.

Deputy Catherine Martin: The published statement of strategy for 2021 to 2023 for my Department sets out the priorities for this Department over the next few years to ensure all sectors recover and grow in a manner that underpins social cohesion and supports strong, sustainable economic growth with a focus on a number of cross-cutting goals of equality, diversity, social inclusion, the Irish language and environmental sustainability. One of the cross-cutting goals of the strategy is to support and promote diversity, social, inclusion and full and effective female participation across my Department's sectors and society in line with programme for Government commitments.

Access to participation in arts and culture is one of the cornerstones of the national framework cultural policy. Culture 2025 underpins the right of everyone to participate in the cultural and creative life of the nation. My Department works with the Council of the National Cultural Institutions to encourage the development of universal audience access, including access for new communities, people with disabilities, the Traveller community and the LGBT+ communities.

The Arts Council of Ireland is the Government agency with responsibility for the arts and artists. Under the Arts Act 2003, the council provides primary responsibility for the promotion and support of the arts throughout the country. The council's equality, human rights and diversity, EHRD, policy and strategy is designed to build on a range of existing Arts Council work areas. The council is committed to promoting and enhancing inclusion, diversity and equality.

It funds key arts organisations that have a central role in supporting these areas of work. These awards and schemes operated by the council are informed by the Arts Council's EHRD policy and strategy and the paying the artist policy. Diversity is a core organisational value in the Arts Council's ten-year strategy. The council encourages board membership with knowledge of matters relating to diversity, equality and inclusion.

Screen Ireland is also committed to developing policies in these areas and plans to publish its diversity and inclusion strategy in 2022. My Department is working to achieve better gender balance and more diversity across membership of all the boards of the national cultural institutions and agencies under its remit.

Deputy Cormac Devlin: I agree that diversity is very important. For too many communities, the arts are on the periphery rather than a core part of those communities. Diversity and inclusion should be the core values for how we view and support our arts. Diversity is important across arts practice in how artists make work and how people experience it. Importantly, support for cultural diversity within the arts sector will allow us to build and reflect an inclusive

and diverse society. We need to open our cultural life to all communities and remove the barriers in place to ensure equal and active contribution, participation and enjoyment of the arts and culture for everybody.

I welcome the commitment in the programme for Government to support, through a consultative process, community groups, arts groups, cultural bodies, sports clubs, voluntary organisations and charities to recover and enhance their impact after Covid-19. We need make sure that the diverse voices are heard, welcomed and integrated into the arts community as part of this process. I welcome what the Minister said with regard to the Arts Council of Ireland and Screen Ireland.

I have two questions for her, however. What are the specific measures and plans to encourage diversity within the arts, particularly for people with disabilities or older people? RTÉ recently broadcast a segment on the Lough Ree Access For All boat, with which I am sure the Minister is familiar. Does she agree that more innovative programmes are needed to open access to the arts? What plans and measures are in place to ensure the voices of those impacted are heard as part of the consultative process?

Deputy Catherine Martin: My Department is developing a number of policies to support diversity and full and effective female presentation and engagement. I would point the Deputy to the Creative Ireland programme. There have been a number of initiatives that encourage diversity within the arts, for example, to facilitate the integration of migrant populations. Songs from Direct Provision in south County Dublin; Song Seeking initiatives in Limerick; a film project called “Under Surveillance” in County Wicklow and a children’s art exhibition in Tramore library are just some examples of projects that provide creative opportunities for people living in direct provision. The programme promotes the inclusion and participation of Travellers and Roma. For example, Cork community arts link is working collaboratively with the Travellers’ visibility group on a large street art project for its premises. The project Crown - hair and identity in Traveller Culture from Mayo County Council wonderfully explores the subject of hair with Irish Traveller women as a powerful symbol of individuality and one which is intrinsically linked to identity, ethnicity, culture and gender.

I refer to the programme which supports people with disabilities, Le Chéile. The Open Youth Orchestra of Ireland is a cross-Border ensemble made up exclusively of musicians of with disabilities, including Down’s Syndrome, autism and cerebral palsy. It was developed by the Royal Irish Academy of Music with Creative Ireland funding. It is the first open national youth orchestra in the world. There are quite a number of initiatives.

Deputy Cormac Devlin: There are wonderful programmes at work. We have seen the arts sector respond very creatively to presenting its programmes, be it virtually or otherwise. All of those programmes are extremely well received and vital to those communities, but the Minister should also look to those communities impacted long before we even heard of Covid, communities in disadvantaged areas. I am familiar with a number of programmes which have been run on shoestrings that did not or need not apply to the Arts Council for funding. One should try to be as broad and diverse as possible, in terms of new and existing communities. It is very important everyone experiences the arts, regardless of their backgrounds or status.

Deputy John Lahart: I know where the Minister’s heart lies on this point. I have heard her perform, when she sang. It was in a church. It was for a very worthy cause, but the church happened to be the venue. The point I wanted to make is one close to my heart. Every parish

and community in Ireland has clubs, pavilions and clubhouses. Sports capital has been incredibly successful. With the exception of those we know best, such as the civic theatre in Tallaght and the theatre in Dundrum, there are no dedicated performance spaces. A great ambition for the Minister to set herself over the period of this Government would be to achieve the establishment and integration of dedicated arts performance spaces in every community. Groups have to beg, borrow and steal, using the school hall, sports hall or the classroom to perform.

It was an excellent performance by the Minister.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh): The Deputy is doubly blessed to have heard the Minister sing and not to have heard the Acting Cathaoirleach.

Deputy Catherine Martin: I am stuck for words, which is a first. I thank Deputy Lahart. I will not sing it now.

In response to Deputy Devlin, due to my background teaching in DEIS schools, I have asked for more DEIS schools to be included in creative schools. Another great initiative is the fighting words creative writing programme, of which the Deputy is probably aware, that works with children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Deputy Lahart is probably aware of the local authority scheme for those creative spaces launched by my Department during the summer. Front and centre is finding those places for those interested in the arts to have easy, accessible spaces to perform.

Arts Policy

8. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the status of the basic income guarantee pilot scheme for the arts; when the scheme will commence; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [47919/21]

49. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the status of the pilot project for universal basic income for artists; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [47954/21]

63. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the status of the basic income pilot for artists; the timeline for when the details of the pilot scheme will be finalised; the number of times the oversight group tasked with examining the manner in which the pilot scheme will be delivered has met to date; the membership of the oversight group; if the oversight group has produced any interim reports to date; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [48012/21]

Deputy John Lahart: There is always a follow-up. There is no such thing as a free compliment, as the Minister will discover.

The Minister has somewhat covered this question in one of her previous answers. I am asking it on behalf of my colleague, Deputy Calleary, but it is a subject close to me and to many Deputies and especially my constituents in Dublin South-West. It concerns the basic income guarantee pilot scheme for arts and when it will commence. Will the Minister make a statement on that?

Deputy Catherine Martin: I propose to take Questions Nos. 8, 49 and 63 together.

I am critically aware of the devastating impact Covid-19 has had on all areas of the arts and cultural sector and have endeavoured to make sure the concerns of those in this sector have been understood and addressed. I have met with numerous representative organisations and officials in my Department have continued contact with these organisations and others on a regular basis, throughout the pandemic, to confirm I had the most up-to-date information to ensure appropriate supports were delivered for the sector. This includes stakeholder forums in August and September where I spoke directly to a wide range of stakeholders and heard their concerns.

With regard to the basic income guarantee pilot, the arts and culture recovery task force report, *Life Worth Living*, was published in November 2020 and made ten recommendations for the sector. These recommendations included a proposal to pilot a basic income scheme for a three-year period in the arts, culture, audio-visual and live performance and events sectors. The delivery of this pilot will be key to underpinning the recovery in the arts and culture sector and will provide much-needed certainty to the artists and creatives who choose to avail of the pilot scheme.

The *Life Worth Living* report describes a basic income as an unconditional State payment each citizen receives - in this instance, for the arts and cultural sector. The introduction of such a basic income pilot would create a more stable social protection mechanism to allow artists and workers to sustain themselves during the pandemic. It should keep the sector intact, minimising the loss of skills and contributing to its gradual regrowth, with ongoing social and economic, local and national benefits.

I fully agree the arts sector represents a very appropriate area for a basic income guarantee scheme for many reasons, including that it is often being characterised by low and precarious income; it includes a broad mix of employment types; and it has been chosen for basic income pilots in other jurisdictions, allowing for international comparisons to be drawn.

I was delighted that as part of the national economic recovery plan, I secured a commitment from Government to prioritise the development of a basic income guarantee pilot scheme for the arts and cultural sector.

As Minister with responsibility for arts and culture, I am conscious of the value this sector brings to all citizens, which was especially evident during the pandemic. The importance of Irish culture, Irish art and Irish productions as a whole cannot be understated in its impact both internationally and at home. The Government recognises that bold steps are necessary for our much-treasured arts, events and cultural community to come back stronger than ever before.

I established the oversight group in June to appraise the recommendations in the *Life Worth Living* report. Although the remit of the oversight group included the examination of all recommendations in the report, I asked they prioritise the consideration of the recommendation of a basic income guarantee pilot scheme for artists and arts workers. The oversight group is chaired by my Department and joined by representatives of the Departments of Finance; Social Protection; Housing, Local Government and Heritage; Public Expenditure and Reform; and Enterprise, Trade and Employment. The directors of the Arts Council and Screen Ireland are also members, alongside a representative of the County and City Management Association.

The oversight group has met eight times over the past four months to discuss the basic income recommendation, alongside the other nine recommendations. To assist in these discussions, the oversight group established a subcommittee to focus solely on the progression of the

recommendation for the basic income pilot scheme. This subcommittee met nine times over the summer months to develop a number of options that could fulfil the requirements of a pilot scheme as set out in the Life Worth Living report. The oversight group, with the research carried out by this subcommittee, has provided me with a preliminary report on the different options for a three-year pilot scheme, which I am currently considering.

A number of organisations have given presentations to the oversight committee to inform its considerations. These include the National Campaign for the Arts; Social Justice Ireland; Praxis, the artists' union; Dr. Stephen Kinsella, economist in University Limerick; and Niamh NicGhabhann and Annmarie Ryan, who have done research in the area of artist basic income. In addition, Equity, the actors' union is due to present to the group next week.

The objectives of the pilot scheme will include: minimising the ongoing loss of skills in the arts sector with regard both to artists and arts workers; contributing to the sector's post-pandemic recovery with ongoing social, economic, local and national benefits; and enabling artists to focus on their practice without having to enter into employment in other sectors to sustain themselves.

It is particularly important for this pilot scheme to also address the well-being of those in the arts and cultural sector, and to stimulate the arts sector's recovery post-pandemic. I will be providing further detail on how this pilot scheme will operate in the near future as part of the discussions around budget 2022. Significant stakeholder engagement will take place in the coming weeks between my Department and those in the sector to ensure this pilot meets the needs of the sector alongside the objectives agreed by the oversight group. I envision that this pilot should launch in early 2022 and I believe it will bring new life and support to the arts and cultural sector, after the difficult circumstances it has endured over the last year and a half.

Deputy John Lahart: As far as I am concerned, the Minister has left few questions to be asked. The fact that a number of us submitted questions gave her ample time to give us that answer. I am taken with the Minister's response. I completely trust her on this issue. She has touched on every possible point there, from stakeholder involvement, to various different models of pay that might be considered, to the need that she recognises for a universal basic income. This is what motivated Deputy Calleary to ask the question. The Minister has demonstrated a sensitivity and an empathy in her answer. Anybody who seeks to be able to take advantage of a universal basic income, UBI, when it emerges, can know that it is in safe, capable and, as I said, empathic hands. The Minister clearly wants to deliver this.

The Minister mentioned 2022. When might we see an artist, or anybody involved in this walk of life, being able to draw down such a basic income?

Deputy Gary Gannon: Similarly, I am taken with the Minister's response. I appreciate the work she has done in this area. This would be an extraordinarily welcome development. A basic income scheme for our artists will allow them to be just that - artists. They will be able to be creative. The basic income will be an investment into the work they will produce, and all that will bring with it.

The Minister mentioned early 2022. Should we assume that the date will be in January? I would be interested to know the types of figures we are talking about and what artist would be paid by way of the basic payment. I appreciate the work the Minister has done to bring it to this point. It is a Rubicon that we will cross in terms of appreciating our artists. It will be a legacy

that will long surpass the Government and I congratulate the Minister.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I, too, appreciate the Minister's comprehensive answer and that she acknowledged that the arts sector represents an appropriate area for a basic income guarantee, because of the precariousness of the employment, that it includes a broad range of employment types and that the basic income has been successful in Finland, Germany, Canada, and France.

The Minister has answered some of my questions, such as how many meetings have been held, and so on. However, I am troubled about what was published. The Pathways to Work Strategy 2021-2025 was published in July 2021. It proposes a working age payment and a basic income guarantee in the arts sector, which is good. However, as proposed, it is along the lines of the working family payment, which is means tested and is not universal. Could the Minister tell me what contact she has had with the Department of Social Protection? I know the Department is on the oversight board. However, the Minister and the Department seem to be going down two different paths, but maybe I am wrong. Could the Minister clarify that?

Deputy Catherine Martin: I believe that with this pilot and this commitment and by delivering the number one recommendation, we as a country have an opportunity to lead. In earlier questions I mentioned how we really value and the arts. I see this opportunity, so I am grabbing it. That is why we had so many meetings over the summer. The pilot scheme we are working on relates to the commitment in the National Economic Recovery Plan 2021. That is what I am committed to. There may have been confusion in the wording in the Pathways to Work Strategy 2021-2025. As the Deputy said, the Department of Social Protection is on the oversight group. I am working on what was sought in its task force report last year.

On the timeframe, I said early 2022. If I could have done it yesterday, I would have done it, but it will take time. I am aiming for 1 January 2022, but I do not know if it will be that date. However, it will be as early as possible. I am committed to that. As soon as it can be done, we will do it. We are doing something different and unprecedented, so I want to make sure that we do it properly.

Deputy John Lahart: The thought that comes to mind is that Fianna Fáil has a proud tradition in this area, of which the Minister will be aware. Charles Haughey was remembered for the tax exemptions for artists. These kinds of measures do not even happen once in a generation. These kinds of measures skip generations from time to time. The Minister now has a heavy burden on her shoulders. I do not think that we are bigging this up. We have a sense of what we hope that she will be able to deliver. The Minister will be making an impact and a statement, in particular about how Ireland views its artists. Artists can be a vulnerable community of people, whether they are writers, painters or musicians. It can be a vulnerable craft. Artists were particularly vulnerable during Covid-19. I wish the Minister well in this regard. I hope that she keeps the House updated. We look forward to the matter coming to a conclusion.

Deputy Gary Gannon: Again, I acknowledge the Minister's work and commitment to this issue. In addition to being the Social Democrats' spokesperson on the arts, I am also its spokesperson on social protection. I do not necessarily share the Minister's the same level of regard for the way that Department has operated. The scheme will be innovative and new. I hope it will be operated on the basis of trust. I hope we give the payment to the artist without subjecting them to the type of scrutiny that, for example, one-parent families currently receive from the Department of Social Protection. Let us make this initiative one that demonstrates trust in

our systems, by paying our artists. For me, that would be the most important thing about how the initiative will operate.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I do not think I heard the date in January that the scheme would begin. Maybe I missed that. I am going back again to my earlier question. I am concerned, but I am not confused. I do not know where the confusion is, but there is confusion. The Pathways to Work Strategy 2021-2025, which was published in July 2021, proposed a pilot with a working age-based payment, or basic income guarantee in the arts sector, which would be modelled on the working family payment, WFP. The Minister mentioned that Social Justice Ireland, among other organisations, made a presentation to her. Social Justice Ireland points out that the working family payment model has utterly failed to reach its objectives. The WFP is also limited in time. While I am delighted with the answer the Minister has given, I am a little concerned by the confusion within Government and, certainly, within the Department of Social Protection. Can the Minister confirm that she will not use the WFP model and that the Department of Social Protection is exploring that model in parallel? Is that right, or is it not right? I am quoting verbatim from the strategy.

Deputy Catherine Martin: I can confirm that I am looking at the recommendation in the task force report from last year. The oversight group presented a number of options to me. I will make my decision based on the option that I think is best for the arts sector. I cannot give any more detail than that. The Deputy will appreciate that this information is sensitive. It is also part of the budget negotiations. With the greatest of respect, I ask the Deputy to give me some time. It is at a crucial stage.

On the Deputy's question on the date, I did not give a specific date, because I cannot give one. All I can say is that the desire is there for it to be as early as possible in the new year. However, I must have everything over the line with the budget negotiations. I need to consult with the sector to make sure that it is happy with the decision I take on the options the oversight group has presented to me. To me, engagement is key here. It is how I operate as a Minister. Therefore, I will not just decide, but I will go back to the sector to engage with it.

Gaeltacht Policy

9. D'fhiafraigh **Deputy Catherine Connolly** den an Aire Turasóireachta, Cultúir, Ealaíon, Gaeltachta, Spóirt agus Meán soiléiriú a thabhairt i dtaobh an phacáiste tacaíochta atá beartaithe chun cabhair a thabhairt do na coláistí samhraidh i mbliana; agus an ndéanfaidh sí ráiteas ina thaobh. [47902/21]

Acting Chairman (Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh): Glaoim ar an Teachta Uí Chonghaile. Tá tú gnóthach anocht. Tá an chéad cheist eile, ceist Uimh. 9, i d'ainm freisin.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: Is í seo ceist maidir leis na coláistí samhraidh. Is dócha gur thug an tAire Stáit freagra roimhe seo. Bheinn buíoch dá bhféadfadh sé é a rá arís, mar níl soiléiriú agam. Níl a fhios agam cén fáth go bhfuil moill ann ó thaobh na gcoláistí samhraidh de agus mar sin tá soiléiriú ag teastáil uaim.

Deputy Jack Chambers: Mar aitheantas ar thábhacht chóras na gcoláistí Gaeilge, cuireann mo Roinn cistíocht ar fiú os cionn €4 milliún ar fáil go bliantúil de ghnáth mar thaca praiticiúil don earnáil. De thoradh an chúnaimh seo, déantar fóirdheonú ar an gcostas a bhaineann le

freastal ar chúrsa Gaeilge sa Ghaeltacht - beart a bhaineann os cionn 26,000 scoláire leas as go bliantúil. Is le os cionn tuairim is 700 teaghlach Gaeltachta atá cáilithe faoi réir scéim na bhfoghlaimeoirí Gaeilge na Roinne a íoctar an cúnamh sin faoi scáth na scéime go príomha. Lena chois sin, cuirtear cúnamh reatha ar fáil don scáthghrúpa CONCOS le go mbeidh sé in ann gníomhú mar is cuí thar ceann mhórán na gcoláistí. Ina theannta sin, cuirtear cúnamh faoi leith ar fáil ar leas foriomlán na hearnála mar a bhaineann sé le dhá bheart faoi leith: DEIS Gaeltachta agus ERASMUS Gaeltachta.

De thoradh Covid-19, beidh a fhios ag an Teachta gur cuireadh ciste cobhsaithe faoi leith ar bun in 2021 ar leas lucht lóistín agus lucht stiúrtha na gcoláistí araon. Dearadh an ciste sin go cúramach, ag cur san áireamh oiread agus ab fhéidir na tosca faoi leith mar a bhí an tráth sin. Maidir le gnóthaí na bliana seo, mar is eol don Teachta, d'fhógair mé cheana pacáiste maoinithe méadaithe ar fiú €2.2 milliún é do lucht lóistín an chórais mar aitheantas ar an mbealach tábhachtach a chuireann siad leis an earnáil. Tá tuairim is 700 teaghlach atá aitheanta faoi scéim na Roinne tar éis leas a bhaint as an gciste méadaithe faoi leith sin. Ina theannta sin, d'fhógair mé ciste faoi leith le gairid ar fiú thart ar €240,000 do na hallaí pobail a úsáideann na coláistí samhraidh de ghnáth. Is maoiniú tábhachtach breise é seo mar aitheantas ar an obair fhóna a dhéanann lucht na hallaí go deonach den chuid is mó agus an tábhacht atá leo.

Maidir leis na coláistí féin, tá go leor oibre déanta ag feidhmeannaigh mo Roinne le roinnt míonna anuas i gcomhar le scáthghrúpa na gcoláistí, CONCOS, agus leis na coláistí féin ar mhaithe le cur chuige a fhorbairt agus a fheidhmiú chun cabhrú tuilleadh leis an earnáil. Mar chuid de chur chun feidhme an tríú beart seo, ar leas foriomlán na hearnála, tá bailchríoch á cur faoi láthair ar an obair ullmhúcháin ina leith. Chuimsigh an obair sin ceistneoir faoi leith a seoladh chuig gach coláiste mar aidhm aige léargas níos fearr a fháil ar staid reatha gach coláiste agus foirmle réitigh cuí a dhearadh a thabharfadh aghaidh oiread is féidir ar thacú tuilleadh leis na coláistí iad féin. Tá sé i gceist agam toradh an phróisis seo a fhógairt gan rómhoill.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire Stáit as an dá leathanach eolais agus tugaim faoi deara go mbaineann an chuid is lú díobh leis na coláistí samhraidh. Dúirt an tAire Stáit go bhfuil go leor oibre déanta agus go bhfuil go leor oibre le déanamh, agus go bhfuil ceistneoir i gceist. Ní thuigim an mhoill leis seo. Tá an tuarascáil ón gcomhchoiste Gaeilge againn, agus mar is eol don Aire Stáit, is ball den choiste mé mar aon leis an gCathaoirleach Gníomhach, an Teachta Ó Cathasaigh. Tá 23 moladh ann agus ní raibh aon easaontas ó thaobh na moltaí sin. Nuair a scríobh Cathaoirleach an choiste an réamhrá, chuir sé béim ar mholadh uimhir a trí maidir le tacaíocht phráinneach atá ag teastáil ó na coláistí samhraidh. Cuireann an tuarascáil seo in iúl dúinn chomh tábhachtach is atá siad do na Gaeltachtaí uilig agus do na daltaí, agus - mar atá scríofa sna moltaí - gur gá iad a leathnú amach do dhaoine eile. Sa chomhthéacs sin agus i gcomhthéacs na paidéime, an féidir leis an Aire Stáit a rá go simplí cén fáth go bhfuil an mhoill seo ann?

Deputy Jack Chambers: Is obair í idir an Roinn agus CONCOS chun an próiseas seo a chríochnú. Beidh sé críochnaithe chomh luath agus is féidir. Mar atá ráite agam cheana, bíonn teagmháil rialta ag mo Roinn le hionadaithe na gcoláistí agus go háirithe le scátheagraíochtaí. Go deimhin, is fiú a thabhairt faoi deara go gcuireann mo Roinn deontas reáchtála ar fáil do CONCOS gach bliain, mar is eol don Teachta, ar mhaithe le cabhrú tuilleadh le hearnáil na gcoláistí samhraidh. Tuigim go maith na deacrachtaí atá ag cuid de na coláistí i mbliana de bharr nach bhféadfadh cúrsaí samhraidh dul ar aghaidh don dara bliain as a chéile. Tá go leor oibre déanta ag feidhmeannaigh mo Roinne le roinnt míonna anuas i gcomhar leis na coláistí ar mhaithe le scéim chuí a fhorbairt chun earnáil na gcoláistí samhraidh a chobhsú.

Mar a thuigfidh an Teachta, tá an cheist níos casta i mbliana de bharr ioncam a bheith ag cuid de na coláistí ó fhoinní eile nach raibh ar fáil dóibh anuraidh. Mar shampla, fuair roinnt coláistí ioncam ó chúrsaí ar líne dírithe ar ábhar oidí. Chomh maith leis sin, ar ndóigh, bhí cuid de na coláistí ag tarraingt ar scéimeanna eile de chuid an Stáit a bunaíodh de bharr na paidéime. Dá réir sin, b'éigean don Roinn é sin a chur san áireamh.

Mar chuid den taighde a tugadh faoi le tamall anuas, chuir an Roinn ceistneoir faoin ábhar chuig gach coláiste atá bainteach leis an gcóras. Tá an obair thaighde agus anailís beagnach críochnaithe agus tá súil agam an tríú beart a fhógairt go foirmiúil gan rómhoill eile ar mhaithe le leas foriomlán an chórais agus ceantar na Gaeltachta.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: Maith dom é má tá mé soiniciúil maidir leis an bhfreagra go bhfuil go leor déanta agus go leor le déanamh fós. Cathain a bheidh an obair seo críochnaithe? Cén dáta atá i gceist? Tá sé sin tuillte agam mar Theachta Dála. I bhfianaise thábhacht na gcoláistí samhraidh don cheantar uilig agus don Ghaeilge agus an ghéarchéim atá ann ó thaobh na Gaeilge de, tá gá le dáta ann. B'fhéidir go bhfuil sé casta; níl a fhios agam cén fáth go bhfuil sé. D'éirigh leis an Roinn pacáiste a chur ar fáil an bhliain seo caite. Táimid sa dara bliain agus bheinn den tuairim go mbeadh sé níos éasca mar go bhfuil taithí ag an Roinn anois agus go bhfuil sé aitheanta go bhfuil na coláistí samhraidh thar a bheith tábhachtach. Ag an bpointe seo, an féidir leis an Aire Stáit a rá liom cén dáta a bhfuil súil aige go mbeidh an obair críochnaithe agus pacáiste cabhrach ar fáil?

Deputy Jack Chambers: Tuigim go bhfuil dúshlán ann agus is í sin an fáth go bhfuilimid i measc an phróisis seo. Mar a dúirt mé cheana, tá an próiseas beagnach críochnaithe agus is féidir leis an Teachta a bheith cinnte go leanfaidh mo Roinn ag faire amach ar na bealaí a bhféadfaí cabhrú leis an earnáil mar atá déanta ag an Roinn ó bunaíodh córas na gcoláistí Gaeilge. Tá súil agam go ndéanfar é chomh luath agus is féidir. Bíonn an Roinn agus CONCOS i dteagmháil an t-am ar fad chun an obair seo a chríochnú.

Arts Policy

10. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the measures that will be taken to place the arts at the centre of local communities for children; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [47923/21]

Deputy Cormac Devlin: On behalf of my colleague, Deputy Niamh Smyth, I ask the Minister to outline the measures that place arts at the centre of local communities, with specific reference to children.

Deputy Catherine Martin: There are two major areas of work taking place under the remit of my Department in regard to arts in the context of the child, through the Arts Council and the Creative Ireland Programme. Children and young people participate in the arts in early learning and care settings, schools, and other education and youth work settings. These opportunities may be offered in partnership with independent and community providers. Other activities are offered outside mainstream education or youth work settings and are led by artists, specialist teachers and facilitators working in a range of organisations and community settings.

The Arts Council recognises the value of arts and cultural participation among children and young people and acknowledges their fundamental right to participate in the arts. The council

supports and promotes children's and young people's engagement with the arts from birth to early adulthood. The Arts Council considers opportunities for children to learn and develop artistic skills, and to experience the arts, as being essential to realising their rights as set out in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Through the Creative Ireland programme, my Department continues to support community-based measures to increase and expand the opportunities for children and young people to access arts and culture-based creative activities. As part of the ongoing implementation of the Creative Youth plan, a number of measures and initiatives have been developed and delivered which have enabled increased access to a wide range of creative activities, including the arts. Key in this regard has been the establishment of Cruinniú na nÓg, the annual day of free creative activities for children and young people under 18 years of age. Cruinniú na nÓg is funded by my Department and delivered by all 31 local authorities. On Saturday, 12 June last, my Department's support enabled more than 630 events and activities to take place throughout the country. As society begins to reopen, it is important to ensure children and young people continue to have opportunities to take part in and access a range of art activities through which they can express and enjoy themselves and develop their skills. For this reason, I will continue the important work of Creative Ireland in relation to the Creative Youth plan, and I look forward to continuing engagement with the Arts Council in its strategies to ensure ongoing engagement by children with the arts.

Deputy Cormac Devlin: We know the arts play a crucial role in bringing communities and people together. We need an arts strategy that reaches into every corner of the country and, indeed, society. Planning and providing for the arts within the local communities for children is a vital part of building a strong and vibrant community. Strong supports for the arts at local community centres will create a space for communities to express themselves and for talented artists to thrive.

We have seen great success with the Creative Youth programme and Cruinniú na nÓg, as referred to by the Minister. There is an explicit commitment to enable children's participation in cultural life and the arts in Ireland through initiatives such as Making Great Art Work, which is the Arts Council strategy for 2016 to 2025. As noted by Professor Emer Smyth of the Economic and Social Research Institute, ESRI, in her review of this topic for the Arts Council, "Children and young people's experience of the arts and culture is clearly impacted by their parents and by a range of personal circumstances", as well by decisions "made in the public realm" on their behalf. These include, "the quality of their early childhood care and education, their school experiences, and the availability and accessibility of cultural activities after school".

Deputy Catherine Martin: The Creative Youth plan to enable the creative potential of every young person was published in December 2017 as one of the five pillars of the Creative Ireland programme. One of the key measures taken to support young people's engagement at community level has been the establishment of Cruinniú na nÓg, as I mentioned earlier. It is the day when every young person in Ireland can experience something new and exciting and something to spark and nurture their creative skills. As with many other events and activities, unfortunately, the necessary public health measures meant that we had to shift much of the programme online and undertake it virtually. However, the engagement was still happening and that was the key point. It ensured that every child in Ireland had access to Cruinniú na nÓg activities and also enabled us to reach children in the Irish diaspora. It was interesting that what happened during Covid-19, therefore, was the broadening out of such activities.

Moving to creative schools, and similar to the response to a previous question asked by the Deputy, over the last year and a half I have sought to ensure that initiatives such as the Creative Schools programme place a particular focus on supporting young people at risk of marginalisation. To that end, I provided resources last year to enable the Arts Council to increase capacity within creative schools with additional places, 10% of the total, all of which were targeted at DEIS schools. I will be making an announcement tomorrow with my colleague, the Minister for Education, Deputy Foley, about new schools entering the Creative Schools programme from May 2023. There is a policy, therefore, of providing more access at all times to the arts for more children.

Deputy Cormac Devlin: I thank the Minister. I am glad that we had this engagement because that is welcome news. It ties in nicely with what we were talking about previously. The programme for Government outlines a vision for Ireland where people of all ages and the arts and culture thrive. We must ensure that children are given every opportunity to express themselves, to take part in the activities of their communities and to reach their full potential. I note what the Minister said about Cruinniú na nÓg and the 630 events in that context. I commend the local authorities for their engagement with this programme and its roll-out. The promotion of the programme was excellent, given everything that was going on then.

I have two other questions on this topic. What are the Minister's plans to ensure that all parts of our communities have access to artistic facilities in their local areas, and for our children in particular? How can we ensure that the voices of children are best heard and that their needs are best met as part of the delivery of arts services in their local communities?

Deputy Catherine Martin: The local authorities have an extensive track record of community engagement through the arts, culture, heritage and library services. The Deputy is aware of this aspect as we both served on Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council. These services are fundamental to developing a stronger society. Through the Creative Ireland programme and in partnership with the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, my Department has supported each of the 31 local authorities to develop and implement individual cultural and creative strategies. These strategies are designed to engage local communities.

Within the 31 local authorities, priorities around programmes for children and young people exist in more than 75% of their culture and creative strategies. Good progress is being made in that direction, therefore. I also point the Deputy in the direction of the pilot local Creative Youth partnerships that have been established in conjunction with six education and training boards. Those seek to develop closer local networking and to provide more opportunities for young people to engage with creative activities outside of school and especially those who are most disadvantaged. The Creative Ireland national music education programme, Music Generation, is expanding to the remaining areas where music education partnerships have not yet been established. This amounts to nine new partnerships being established. Five have already been set up in Kerry, Kildare, Meath, Longford and Tipperary and one is being established in Fingal in 2021.

Question No. 11 replied to with Written Answers.

Údarás na Gaeltachta

12. D’fhiafraigh **Deputy Catherine Connolly** den an Aire Turasóireachta, Cultúir, Ealaíon, Gaeltachta, Spóirt agus Meán cén teagmháil a bhí agus atá aici le hÚdarás na Gaeltachta maidir leis an mhonatóireacht atá á dhéanamh ag an Údarás ó thaobh an Ghaeilge a chur chun cinn sna monarchana a thagann faoi chúram an Údaráis; agus an ndéanfaidh sí ráiteas ina thaobh. [47903/21]

Deputy Catherine Connolly: Baineann mo cheist le hÚdarás na Gaeltachta agus leis an gcóras monatóireachta atá aige ó thaobh na Gaeilge de maidir lena comhlachtaí a thagann faoi chúram an údaráis. An bhfuil an córas monatóireachta cuí don fheidhm; is é sin chun a chinntiú go bhfuil an Ghaeilge i lár an aonaigh sna monarchana uilig?

Deputy Jack Chambers: Is é cuspóir forbartha agus fostaíochta Údarás na Gaeltachta ná postanna poist a chruthú do phobal na Gaeltachta ar mhaithe le pobal inmharthana Gaeilge a chothú sa Ghaeltacht. Oibríonn an t-údarás lena chliantchuideachtaí ar bhonn leanúnach le cinntiú go bhfuil a dtionchar ar an nGaeltacht dearfach ar go leor bealaí mar a bhaineann sé le fostaíocht, úsáid na Gaeilge, seirbhísí agus infreastruchúr pobail ach go háirithe.

Agus pacáiste tacaíochta á phlé agus á cheadú ag an údarás do chliantchuideachta, déantar plean teanga a aontú leis an chliantchuideachta. Déantar bearta sonracha a aontú mar chuid dá bplean teanga i réimsí faoi leith lena n-áirítear gnéithe a bhaineann le: an chumarsáid scríofa, mar shampla ar chomharthaíocht, i bhfógraí agus in ábhar poiblíochta agus bolscaireachta; an chumarsáid labhartha; polasaithe earcaíochta agus oiliúna na cuideachta; agus aitheantas a thabhairt don Ghaeilge sa ghnó agus sa phobal ina bhfuil sé lonnaithe. Aontaíodh pleananna teanga agus rinneadh athbhreithniú ar phleananna teanga i mbeagnach 60 cliantchuideachta le linn 2020. Anuas air sin, fuair 199 gnó tacaíocht faoin scéim trádáil ar líne agus d’éirigh leis an údarás dul i bhfeidhm ar na gnóthaí sin maidir le breis Gaeilge a úsáid ar a gcuid uirlísí ar-líne.

Cuireann an t-údarás na tacaíocht deontais ar fáil do chliantchuideachtaí nuair atáthar sásta leis an dul chun cinn atá á dhéanamh ar an bplean teanga. Sa chás go mbíonn dúshláin ag cliantchuideachtaí an plean teanga a chuir i bhfeidhm, oibríonn feidhmeannaigh an údaráis go dlúth leo chun tacú leo na gníomhaíochtaí a bhíonn aontaithe a chomhlíonadh. Ní phróiseáiltear éilimh ar íocaíochta mura bhfuil an plean teanga atá aontaithe comhlíonta chun sástacht an údaráis. Tá córais rialaithe inmheánacha i bhfeidhm ag an údarás a chinntíonn an méid sin. Tuigtear dom go bhfuil athbhreithniú idir lámha ag an údarás ar na córais agus an cur chuige atá in áit aige faoi láthair le taca le cur chun cinn na Gaeilge sna cliantchuideachtaí agus ar na bealaí a dhéantar an t-ábhar a bhaineann leis a riar.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: Maíodh san abairt deireanach ansin “go bhfuil athbhreithniú idir lámha ag an údarás ar na córais”. Fáiltim roimh sin. Cén uair a bheas an t-athbhreithniú sin críochnaithe? Bhain mo cheist le hÚdarás na Gaeltachta agus bhain sí go shonrach leis an dteagmháil a bhí ag an Aire Stáit leis. An bhfuil an t-údarás sásta, nó níos tábhachtaí fós, an bhfuil an tAire Stáit sásta go bhfuil an córas monatóireachta cuí don fheidhm? Mar is eol don Aire Stáit, tá trionóid de fhreagrachtaí ag Údarás na Gaeltachta. Is iad sin fostaíocht, an pobal agus an teanga. Tá a fhios agam go bhfuil obair na gcapall déanta aige, ach go háirithe i bhfianaise na ciorruithe leis na blianta fada ach tá mé ag díriú isteach ar an teanga mar tá sí tábhachtach agus tá sí mar chuid lárnach den trionóid atá aige. Tá athbhreithniú i gceist; cén fath agus cén uair a bheidh sé críochnaithe?

5 October 2021

Deputy Jack Chambers: Beidh mé i dteagmháil leis an Teachta maidir leis an dáta a bheidh an t-athbhreithniú seo críochnaithe. Mar is eol don Teachta, tá sé mar chuspóir ag Údarás na Gaeltachta pobal inmharthana Gaeilge a chothú sa Ghaeltacht. Déanann an t-údarás an cuspóir seo a bhaint amach trí fhorbairt fiontraíochta agus tionscnaimh fostaíochta a chothú agus a mhaoiniú chomh maith le tacaíocht a thabhairt d'imeachtaí pobal, cultúrtha agus teangabhunaithe. Tá an cheist seo maidir le húsáid na Gaeilge sna cliantchomhlachtaí ardaithe cúpla uair le bliain anuas agus tá sé curtha in iúl ag an údarás go mbíonn teagmháil rialta ag roinnt oifigigh teanga leis na cliantchomhlachtaí agus leis na feidhmeannaigh fiontraíochta a bhíonn ag plé leo agus n-éiríonn go maith leo dul i bhfeidhm orthu ó thaobh na Gaeilge de.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: Táim ag súil leis go dtiocfaidh an tAire Stáit ar ais chugam.

9 o'clock

Questions Nos. 13 to 23 replied to with Written Answers.

Culture Policy

24. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the plans for alcohol-free events in the night-time economy proposals. [47898/21]

Deputy Thomas Gould: I wish to ask the Minister what plans are in place for alcohol-free events in the proposals for the night-time economy.

Deputy Catherine Martin: The report of the night-time economy task force was launched in recent days. I and the Minister of State, Deputy Naughton, emphasised that it was not all about alcohol. I thought that was key to it. There were offerings regarding cultural institutions and spaces for events to happen without alcohol. It is a key element of the approach that we do not associate the night-time economy solely with alcohol. There was a lot of engagement with the HSE in the preparation of the report. Multiple events can be considered in the context of the night-time economy task force.

Deputy Thomas Gould: As the Sinn Féin spokesperson for addiction recovery and well-being, I have met with various groups and organisations. The importance of having an alternative to alcohol has been raised, especially for people in recovery. I am the chairman of St. Vincent's Hurling and Football Club in Cork. We partnered with a recovery group and gave it the use of our all-weather facilities for the month of September as part of National Recovery Month. The group got a coffee van and we had a group meeting with various people in recovery.

As the Minister indicates, there is a culture in Ireland whereby if you are out late at night, it all revolves around socialising with alcohol. We need to do a lot of work as a society to change the culture. That is something on which I want to work with the Minister to see what events and spaces we can provide. It is very important we work with local authorities because there are many people who are in recovery as well as many others who do not drink alcohol. It would be a positive step if we could organise more events for them.

Deputy Catherine Martin: A key part of the report, as emphasised at the launch, was to place a value on electronic music and the club culture as part of the arts and culture sector, which has never been done before. There is also ample opportunity to ensure cultural activities

do not stop when it gets dark. That does not mean all cultural activities must involve alcohol. We will be looking to have family-friendly activities. I would like to be in a position to take my children to events at 10 p.m., 11 p.m. and 12 midnight, if they want to engage in them. I see huge potential in this regard.

As Deputy Gould says, we must engage with the HSE and addiction services. That engagement has been happening and will be ongoing. As the Minister of State, Deputy Naughton, and I said at the time, there is potential in this area. I do not think the focus for the night-time economy should be on alcohol, as that would be unnecessarily negative. This is a positive development in the extension of the night-time culture and all that it offers to everyone.

Deputy Thomas Gould: I agree with the Minister. There are initiatives we can work on. The night-time economy can be positive and we can build on it. Coupled with that, we can have alcohol-free events and change the culture. Like the Minister, I have two daughters aged 12 and 15. Sometimes, pre-Covid we went to concerts, but virtually everything we attended at night involved alcohol. Irish society is now more nuanced and we are starting to change. One of the results of Covid is that people are looking at different ways to live their lives and interact. That is why it is so important the night-time economy is not just captured by alcohol. We want to see a broad range of events that everyone can attend. I hope we can work together on this.

Deputy Catherine Martin: I see massive potential for a broad range of events for everyone, as the night-time economy belongs to all people. I am open to suggestions. There is potential for consultation with the cultural advisers that are mentioned in the report on the events to which Deputy Gould refers. As it is, great work is being done by the cultural institutions and theatres. As outlined in the report, there will be pilot events in cultural institutions late at night and some family-focused events.

Written Answers are published on the Oireachtas website.

Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

Childcare Services

Deputy John Paul Phelan: I thank the Office of the Ceann Comhairle for selecting this matter and the Minister for being here to respond to the debate. It is fair to say the title that has been given to the matter raised is an abbreviated version of the question that was asked. It was prompted by the publication last week by HIQA of the overview report of statutory foster care services 2019-2020. On its publication last week, the report got some coverage. It was very critical in places of the services that are provided in parts of the country, in particular in the community healthcare organisation, CHO, that covers my home area of Carlow, Kilkenny and south Tipperary, in terms of access to social workers for children in foster care and families providing foster care in the region.

Some of the statistics were very stark. The initial part of the report from 2019 described how more than one fifth of children in care in Carlow, Kilkenny and south Tipperary were not allocated social workers for long-term charge of their case. The number of children in 2019 was

72, which is an incredibly high figure, behind which is hidden 72 young lives that are placed in the charge of the State, in this case under the supervision of Tusla and social workers employed by it. The report went on to describe the provision of services in Carlow, Kilkenny and south Tipperary as “chaotic”, with frequent changes in allocated social workers to individual cases.

The figures for 2020 were better, in that the number of children without an allocated social worker for their long-term care in Carlow, Kilkenny and south Tipperary was reduced to 30, but that still hides the fact we are talking about 30 young lives that need to be protected. In many circumstances, most of the children who find themselves in foster care are in the most vulnerable category of children you could possibly deal with, and 30 is still an unacceptably high figure.

What was possibly even more disturbing about the report is that while one in five children in 2019 in the Carlow, Kilkenny and south Tipperary area did not have an allocated long-term social worker, the figures for south Dublin, Wicklow and Kildare were 19%, in the mid-west, 18% and for the midlands, 17%. It is fair to say the report was critical of Tusla. The report indicated that in the change between 2019 and 2020, the figures were moving in a downward direction but were still alarmingly high. I know there are ongoing challenges for Tusla in workforce recruitment and retention, in this case of social workers to deal with children in foster care. I welcome the Minister’s views and direction as to ensuring that figure of 30 can be reduced as soon as possible to zero for Carlow, Kilkenny, and south Tipperary, as well as the other regions of the country.

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman): I thank the Deputy for this Topical Issue and welcome the opportunity to speak on what is an extremely important matter. There are approximately 6,000 children in care in the State today. The majority of these children live with foster carers and a small number live in residential care. Appropriate oversight of foster care placements is important to ensure that the needs of children are met and that foster carers are supported.

Under the National Standards for Foster Care 2003 and the Placement of Children in Care Regulations 1995, children in care are required to have a written care plan and an allocated social worker, while foster carers are required to have a dedicated link worker. These dedicated staff members have a key role to play in placement stability and ensuring that the evolving needs of children are met. In addition, regular contact with social workers is a protective factor for vulnerable children. Children should feel that their social worker knows and understands them and takes their concerns seriously. Where a child does not have a social worker, it can end up causing frustration for the child, and it puts additional pressure on the social work area to ensure that planning and child in care reviews happen in a timely manner.

The Deputy specifically refers to the Carlow, Kilkenny and south Tipperary area. HIQA’s inspections of services in this Tulsa area. including most recently in October 2020, clearly demonstrate pressures within the service, including staffing shortages and unallocated cases. Over recent years, this area has been one of five with a disproportionately high number of unallocated cases when compared to the remaining 12 Tulsa regions, and the Deputy made reference to these five regions. Issues in the most recent HIQA inspections were specifically linked to vacancies in the area at the time the inspections took place. Since then, Tusla has worked intensively to address issues within this area. It is important to note that HIQA has accepted the action plan Tusla has provided in response to these inspections. Among the key actions were the prioritising of recruitment of social workers for the children in care team and assigning a

social care worker and a link worker to every child in care who was unallocated. These cases are monitored on a weekly basis by the principal social worker, and children's statutory care plans are kept up to date.

The cyberattack has impacted on Tusla's performance reporting. I am going to follow up with Tusla on the matter and will write to the Deputy directly to give the most up-to-date account in terms of meeting the action plan.

It is encouraging to note that the inspections also found evidence of highly-dedicated social workers and other Tusla staff who are clearly committed to providing quality services to children and families. Inspectors also found that most children are happy with their foster carers and the vast majority of foster care placements are stable, which is so important for these young people. HIQA, as the regulatory body, plays a key role in ensuring that services are accountable.

The recruitment and retention of social workers is a priority for Tusla, requiring investment now and into the future. In some areas, including the area to which the Deputy refers, there are staff shortages on social work teams. It is clear from Tusla's own performance reporting and regulatory inspections that these staffing shortages are impacting service delivery in a minority of Tusla's regions.

It is important to note that children whose care is unallocated still receive a social work service. These children are looked after by social work team leaders and duty teams, and are reallocated to a named social worker as soon as possible. It is Tusla policy that no child without an allocated social worker should be placed with foster carers who do not have a link worker.

In terms of the measures Tusla has taken to improve recruitment, it now has its own in-house recruitment service and actively engages with third-level institutions to attract new graduates. Almost two thirds of social work graduates this year were recruited directly by Tusla. In addition, Tusla has had success in turning agency staff into full-time staff.

Deputy John Paul Phelan: I thank the Minister. On that last point, I would be interested to know if Tusla is actively engaged in trying to recruit Irish graduates who are overseas. We are all public representatives and we are all social workers with a small s and w, and we deal with people who are often at the most difficult times in their lives. I understand it when the Minister says that unallocated cases still receive social work support. I know he understands the point. In his comments, he spoke about the link that can be established between a long-term social worker who is attached to a specific case and a child or a foster family. That leads to good relationships and, I would argue, probably also to better outcomes for children and foster families.

In conclusion, I acknowledge that Tusla has taken remedial action but the figure of 30 unallocated cases in Carlow, Kilkenny and south Tipperary is way too high. I thank the Minister for stating he is going to respond directly and follow up on some of the points that have been raised. I also ask him to ask Tusla, when it is dealing with recruitment, to identify graduates in different parts of the sciences who left the country in the last number of years, before Covid and before travel restrictions were implemented. I am sure some, though not all, would be very interested in a long-term career in social work and employment with Tusla in the State.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: I thank the Deputy. He is right that there are a significant number of Irish social work graduates in the UK, Australia and other jurisdictions. Tusla has been particularly targeting those in the UK, using professional journals and so on as part of its

advertising campaign. Tusla has had real success and 2020 was the first year for a long time that the net number of incoming social workers was greater than the number of those exiting, which is because of that conversion. It was taking a lot of agency staff and giving them permanent or full-time contracts, which was obviously very attractive to many graduates. The scheme it has brought in this year, directly targeting fresh graduates coming out of the universities and offering them a contract immediately, again, even if it is only for a number of years, is very attractive to get that initial element of experience.

Of course, we have been happy to support Tusla. The Government gave Tusla very significant support last year, with an additional €66 million in funding, the biggest bump in funding it had received since the organisation's foundation. That was a recognition, particularly last year, that Tusla needed support because it is dealing with the most vulnerable children, whether it is children in residential care or children in foster care, as the Deputy has identified.

The Deputy is right to raise this issue. Whether it is 72 children in 2019 or 30 in 2020, it is still too many, although it is good to see the numbers are coming down. HIQA has accepted Tusla's action plan in respect of Carlow, Kilkenny and south Tipperary. We will get direct responses to the Deputy on those issue issues so we can, hopefully, see a continuing fall in the number of unallocated cases.

Coroners Service

Deputy Thomas Gould: A year ago, sadly, Andrew Gearns passed away. I want to take this opportunity to express my condolences to the Gearns family. One year on, his family are still waiting for an inquest and they feel it would help them to move forward with their grief. Andrew's brother Evan contacted me, very upset and frustrated at the length of time the family are waiting for an inquest.

Unfortunately, there are too many families like the Gearns family in Cork. This is not the fault of the coroner or his staff, who do Trojan work despite being under-resourced and understaffed. Cork Coroners Court deals with a quarter of the cases that the Dublin City Coroner deals with yet has only two staff compared to Dublin's 24. The courtroom they used pre-Covid is now an office to facilitate social distancing and the coroner has to fit in inquests where he can. Without proper funding, the coroner cannot do his job and families like the Gearns are left waiting. Surely, the Minister of State can recognise the role she has to play in this.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: When somebody dies in tragic circumstances or other circumstances that require an inquest, that inquest is part of the process of healing, recovering afterwards and grieving. Obviously, it is complex and it is not possible to do it straight away. It is not reasonable to expect families to wait a year and more for such an inquest, particularly when there may be unanswered questions and when there may be so much that they want to know, or where there is a need for closure. That is what the inquest is about.

I have been contacted by families who have been waiting for a significant period, including the Gearns, whose situation Deputy Gould eloquently outlined. It is heartbreaking.

It also affects our understanding as policymakers. For example, it slows down our ability to gather statistics on suicides. Indeed, there is a wider issue about the inconsistency of how numbers relating to suicides are compiled in coroner's reports. It slows down the ability to compile

statistics around accidents and the like. This is all slowed down by the fact that the coroner's court is facing such delays. They are not without importance.

The key issue is families are waiting a year or more to find out what happened to their loved one and to find answers to so many of their questions. That is not remotely good enough. Deputy Gould outlined it. With a quarter of the cases that Dublin handles and one twelfth of the staff, how can they keep up? It is not their fault. They do not have the resources. They need far greater resources to deal with these inquests.

Minister of State at the Department of Justice (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton): I thank the Deputies for raising this important matter and for the opportunity to provide clarity on some issues.

The Coroner Service comprises the network of coroners located in districts throughout the country. Coroners are independent quasi-judicial officeholders whose core function is to investigate sudden and unexplained deaths so that a death certificate can be issued.

This is an important public service to the living, in particular, to the next-of-kin and friends of the deceased. Coroners not only provide closure for those bereaved, but also perform, as Deputy Ó Laoghaire said, a wider public service by identifying matters of public health and safety concerns.

The timing and conduct of inquests in any district is a matter entirely for the coroner concerned. Neither I nor my Department has any function in this regard.

Most coroners hold inquests in local court houses, and as a result of Covid-19 public health considerations, inquests have unfortunately been severely curtailed. My Department is aware that the delay in holding inquests is causing distress for families and officials from my Department are liaising with the Courts Service on this matter.

The Courts Service works closely with coroners across the country to facilitate inquests and continues to do so while ensuring adherence to public health guidelines.

Deputy Thomas Gould: I thank the Minister of State.

We know the coroner is independent. We are not asking about that. What we are asking is that the service would be funded, resourced and staffed to deal with the work it has to do.

The coroner's job is serious and difficult. The Minister of State outlined the role I am asking what is her role and that of the Department, not in the coroner's work but in the coroner's support with funding and staffing issues.

Families must be supported, especially in this time of need, and not be left waiting months, and even more than a year, for a court date. It is simply not good enough.

There are have been many issues and delays because of Covid. Will the Minister of State give a commitment to provide the resources necessary to clear the backlog?

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: I have had a fair few Topical Issues taken since I was elected five years and that is one of the shortest printed responses I have ever seen. That is a desperate response. I can see from the Minister of State's face and from the way she spoke that she is sympathetic and that she understands the problem here. She did not write this. Officials

in the Department of Justice had input into this. I ask her to have a word with them. This is not a good enough response for us to go back to those families with.

The Minister of State will be aware that we are not asking her or the Department and her colleague, the Minister, Deputy Humphreys, to intervene with coroners and say that they need to hurry up. That is not the issue. The Department appoints the coroners. There are two staff in Cork, 24 in Dublin and the former has a quarter of the cases the latter has. They cannot keep up. How could they?

I believe the Minister of State is sympathetic. I ask her to go back to her Department and say this is not a good enough situation and more staff are needed in Cork. I ask her to work on that.

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: I understand the frustration and the pain of many families. I empathise with the concerns raised here tonight. I reiterate that I have no role in the timing and the conduct of the inquests and that it is strictly a matter for the coroner concerned.

Regarding the specific concerns relating to Cork, as I have said, the Courts Service works closely with coroners throughout the country to facilitate inquests. They continue to do so, ensuring that they adhere to public health. I will ask my officials to liaise bilaterally with the Deputies regarding the specific concerns in that area in particular.

Transport Infrastructure Ireland

Deputy Cormac Devlin: I thank the Minister of State for taking our debate this evening.

It is important, for both Deputy McAuliffe and me, to speak about public transport in Dublin. Last year, during a debate with the Minister for Transport, Deputy Eamon Ryan, I called for public transport projects such as the MetroLink, the DART+ and Luas upgrades to be fast-tracked to deal with future demand and to give Dubliners an alternative to their car.

While I welcome these critical projects being included in the national development plan, NDP, it was disappointing not to see concrete timelines. Ultimately, agencies and officials take their lead from the top. I would like to see a more urgent hands-on approach to this particular issue. We need to be more ambitious when it comes to large-scale capital projects.

My colleague, Deputy McAuliffe, will deal with the MetroLink and Luas upgrades in more detail and I will focus my remarks on the NDP commitments and DART+.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: This is the third week in a row in which I have raised questions on the metro project. I have addressed them to the Tánaiste, the Taoiseach and now the Department of Transport. The reason I have done that is there was significant concern in my community and many others in north Dublin about what was being reported as a strategic delay by Government in the metro project.

Yesterday, we saw in clear terms that not only is the Government committed to the metro project but it is committed to increased funding for it, but there remains a concern. For all of the reasons that Deputy Devlin outlined, the people of Dublin need different transport options. We need public transport options, cycling and active mobility. However, when we announce these projects, we also need to have integrity and credibility and public buy-in that these projects will be delivered in order that when we talk about metro, people believe that it will be delivered.

I accept, and it is well on the record, that the Government has not decided to delay the metro project but it is clear that there are delays. What are those delays and what will the Government do to ensure that they are addressed?

Along with all of the positives that come with this project, there will be negatives. This involves significant construction up Ballymun Road and beyond the M50. The residents living along that stretch will experience significant delays and disruption. We need to be honest with those people about when that will start and when it will conclude.

We need to get to the bottom of the delays in this project. People accept there will be delays with planning, legal issues, etc. What are the delays and what is the Department doing to resolve them?

Deputy Cormac Devlin: I got the timing wrong.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Indeed.

Deputy Cormac Devlin: I thought I had gone over my time.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Deputies have two minutes each.

Deputy Cormac Devlin: If I could finish my point on the DART underground, I was about to commend the fact that 41 new DART carriages are on the way, which is welcome.

A transport strategy for the greater Dublin area is under way. This would deal with the initial planning and design stages for the rail projects, such as the DART underground. The DART underground has been on the cards since 1972 despite a reported €45 million being invested in planning and design. The DART underground is the missing link between Heuston and Pearse stations. It is seen as the Holy Grail of the integration of the DART network. As such, the DART underground is important for the city.

Deputy Hildegard Naughton: I thank the Deputies for raising this important issue, which I am taking on behalf of my colleague, the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan.

Improving public transport services and infrastructure is central to improving citizens' quality of life and addressing our climate action challenge, and the Government is committed to a fundamental change in the nature of transport in Ireland. As the Government, we need to provide people more options so that they can make the switch to sustainable mobility. Within the national development plan, the Government has committed that MetroLink will be one of those options.

MetroLink faces imminent and important milestones in the coming months. These milestones will determine its progress in the coming years. First, there is the Government's approval of the preliminary business case. Second, there is the submission of a railway order application to An Bord Pleanála. There has been no impact on either of these significant milestones in recent days.

Regarding the first milestone, the Department of Transport has received the preliminary business case for the project. This represents decision gate No. 1 under the public spending code and indicates that the preliminary business case is currently under review. For major projects like MetroLink, the public spending code requires a Government decision. The Minister expects to seek such a Government decision in the near future. Approval by the Government

5 October 2021

will allow MetroLink to move into the statutory planning system, subject to the completion of the necessary planning and environmental documentation.

The second impending milestone is the submission of the railway order application. That application requires the finalisation of an extensive set of documentation, including environmental impact assessment reports. That work is ongoing. The Minister informed the House recently of his understanding that an extensive body of work remained in terms of finalising the preliminary design, completing the required environmental impact assessment reports and closing out property referencing issues. He stated his understanding that this work would be completed during quarter 1 next year. Subject to the Government decision, the project will then be ready to seek planning permission.

The preliminary business cases for BusConnects and DART+ are also being reviewed by the Department. The Minister expects to bring these projects to the Government for approval by the end of the year in line with the requirements of the public spending code. This will allow applications for a railway order for the DART+ West project and planning applications for the BusConnects core bus corridors to be submitted to An Bord Pleanála.

In addition to this necessary preparatory work, we are also seeing delivery on the ground. On active travel, we are all aware of the real progress that has been made in rolling out new and improved infrastructure across Dublin. We have seen some fantastic initiatives rolled out across all four Dublin local authority areas and the national development plan will support that in the years ahead.

Regarding BusConnects, we have already seen the roll-out of new services, with Howth starting earlier this year and Lucan to start by year's end. I am delighted to say that the reaction to the Howth spine has been positive.

The Luas green line capacity enhancement project has been successfully delivered with the delivery of eight new trams and 26 tram extensions.

Regarding rail, construction is continuing on the 41 new carriages for the greater Dublin area commuter rail fleet. They will arrive next year and enter into service in 2023.

I assure the Deputies that the Government is committed to improving and expanding public transport in Dublin. We have a busy programme ahead of us, but progress is being made and that progress will be supported by the funding secured in the national development plan.

Deputy Cormac Devlin: I thank the Minister of State for that update. BusConnects and everything else seems to be on track in terms of everything we were told this year and late last year. That is welcome, as is the application to An Bord Pleanála.

Regarding active travel, some fantastic initiatives have been undertaken across Dublin. However, a key element is the coastal Sutton-Sandyford route, which has been part of the plans for more than 30 years. The Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, is aware of the project. On-roading now appears to be the solution. We will need coastal defences across Dublin and we should at least consider putting cycling or walking facilities on those defences.

It is important that the Minister of State is present. On Friday, 22 October, our night-time economy will be open once again. We need a Nitelink service for all of Dublin from 22 October, not just the end of November.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: I concur with my colleague on the need for a Nitelink service in Dublin from 22 October. I wish all of those engaged in the hospitality industry well on what will be a significant date.

I appreciate the Minister of State's answer. She is essentially saying that we are at the first stage of progressing the railway order. A great deal of informal public consultation has already taken place. The communities are ready for this to start.

The national development plan refers to the Finglas Luas project, which looks like it is being fast-tracked and is coming to construction earlier than indicated in the previous national development plan. However, if the delivery of the metro is not credible, then the delivery of the Finglas Luas project is not credible. Credibility will require more than just the Government publishing an indication or commitment in the plan. Rather, it will require the Government grabbing the project by the scruff of the neck and making sure that Transport Infrastructure Ireland, TII, and the National Transport Authority, NTA, do their job and deliver it on time and within a budget that provides value for the public's spending.

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: I will relay the Deputies' comments to the Minister. I reiterate that the national development plan supports and commits to BusConnects, DART+ and MetroLink. The most important date for MetroLink will be when it secures planning permission. To do that, it needs to enter the planning system and, to do that, it needs Government approval. The focus within the Department is on completing the review of the preliminary business case and secure Government approval. At project level, the focus will be on completing the work needed to submit a planning application. That work will be finished during quarter 1 of 2022. Those are the key dates for this project.

We are in a similar position with DART+. The most advanced projects within the overall project are DART+ Fleet and DART+ West. The key focus within the Department is on completing the review of the preliminary business case and the key focus at project level is on finalising the railway order application for DART+ West and the contract negotiations for DART+ Fleet. Public consultation is still ongoing in respect of DART+ West. That will need to finish and the issues raised will need to be considered before the project is ready to enter the planning system. In the meantime, the Minister expects to have brought the preliminary business case to the Government for approval.

I again thank the Deputies for the opportunity to address the House on this matter.

Proposed Legislation

Deputy Joan Collins: The Minister of State is aware of this issue, given that contact was made with her this year when she advised that it was a matter for the Minister for Transport and that all correspondence should be sent to him.

I will provide the background. The carriages are a regular sight in and around the St. Stephen's Green area as well as St. James's Gate. In May 2019, carriage drivers led a convoy to Leinster House to ask that new by-laws be made in respect of drivers in the capital. Since 2018, Dublin City Council has not issued licences for carriage drivers, which would allow them to operate commercially. This is due to older Victorian laws - the Dublin Carriage Act 1853 and the Dublin Amended Carriage Acts 1854 and 1855 - that state that the responsibility lies with

the police force. These need to be repealed. In 2011, Dublin City Council took over responsibility for the licensing of horse-drawn carriage operators and drivers from the Garda Carriage Office. In late 2018, however, the council was advised that the legal basis for its by-laws regulating horse-drawn carriages was uncertain. As a result, it was determined that the council's 2011 by-laws on the control of horse-drawn carriages were not valid. In late 2019, the Attorney General confirmed that Dublin City Council was not empowered to regulate horse-drawn carriages because the 1853 to 1855 Acts had previously vested the power to regulate horse-drawn carriages in Dublin in the Commissioner of the Dublin Metropolitan Police, to which An Garda Síochána is the successor. The Attorney General advised that legislation had to be introduced. Approval was given in December 2019 for the general scheme of a Bill empowering all local authorities to regulate this area.

I have looked through the legislative programme for this year. There is nothing in it with regard to this issue which has been ongoing since 2018. This is a serious issue. If a tourist or other person gets knocked down in an accident involving one of these uninsured horse-drawn carriages, he or she will be completely at a loss and in a difficult situation.

The former Minister, Mr. Ross, received approval from the then Cabinet to draft a Bill. Where is it? As I said, this is a serious issue. In 2022, we will have been waiting four years for this legislation. With the lifting of Covid restrictions, we will see an increase in tourists. Operators who were previously licensed want horse-drawn carriages to be covered by a system under which they must be registered and display licensing plates, insurance discs and so on. Will the Minister of State give a clear indication as to when legislation to deal with this matter will be introduced because Dublin City Council needs to be able to move now to introduce the by-laws that are needed?

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: I am taking this matter on behalf of my colleague, the Minister for Transport, Deputy Ryan. I thank Deputy Collins for raising the matter of the regulation of horse-drawn carriages for hire and reward within the Dublin area. The Minister has asked me to use this opportunity to outline how this issue came about and to set out the work under way with Dublin City Council to resolve this issue.

Deputy Joan Collins: I welcome that work on this matter is progressing. I have checked the legislative programme for 2021 and there is nothing within it in regard to this issue, which would indicate it is not being prepared. Will the Minister of State give me a date for when a general scheme of a Bill will be forthcoming?

At this stage, we are in a very difficult situation in that anyone over the age of 16 years can operate a horse-drawn carriage for hire or reward. There is no regulation, no inspections for insurance, no vehicle roadworthiness testing, no Garda vetting, no pre-checks to determine if a horse is suitable for the job and no requirement to display a licence plate in order that a member of the public can report an incident. The Garda does not have the power to do anything except through the Road Traffic Acts, which is very difficult. We know for definite there are criminals operating some of these carriages. The system is very loose in regard to those who were previously licensed and who want legislation introduced so that they can operate in a safe environment and to ensure they are well covered.

Operators who were previously licensed are keen to see this area regulated. They were keen to link-in with the former Minister and to get involved in the discussions, but they appear to have been excluded from the current process. In the previous Dáil, former Deputy Maureen

O'Sullivan, raised this issue many times. I have read over the many questions she put down at that time.

I welcome that work is being progressed. Will the Minister of State give me a more definite timeline for the introduction of the legislation and will the Minister encourage the involvement in that process of those who were previously licensed?

Deputy Hildegard Naughton: I will convey what the Deputy stated here to the Minister, Deputy Ryan. On the process, once the general scheme is published, the Minister will engage with the Joint Committee on Transport and Communications in regard to commencement of the pre-legislative scrutiny. I want again to underline the Government's commitment to resolving this issue and empowering Dublin City Council to regulate horse-drawn carriages on the same basis as every other local authority. I am happy to confirm to the House work on the development of legislation in this area is no longer on hold. It is progressing in close co-operation with Dublin City Council. I will ask the Minister to come back to the Deputy on the issue of wider engagement around the process.

The Dáil adjourned at 9.48 p.m. until 9.12 a.m. on Wednesday, 6 October 2021.