



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES
DÁIL ÉIREANN

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

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Déardaoin, 21 Deireadh Fómhair 2021

Thursday, 21 October 2021

Chuaigh an Leas-Cheann Comhairle i gceannas ar 09.00 a.m.

Paidir.

Prayer.

Ceisteanna - Questions

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Agriculture Schemes

1. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the new measures included in budget 2022 for suckler beef farmers, sheep farmers and farmers in areas of natural constraint. [50847/21]

Deputy Matt Carthy: I ask the Minister to outline the new measures in budget 2022 for suckler beef farmers, sheep farmers and farmers operating in areas of natural constraint.

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): I thank the Deputy for his question. I am pleased to have secured more than €1.8 billion of funding in budget 2020 for the overall sector. This is in addition to almost €1.2 billion in direct payments annually. Farmers can have confidence that this budget protects family farms and their income and supports action to improve safety and sustainability on farms. I have succeeded in maintaining all of the crucial schemes for farmers. The budget provision will also allow us to provide additional funding for several policy priorities. I am committed to supporting our suckler and sheep sectors now and into the future.

More than €100 million will be provided in targeted supports for the beef and sheep sectors, including the beef data and genomics programme BDGP, the beef environmental efficiency programme for sucklers, BEEP-S, the sheep welfare scheme and the dairy calf programme. Other measures relevant to the livestock sectors include €7 million for Enterprise Ireland capi-

tal investment schemes to support the meat and dairy sector to invest in greater product and market diversification; €4 million for the establishment of the office of the food ombudsman; €80 million for on-farm investments through the targeted agricultural modernisation scheme, TAMS, including specific supports for solar energy installation; a tax package that protects the stamp duty relief for young, trained farmers, as well as stock relief; and an additional €2 million to support farm safety initiatives.

Within the 2022 provision, some €872 million allows key rural development programmes and forestry supports to remain available through the transitional period between the two CAP programmes. Of course, we cannot do new schemes this year, as the Deputy is aware. We are working hard on delivering the new schemes that will be in place in January 2023 but we cannot do new schemes at the moment. We are certainly determined to ensure all the schemes that are available are fully paid for and that there are no gaps in farmers' incomes.

I have worked closely with my colleague, the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputy Michael McGrath, to finalise a financial package for the new CAP which I announced yesterday. Overall, in the context of fully supporting farm family incomes this year and next year as we transition to the new CAP, we have delivered very strong support for farm families.

Deputy Matt Carthy: I thank the Minister. That was a long way of answering “There are none” to the question I asked him regarding new measures. Of course, the Minister can apply to implement new Exchequer-funded schemes next year. There is nothing stopping him from doing so.

In the context of the CAP proposals he brought forward yesterday, and specifically in respect of the sectors to which I refer, will the Minister confirm that BEEP-S will remain a stand-alone scheme separate from the new suckler package he outlined and will continue to be funded through the Exchequer for the lifetime of the next CAP? As regards the sheep welfare scheme, the Minister is aware that an annual budget of €25 million was earmarked but the most that was ever actually drawn down was €17 million per year. What will the annual budget for that scheme be in the next CAP? What proposals will he bring forward to ensure the full amount is drawn down?

As regards areas of natural constraint, it has been reported that the scheme will continue. I ask the Minister to confirm whether an additional annual budget will be allocated to that scheme under his proposals.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: To correct the Deputy, we cannot do new schemes under the transition regulation. We have the facility to continue with existing schemes and, of course, that takes a significant amount of money because at the end of a CAP programme there are full participation levels and maximum cost for all of those schemes. Thankfully, with the 11% increase last year from the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform and the further increase of 2% this year, we have delivered a total increase of 13% in the budget of the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine over that two-year period. That increase was required to ensure these schemes could be continued and to do some new initiatives such as the results-based environment agri pilot, REAP, scheme that we kicked off last year and the soil sampling programme that will continue this year.

As regards the 50% increase in CAP co-funding that I announced yesterday, under the new suckler carbon efficiency scheme, it will deliver €150 per cow for the first ten cows and €120

per cow for the remainder of the herd. That will be within the CAP strategic plan programme for five years. The capacity will remain open to us to also support sectors in parallel with that, as was the case with the BEEP scheme. The announcement yesterday was very much about what is programmed for the full five years.

Deputy Matt Carthy: The Minister did not deal with the specific questions I asked in respect of those three schemes. Perhaps he will furnish me with a written response on that.

The difficulty facing farming is that under the old CAP, Pillar 1 payments amounted to €5.975 billion in Exchequer and EU funding. Under the new CAP, for the entire programme, that figure is exactly the same. In real terms, that is a significant decrease. Under Pillar 2, the funding allocated across all areas under the old CAP was €4.258 billion. Under the new CAP, that figure will be €3.861 billion. In constant terms, there is a decrease in Pillar 2 payments. The proportion relating to co-financing is increasing and will include the €1.5 billion from the so-called carbon tax fund that the Minister committed would not form part of carbon tax. Does the Minister accept that Irish agriculture will be worse off under the next CAP because of the EU budget to which he agreed?

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: It will be much better off with this Government in place. I refer to the proposals in the alternative budgets put forward by Sinn Féin. Even though it proposes much more spending economy-wide in its fantasy budgets, agriculture always gets short-changed. The proposals in the Sinn Féin fantasy budget for last year-----

Deputy Matt Carthy: We proposed a 12% increase-----

(Interruptions).

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: -----came nowhere near the 11% increase I delivered last year. Agriculture was short-changed even in the massive spending proposed in the Sinn Féin manifesto before the most recent general election. I am glad-----

Deputy Matt Carthy: There is going to be a 10% cut under CAP----

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: Sinn Féin profiled less than Fianna Fáil or Fine Gael profiled in their manifestos. Thankfully, Sinn Féin is not in government. This Government is delivering for Irish farm families.

Deputy Matt Carthy: The problem is that the Government is not delivering; it is spinning.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: Obviously, as regards budget pressures at European level, we fight that battle to try to keep that budget up. We got it narrowly increased after a big battle. As regards matters within our control, we are delivering a 50% increase in national funding.

Deputy Matt Carthy: There is only a 1% increase next year-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I thank the Minister. I am moving on to the next question.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I am very glad to be able to do so to support farm family incomes.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I ask Deputies to listen to each other.

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Inshore Fisheries

2. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the actions he is taking to address the programme for Government commitment to ensure that inshore waters continue to be protected for smaller fishing vessels and recreational fishers and that pair trawling will be prohibited inside the six-mile limit. [51910/21]

Deputy Holly Cairns: I ask the Minister to provide an update on the status of the ban on large trawlers of more than 18 m operating in inshore waters. Last month, the Court of Appeal refused the Minister's application to continue a stay on the ban. I realise it is a matter the Minister inherited, but it is a very important issue for many fishers, the marine sector and coastal ecosystems.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I thank the Deputy for her question. As she is aware, the programme for Government commits to ensuring "that inshore waters continue to be protected for smaller fishing vessels and recreational fishers and that pair trawling will be prohibited inside the six-mile limit". I am fully supportive of this objective, as is the Deputy.

As she may be aware, in December 2018, the then Minister, Deputy Creed, who demonstrated very strong commitment in issuing this direction, announced that vessels over 18 m would be excluded from trawling in inshore waters inside six nautical miles from 1 January 2020. A transition period of three years for vessels over 18 m targeting sprat was allowed to enable adjustment for these vessels as the sprat fishery is concentrated inside this area. Policy directive 1 of 2019 was introduced in March 2019 to give effect to the changes. A judicial review was taken by two applicant fishers challenging the validity of the policy directive. On 6 October 2020, the High Court judgment held that the policy directive was made in breach of fair procedures and is void and/or of no legal effect. I appealed the decision to the Court of Appeal and a full hearing took place on 22 June 2021. Judgment on the case is reserved.

I also sought an extension on the stay on the order of the High Court, which was granted by the Court of Appeal on 19 March 2021, reinstating the policy directive. On 23 September 2021, the Court of Appeal refused my application to continue the stay further. This refusal means that vessels over 18 m have resumed trawling in the waters inside six nautical miles.

I am currently awaiting the decision of the Court of Appeal to inform my next steps. As the matter is *sub judice*, I cannot comment further until the matter is resolved before the courts.

Deputy Holly Cairns: I thank the Minister for the clarification and his ongoing work to protect our inshore waters. The reality is that within a few days, or even a day, of the recent court decision, I was receiving reports of large vessels operating by the coast, often within Bantry Bay in west Cork. It is a major concern for local professions and organisations. The issue has now been going back and forth for over a year. The uncertainty around the ban will probably continue for some time.

I ask the Minister to explain why the Department has not begun a new consultation process as a back-up if the eventual court ruling finds definitively against the directive, which we know is a possibility. Groups are rightly concerned that at the end of the legal proceedings the process might have to start all over again, with all that time lost. Why not have a fresh consultation as a redundancy, given that the policy directive was overturned in the first place because the consultation was not adequate?

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: These matters are always complex and, as we know, very much subject to legal challenge. Therefore, because I do not have the decision from the Court of Appeal on the previous process, it would be premature to commence a new consultation in advance of that. I must be informed and have all the information to hand in respect of the legal judgment on the previous process. I must await that judgment.

My commitment is clear, given that I appealed the previous decision on the strength of legal advice that I sought, and I want to deliver on this issue. I will await the judgment of the court, which really is the only option available to me. The judgment should be published soon and as soon as I have it, I will give it my full consideration and plot out how I will proceed.

Deputy Holly Cairns: I am sure the Minister can see why groups are calling for a new consultation process. The situation is difficult to unravel for people. While the Minister does not have the decision from the court, he knows that the consultation process was the reason the directive was overturned in the first place. My point is that this may not work out and if we had started a new consultation process already, less time would be lost. Another potential solution suggested to me is the introduction of a statutory instrument to restrict inshore pair trawling or activities by large vessels. Is that something the Minister is considering? As I said, the matter is likely to go on for some time and I am not sure if the Minister has a timeframe for its conclusion.

This issue directly affects the inshore fishing sector, a substantial cohort of coastal and island communities which are often overshadowed by the bigger players. Their representative groups need producer organisation, PO, status. While I recognise the Minister's work to date in granting some PO status, additional support and guidance which can be given to the remaining organisations to secure such status is vital. Inshore fishing is a sustainable practice and part of our coastal heritage that supports the livelihoods of hundreds of families and entire communities.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I value the inshore sector; it is important to the communities right along the coast. It has been great to see how they have strengthened in terms of their organisational capacity in recent months and years. I am fully supportive of that. I am aware that there is an application under consideration for PO status. I was glad to be able to award PO status to the Irish Islands Marine Resource Organisation, IIMRO, which represents the islands, a few months ago. That strengthening of the organisation has served the inshore sector very well. I can see that coming through in the meetings I have with the organisation, in the coherence and strength with which it makes representations.

This issue of particular importance to it. There was a lot of merit-----

Deputy Holly Cairns: On the question of statutory instruments, would the Minister consider introducing a statutory instrument?

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: A statutory instrument on what?

Deputy Holly Cairns: On banning pair trawling.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: It is my understanding that I will have to undertake a consultation in advance of any action I take. When I-----

Deputy Holly Cairns: Can that consultation be started now?

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Deputy Charlie McConalogue: It is important that I have access to the full information on conclusion of the legal process before I make any decisions, because we do not want any unnecessary flaws to arise in future.

Organic Farming

3. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the projected number of new organic farmers for 2022; the additional funding that will be allocated to the organic farming scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [50848/21]

Deputy Matt Carthy: I ask the Minister of State the number of new farmers that she expects to join the organic farming scheme in 2022; the additional funding that will be allocated to the scheme; and her proposals for the sector.

Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Senator Pippa Hackett): I, along with the Government, am committed to seeing the area under organics grow. Therefore, I am delighted to have secured a significant increase in the budget for organic farming for 2022.

Funding for the organic farming scheme, OFS, has been increased to €21 million, up from €16 million last year, with a further €2 million for further organic sector development measures. This increase is most welcome and addresses the growing demand from both farmers and consumers for this type of production. It effectively doubles the funding for organics since I took office less than two years ago.

As the Deputy will be aware, the current programme for Government contains a commitment to align Ireland's organic land area with that of the then EU average of approximately 7.5%. Budget 2022, with its increased allocation for organic farming, will assist in working towards that goal. At the same time, I will also continue to progress the implementation of the National Organic Strategy 2019 to 2025, which sets out ambitious growth targets for the sector by aligning it closely with market opportunities.

The additional funding to be allocated to the opening of the OFS in 2022 could provide for an additional 50,000 ha converting to organic production in 2022. This would represent an increase in excess of 50% in the area currently farmed organically and would take us further along the route to the goal of 7.5% land cover. I am encouraging all farmers from all sectors to join, and my Department and the relevant agencies and advisory bodies will be working with them before the opening of the scheme.

In addition to the OFS, budget 2022 will provide funding for other supports for organic farmers, such as the organic capital investment scheme and the organic processing investment grant scheme. Initiatives to assist in the development of the sector, such as the organic demonstration farm programme and other training and education projects, will also be funded.

Organic farming and production is a key priority of mine and, indeed, the Government. No Minister or Government has ever funded its expansion to this extent and I intend to continue to invest in its future under the next CAP also.

Deputy Matt Carthy: For the sake of clarity, I ask the Minister of State to outline what the current organic land area is and what proportion she expects that to reach by the end of 2022. I

gather from her reply that the target remains 7.5% by 2030. That is absolutely pathetic.

One of the reasons for the lack of ambition is apparent in the Minister of State's comment that she wants to align the organic sector "closely with market opportunities". We know that for a sector like organics to grow, the Government must be proactive in creating new opportunities, as opposed to simply waiting for the market to take the lead. It has been shown, time and again, that when consumers are given a choice and when the origin and type of food that is produced is clearly labelled, they will always choose organic. However, they must be given that choice; the market will not take lead on its own.

Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Senator Pippa Hackett): The current area under organic production is 74,000 ha and we brought in 13,000 ha from last year. Therefore, the total area either in organic or in conversion is 87,000 ha. As I said, an increase of 50,000 ha with the proposed money in the budget for next year would bring the figure to around 130,000 ha, which would represent a 57% increase on this year.

In terms of the 7.5% target, it was not set to be reached by 2030. Originally, it was to be reached in the term of the Government but as that is not a set period of time, we aligned it with the CAP strategic plan period. That means the 7.5% target is to be met by 2027.

I agree with the Deputy with regard to markets. I am engaging closely with Bord Bia to find these markets and open them up. Organics is a growing sector, particularly throughout the EU and domestically. It offers great opportunities.

Deputy Matt Carthy: I thank the Minister of State. The EU average was 7.5% about three years ago. Across the board, the EU has set a target of 25%. We are second to last, coming only ahead of Malta with regard to land under organic use. The question I posed was very specific. It was on the number of new organic farmers. While the amount of land under organic use is important, and the Minister of State's reply dealt with this, it is also crucial that we increase the number of organic farmers. Otherwise I fear the Department will go for what might be considered low hanging fruit. It will go for the larger farmers to come into the scheme in order to meet the 50,000 ha target. Will the Minister of State give a commitment that she will shape the scheme to encourage smaller and medium-sized farmers to enter organics?

Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Senator Pippa Hackett): I thank the Deputy. He is absolutely right. We do need to bring in large number of farmers because this will create a critical mass and allow for significant engagement, knowledge transfer and peer-to-peer work. I certainly concur with that.

With regard to the current design of the scheme, the average farm size in the scheme across the board is in the region of 40 ha. They are relatively small farms. There are also smaller farms in the scheme and not many large farms. The scheme is capped at an area-based payment to a certain hectareage so it so the payment does not keep increasing. The further people go into it, the less they get. In a way, it is designed to support smaller and medium farmers. We really want to encourage all farmers to join the scheme. There is a great market for tillage and organic arable production. These farms tend to be larger. I do not want to rule anyone out. I concur that we need many farmers in the scheme.

Question No. 4 replied to with Written Answers.

Agriculture Schemes

5. **Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the number of applicants involved in the beef data genomics programme, BDGP, and the beef environmental efficiency programme – sucklers, BEEP-S, schemes in 2020; the number that are taking part in the BDGP and BEEP-S schemes since their roll-over into 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51911/21]

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: I ask about the numbers involved in the BDGP and BEEP-S schemes in 2020 and the numbers taking part in the BDGP and BEEP-S schemes in 2021. Will the Minister make a statement on the matter?

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: In 2020, the number of farmers participating in BDGP I was 22,243 with a further 1,422 participating in BDGP II, giving a total of 23,665. Payments to farmers under BDGP for 2020 were approximately €41.5 million. A total of 27,025 farmers were participating in BEEP-S in 2020. Payments under the scheme amounted to approximately €41 million.

Those farmers in BDGP I who had met all the scheme requirements could opt to join the transitional scheme in 2021. The number of farmers participating in the BDGP transitional scheme is 17,683. This represents a roll-over rate of 79.5%. A further 1,421 farmers are still in BDGP II, giving a total of 19,000 now in the BDGP. In addition, there are a total of 27,516 farmers participating in the 2021 BEEP-S scheme.

Overall for 2021, 16,155 farmers are in both schemes. To put it another way, 84% of BDGP participants are also in the BEEP and 58% of BEEP-S participants in 2021 are also in the BDGP. Payments for 2021 under the BDGP and BEEP-S are scheduled to issue in December.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: I thank the Minister. Is it worrying that 23% or 24% of farmers have not gone for the roll-over? Has the Department done an analysis of the reasons for this? Was it because of the non-compliance of some farmers? Was it because of inspections? Was it because farmers were not interested? What are the reasons? We would think more farmers would be getting involved. I know we could not go for any more than what was there. We see a drop-off of 20% or 25%. We are talking about 17,683 as against 23,365. These are the figures I have just taken down. That is a large number of farmers. In the analysis, has the Minister looked at what these farmers have done and where they have gone? Have they gone to a different enterprise? What has happened? It is a worrying trend when we look at these figures.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: Prior to this year, farmers participating in the BDGP were in a five-year programme. They had to sign up for five years and they did not have the option to decide whether to stay in or come out of the scheme. It was a full five-year programme. I continued it in 2021 for one year and farmers had the option to decide whether to take it up that year. In terms of practicality, I made it as straightforward as possible because I wanted to give farmers every opportunity to avail of and continue to be in the BDGP and BEEP-S for this year. We could not run new schemes because we are in a transition period. New schemes can only start from 2023. I wanted to do everything I possibly could to ensure farmers in schemes were able to stay in them. The main reason I would see is the fact it was coming out of our five-year commitment and for a variety of reasons, some people decided to draw a line after the five years and not necessarily take up the option of continuing for another year.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: Would it be the case that farmers who looked at this were tied into the five years because the only way they were going to get out was *force majeure*? To be frank, it would be an awful lot easier for people to go into a one-year scheme if it was attractive because they would not be tied in for a longer period of time. Would it be the case that one quarter of these farmers felt it was too cumbersome or that there was something wrong with the scheme? It is very important that we do an analysis of what is going on. If we lose 25% or 24% of farmers from a scheme, it sends a message that there is something wrong, one way or the other. The Department needs to look at these schemes to see how it can streamline them and make them easier for farmers. This is a worrying figure in my opinion.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: A big part of the reason was that things can change for farmers over the course of five years. We had a five-year contract that finished and people then had the option of taking a one-year contract. The administration and red tape involved in extending for a year was minimised. People could continue as they were. The scheme was not open to new entrants. People had to be in the previous five-year BDGP. We could not start a new scheme but people could continue if they were in it. While the option was open to participants not to continue in the scheme, there was no option for new people to come in. I have no doubt if the option had been available for new people to come in for one year, it would have been a different kettle of fish.

As the Deputy knows, I have been travelling in every county in the country to get feedback on all of these issues. The biggest feedback I have had is that farmers want to see the programme continued and strengthened. To compare the BDGP with the programme I announced yesterday, in the BDGP €90 is given for the first ten animals and €80 for the remainder, whereas in the new scheme €150 will be provided for the first ten animals and €120 for the remainder. We are, therefore, strengthening the funding allocation available. I hope we will see a strong take-up of the carbon beef suckler efficiency scheme from 2023 onwards. We will continue the BDGP for 2022, as announced in the budget.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

Animal Diseases

6. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the number of bovine animals found to have failed the tuberculosis eradication test in each of the years 2019, 2020 and to date in 2021 in respect of the dairy herd and the beef herd; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51671/21]

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: What numbers of bovine animals in the beef and dairy herds were found to have failed the TB eradication test in 2019, 2020 and to date in 2021?

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I thank the Deputy for the question. The number of dairy herd reactor animals is 8,837 for 2019, 12,440 for 2020 and 8,402 up to 29 September of this year. The number of suckler herd reactor animals is 5,894 for 2019, 7,275 for 2020 and 4,684 up to 29 September of this year. The number of other herd reactor animals is 347 for 2019, 515

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for 2020 and 344 to the end of September of this year. The overall total in respect of reactor numbers is 17,000 for 2019, 22,562 for 2020 and 14,901 up to 29 September of this year.

Herd incidence rose every year between 2016 and 2020, which has been very concerning. This disease causes untold hardship for farmers and farming families, as the Deputy knows. Although the challenge is serious, my Department, working together with stakeholders, is engaging with farmers and is committed to eradicating this disease.

Earlier this year I launched a new bovine tuberculosis eradication strategy for the period from 2021 to 2030. The implementation of this strategy is overseen by the TB stakeholder forum with support from three new working groups on science, implementation and finance to ensure that all aspects of the strategy are addressed. Extensive consultation with the three working groups will develop a shared understanding of how collectively we can reduce TB incidence along with implementing the new TB eradication strategy over that period.

Deputy Pádraig O’Sullivan: The figures the Minister provided are very concerning and the trend is clear for people to see. It confirms what we hear on the ground, namely, that TB is prevalent again. Many farmers I have contact with have spoken of TB being detected in their herds for the first time in 30 years. This causes monetary and personal distress for these farmers.

Responding to a TB outbreak is particularly onerous. When a TB reactor is found in a herd it imposes significant constraints on the farmer and the way he or she can conduct business. No movement of animals in or out of the herd will be allowed and two consecutive clear tests will be required and this can take a maximum of 120 days.

I ask the Minister to look at the issue of stock retention on the farm while awaiting de-restriction and the requirement for new-born calves to be reared on a farm. These calves can often be sold at seven weeks. Many farms are not set up and simply do not have the space for these extra numbers. This is placing a significant workload and burden on individual farmers. I also ask the Minister to consider allowing contract-reared animals and heifers reared in outside places to return home to the herd and be included in the compensation framework.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I thank Deputy O’Sullivan for his comments and suggestions. As the Deputy knows, when we are dealing with an infectious disease the strategy is not set in stone. The TB strategy I have put together is a living document which will be subject to amendment and refinement on an ongoing basis. The TB stakeholder forum and the three working groups are considering all issues as this matter evolves. They will consider issues such as the suggestions made by the Deputy.

As part of my ongoing commitment to eradicating TB, I have sanctioned an additional €1 million in budget funding for the wildlife programme, which is an integral part of the overall programme. There have been positive indications of progress with the TB situation for 2021. These are likely to represent a necessary improvement compared with 2020. Working together we can build on the momentum we have developed. I am acutely aware of the financial and emotional burden associated with a TB breakdown and we must do everything we can, working together, to tackle this very serious challenge.

Deputy Pádraig O’Sullivan: It will be interesting to see the final figures for the year. I am giving feedback to the Minister on the lads who are working on the ground eradicating TB. They are highlighting to us that they are facing an uphill battle. That said, I welcome the

investment of €6 million in budget 2022 for TB eradication but this money must translate to boots on the ground. An important part of this investment is the wildlife programme, as the Minister said. Increased resources must be targeted in this area. The work is enormous and time-consuming.

I ask that the relocation of the vaccination programme be escalated and that a territory expansion survey be carried out in certain areas for certain species. Roaming stocks are also a contributing factor and need to be curtailed.

I welcome the Department's commitment to a major works analysis and habitat preservation. The impact on wildlife from expansion, deforestation and reclamation is also a contributing factor. These activities should be carefully managed.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I thank Deputy O'Sullivan for raising this very important issue and for his interest in it. I know it arises from his engagement with farmers in his constituency and the concern they have about the growing incidence of TB, certainly in 2020, and the burden this places on the affected farmers and the stress and financial strain associated with it. I assure the Deputy that we will continue to work on this matter. The Deputy's suggestions are being brought to the table by farm organisations, as part of the TB stakeholder forum.

All eyes and brains are being applied to this matter to ensure we are taking a scientific approach with the objective of driving down TB numbers. Getting to a position where we can drive numbers as low as possible and work towards eradication is the best outcome for all farm families.

I thank the Deputy again for his suggestions and for raising the matter. I assure him of our efforts, working with the Deputy and other Oireachtas Members are very keen to make progress on this issue, to set the right course and reverse the challenging increases in TB incidence we have seen in recent years.

Questions No. 7 replied to with Written Answers.

Common Agricultural Policy

8. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine his plans to support hill farmers in the next CAP; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51715/21]

Deputy Dara Calleary: Farmers and sheep farmers have been left aside in previous Common Agricultural Policy plans. Given his experience of the sector, what are the Minister's proposals within the new CAP strategic plan to support and sustain this sector and to guarantee and encourage people to go into it?

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I thank Deputy Calleary for his question. Hill farming is a very important sector in the Deputy's constituency, as it is in mine. The sheep welfare scheme has been in place for the past while and was continued in 2020, 2021 and again for 2022. In addition, some of the key payments that are very important for hill farmers, such as the areas of natural constraint, ANC, payment, have been maintained for this year, as have environmental schemes.

The Deputy's question relates to the next CAP programme which was announced just yesterday. Overall, it provides for a 50% increase in the national co-financing based on the previous CAP. For this seven-year period, we will see €2.9 billion of national co-financing compared with €1.9 billion in the previous CAP. This is a demonstration of the significant commitment of this Government to supporting farm families. Included in that is support for sheep farmers.

In the proposals, to start in 2023, we will see an increase in the sheep welfare scheme, which will be available at €12 per ewe. Support will also be provided through the ANC payment, which has been available until now, and the young farmer schemes.

What will be particularly significant for sheep farmers will be the significant support available under the new environmental scheme, for which 50% extra funding will be provided. The new scheme will succeed the green low-carbon agri-environment scheme, GLAS, the agri-environment options scheme, AEOS, and the rural environment protection scheme, REPS, which preceded the AEOS. There will be the potential for some farmers to avail of landscape options and earn up to a maximum of €10,000, with an average of €7,500, and for other farmers to earn up to a maximum €7,000, with an average payment of €5,000. That will strongly support our hill sheep sector.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I thank the Minister and commend him and his team, including the Ministers of State, Senator Hackett and Deputy Heydon, the Taoiseach and the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputy Michael McGrath, on the new CAP programme. It appears from the early signs that it is very positive and will support farming in our region in particular.

On the extra €2.9 billion, how will the Minister ensure this money gets down to the farm table? There is so much red tape involved in schemes that people will not engage with them. This is particularly the case for hill and sheep farmers, which is an ageing sector. We need to encourage people to engage. In the context of the role of the Minister of State, Senator Hackett, sheep and hill farmers were the original biodiversity farmers, long before the REPS and other schemes. As I said to the Minister last week at Balla mart, hill farming in Mayo goes back 5,000 years. They were the guardians of the environment and they continue to be. Unless we keep them on sustainably on the hills, that support and guardianship will be gone. This CAP plan, for many, may be the last chance saloon. We want to ensure that it will get right down to them with as little red tape as possible and that it will be easy to apply for.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: That is really important and it is why I am engaging closely with farmers on putting together the CAP programme and those schemes. It is also why I visited Mayo with the Deputy last week and have been visiting every county. Indeed, I will be in Carlow this afternoon, and Kilkenny this evening, doing the very same thing.

It is crucial that this funding gets to farm families, in this instance to support hill sheep farming. We will engage further on the structure and composition of the various schemes to ensure they will deliver income for farmers, as well as the environmental and food production benefits. The Minister of State, Senator Hackett, has provided for a 500% increase in the budget for organics over the coming years, which is unprecedented. She will engage with all sectors on the options that are available in that regard. That will be of interest to the hill sheep farming sector as well.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I think the target participation rate for the new agri-environmental

scheme is 50,000, which equates to the current participation level in the green low-carbon agri-environment scheme, GLAS. How will we ensure that those who are excluded from GLAS will not be excluded from the new agri-environmental scheme, whatever it will be called? How will we further ensure that the restrictions in the current GLAS scheme will not transfer across to the new scheme and that its benefits will not be lost to many, including many hill sheep farmers?

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: From memory, the number on the current GLAS programme is about 43,000 or 44,000. The 50,000 figure we have mentioned, therefore, will embrace all farmers. The objective will be to ensure that all farmers who want to participate in the scheme can do so. As for its composition, we will engage closely with farmer organisations to ensure the measures involved will provide options for all farmers to be able to engage.

Question No. 9 replied to with Written Answers.

Agriculture Industry

10. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the engagement he has had with Teagasc and other Ministers on the need for recognition of carbon removal on farms; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [49992/21]

Deputy Denis Naughten: Following the passage of the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Act 2021, we now have to take into account the issue of sequestration. There is great anxiety among the farming community regarding what they will be asked to do as a result of carbon budgeting. We now have reports that agriculture will be asked to reduce emissions by up to one third, which, as the Minister knows, is a monumental task that will not be possible without some account being taken, in a practical way, of sequestration.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I am very much aware of the important role on-farm carbon removals and carbon pool protection will play in meeting the sector's challenging climate change targets going forward. Teagasc, along with private sector agricultural consultants, is an essential component in providing best practice advice to the farming community on measures necessary for the increased sequestration and storage of atmospheric carbon through making better on-farm management decisions.

It is important not only that the increased removal and storage of atmospheric carbon brought about through the activities of our farmers be recognised in the national inventory reporting accounting system but also that farmers receive recognition for their efforts in this area. This recognition, however, needs a solid scientific basis backed up by country-specific data. Towards this end, I recently provided funding through Teagasc for the establishment of a national agricultural soil carbon observatory, with supporting technology for the measurement of greenhouse gas emissions from a range of soil and farm types. This will place Ireland at the forefront of EU carbon sequestration research. This infrastructure, which will be located on a number of Teagasc Signpost farms, is a new initiative that aims to support farmers by acting as a demonstration and research resource for best practice on farms.

In tandem with the soil carbon observatory infrastructure, I also recently launched the pilot soil sampling and analysis programme, which will provide a baseline assessment of soil organic carbon throughout the country. Teagasc also recently commenced a research project called "Farm-Carbon - Farm Hedgerows and Non-forest Woodland Carbon". This project will

provide a deeper understanding of hedgerows and non-forest woodland as carbon stocks in agricultural landscapes and will allow researchers to identify approaches to maintain and enhance this contribution. The knowledge gained from these activities will place Ireland at the forefront of research in this area, while also allowing for the refinement of our reporting to the national inventory, further emphasising the sustainability of the agricultural sector.

Deputy Denis Naughten: I welcome the commitments the Minister gave in respect of scientific research in this area. He is absolutely correct; without having a scientific basis, we have no opportunity to move forward. In 2016, this was made very clear to me, as Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment, from my engagement with colleague ministers throughout Europe and my Scottish counterpart. It was clear at that stage that that research should have taken place; we are a decade too late in doing it now. The outputs the Minister is talking about will take a considerable time to filter down to the ground, into the farming community. We need urgent measures that can be taken by farmers and be reflected in their on-farm sequestration. What are we doing and what funding has been ring-fenced in the carbon tax budget to ensure that will happen?

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: As the Deputy will know, the funding from the carbon tax budget is very specific in that between now and the end of 2030, €1.5 billion will go directly to farmers. It is targeted specifically to get to farmers' pockets through the new agri-environmental scheme, which, as I outlined earlier, will deliver up to €10,000 for 20,000 participants and up to €7,000 for 30,000 participants. That is where the carbon tax is going.

Since my appointment as Minister, I have been working with Teagasc and investing in how we can develop the science and research to contribute to meeting our emissions reductions in the time ahead. Overall, in the context of our emissions reductions, the most important issue is that the targets that are set for us will not only continue to enable us to do what we do really well, namely, be a world leader in producing sustainable and healthy nutritious food, but they will also ensure we can drive down overall emissions in the agricultural sector in as strong a fashion as possible. Ultimately, that will only strengthen our overall agricultural model by delivering to consumers what they want, namely, food that has been sustainably produced.

Deputy Denis Naughten: Let us put this in practical terms. We could be looking at an ask for the agricultural community of between 7 million tonnes and 8 million tonnes of a reduction between now and 2030. Teagasc has in place a roadmap that could achieve 2 million tonnes of that and, with a tailwind behind it, it might get up to 3.5 million tonnes. As an example, delivering on that target, however, would involve the use of protected urea, but protected urea cannot be got for love nor money at the moment.

Parking the issue of forestry, what funding is going into carbon sequestration on farms throughout the country? The research is welcome and it is a positive development, but what does it mean in practical terms between now and 2030? Is it not the case that the vast majority of carbon tax being generated, whether in the Minister's Department or other Departments, is only replacing direct Exchequer funding?

Deputy Michael McNamara: If we are going to reduce carbon emissions, we will obviously have to measure them. One of the many failings of the carbon action plan was that it did not even set out how we were going to measure emissions but rather that the Government will decide how will do so, presumably by way of a statutory instrument. Will either the Minister or his colleague the Minister of State, Senator Hackett, tell me how we are going to measure

emissions? Has that been determined by the Government? Whether we use the global warming potential, GWP, measurement criterion of GWP100 or GWP* will have a strong bearing for the purposes of agriculture, given that methane is treated very differently depending on whether one measurement criterion is used rather than another. Methane is a relatively short-lived gas compared with CO₂ and how it breaks down. Either way, the environmental lobby will say there is a strong argument for reducing methane because we can get a quick hit with it. However, the obvious corollary of that is that if one is reducing agricultural methane as a means to get a quick hit, one is not treating the problem.

Deputy Matt Carthy: I concur with other Members. It is vital to measure the carbon sequestration that is taking place in the agriculture sector. It is impossible to say that there is an obligation relating to carbon emissions if we do not also recognise the level of carbon storage. Does the Minister agree that we have to compile a report on a farm-by-farm basis so each individual farm is aware of the carbon that is stored on its land, the carbon sequestration that is taking place and the carbon that is being emitted, so that targets can be set on a farm-by-farm basis and rewards can be achieved for people who can shift the balance on that level? My fear is that if this is done on a State-wide or sector-wide basis the people who are providing the greatest benefit in respect of carbon sequestration and reducing emissions would not get the financial rewards for doing so.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: First, in response to Deputy Naughten, the key basis and platform on which we can monetise carbon sequestration and pay farmers for it is by having the measurement tools in place. I am giving significant funding to Teagasc to develop that. With regard to carbon tax replacing direct Exchequer funding, that is certainly not the case. A concern that has been raised over the last year or so by farmers is that they did not want to see it replacing direct Exchequer funding. The massive package I delivered yesterday is an increase, before carbon tax is included, on what was available in the last CAP programme in national co-funding. Indeed, the carbon tax on top of that represents a 60:40 ratio, whereby 60% of Pillar 2 will now be State funded versus 40% coming from Europe. The outgoing CAP was 47% from the State and 53% from Europe. It is additional, therefore, and is seriously delivering income directly to farm families.

Deputy McNamara asked about the measurement of it. Obviously, that will be clarified as part of the climate action plan. The key principle and objective at all times is ensuring that we can continue to produce the food we currently produce while driving down the emissions footprint of its production. That is the bottom line, in my view, with regard to setting feasible targets.

Deputy Carthy spoke about farm-by-farm measurement. The soil sampling scheme that I launched a few weeks ago is doing that farm-by-farm in terms of assessing what the benchmark is in each farm to enable farmers to see their current position and so they can build on and develop that in the years ahead.

Horticulture Sector

11. **Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if a report (details supplied) will examine the way Ireland can position itself to take advantage of the growing international trend to plant-based diets; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51527/21]

21 October 2021

Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh: My question is about the KPMG report recently commissioned by the Department, which is to examine the trend towards plant-based diets or increasing the amount of plants in our diets. Will the parameters of that report allow us to examine ways in which Ireland can position itself to take better advantage of that growing market internationally?

Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Senator Pippa Hackett): As Minister of State with responsibility for this sector I recently commissioned KPMG to compile a report on growth opportunities in the horticulture sector, including those opportunities deriving from the global trend towards plant-based diets. The report will form the basis of a roadmap for the sector, which will outline the support and approach required to take advantage of these opportunities, and there are many. The report's outputs will sit within our new ten-year strategy for the agrifood sector, Food Vision 2030.

Additionally, the prepared consumer food centre located in the Teagasc food research centre in Ashtown is funded by my Department to support research, development and innovation in the prepared consumer food sector. Horticulture certainly feeds into this in a significant way. The centre provides companies with the opportunity to pilot equipment, to scale up their own production and to enable adoption of novel technologies to meet evolving consumer demands and expectations. The services include technical support and advice, new product development, including with regard to plant-based products, laboratory and analytical testing, pilot scale processing and the packing of foods and food ingredients.

My Department also provides supports to help expansion across the horticulture industry in Ireland through the scheme of investment aid for the development of the commercial horticulture sector and the EU producer organisation scheme. My Department has committed an allocation of €9 million in this year's budget for the scheme of investment aid for the development of the commercial horticulture sector, recognising the sector's importance, as well as confidence in the sector to grow in the years ahead.

Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh: One of the things that have driven me mad for years, particularly at this time of the year, is to walk past apple trees laden down with apples only to find New Zealand apples on the shelves of our supermarkets. Mick Kelly had a similar journey with regard to garlic when he set up GIY Ireland Limited. He was looking at Chinese garlic on the shelves when it is so easy to grow it in this climate. By the same token, I visited Grantstown Tomatoes, tomato growers and horticulturists in Waterford, last week. The owner has an outstanding operation. The produce is of the highest quality and he uses biological pest control. All those things are absolutely first rate, but the market makes it incredibly difficult for him to make a margin. It is extremely tight and he finds that he can only aim at the highest end because we are not always prepared to pay for the quality. How can we help horticulture growers from now on to make it a more profitable business for the people involved?

Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Senator Pippa Hackett): The horticulture sector has been largely ignored over the decades in terms of support. That has increased more recently and it is something we have to build on. There is a role for horticulture, particularly now with the need to shorten supply chains. There is a huge import substitution piece that we are not embracing yet, and there is certainly an intent to do that. In budget 2022, €500,000 has been allocated for examining local food systems and how to connect local growers with local consumers. There are supports available but it is not always easy to navigate access to local foods for either a producer or a consumer. Work is going to

occur in that area.

Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh: It is a massive opportunity for local and rural jobs, in particular. The horticultural sector is worth approximately €467 million per annum to the economy, and approximately 6,600 people are directly employed in it. There are many different sectors within it, but in field vegetables we have gone from 300 operators in 1999 to 140 operators now. The number has more than halved in that time. While the amount of produce arriving on the shelves is more or less the same, we have fewer producers because profit margins are becoming incredibly tight. Even with regard to soft fruit operations, we know that staffing issues are increasingly difficult. It is a sector that is primed and ready for growth and we have an outstanding quality of produce but the sector needs support to help it become viable.

Deputy Michael McNamara: Garlic can be particularly difficult to grow, but I take the point about the necessity to replace imported horticulture with Irish horticulture. However, it will be difficult to do that when carrots are for sale at 49 cent per bag. There has to be some correlation between the price at which products are sold and the cost of production. I grew up in Clare and there was extensive market gardening in Kinvara, presumably supplying Galway mainly, and in Ogonnelloe, supplying Limerick. That is all gone because who can compete? People think they are doing the world a favour when they are buying organic carrots from Morocco that have been flown in here. Unless there is some type of link between the cost of production and the price at which produce is sold, there will be a difficulty.

A further difficulty is that while it provides an opportunity for more jobs, as Deputy Ó Cathasaigh said, existing producers cannot get labour. I realise it is a matter for the Department of Justice but we really need to look at labour because it is a problem in the horticulture sector and in the general agriculture sector, yet we are deporting people from Ireland. Many of them near my constituency are from Brazil. They came here to work and have family links. They are being deported because there is no work, yet nobody can get workers.

Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Senator Pippa Hackett): The labour issue is going to continue to be a problem, and I ask myself where it will end. We are spiralling towards a race to the bottom and we have to get off that track. That is in supporting local food producers.

10 o'clock

Many wonderful local food producers operate off a handful of acres, maybe employing five or six people supplying a small town with quite a significant number of horticultural projects and making a good living out of it. Therefore, it can be done. It is small scale. I suppose we very much focused on the retail side, the larger commercial growers and the supports tended to go that way, which is fine, but we end up with that conundrum. However, we also need to support people to grow for retail. That may drive us down the road whereby we are always looking for cheaper labour, always struggling with the price at the till. We need to look to other routes to market. Connecting with local growers is the way to go.

Agriculture Schemes

12. **Deputy Michael McNamara** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the average value of each basic payment scheme, BPS, entitlement per county in 2019 and

2020, respectively; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51679/21]

Deputy Michael McNamara: I ask the Minister to provide the average value of each BPS entitlement per county in 2019 and 2020, respectively. I do not know if he will list every single county, but perhaps he might list a few counties at the top, a few counties at the middle and a few counties at the bottom. Of course, I have a particular interest in County Clare.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I apologise to Deputy McNamara as while I have some of the overall details, I do not have the full list by county, including County Clare, but it will be forwarded to the Deputy. The variation in the county breakdown of average entitlement values is centred on the country average of approximately €185. That is before greening, which obviously is in addition to that. The minimum value was seen in Leitrim in both years with an average entitlement value of €151 in 2019 and €152 in 2020. The national average is €185 and Leitrim was the lowest at €152 in 2020.

The highest county average value in 2019 was in Kilkenny with an average value of €210 and in 2020 the highest average value was seen in Wexford at almost €210. The national average is €185; the highest was €210 and the lowest was €152 last year. The values varied very little from 2019 to 2020 in each county, with a maximum difference of just over €1 observed.

I refer here to the payment entitlement value only, with the vast majority of farmers also receiving the greening payment in addition to the entitlement value, which is an additional 44% of the entitlement value and obviously it is proportionate to the entitlement value. Grassland farmers are generally green by definition and therefore receive this greening payment automatically. Farmers in some other sectors must meet scheme terms and conditions to receive the greening payment.

A full table with the county breakdown will issue to the Deputy. Variation is from €152 to €210, with €185 being the average.

Deputy Michael McNamara: It is interesting, but not surprising, that the lowest is in the west and the highest is in the south east. I wonder if that is a general trend. I appreciate that the Minister does not have the figures and as I said at the outset, I did not expect him to have them all. Is that a general trend? It is interesting that the greening is a percentage of the entitlement. While agriculture per acre might be more productive in certain parts of the country than in others purely because they are gifted with better land and there is very little that can be done about that, there may be more environmental benefits to the type of farming in other parts of the country but that benefit is not being seen by those farmers. I ask this in the context of the debate on convergence and what we plan to do about greening measures. The information that we have to hand needs to feed into policy.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: That was the situation with greening with the outgoing CAP. As the Deputy knows, the eco schemes are being introduced now as part of Pillar 1, accounting for a proposed 25% this time around, which will be totally disconnected from entitlement value and will be paid at a flat rate per hectare.

While I do not have the full table here, the divergence might not be quite as large on a county basis as people might think, even though it is significant. That gap will be closing in the time ahead because we will be moving to 85% convergence over the course of the next CAP. In addition, there is the flattening impact of the eco scheme and the flattening impact of front-loading, with 25% in the eco scheme and an additional 10% in front-loading. That 35% will

flatten immediately from the start of the next CAP and the remainder will flatten to 85% over the course of the period.

In counties, such as Clare with more small and medium-sized farms, the front-loading will have a significant impact and that will add an additional €42 per entitlement on the first 30 ha. I know that will affect a number of farmers in the Deputy's county.

Deputy Michael McNamara: The Minister made a point about small and medium-sized farmers, which is a bit of a misnomer. Will the environmental measures be capped at a certain size of farm? Someone could have a large holding of marginal land while someone else might have a much smaller holding of more productive land. If it is capped, it will penalise the person with the marginal land. For example, the Burren is productive and is renowned obviously, but it takes a sizeable acreage to feed a herd of cattle. Similarly, someone might have a large chunk of land in Slieve Aughty which looks fantastic on paper until one actually goes and sees the land. Someone with much smaller acreage could have more productive land. Capping it at a certain acreage or even having a sliding scale could be counterproductive to what the Minister is hoping to achieve.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: The objective behind the eco scheme is to achieve an environmental result from it and it is about how the land is managed. There is a flat rate per hectare for that. It is not a straightforward direct payment; it is for how the farmer manages the land. Therefore, it is logical that the eco scheme aspect of it applies to all the land being managed. The proposal is that it will apply to all the land that is being managed in that way under the eco scheme the farmer chooses.

Fishing Industry

13. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if trawlers over 18 m in length are currently permitted to carry out fishing activities in Irish waters inside of the six-nautical-mile limit; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51539/21]

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I am returning to a matter that was raised under a priority question earlier. I am asking about the position with boats of over 18 m. I have tried twice to get clarification from the Minister's office. I was forced into submitting this parliamentary question. A Topical Issue was ruled out of order, which I understand as the question was *sub judice*. There are serious implications here and I wish to return to the matter to tease out what analysis the Department has done since the ban was lifted. What tonnage of sprat is being caught?

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I do not have the figures for the tonnage of sprat, but I will see if I can get that. Sprat is a non-quota species. The Marine Institute would probably have figures and may be able to do a general assessment.

As I said to Deputy Cairns earlier, I am awaiting the final judgment from the Court of Appeal at which point I will decide how I proceed. Obviously, I have outlined my commitment to the six-nautical-mile zone and the prioritisation for smaller vessels. When I get the judgment, I will need to reflect on how I will proceed.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I hope I can benefit from the time the Minister has given

up. I appreciate the Minister's bona fides and that he is supportive of this. This policy was announced in 2018 and it was to come into effect in 2019 or 2020 with a three-year stay for the bigger trawlers to allow them adjust. The Minister knows more about this than I do. My difficulty is that while the judgment might have been perfected in October, the Minister has known since July 2020. Given the seriousness of this matter, I have no idea how a stay was not applied for in time, applied for months later, refused, appealed, granted for a period of time and then removed.

This policy was a game changer and was backed by almost all of the approximately 800 submissions made and by all the relevant and important organisations on the ground. Sprat may not be bound by quota, but it is a most important source of food for fish and mammals, and vital for the ecosystem. I know the Minister appreciates the importance of this, but the big trawlers are now going back in to remove sprat unsustainably.

Acting Chairman (Deputy John Lahart): The Minister did not use all his time with the previous reply.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: When I appealed this in the Court of Appeal I also applied for a stay on the previous decision removing the ban on the six nautical mile zones. The Court of Appeal allowed the stay at that stage. Maybe six weeks or so ago, the Court of Appeal removed that stay but I am still waiting on its final judgment. My commitment to this is clear and it has been very much informed in the latest period by engagement with the court and the court decisions. As it stands, I must wait for the final detail on the outcome of the appeal and reflect on and decide how to proceed.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: The answer to my simple question is also simple. It is that the boats are free to go in and fish unsustainably, taking out as much sprat as they possibly can and as quickly as they can. That is our current position despite a policy decision way back indicating that this was unsustainable. It is despite the rising numbers of sprat being caught in an unsustainable manner in 2021.

Why was this process not fast-tracked or explained to the court? I do not want to get into anything substantive that is *sub judice*. Why was it not explained to the court that the matter is extremely urgent? We fast-track commercial matters and this is absolutely essential with respect to climate change and biodiversity emergencies and the plight of local fishermen. Yet we have a complete lack of clarity in how the stay was lifted.

I wrote to the Minister's office twice. I do not want to personalise this matter but confusion was allowed to persist so we had to raise it in this manner. When will the judgment be given or what indication has been given from the court in this respect?

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: Deputy Connolly appreciates these are matters for the court and not for my office to decide. Only the court can give an indication in that regard. As a party to the appeal I cannot give such an indication.

I applied to the court for a stay and this was granted, meaning those large vessels were blocked from coming into the six nautical mile zone while the court was adjudicating on its decision. I applied for a further stay a number of weeks ago and the court did not grant it. That is the legal position and I am awaiting the final outcome of the appeal decision. As the Deputy can see from the court process that was undertaken, the banning of vessels over 18 m from that six nautical mile zone involves a complicated consultation process. That was undertaken under

the leadership of the previous Minister, Deputy Michael Creed, who was very committed to this. This was contested in the courts and that is the position we are in today.

Agriculture Industry

14. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine his plans for the future of the beef task force; and the consideration he has given to extending its remit in order to secure a fair price for beef farmers. [51705/21]

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: What are the Minister's plans for the future of the beef task force and what consideration has been given to extending its remit in order to secure a fair price for beef farmers? Is the Minister satisfied it has achieved the transparency and equity it set out to achieve?

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: The beef task force was established on foot of the beef sector agreement of 15 September 2019. Its remit as set out in its terms of reference was to monitor the implementation of the actions arising from that agreement. The task force was to meet at least quarterly from October 2019 for a period of one year after which the task force's progress was to be reviewed. However, progress was delayed in 2020 due to Covid-19.

As the Deputy may be aware, I requested the independent chair of the task force, Mr. Michael Dowling, to provide a report to me on the progress to date of the task force, which he has done. I will complete my analysis of the final report, after which I will make the necessary decision on future strategic engagement with the sector.

The beef sector agreement contained 38 specific actions. Of these 38 actions, 30 were finite actions that had timelines attached for completion. The remaining eight are ongoing actions, which by their nature are long-term and will continue outside of the context of the beef task force. All documents from the task force meetings, including minutes and updated progress reports, are published on the *gov.ie* website.

It should be noted that the task force was set up in response to the issues that prevailed in the sector in the late summer of 2019 and had specific actions to address. It is conceivable that it may not be the most suitable vehicle for addressing those that exist in 2021 and beyond. I will make a decision on this shortly. Effective strategic engagement across the beef sector is crucial to its development in an economically, socially and environmentally sustainable way that works for all actors in the supply chain and it must work for farmers in particular.

As the Deputy is aware, the determination of price for beef or any other commodity is a commercial matter. However, the Deputy can be assured that my Department and I will continue to support constructive strategic engagement within the sector, as well as measures aimed at strengthening the supply chain, including support for producer organisations and interventions aimed at supporting productive and environmental efficiency for beef farmers in the future. I am also progressing work to deliver the primary legislation required to establish the office of the national food ombudsman, which will have a major role in delivering much-needed transparency for the sector.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: One of the key tasks that needs to be undertaken is a comprehensive analysis of the impact of factory-owned feedlots in the market, including their im-

pact on the prices and effect on the environment. Figures released by the Department indicate the numbers originating from feedlots has increased drastically. The number of cattle originating from units with feedlot status during the first eight months of 2021 was 224,000, and that puts this year's potential overall kill for animals originating from controlled finishing units well on course to exceed last year's total of 299,000. Last year's figure was, in itself, 10,500 stronger than the figure for 2019, which was 288,500.

Deputy Michael McNamara: When the beef task force was introduced, I predicted it would be a talking shop. I accept I was wrong and it was not even a talking shop. How it could not meet during the Covid-19 pandemic using Skype, Zoom or Microsoft Teams like the rest of us is beyond me.

I completely agree with Deputy Conway-Walsh about feedlots. This growth of cattle coming out of feedlots is very much at odds with the image of Irish beef that the Minister is rightly seeking to portray abroad. It is an idea of cattle happily roaming the pastures green when in fact they may be in feedlots being fed with concentrates.

The 30-month rule was a main item of contention and must be reviewed. It was initially introduced as a measure against bovine spongiform encephalopathy but now we are told it is now an environmental measure. To finish cattle and particularly continental breeds at 30 months, there is a requirement to be fed with concentrates, possibly in a feedlot. Either way those concentrates have a carbon footprint that must be considered. People are seeking to portray the 30-month rule as an environmental measure but it could have the opposite effect.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: The task force did valuable work and it was important in bringing all the stakeholders together. The reports were very important, particularly the transparency reports. I am progressing the legislation for the food ombudsman and I can see it carrying out a role there, bringing that much-needed transparency into the food supply chain.

I will reflect on this and it is important we have a structure for engagement over time, working with all stakeholders in the beef sector. I will reflect on how to step forward with the work and outcomes from the task force. I am grateful to Mr. Michael Dowling for the work he carried out. It was challenging and a really difficult time for the sector when it was set up. He drove on the work and I am grateful to him for taking on the role. Transparency is key in this and that is central to my objectives as Minister.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: I thank the Minister. Despite the achievements to date, there is still a clear trend for an ever-increasing share of intensive farming driving out the family farms. That is what we are concerned about in the west of Ireland. The other clear trend over the past number of years is for beef prices to get ever lower. The Minister might say for a moment in time, they have increased, but the continued growth of the factory feedlot presents an existential threat to the Irish beef product. Consumers from all over the world buy it because of the image of the cows and farmers in fields, as has been mentioned, and that type of farming. If the beef produced in this country continues to come from the factory feedlots, so too will that image and that will damage us in the long term.

Deputy Michael McNamara: It is regrettable that cattle coming from feedlots will benefit from the protected geographical indication, PGI, status applied for by the Minister, if his application is accepted. It will mean farmers who produce cattle in a more traditional way, that are never housed and are outdoors, perhaps in the Burren or wherever, during the winter, and are

killed off the land must compete with huge feedlot producers. That is what destroyed agriculture throughout North America and we are letting it happen here.

I invite the Minister to consider the 30-months rule and the real impact it has. To finish cattle at 30 months - certainly in the west of Ireland - such as continentals, one must give them concentrate feed. We do not grow soya. It is shipped in and there is a significant carbon footprint associated with that which is not present with grass-finished cattle at 36 months.

Deputy Matt Carthy: I commend Deputy Conway-Walsh on raising this issue. Will the Minister confirm that the suckler scheme in the next CAP will include preventative measures for farmers who want to increase their suckler herds? If so, that would be the second time a scheme would be introduced that seeks to either reduce or limit suckler production in this State, when a similar measure has never been brought in against more environmentally damaging methods, including the factory feedlots referred to? Such a proposition would be counterproductive and prevent the development of what is our most important sector within agriculture.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I disagree with Deputy McNamara in regard to being able to finish animals under 30 months off grass. That practice is done on many farms.

Deputy Michael McNamara: Is it done without concentrates?

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: It is done with minimal concentrates and without concentrates. The Deputies have seen in their part of the country that many animals are sold in March and, for ten or 12 weeks, are put through a finishing programme that increases their weight and value. That is certainly a common practice and contributes to the overall value of the animal. To qualify for the PGI grass-fed status, animals will have to be fed on 95% grass diets throughout their life, which is an important aspect, and they will have to meet that criteria.

On Deputy Carthy's point in regard to the new beef carbon efficiency scheme, the first ten cows will receive €150 and €120 thereafter, which is an increase from the €90 and €80 available under the beef data and genomics programme, BDGP. There will not be a limit on the number of cows farmers can keep within that scheme.

Deputy Matt Carthy: Can they expand?

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I will set a reference in terms of how many will be paid for, but there will not be a limit on farmers increasing their numbers. This is a matter on which I have engaged with farmers throughout the country. My objective is to fully support the suckler farmer to ensure it remains an anchor of our beef sector, to support family farms, and the scheme I put in place will do that.

Question No. 15 replied to with Written Answers.

Organic Farming

16. **Deputy Johnny Guirke** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the measures that were introduced in budget 2022 to support the organic sector; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51436/21]

Deputy Matt Carthy: We spoke previously about the organic farm scheme and the specific

supports for farmers. Will the Minister of State outline the broader measures she intends to introduce in order to expand the organic sector?

Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Senator Pippa Hackett): I am delighted to have secured the significant increase in the budget for organic farming in 2022. Funding for the organic farming scheme was increased to €21 million, up from €16 million last year, and €2 million was allocated for further organic sector development measures. This increase is welcome and will certainly address the growing demand from both farmers and consumers for this type of production. The €21 million funding is a doubling of the funding for organics since I took office less than two years.

The Deputies will be aware that the programme for Government contains a commitment to align Ireland's organic land area with that of the EU average. At the time of the programme for Government formation talks, that figure was 7.5%, although I appreciate it is higher at present. In assisting the delivery of that commitment through the scheme, I will also progress the implementation of the National Organic Strategy 2019-2025, which sets out ambitious growth targets for the sector by aligning with market opportunities. Engagement with Bord Bia in identifying those opportunities and the opening them up for our producers is crucial.

The additional funding allocated to the opening of the organic farming scheme in 2022 could provide for an additional 50,000 ha of land converted to organic production. This would represent an increase in excess of 50% of the area currently farmed organically. It will take us further along the path to the goal of 7.5% land cover. I encourage all farmers from all sectors to engage with my Department and relevant agencies. Advisory boards will be made available to farmers for information.

Deputy Matt Carthy: My difficulty is that the Minister of State refers to significant increases in funding, and such language, yet she keeps reverting to the pathetic target of 7.5% over the course of the next CAP. There is one magic ingredient that will ensure a substantial over-subscription by farmers to the organic farm scheme, that is, the removal of the anomaly that prevents those on the organic farm scheme from also participating in agri-environmental schemes. With a bit of imagination and flexibility on the part of the Department and the EU, that can be resolved. Will the Minister of State ensure farmers can participate in both the organic farm scheme and the agri-environmental scheme? Both schemes would benefit from a show of flexibility.

Deputy Michael McNamara: I, too, welcome the increase in funding but the problems in the market need to be tackled also. In livestock production, organic farming is not attractive. We know there is a monopoly among a couple of big players in the meat business. They offer a pittance more for organic beef compared to non-organic beef, such that it is not economically worthwhile producing organic beef. One can go to independent abattoirs, however they are - pardon the pun - an increasingly endangered species for a variety of reasons. Only the Minister of State can tackle those reasons.

Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Senator Pippa Hackett): On the target, I appreciate it is nowhere near the EU target of 25%. We are coming from an incredibly low base level because of low support for this sector in recent decades. I am getting us on the road to improve that. It is my hope, if we hit those targets by the end of this CAP, the door will be open to ramp them up in the next CAP.

Organic farmers are not excluded from agri-environmental schemes. Sometimes the Commission rules and the regulations limit double payments on the same land for essentially the same measures, which is the issue. Organic farmers are invited to apply for and are at the top of the list to get into agri-environmental schemes. It depends on the design of that and is a matter I will consider in the next round of CAP negotiations.

Deputy Matt Carthy: The Minister of State can say the farmers are not prevented from applying to agri-environmental schemes but the reality has been that it has been virtually impossible for them to enter both schemes under the previous CAP and is a matter that needs to be addressed.

The Minister of State referred to Bord Bia. There is a recognition that Bord Bia and Teagasc have a huge role to play in the research and marketing of organic produce, if this sector is to expand and become successful. I am not sure whether I trust either organisation to do that unilaterally. There must be pressure applied and the budgets of both organisations must be ring-fenced to indicate that they need to reflect the level of ambition that the rhetoric suggests is there, in order that specific marketing and research budgets are assigned for organics. Will the Minister of State consider this?

Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Senator Pippa Hackett): I have engaged closely with Bord Bia and Teagasc. It is my priority to direct those agencies to increase what they do for organics with regards to Teagasc's research and advisory role and Bord Bia's marketing of organic produce, including domestic marketing, which is important. This relates to the previous comments on market opportunities, particularly for livestock farmers. I know organic producers. Some take the factory route while others look at a more local base and command a very significant price for their animals. With regard to supports for connecting local food producers to local consumers, there is great scope in that area. I would like to see that explored through Bord Bia and in other ways.

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Inquiry into the Death of Mr. Shane O'Farrell

79. **Deputy Martin Kenny** asked the Minister for Justice when the results of the scoping exercise in relation to the death of a person (details supplied) will be made available to their family; and when the full commission of investigation will be established. [51337/21]

Deputy Martin Kenny: My question this morning relates to the scoping exercise with regard to the case of Shane O'Farrell, which has been going on for quite some time now. I hope the Minister has some positive news in that regard so that it can be ensured that the commission of investigation will start as quickly as possible. As the Minister will know, the entire Oireachtas voted on this. It is very important that we ensure transparency around this. Shane O'Farrell lost his life in the most tragic of circumstances and his family has waited too long to see justice delivered.

Acting Chairman (Deputy John Lahart): We are going to stick to the time.

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Minister for Justice (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. I assure him that I recognise the ongoing pain and anguish of the O'Farrell family on the tragic death of Shane and I deeply sympathise with them on their loss.

As the Deputy will be aware, a highly respected retired judge, Gerard Haughton, has been conducting a scoping exercise into the tragic circumstances surrounding Shane O'Farrell's death. The purpose of this exercise is to advise as to whether any further investigation or inquiry beyond those already carried out is necessary and, if so, to advise on the form of such an investigation or inquiry and its terms of reference. Judge Haughton furnished an interim report to the then Minister for Justice in November 2019 in which he stated that he would not restrict or limit Shane's family in their submissions to him or the nature and extent of the documentation they wished to furnish to him in his scoping exercise.

As the Deputy will appreciate, the judge is completely independent in conducting this scoping exercise. It is not open to me, as Minister, to comment on any aspect of the judge's work or the process of compiling the final report. My Department maintains regular contact with the judge and has assured him that any assistance he requires to complete his final report will be made available.

While I genuinely regret that this process has taken significantly longer than any of us would wish, I am also aware that the judge is doing all that he can to ensure that the concerns which the family have raised with him during the process are addressed to the greatest extent possible. I understand that Judge Haughton has been in contact with the O'Farrell family throughout his scoping process. I am informed the process is now at the stage of seeking comments on various sections of the report from the parties named in it, including my Department.

Deputy Martin Kenny: I thank the Minister. I appreciate that the process taking place is independent and that Judge Haughton has his work to do. We all understood that from the very outset. Unfortunately, it has taken a very long time for this family to reach a point at which they feel they are getting some semblance of justice. As many of our teenage youngsters do, Shane O'Farrell went out to ride his bicycle and get in a bit of exercise but he never came home. His family were shocked that the man who killed him had numerous charges against him and was on bail in both the North and the South. How this tragedy unfolded for the family is just unbelievable. While I am not directing this at the Minister herself, the system seems to be covering this up. Until we get a breakthrough, there can be no other word for it.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: I thank the Deputy. I, too, understand what this family has been through. I know Deputy Carthy, who is sitting behind Deputy Martin Kenny, has been speaking to the family, as have I. It is not easy for them but it is fair to say that this process is in place and that the judge is doing his work. We have to wait until he produces his report. As far as my Department is concerned, we will support him in carrying out his work in any way we can. The judge's final report on the outcome of his scoping exercise is awaited. I assure the Deputy that this final report will be an important part of ensuring that any outstanding questions are answered.

Deputy Martin Kenny: We need progress on this. The experience of the family and their community has been one of delay and more delay. I ask the Minister for an assurance that she will contact the judge, not to interfere in the process, but to relay the heartfelt grief of this family and to let him know that this grief is being compounded by these delays. I ask the Minister to do that as a matter of urgency and to bring an urgency to this case. This happened in her

own constituency. I know she has spoken to the family herself. This is one example but many other families feel they are in the same circumstances. With regard to the Shane O'Farrell case, we want the Minister to speak to the judge to ensure this is delivered as quickly as possible. It cannot go on forever. It has been going on for years now.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: I thank the Deputy. As I said, and as I know the Deputy will appreciate, the judge is completely independent in conducting this scoping exercise and it is not open to me, as Minister, to comment on any aspect of the judge's work or the process of compiling the final report. I understand that Judge Haughton has been in contact with the O'Farrell family throughout this scoping exercise. He recently wrote to my Department seeking comments on a number of sections of his draft report. The Department further understands that Judge Haughton has been in touch with the O'Farrell family regarding this matter. Following receipt of responses from all relevant parties, it is understood that Judge Haughton will be in a position to finalise this report. Like the Deputy, I hope this report will be made available very soon.

An Garda Síochána

80. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Justice if she has engaged with the Garda Commissioner in respect of further issues regarding the appropriateness of the management and cancellation of computer-aided despatch incidents and 999 calls (details supplied); and if her Department has provided administrative assistance and or advice to Garda management on same to date in 2021. [51666/21]

Deputy Catherine Murphy: This question relates to the cancellation of a very significant number of 999 calls. I am seeking information from the Minister as to whether her Department has provided administrative assistance or advice to Garda management on that issue in 2021.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: I thank Deputy Catherine Murphy for raising this matter. As the Deputy will be aware, I consider any inappropriate cancellation of 999 calls a very serious matter. This falls significantly below the high standards that the public expect from gardaí and the high standards that An Garda Síochána sets for itself. I am particularly concerned that anyone experiencing domestic abuse or anyone in a vulnerable position who summoned the courage to seek assistance may not have received it. The Policing Authority was asked by the Minister, Deputy McEntee, to oversee the review being carried out by An Garda Síochána in regard to this matter and there have been a number of engagements between the authority and An Garda Síochána since March this year.

I share the authority's concern about the continuation of what appears to be the inappropriate cancellation and classification of calls since the introduction of the new procedures. These circumstances will of course be considered by the authority as part of its continuing oversight of the Garda review of this matter and will be taken into account in the work being carried out by an external policing expert who has been appointed to assist the authority in this task. I await the outcome of the authority's work in this regard.

My Department has ongoing engagement with the Garda authorities regarding their work to address issues which have arisen in respect of the management of 999 calls. The question of the Department providing administrative assistance has not arisen. However, I do not think that would be appropriate, having regard to the Commissioner's statutory responsibility for the

administration of An Garda Síochána. I will, of course, consider any recommendations the authority chooses to make regarding the future management of these matters.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: When was the Minister's colleague, Deputy McEntee, first informed that there would be an obligation to inform her under section 41 of the Garda Síochána Act 2005? Did the Minister or, indeed, the acting Minister for Justice or the Garda Commissioner receive any protected disclosures in regard to the cancellation of these calls? If there were protected disclosures, what happened to them? When the issue was reported in *The Sunday Times* in late 2020, what precisely was communicated? Was it communicated through the press office? There is a sense that what was communicated initially was that there was some technical issue. That certainly was not my reading of the situation. Has there been full and frank engagement between the Minister and Garda throughout this process?

Deputy Heather Humphreys: I thank the Deputy. The Policing Authority was asked by the Minister, Deputy McEntee, to oversee the review being carried out by An Garda Síochána. There have been a number of engagements between the authority and An Garda Síochána since March this year. Regarding the exact date that the Minister was made aware of this, I do not have the information to hand but I will make sure it is provided to the Deputy.

I share the concern of the authority about the continuation of the inappropriate cancellation and classification of calls since the introduction of the new procedures. As the Deputy knows, the independent policing expert is carrying out a separate examination of the review and that is being carried out by the Garda authorities which will assist the authority in its oversight of this matter and its advice to me in this regard. The Commissioner has said that it is of concern to him and he has referred the matter to the authorities.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: I asked the Minister about protected disclosures. She might come back to me on that very specifically. It appears to me that there is certainly an issue with the credibility of the Garda National Protective Services Bureau. Would the Minister accept that is the case? Not only were large numbers of 999 calls cancelled, in areas where people were very definitely at risk, that continued even after that issue had been notified and was in the public domain. Has the Minister communicated anything in regard to that directly with the Garda Commissioner?

Deputy Heather Humphreys: Regarding the protected disclosure, the Deputy will appreciate that there is a duty of confidentiality regarding protected disclosures as set out in the Protected Disclosures Act 2014. It would not be appropriate for me to comment on a protected disclosure.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: Have there been any? How many have there been? How have they been dealt with?

Deputy Heather Humphreys: There have been. I will get my officials to provide the Deputy with that information. The Commissioner is taking this very seriously. The management of An Garda Síochána is a matter for the Commissioner. The Commissioner is due to appear before the authority next week, as the Deputy will know. I expect that this issue will be raised at that meeting. This is oversight in operation. That is exactly what this is about. That shows the structures are in place to ensure that when there is a problem there is oversight in place to deal with it. We need to allow the Policing Authority to do its work and await the report.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

An Garda Síochána

81. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Justice her views on and response to criticism by Garda superintendents of the proposed policing Bill; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [51417/21]

Deputy Dara Calleary: I am concerned that the proposed policing Bill will walk us into a crisis. I have observed the various commentary on it. There were pre-legislative scrutiny hearings. What work has been done in the Department to address the very serious concerns that were expressed, even outside of the pre-legislative scrutiny process? A far greater response is required.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: I thank Deputy Calleary for raising this matter. It is important to acknowledge that significant and necessary reforms have taken place in An Garda Síochána over the past few years, and Garda superintendents have played their part in these reforms. I am conscious that the publication earlier this year of the general scheme of the policing, security and community safety Bill represents a major milestone in the ongoing process of reform, and is particularly vital in providing a legislative framework for the implementation of many of the recommendations from the commission on the future of policing in Ireland. The Deputy will no doubt recall that the commission undertook significant consultation with gardaí of all ranks and with Garda staff in finalising its report in 2018.

I attended the Garda superintendents' annual association conference last week and listened carefully to their concerns. Significant organisational reform, including institutional change, culture and work practices, is always challenging, but the Government's aim is to provide a new coherent governance and oversight framework that will strengthen external oversight of An Garda Síochána and internal governance within the organisation as recommended by the commission. Central to this vision is a professional, ethical, modern and effective service that is efficiently managed, properly trained and equipped and is clearly accountable.

The Bill provides for a new policing and community safety authority which will be entirely focused on providing robust independent oversight. It will combine the functions of the Policing Authority and the Garda Síochána Inspectorate, building on their excellent work, while reducing the number of oversight bodies. The Bill will also greatly strengthen the independent oversight of the handling and investigation of allegations of wrongdoing by Garda personnel, through expanding the remit of the independent ombudsman and by overhauling its investigation procedures to support the timely, transparent and effective resolution of complaints and investigations while safeguarding due process for all concerned.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I thank the Minister. Garda superintendents say the Bill will give more power to oversight bodies to deal with gardaí than An Garda Síochána has to deal with criminals. That is the kind of thing that is said for attention at annual conferences, but it is a very serious charge from a group of people who, as the Minister said, have co-operated with reform and are leaders in their communities and of the force.

The Commissioner has spoken about sections of the Bill granting powers to the proposed new ombudsman which, in his direct comments to the Joint Committee on Justice this week,

would be disproportionate and unconstitutional and will not withstand an expensive and time-consuming test in the courts. In her response, the Minister spoke about the coherence of structures. The Commissioner said the introduction of a wide range of oversight structures in bodies with clashing and conflicting agreements will see the Commissioner of the day spend more time on reporting. He said he has concerns about the amount of time he will spend on accountability bodies which makes the proposed system dysfunctional and unconstitutional and that there are conflicting remits.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: The Joint Committee on Justice is conducting pre-legislative scrutiny, as the Deputy said, on the policing, security and community safety Bill. I am aware of the Commissioner's comments at the committee meeting yesterday. As the Commissioner explained, we have had good engagement. I have discussed this with the Commissioner. He has come into the Department and we have had a good engagement. There have been ongoing discussions between my Department and the Commissioner during this process. We had another meeting recently and my Department will continue to engage with the Commissioner and the other bodies concerned with the Bill as drafting continues. I also look forward to receiving the justice committee report in due course. As I said, we will continue to work on this. Deputy Calleary is right: we need to get the views of the people for whom we need to implement this legislation. I said at the Garda superintendents' conference that we will listen to them and take on board their views. We all want the same thing: a world-class policing service that provides the service it has to provide to the public. At the same time, however, it has to be transparent and accountable.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Absolutely. We all want that, but to have a world-class policing service we must have the confidence of An Garda, which, at all levels, is losing confidence in this Bill. The Minister has had interaction with the Commissioner but he appeared before the justice committee this week and used the phrases to which I referred so, obviously, he is not too convinced that there will be too many changes. The Minister had the interaction with the Garda superintendents. What about the issue coming from rank-and-file members of their difficulties in dealing with vexatious complaints? Will that be dealt with? When we hear the Garda Commissioner, who is a straight-down-the-line kind of Commissioner, use the words "disproportionate, unconstitutional and will not withstand an expensive and time-consuming test in the courts", that needs to be dealt with urgently, I suggest, rather than waiting on reports.

Finally, I express a concern about the dilution, contained within the new Bill, of the joint policing committees, JPCs, which are extremely effective. It is a retrograde step to reverse the progress and the effectiveness of joint policing committees with these new community safety partnerships.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: The Deputy will acknowledge that there has been much reform in An Garda Síochána over recent years. I acknowledge that. It is important we engage with the relevant bodies, as I said to the Deputy. We need to work with the Garda Síochána because it is the superintendents, the chief superintendents, the commissioners and everybody else in the Garda Síochána who will have to help us implement these changes. Change is not easy, and I accept that, but it is important there is engagement. There has been engagement and, as this process goes through the Houses of the Oireachtas, there will be further engagement. We want to make sure not only that we can support the Garda in the work it does but also that there is accountability and transparency.

Visa Applications

82. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Justice the progress to date on the processing of visas, including family reunification applications, for Afghan nationals arising from the fall of the democratically elected Government in Afghanistan; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [51544/21]

Deputy Colm Burke: What progress has been made on the processing of visa applications, including family reunification applications, for Afghan nationals, arising from the fall of the democratically elected Government in Afghanistan? Will the Minister outline the progress that has been made to date?

Minister of State at the Department of Justice (Deputy James Browne): I thank Deputy Burke for raising this very important question. I share his concerns for the Afghan people and the humanitarian crisis unfolding in Afghanistan.

Ireland has acted swiftly and compassionately to demonstrate our support and solidarity with the Afghan people. My Department is working closely with colleagues in the Department of Foreign Affairs and the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth to ensure a co-ordinated national response. This includes opening the Irish refugee protection programme under the remit of the Minister, Deputy O’Gorman, to Afghan persons in need of protection and working to ensure that applications received from Afghan nationals under the various State schemes for immigration residence and international protection can be prioritised for speedier processing where possible. These schemes provide avenues for Afghan nationals to seek protection and for eligible family members living in Ireland to seek to have their close family members granted permission to reside in Ireland where the relevant criteria are met. More than 740 Afghan nationals have been granted permission to reside in the State so far this year.

The Minister, Deputy Humphreys, and I have secured Government approval for an additional initiative, namely the special Afghan admission programme, which will provide places for up to 500 Afghan family members. Each applicant will have an opportunity to nominate up to four family members who are currently residing in Afghanistan or who have fled to neighbouring territories and who they consider are especially at risk in terms of their freedom and safety. The programme, including the detailed eligibility criteria and the application process, will be developed over the coming months with a view to issuing a call for applications in December. The programme is unique across the European Union and was hailed by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, UNHCR, as a very welcome commitment by Ireland that will bring much solace to Afghans who are worried about their relatives abroad.

In the meantime, all current immigration avenues remain open for new applications, including visa and family reunification applications. My Department will process any new applications received speedily and sympathetically.

Deputy Colm Burke: Can the Minister of State outline how long it is taking to process applications from the time they come into the Department? In addition, I have written to the Minister about people who are part of the judicial process in Afghanistan and who are very vulnerable because of certain decisions they made when the democratically elected Government was in place. Can priority be given to that group of people, who are now at serious risk?

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Deputy Paul Donnelly: I also thank Deputy Burke for raising this question. It is extremely important. I have been in contact with both Departments about a constituent of mine who has family in Afghanistan. Members of the family previously worked for the Afghan Government, one in a particularly high-profile position. That person is now going from safe house to safe house and is being protected by his family. It is an extremely serious case and I urge that it be considered. Evidence has shown that this person is particularly high-profile and at real risk. His family and their friends who are helping this person are also at serious risk, and we know that the Taliban is going from door to door searching for this person.

Deputy James Browne: I reiterate that what Ireland is doing about the Afghan situation is unique. Between our Department - the Minister, Deputy Humphreys, and me - and the Ministers, Deputies O’Gorman and Coveney, significant steps have been taken to help the Afghan people inasmuch as we can as one nation. We are encouraging other nations across the European Union and the European Union itself to do similar. I do not have to hand the specific numbers for the applications that have been processed but I can get them to the Deputy later today because I know they are available. What I can say is that any applications for visas from Afghan people are being processed as a matter of priority and have moved to the top of the list. As for the Judiciary and high-profile cases, there are a number of cases ongoing. I do not want to give any details, but a number of cases are being worked on closely with the Irish Judiciary and the Department.

Deputy Colm Burke: Finally, is the Minister of State satisfied that, once the applications are processed, we have adequate support measures in place for the people coming here? He might not be able to give me an answer here and now, but I would like to get details of the process and the level of supports in place.

11 o’clock

Deputy James Browne: That is absolutely correct. We need to ensure that for anybody coming here the supports are put in place. That is why we have worked with the Minister, Deputy O’Gorman, in that respect. As in many cases, the supports that need to be put in place need to be worked on with the Minister, Deputy O’Gorman, to ensure they are put in place. They would include, for example, school and mental health supports and other health protections. We are ensuring that those are in place for anybody who comes here. Of course, we have other commitments in respect of other refugees such as Syrians. We have a strong, robust process in place to ensure that those supports are there for any refugees coming to Ireland, and we will ensure that the same happens for the Afghan people.

An Garda Síochána

83. **Deputy Joe Flaherty** asked the Minister for Justice the number of gardaí assigned to stations in County Longford; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [51553/21]

Deputy Joe Flaherty: The Minister will be aware that Garda numbers have fallen for the past five consecutive months and are now at their lowest since January 2020. This is a cause of concern and annoyance within the force but also across rural communities.

Will the Minister of State give some figures on the number of personnel in each Garda station in County Longford?

Deputy James Browne: The budget provided by the Government to the Garda Commissioner continues to increase to unprecedented levels, with an allocation of €1.952 billion for 2021. Budget 2022 provides more than €2 billion in funding. This reflects the Government's commitment to making sure people are safe in their communities.

As the Deputy will be aware, the Garda Commissioner is by law responsible for the management and administration of An Garda Síochána, including the deployment of Garda members throughout the State. As Minister of State, I have no role in these independent functions. I am assured that Garda management keeps the distribution of resources under continual review.

I can inform the Deputy that as at 30 September 2021, the latest date for which figures are available, there were 139 gardaí assigned to stations in County Longford, an increase of 13% since 2015 when there were 123 Gardaí assigned.

Following a period when the Garda Training College in Templemore was closed due to Covid-19 restrictions, which constrained recruitment, I am glad to confirm that 450 gardaí will be recruited this year and the funding provided for next year fully supports the recruitment of Garda members and staff to resume in full. In particular, the funding announced in budget 2022 will enable the recruitment of 800 new Garda recruits and 400 Garda staff in 2022 - an additional 1,200 personnel. This increase in the number of Garda members and staff will deliver significant growth in operational policing hours nationwide and improved services to the public generally.

Furthermore, I am pleased to note that the first meeting of the new Longford community safety partnership was held on 20 September. This initiative has the potential to further support the work of the Garda in Longford through building on the existing joint policing committee. It brings together residents, community representatives, business interests, councillors, the local authority, An Garda Síochána and State services, including the HSE and Tusla, to devise and implement local community safety plans, reflecting community priorities and local safety issues. The Longford partnership is one of three pilots, which will run for the next two years. I am also delighted that budget 2022 provides for the establishment of a new community safety innovation fund.

Deputy Joe Flaherty: The Minister may be aware that an unexpected but very beneficial consequence of the Covid pandemic was that trainee gardaí from Templemore were dispatched nationwide to support the Covid policing effort. This was transformative in County Longford because it allowed stations to move from a traditional roster of six ten-hour shifts to a more effective and productive roster of four 12-hour shifts. It greatly enhanced the visibility of officers on the street. The additional officers deployed in Longford throughout Covid points to the optimum number of officers needed to safely police the county. The number of personnel across County Longford needs to be augmented to approach the number we had when trainee officers were provided throughout Covid. I hope this can be taken on board by the Commissioner and the Department.

Deputy James Browne: I thank the Deputy. I also thank rank and file and senior Garda officers who stepped up to the mark during Covid and showed their commitment to the local communities in which they were based and living throughout that very difficult period. I also thank the trainees who stepped up to the mark during the period when a slightly different approach was taken from the approach taken in the past. While the 12-hour shift roster has been very positive in An Garda Síochána, operational matters are for the Garda Commissioner.

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Another 400 Garda staff will be recruited in 2022. There will also be an additional 800 new garda recruits in 2022 and we have ongoing additional recruitment this year. We have fallen behind in recruitment due to Covid and the restrictions imposed on the training centre in Templemore. I am sure, given the additional resources we will have, that more gardaí will be assigned to Longford.

Deputy Joe Flaherty: I thank the Minister of State. I appreciate that the programme for Government has an ambitious target for the growth of garda numbers nationwide but Garda strength fell from a high of 14,500 in 2009 to 12,800 in 2014. It is great that we will have 450 new officers coming out of Templemore this year. I emphasise that a significant number of those new officers need to be deployed in rural Ireland, specifically in counties such as Longford.

Deputy James Browne: I thank Deputy Flaherty for raising the issue of the number of gardaí in County Longford. I am aware that policing and protecting rural communities in the county is a hugely important matter for the Deputy, who has raised this matter with me on numerous occasions. The deployment of gardaí is a matter for the Garda Commissioner but I have no doubt that he will deploy additional gardaí to those areas, as necessary.

As a member of the rural forum, I can inform the Deputy that we are working on a new rural crime strategy that we hope to announce next year. This will bring together the various policies for the prevention of rural crime. An Garda Síochána are there to empower the communities in preventing crime. As we have seen with the new community safety partnerships, we can bring together all of the different elements of our communities to ensure they are protected from those who seek to exploit our communities and commit criminal offences.

Acting Chairman (Deputy John Lahart): The Deputy who tabled the next question is not here and that has not been notified.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: He did notify. I am standing in for him.

Acting Chairman (Deputy John Lahart): I need to check that. I will move to Question No. 86 and revert to the Deputy. *Questions Nos. 84 and 85 replied to with Written Answers.*

An Garda Síochána

86. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Justice the number of gardaí assigned to the Donegal division in each of the years 2016 to 2020 and to date in 2021; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [51723/21]

Deputy Thomas Pringle: This question is similar to a number of other questions on the Question Paper today. It relates to the number of gardaí assigned to the County Donegal division in the years from 2016 to 2020. I would like to see the figures.

Deputy James Browne: I thank Deputy Pringle for raising this important matter of Garda numbers in County Donegal.

As the Deputy will be aware, the Garda Commissioner is responsible, under the Garda Síochána Act 2005, for the deployment of An Garda Síochána throughout the State and for the management and administration of Garda business, including the recruitment and training of

Garda members and staff. As Minister of State, I play no direct role in these independent functions. I am assured, however, that Garda management keeps this distribution of resources under continual review in the context of policing priorities and crime trends, to ensure their optimum use.

I am pleased that budget 2022 reflects the commitment of the Government to ensuring our communities are safe and that An Garda Síochána has the resources to be an effective and trusted policing service. The budget provided by the Government to the Garda Commissioner continues to increase to unprecedented levels, with an allocation of €1.952 billion for 2021. Budget 2022 provides for more than €2 billion in funding.

I am informed by the Garda authorities that the number of gardaí assigned to the Donegal division in each of the years from 2016 to 2020 is as follows: 382 in 2016; 386 in 2017; 404 in 2018; 460 in 2019; and 462 in 2020. At 30 September 2021, there were 449 gardaí assigned to Donegal division. While I acknowledge there has been a year-on-year drop in 2021 compared with the 2020 number, this year's figure represents an increase of almost 18% since 2016.

As the Deputy may be aware, Covid-19 restrictions on the Garda Training College in Templemore constrained recruitment and training for periods over the last 18 months. I am glad to confirm, however, that 450 gardaí will be recruited this year and the funding provided for next year fully supports an additional 800 gardaí and 400 staff being recruited.

Deputy Thomas Pringle: I thank the Minister of State for his response. I listened to the figures for Garda numbers in Donegal and compared them with the answers to similar questions, for example, on Garda numbers in Longford. It is interesting that Donegal has three times the population of Longford and is probably five times its size but has proportionally fewer gardaí available to it. This is very worrying, particularly for my area in the south-west of the county where Killybegs, Glenties and Ardara are the larger towns. There are basically two gardaí on duty in that whole area which has a population of 30,000 or 40,000 people. That is nearly as many people as live in County Longford, yet there are only two gardaí on duty. In effect, gardaí cannot answer calls because they do not have the numbers to do so. This is very worrying and needs to be addressed.

Deputy James Browne: Deputy Pringle keeps a strong watch on the number of gardaí because it is so important to have the necessary gardaí in place. As I said, the deployment of gardaí is a matter for the Garda Commissioner. I would hope that the additional gardaí going into training this year and next year will be distributed as necessary throughout the country, as they become available to the Commissioner.

I know Donegal well. It is a little similar to County Wexford where I am from. It is a long county with lots of towns spread throughout, as opposed to having one major metropolis in the county. I have no say in where gardaí are deployed but hope the additional gardaí will be deployed fairly.

Deputy Thomas Pringle: Deployment in a fair manner is key. Based on the figures the Minister of State provided today, by comparison with those provided in response to other questions, it does not seem to be fair. I ask him to impress on the Garda authorities that deployment should be fair and that every part of the country has to be policed in the same way. This is important for community safety. It is important that communities see gardaí have been deployed and are available. I ask the Minister of State to seek assurances from the Commissioner that

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Donegal is not being policed less than other parts of the country.

Deputy James Browne: Again, I thank the Deputy for raising the matter of Garda numbers in Donegal. We will always endeavour in the Department of Justice to ensure the Garda Commissioner is deploying gardaí fairly throughout the country as they are needed.

Acting Chairman (Deputy John Lahart): We are moving on to Question No. 90. We are checking the matter concerning Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: What is being checked?

Acting Chairman (Deputy John Lahart): Whether the Deputy's name was submitted as a substitute.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: And?

Acting Chairman (Deputy John Lahart): It is being checked.

An Garda Síochána

90. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Justice if Budget 2022 provided for additional community Gardaí in Dublin; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [51091/21]

Deputy Mark Ward: Since Fine Gael came into power, we have seen community Garda numbers reduce dramatically right across Dublin. Does budget 2022 provide for additional community gardaí in Dublin? When will the Garda number meet the needs of the citizens of Dublin?

Deputy James Browne: Budget 2022 will see over €2.062 billion allocated to An Garda Síochána next year. This funding will include provision for the recruitment of 800 new Garda recruits and 400 Garda staff. This increase in the number of Garda members and staff will deliver significant growth in operational policing hours nationwide and improved services to the public generally.

In Dublin, through sustained Government investment in An Garda Síochána, the number of gardaí across all divisions in the Dublin metropolitan region, DMR, has increased by approximately 5.5% since 2018, while the number of gardaí designated as community gardaí in the DMR has increased by approximately 11% since 2018, bringing the total to 326 Garda members. This additional investment, in Dublin and throughout Ireland, is in line with the Government's commitment to ensuring that people feel safe in their communities.

Community policing is at the heart of the work of An Garda Síochána and all gardaí have a role to play in community policing in the course of carrying out their duties. The official categorisation as a community garda has referred to those who are exclusively assigned to building relationships with local communities and civil society, including by giving talks to schools, community groups and others.

As the Deputy will appreciate, the Garda Commissioner is responsible for the general management and administration of the Garda organisation under the Garda Síochána Act 2005. It is proper that I, as Minister of State, have no role in these independent functions. I am assured that Garda management keeps the distribution of Garda members throughout the State under

continual review in the context of policing priorities and crime trends, to ensure An Garda Síochána is optimally positioned to keep our communities safe. I understand it is a matter for each divisional chief superintendent to determine the optimum distribution of duties among the personnel available to him or her, having regard to the profile of each area within the division and its specific needs.

Deputy Mark Ward: The Minister of State mentioned that there has been an 11% increase since 2018 but I want to put that into context. There has been a 45% decrease since 2010 so we are only playing catch-up. The Minister of State said that, in an ideal world, community gardaí would have a visible presence – the feet on the beat. We do not live in an ideal world. We have lived under Fine Gael Governments since 2011. In this time, community Garda numbers have been decimated. In 2010, the year before Fine Gael came into power, there were 508 community gardaí right across Dublin. The latest figures I have, from 2020, show that we now have 278. That represents a 45% decrease in the number of community gardaí. This happened on the watch of the Minister of State, and parts of my city are being abandoned.

Deputy James Browne: Since 2018, there has been an 11% increase in the number of community gardaí. The number of community garda members I have obtained from An Garda Síochána is 326. Four hundred and fifty additional gardaí will be recruited this year, and the budget has allowed for an allocation of funding for another 800 new Garda recruits for next year and 400 Garda staff. The additional Garda staff will also facilitate gardaí moving from administrative duties back onto the beat. The designation of community gardaí is a matter for the Garda Commissioner and chief superintendent in the relevant area. Unfortunately, I have no role in that matter.

Deputy Mark Ward: The Minister of State mentioned that designation is a matter for the Garda Commissioner, but if the Commissioner does not have the personnel, he cannot move them around.

Rathcoole is a small town at the edge of my constituency, Dublin Mid-West. It has one of the fastest-growing populations in the State. It has a Garda station on Main Street. In 2010, prior to Fine Gael entering Government, there were 28 full-time gardaí in Rathcoole. In 2021, the figure dropped to 18, representing a decrease of 36% under Fine Gael's watch. Census figures indicate that Rathcoole's population grew by 27% from 2011 to 2016. It has increased since 2016. The village has one of the fastest-growing populations in the State. As the population has grown, Garda numbers have not.

The latest figure I have for the number of gardaí needed to keep pace with the population in Rathcoole is 36, not 18. Therefore, the station is at 50% capacity given the growing population, and that needs to be addressed.

Deputy James Browne: I thank the Deputy for raising the important matter of Garda numbers in his area. As stated already, I do not have any powers regarding the distribution of gardaí or their designation. The 450 additional gardaí being recruited this year, the 800 to be recruited next year, and the 400 additional Garda staff that will be recruited will bring the total number to 14,600 fully attested members in 2022, with 600 in training, putting us on course to meet our target of 15,000 sworn members. Budget 2022 will bring the total number of Garda staff to 3,800, the highest ever number, ensuring that more gardaí can focus on core policing duties rather than administration. It will also enable the organisation to recruit special civilian staff – to combat cybercrime and fraud, for example – and improve the internal management of the

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organisation in finance and ICT. The distribution and designation of gardaí are matters for the Commissioner and chief superintendent but we are now on course. The numbers fell slightly as a result of Covid but we are on course to get the number up to the 15,000 mark over the next 18 months.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I wish to speak on the same issue. I have raised the question of Cherrywood Garda station. I thank the Minister of State for his clarification on distribution being a matter for the Commissioner.

On Garda strength, it has been the case over the past 20 years that the number of gardaí has been between 11,000 and 14,500. It is very welcome that recruitment has recommenced, with the reopening of Templemore in 2014. I thank the Minister of State for the continuing commitment to increasing the number of gardaí this year and every year it is possible.

Acting Chairman (Deputy John Lahart): There has been no notification to the Ceann Comhairle's office of substitutes for questions.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: There was a notification.

Acting Chairman (Deputy John Lahart): We are going back to Question No. 87, in the name of Deputy Murnane O'Connor.

Domestic Violence

87. **Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor** asked the Minister for Justice the enhanced supports Budget 2022 will provide to tackle domestic, sexual and gender-based violence; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [51655/21]

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: I appreciate being able to raise this important issue with the Minister for Justice, Deputy Humphreys. Domestic violence continues to be a pervasive problem in our society. Nearly 15% of women between the ages of 18 and 74 have experienced physical and sexual violence in their lifetime and nearly 31% have experienced psychological violence. Could the Minister outline the enhanced supports that budget 2022 will provide to tackle domestic, sexual and gender-based violence?

Deputy Heather Humphreys: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. I am aware that she is particularly interested in it.

The Government is committed to tackling domestic, sexual and gender-based violence in all its forms and to supporting victims of this heinous crime. My Department provides funding to support the work of An Garda Síochána to combat such violence. It also provides funding to promote and assist the development of specific support services for victims of crime within the criminal justice system, which includes victims of domestic and sexual crime.

The commitment of the Government to combatting domestic, sexual and gender-based violence and supporting victims is reflected in the funding allocated under budget 2022, with a total of €13 million allocated to my Department for this. This represents an increased allocation of €5.35 million and will enable us to roll out specific awareness-raising and training programmes to combat domestic, sexual and gender-based violence. It will also allow us to provide additional supports to NGOs and specific domestic violence intervention programmes and it will

support several front-line activities. As part of this, an additional €1.1 million will be used to put in place a legal advice and legal aid service in court for victims of sexual violence and €1 million is being provided to the Garda Voté to refurbish and upgrade the divisional protective service units, DPSUs, which will allow us to better support and protect vulnerable victims.

The Deputy will be aware that my Department is leading the development across government of the third national strategy on domestic, sexual and gender-based violence. This plan will outline how the Government will radically improve services and supports for victims and will be the most ambitious plan to date. My Department is also implementing Supporting a Victim's Journey, our plan to help victims and vulnerable witnesses in sexual violence cases, which was published by the Minister, Deputy McEntee, last year. It will reform the criminal justice system.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: I welcome the overall funding of more than €30 million to help tackle domestic, sexual and gender-based violence, including an extra €1 million to improve An Garda Síochána divisional protective service units. The DPSUs are now in every Garda division and deliver a consistent and professional approach to the investigation of sexual crime, child abuse and domestic abuse. As the Minister is aware, the increased incidence of domestic violence this year is not exclusive to my constituency of Carlow, although I have raised the incidence there in the House several times. More than 3,000 extra incidents have been reported during the pandemic. As such, we need better investigation of crime. What is the status of the plan which is to be published in the coming weeks? What is the status of the ongoing reforms under the Supporting a Victim's Journey plan to help victims and vulnerable witnesses in sexual violence cases?

Deputy David Stanton: I commend the Minister and the Department on the supports they are providing in this area, but I put it to her that it is quite often the case that when court cases occur, which is often a long time after the events in question, the victims are retraumatised and there is further need at that stage for support and counselling. I ask the Minister to take that request on board and revert to me regarding what can be done in that regard.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I thank the Minister for her response. This morning, I spoke to a woman experiencing coercive control. She told me of the difficulties she is having in that regard that continue to follow her through the family law system. The use of the family law system by perpetrators of abuse to continue to exercise control is something about which we have to be really concerned. I ask that where awareness and training is provided, that it be made available to family law judges, solicitors and others working in the family law system as much as the very welcome protective services units. I ask the Minister to concentrate on that in the context of the strategy and its delivery. That would be very helpful.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: As I stated, we have secured increased funding under budget 2022 to continue the progress made in our work to support the victims of crime and to combat domestic, sexual and gender-based violence. In the past year, we have already delivered several key actions to make the criminal justice system more victim-centred and to improve how we support and protect vulnerable victims, including the introduction of preliminary trial hearings and the roll-out of the divisional protective services unit. The Garda has told me the unit is very effective because its members have been trained and have the expertise to deal with victims of violence. It is important that the victims get that service. I refer to the first cohort of staff at the new sexual offences unit in the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions formally taking up their roles, as well as advancing the work to ensure training for all personnel who come into

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contact with vulnerable victims, increasing funding for NGOs and providing court accompaniment and related information and support services. A review of grants to organisations supporting victims has been undertaken. There is a significant amount of work ongoing in this area.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: I thank the Minister. I do appreciate these developments, which are most welcome. It is further great news that Safe Ireland and Airbnb have announced the launch of a domestic violence survivor fund backed by a €350,000 donation from Airbnb. The fund will provide grants to women and children who are escaping abuse. Cash and a place to stay are vital supports. When will we see such support in the private sector? The Government is partnering with the NGO sector to develop a new strategy to tackle domestic, sexual and gender-based violence, which was to be published by Christmas. I ask the Minister to address that issue.

I refer to the provision of a women's refuge for Carlow. It is an issue about which I am really passionate. I have been constantly calling for extra gardaí for Carlow Garda station because we need them. Carlow Women's Aid, which is a great organisation, is looking for staff. We have great initiatives and services in Carlow but we need extra funding and services. All of them, working together, will sort out the issues that need to be addressed.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: The Deputy is correct that we need everybody to work together. That is what makes a difference and provides results. As regards a refuge centre for Carlow-Kilkenny, the accommodation review that I understand Tusla is finalising has examined the current level of refuge provision, evidence of demand for services and unmet need. It has also done an analysis of proximity to refuges by local communities. The findings of the review and the recommendations of the monitoring committee of the second national strategy on domestic, sexual and gender-based violence will inform the future decisions of the Government and Tusla on priority areas for investment and development of services. This includes consideration of areas that may lack an existing service infrastructure and may require future refuge development. I know this is an issue about which the Deputy is very passionate, as are the other speakers this morning.

The DPSU in Carlow-Kilkenny has been operational since 7 January 2019. There were 411 reported incidents in 2020, compared with 447 incidents reported up to and including 18 October this year. I know Carlow has experienced an increase in reports of domestic abuse. It is something the Government is absolutely committed to acting on.

Citizenship Applications

88. **Deputy Peter Fitzpatrick** asked the Minister for Justice the number of citizenship applications outstanding for longer than 12 months; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [51504/21]

Deputy Peter Fitzpatrick: How many applicants for citizenship are currently waiting more than 12 months for a decision on their application? How many are currently waiting more than 24 months? My constituency office is overflowing with queries from such applicants. Applications are currently taking at least 23 months to be processed and there are more than 22,000 applicants awaiting a decision.

Deputy James Browne: I thank the Deputy for raising the important matter of the number

of citizenship applications outstanding for longer than 12 months. I am deeply conscious of how important the granting of naturalisation is to those who apply for it. My Department has continued to accept and process citizenship applications throughout the pandemic and during all levels of public health restrictions.

However, the combined impact of the 2019 High Court judgment in the Jones case and the necessary health restrictions arising from the pandemic has resulted in the processing time for standard applications increasing. As a result, regrettably, there are just over 22,200 applications currently on hand, reduced from a high of more than 25,000 applications. This includes 14,800 applicants who have been in the system for more than 12 months. These applications are at various stages of processing, ranging from those that have just been received to those on which a decision has been made and that are ceremony-ready.

My Department is taking a number of steps to speed up the processing of applications. In January, it opened a temporary system to enable applicants to complete their naturalisation process by signing a statutory declaration of loyalty. Almost 6,200 certificates have been issued so far and a further 1,000 people will receive their certificates in the coming weeks. My Department has prioritised the oldest applications on hand and a significant number of these applicants have received their certificates since the start of the year. Several digitisation measures have been introduced to increase efficiency in the process, including e-tax clearance, e-vetting and online payments. The end result of the digitisation process will be to free up more staff to focus on processing applications in a timely and efficient manner, to improve service to our customers and to reduce waiting times.

This year, we are on track to deliver approximately 11,000 decisions, significantly exceeding the levels achieved in the past two years. Additional staff have been assigned to the citizenship team. Based on these measures, my Department's objective is to achieve an improved timeframe of six to nine months for decisions in a majority of applications by 2022. I am pleased to confirm that, subject to public health guidelines, my Department intends to host an in-person citizenship ceremony on 13 December in Killarney, the first such ceremony since the pandemic began in March 2020.

Deputy Peter Fitzpatrick: I thank the Minister for what was, in fairness, a good reply. However, the problem at the moment is that there seems to be a communication breakdown. When my staff contact the Department for an update on the situation, it is nearly impossible to get one. In fairness, it is the same people coming in every time. All they need is an update. To me, the only people making any kind of money out of it are the solicitors, because the applicants are going to solicitors and every time they do so, they are being charged fees. They are looking for updates and they are told to come back in three months, six months, nine months and 12 months. Every time they go, they are getting a bill from the solicitor. People just cannot afford it.

I am asking for better communication from the Department of Justice in relation to updates. Whether it is good or bad news, people are entitled to know the status of their application.

Deputy David Stanton: A number of these citizenship applications are probably from members of the Defence Forces who are foreign nationals. Would the Minister of State and the Department examine the possibility of reducing the fees in cases like that because these people are serving the State?

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Deputy James Browne: The Department is bringing in a number of reforms to try to speed up the process and make the application process simpler. Certainly, since I came into the Department I have pushed for all of the applications to be as simple and straightforward as possible and to minimise the need for any kind of legal advice. Many applicants are involved in the system at different stages. I favour the introduction of a system that is a one-stop shop that is quickly accessible to people, wherever they are in the system.

I understand people's frustration; I have seen it in my own constituency office. We are putting measures in place to try to reform the entire system. That is going to take time. It is unfortunate that as a result of a number of court cases and the pandemic, we have slipped substantially behind.

In relation to the fees, they are set out in law and applied accordingly. Therefore, the Department has little or no role in that matter.

Deputy Peter Fitzpatrick: I thank the Minister of State for his reply. As I said, communication seems to be the biggest problem. I accept that if a one-stop shop was introduced, it would help everybody. Many of the applicants have been in the country for a long time and have children of their own. They are looking for clarity. The last thing they want is to hear a knock on the door and to be told to go to a station from where they could be deported. They have concerns.

The Department must communicate with people and let them know exactly where they are in the system. I appreciate that many staff in the Department have been working from home during the pandemic. However, the applicants are people who want to become Irish citizens. I feel that many of them would be a great asset to our country, particularly the way things are currently in the hospitality sector in respect of the shortage of workers. I would welcome the introduction of a one-stop shop.

Deputy James Browne: Our aim is to get the timeframe for processing applications down to six to nine months. Provision has been made in the budget for additional staff in the immigration services to get those numbers down. We are working through ICT and other processes to make the system move more quickly and to streamline the entire system.

I understand that the length of time it is taking to process applications is deeply frustrating but at least if people knew the status of their application, it would provide them with a certain amount of clarity and comfort. I hear the Deputy's message in relation to the communications piece. I will certainly bring it back to my Department and will endeavour to make it a lot easier for people who have applied.

Departmental Reports

89. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Justice if she will provide an update on the Drogheda implementation plan following the publication of the Geiran report earlier in 2021 with updated associated timelines; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [51513/21]

Deputy Fergus O'Dowd: Following the murder of Keane Mulready-Woods in Drogheda, the Government published the Geiran report, which is a very comprehensive document containing lots of timelines and recommendations on actions to be taken. I ask the Minister to outline,

in particular, what is happening in relation to the Drogheda implementation plan. I wish to acknowledge the fantastic work done by the Minister, the Department of Justice, and locally, by the Garda. There has been an increase in the number of local gardaí of over 30% since that appalling crime was committed. There are also a significant number of cases before the courts. The criminal aspects are being addressed, but action must be taken on the social and community aspects.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: I thank Deputy O'Dowd for raising the matter. I know he has put a huge amount of work into it. As the Deputy will be aware, the publication and implementation of the recommendations of the Drogheda scoping report are key actions in my Department's justice plan 2021.

I am grateful to the former director of the Probation Service, Mr. Vivian Geiran, who made over 70 recommendations in his scoping report on short- and long-term responses to challenges the community faces in Drogheda. This includes measures around crime prevention, youth services, drug addiction, education, infrastructure and community development. The recommendations highlight the need for improved inter-agency co-operation in the administration and delivery of State services in Drogheda, as well as the need to resource public services or provide additional services in certain areas, in particular.

In July, I obtained Government approval for an implementation plan for Drogheda. I also secured commitment from across Government that, given the manifest needs, there will be a special focus on Drogheda including, where necessary, Departments and State agencies prioritising funding applications for projects in Drogheda related to the Drogheda implementation plan. The implementation plan identifies the relevant stakeholders for each recommendation and outlines the next steps for engagement and delivery. I intend that the plan will be a living document and thus reviewed by my Department each quarter, with progress reports produced twice yearly. This will allow for ongoing engagement and consultation.

I can inform the Deputy that some very positive steps have already been taken, such as the provision of supports by the Department of Education to the three schools identified in the report, as well as funding provided by my Department to the Red Door Project to ensure the continued provision of the important services it provides.

At a local level, the Drogheda implementation board will be the core driver and co-ordinator of the activities outlined in the plan, while my Department will lead national oversight to ensure strategic direction, action planning and the delivery of the Drogheda implementation plan.

Deputy Fergus O'Dowd: While I welcome the actions the Minister has taken and in particular, the prioritisation of applications through the implementation board to the separate Departments for the local community, there are problems and they need to be addressed further.

It is true that the Department of Justice has been exemplary in its commitment to change and its response to people through organisations such as the Red Door Project, as mentioned by the Minister. However, that is not universal. The difficulty is that the HSE has not engaged appropriately with the Red Door Project. Unfortunately, the needle exchange programme, which was provided by the HSE, ceased operation on 10 May 2021. Currently, no needle exchange programme is being provided at the Red Door Project and there are no clean needles available to people who need them. We have brought it to the attention of the HSE. I appreciate that the issue does not fall within the Minister's remit, as such, but people are most concerned at the

lack of action and engagement on the part of the HSE. Action on the issue must be fast-tracked and needs to be taken now. It is not acceptable that the Red Door Project, which the Minister rightly and properly fully supports, is not getting the support it needs from the HSE.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: I thank the Deputy for raising the issue. I am disappointed to hear the HSE is not engaging with the Red Door Project. Grants have been provided to the Red Door Project. My Department is engaging with the HSE on the provision of funding to the family addiction support network. I wish to assure the House that the whole of Government is committed to supporting the implementation of the plan for Drogheda.

I will raise the matter with the Minister for Health, as I am sure the Deputy will, because we want to see progress. I must say that good progress has been made. The Deputy has highlighted the issue on numerous occasions in this House and according to the latest figures from the Central Statistics Office, CSO, there was a welcome reduction in most categories of criminal activity in the Louth division in quarter 2 of this year, compared to quarter 2 of last year. The Deputy might be interested to note that as of 30 September 2021, the latest date for which figures are available, there were 396 Garda members assigned to the Louth division. This represents an increase of over 30% since December 2016, when there were 302 members assigned to the division. There has been a good increase there.

Deputy Fergus O'Dowd: As I said earlier, I acknowledge the fantastic job that has been done by the local Garda and the Department of Justice. There must be improvement in communication between the HSE and the Red Door Project. Action on the part of the HSE speaks louder than words.

The other issue is that there must be community representatives on the implementation board. I have looked at the Dublin North East Inner City implementation board, which is in a similar situation to the Drogheda implementation board. There are two community representatives and a representative of businesses and employers on that implementation board. That is lacking in Drogheda. It was not a recommendation of the Geiran report, but I think it needs to be introduced now. Local involvement is needed at the top, because there is a feeling of distance from some community groups. They do not know what is happening and are not being informed by the implementation board through the local media as to what is happening. That is a deficit. The implementation board is aware of that.

We must push forward with it. If we had more people like the Minister and her Department working on this issue, we would be flying.

Deputy Peter Fitzpatrick: First, I wish to thank the Minister for her commitment to the future plans of Drogheda. In fairness, Drogheda needs a bit of help and I am glad the Government and the Minister made a commitment.

A few months ago the Garda Commissioner, Drew Harris, and Chief Superintendent Christy Mangan attended St. Nicholas Gaelic Football Club's open day to show the amount of work the GAA does in the Drogheda area. Whether soccer, Gaelic football or rugby, sport plays a major part. The Garda Commissioner and the chief superintendent made a commitment to the people of Drogheda that they would help to invest in these sports. Having been involved in sport myself, I can say that at least when people are involved in sport parents know where their children are. We have many new estates in Drogheda. One new estate in Drogheda has more than 3,500 people. Can we get more sports facilities and more sports communities in areas to help combat

this situation? Will the Minister have a chat with the Garda Commissioner to request an update on what happened that day? It is in an area of Drogheda that needs help. I thank the Minister for giving a commitment to help combat crime in Drogheda.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: I thank both Deputies for raising these issues. The Minister, Deputy McEntee, who will return on 1 November, is absolutely committed to this implementation plan for Drogheda. It is something on which she has worked very hard. I also acknowledge the work of Martin O'Brien, the CEO of Louth and Meath Education and Training Board. It has agreed to facilitate and support the implementation plan. The board is chaired by Michael Keogh, who is a former senior official in the Department of Education. The implementation board held its first meeting on 13 October. The next step is to get four subcommittees up and running. These groups will reflect the recommendation for subgroups contained in the Geiran report. The groups will include wider representation, particularly local community and voluntary groups as Deputy O'Dowd mentioned. The intention is that a first meeting of these subgroups should take place before the next meeting of the implementation board in November. Deputy Fitzpatrick is right that sport is absolutely essential. It helps young people.

Crime Prevention

91. **Deputy Steven Matthews** asked the Minister for Justice if discussions are expected in the coming weeks with the Garda Commissioner on the plans of An Garda Síochána to ensure a safe Hallowe'en; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [51093/21]

Deputy Steven Matthews: This is probably a question that comes up this time every year. Will the Minister make a statement on discussions or actions with the Garda Commissioner and An Garda Síochána on a safe Hallowe'en? I am particularly concerned about the prevalence of fireworks, the nature, scale and size of bonfires and the materials being put on them.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue regarding safety at Hallowe'en. I am very aware of the distressing impact the improper use and misuse of fireworks has on our communities. Every year, as Hallowe'en approaches, my Department runs a safety awareness campaign aimed at highlighting to the public the very real dangers of illegal fireworks and bonfires. As the Deputy may be aware, I launched this year's campaign, in collaboration with the ISPCA, Dublin Fire Brigade and An Garda Síochána, at the Dublin Fire Brigade Training Centre on 22 September. I am sure the Deputy will be aware of the risks posed by fireworks, particularly to children and animals. I thank the media because they have given it good coverage to make people aware of the dangers of fireworks that go wrong.

As Minister for Justice, it is important for me to be clear in saying that fireworks, because they are explosives, are regulated under national and EU legislation and can only be imported into the country under licence and stored and sold in accordance with explosives laws.

As the Deputy will appreciate, the Garda Commissioner is by law responsible for the management and administration of An Garda Síochána, including operational policing matters. As Minister, I have no direct role in these matters. However, I am assured by the Garda authorities that An Garda Síochána will be working right across the country to keep people, including their colleagues in our front-line services, safe during the Hallowe'en period.

Additional efforts are being made by An Garda Síochána under Operation Tombola to com-

bat the illegal importation, sale and use of fireworks and to address related public order and antisocial behaviour. This operation has an overt uniform presence and a covert element where appropriate to disrupt firework-related and other forms of antisocial behaviour.

Deputy Steven Matthews: I thank the Minister. I am reassured to know there is such action on fireworks. I was at Crumlin children's hospital late one night and the amount of fireworks going off was an absolute disgrace. I do not know what kind of an idiot sets off fireworks near a children's hospital that late at night. We really do need to take action on their prevalence. They seem to be going off for weeks and weeks in advance. Some people even set them off during the day. I do not know what is in somebody's head that they want to light fireworks during the day.

It is the responsibility of the Garda, the fire service and the local authorities. They do very good work in these areas. However, it can become confrontational when they go to address bonfires. We need to have community involvement in this also. Neighbours are intimidated by the level of fireworks and the activity around bonfires. Some people seem to think it is okay to drag whatever piece of domestic rubbish and waste they have in their house and dump it on the local bonfire. It is a way for people to get rid of their three-piece suite of furniture or fridge freezer. The council is then left to clean it up. It is very unfair on the residents in these estates to be left with the mess afterwards.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: I thank the Deputy. I know the Garda works closely with communities. Operation Tombola is directly targeted at delivering a range of initiatives to tackle the sale of fireworks and to prevent associated public disorder and antisocial behaviour through the incremental deployment of Garda resources. It engages with communities and through the various fora. It will encourage people not to engage in this type of activity. Fireworks in the wrong hands could possibly mean no hands because they do terrible damage. In County Monaghan there has been great co-operation between the council, the Garda and communities. They organise one big fireworks display. It is very effective and successful. Communities could come together and pool their resources to put on one decent display instead of things firing off around the country.

Deputy Steven Matthews: I was going to suggest that as something to do. Hallowe'en is a great event for children. People enjoy it and it is fine. We want to have safety and responsibility. I am concerned for people around a bonfire where we do not even know what has been thrown onto it and what could result from something being burned on it and the fumes coming off it. There is nobody to marshal it or monitor what is going on. Perhaps something we could look at with local authorities, fire services and the Garda is having one centralised bonfire with marshalling and co-ordination.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: I agree with the Deputy. The local government sector messages on Hallowe'en, working with the Garda Síochána, place emphasis on fire safety issues with fireworks and encouraging the public to report if they are aware of people gathering pallets or other materials for bonfires in order that they can be safely removed before Hallowe'en, emphasising the environmental damage and the damage to the landscape that bonfires can cause, and the huge distress it causes for dogs and other animals. It is terrible to hear fireworks going off because they are terribly distressed. It is also an issue for older people. The fact the Deputy has raised this creates an awareness and a need for people in communities to work with local members of the Garda and local authorities. I thank the Deputy for raising it.

Victim Support Services

92. **Deputy Pauline Tully** asked the Minister for Justice if she will put a mechanism in place in Garda stations whereby the victim of a violent crime would be notified of the release of the perpetrator from prison three months in advance; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [51160/21]

Deputy Pauline Tully: Is the Minister prepared to put in place a mechanism in Garda stations whereby victims of violent crimes are notified of the release of the perpetrator from prison three months in advance?

Deputy Heather Humphreys: I thank the Deputy for raising this matter. While the Garda is committed to ensuring that all victims of crime receive information, protection and support throughout the criminal justice process, responsibility for notifying victims of crime of the release of a perpetrator from prison rests with the victim liaison office in the Irish Prison Service. The information currently provided by the service covers the obligations under Part 2 of the Criminal Justice (Victims of Crime) Act 2017 and is a key element of the victims charter.

A victim of crime, a member of their family, or a third party person acting on their behalf has the right to request the Prison Service victims liaison officer to enter into direct and ongoing contact with them in order to keep them informed of significant developments in the sentence management of a prisoner. Victims registered with the service are provided with information on when the offender will be released from prison and about any form of temporary release. They are also informed about inter-prison transfers, hospital appointments and court appearances. Victims are also provided with information regarding an escape from custody, as well as being notified about an upcoming parole hearing and the outcome of it.

I understand that while every effort is made to ensure that information on a prisoner's release from prison, temporary or otherwise, is provided in advance, there are some exceptions. On occasion, urgent applications may be considered on compassionate grounds or prisoners can sometimes be released by court order. In such cases, every effort is made by the victim liaison officer to inform the victim of the prisoner's release within the shortest timeframe possible. This officer can also provide victims with general information about the prison system, such as the regime in different prisons, remission on sentences and the operation of the parole board. The officer deals with victims on a strictly confidential basis.

Deputy Pauline Tully: I thank the Minister. It was at a recent joint policing committee, JPC, meeting in Cavan that I became aware that this service actually exists and that the prison service will liaise with a victim or with his or her family. I understand that the Minister has said that one has to request that information. There are many people who are not aware that they need or have to request that service. If something can be done to make people more aware of the existence of that service, that would be very worthwhile.

While people are aware at the time of the sentencing what the sentence will be, with reasons such as good behaviour or early release for different reasons, or even for temporary release for family-related matters, there is the possibility, especially if the victim or survivor and the perpetrator come from the same locality, that they may come into contact with each other. It can be very shocking for the person to come face-to-face with the perpetrator if they are not aware that they have been released and this can cause a significant amount of trauma.

Do I not have two minutes, Acting Chairman?

Acting Chairman (Deputy John Lahart): No, but the Deputy can have another bite of the cherry afterwards. I call Deputy Kenny for a brief comment.

Deputy Pauline Tully: Okay, I thank the Acting Chairman.

Deputy Martin Kenny: Briefly, to respond to the Minister, I have also come across a number of cases of people who have contacted my office where they had been a victim of crime and the first thing that they knew of the perpetrator being out in the public again was when they, or a close member of their family, met them on the street. There has clearly been a breakdown in that service in that it does not automatically inform the victim. If a crime is above a particular seriousness, that service should automatically engage with the victims of crimes.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: I thank the Deputy Tully for raising this issue because it is only through open discussion that we get the message out there to people that those supports are there. Ensuring that victims are better supported by the criminal justice system, including by ensuring that they are fully informed of their rights, is a priority for the Government. A significant part of the work to implement supporting a victim's journey focuses on this.

My officials are working on promoting and policing the rights that victims of crime have, including publicising their right to register with the Garda Victim Liaison Office and to be kept informed of any significant sentence management decision taken. As to who can register with the victim liaison office, a person can register and receive information if he or she is a victim of the offence for which the offender is in prison.

I take and accept the Deputy's point that where a person has been a victim of violence and somebody has been imprisoned, and the victim does not know that this person has been released and meets them on the street, it is not easy for any victim.

Deputy Pauline Tully: I am conscious that gardaí who investigate the crime often stay in touch with the family and keep them apprised of issues. Gardaí can move on for different reasons because of promotion or retirement and I do not expect them to remember every individual case they deal with. Could there be some sort of electronic or technological reminder in the Garda station to contact the family, the victim or survivor? I am particularly concerned in cases of domestic violence also because there is often the likelihood of a repeat offence there. To forewarn the victim means that she may have time to put a safety plan in place on his release.

Acting Chairman (Deputy John Lahart): Just to inform Members, the question from Deputy Brendan Smith will be the last question. I call on the Minister to conclude.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: I thank the Acting Chairman. Under budget 2022, €4.9 million is being allocated to support victims of crime. The contact that the victim of crime really needs to make is with the victim liaison office. This can be done by telephone, email or online via the Irish Prison Service website. I agree with the Deputy that it is no harm to do an awareness campaign around this so that people know exactly who they can contact. If they cannot do it themselves, an immediate family member or a person who has a close relationship with someone who has died or was injured as a result of the offence can also register with the service. The service is there to help people and we want to ensure that people use it and are aware of it. I take the Deputy's point on board and thank her.

Inquiry into the Death of Mr. Shane O'Farrell

93. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Justice the progress to date in establishing a public inquiry into the death of a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [51633/21]

Deputy Brendan Smith: My question relates to the tragic death of Shane O'Farrell in County Monaghan following a hit-and-run accident in August 2011. I have often listened to Lucia O'Farrell, Shane's mother, outline with great detail and clarity the dysfunctionality of so many elements of the criminal justice system that led to Shane's tragic death. A scoping exercise was established by a previous Minister for Justice and Equality a considerable time ago. We need this public inquiry process to be progressed as soon as possible.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: Gabhaim buíochas. I thank the Deputy again for raising this issue. I wish to assure the Deputy that I also, as do others in this House, recognise the ongoing pain and anguish of the O'Farrell family on the tragic death of Shane and I deeply sympathise with them on their loss.

As the Deputy will be aware, a highly respected retired Judge, Gerard Haughton, has been conducting a scoping exercise into the tragic circumstances surrounding Shane O'Farrell's death. The purpose of this exercise is to advise as to whether any further investigation or inquiry beyond those already carried out is necessary and, if so, to advise on the form of such investigation or inquiry and its terms of reference. Former Justice Haughton furnished an interim report to the then Minister for Justice and Equality in November 2019 in which he stated that he would not restrict or limit Shane's family in their submissions to him or the nature and extent of the documentation they wished to furnish to him in his scoping exercise.

As the Deputy will appreciate, the judge is completely independent in conducting this scoping exercise. It is not open to me as Minister to comment on any aspect of the judge's work or the process of compiling the final report. My Department maintains regular contact with the judge and has assured him that any assistance he requires to complete his final report will be made available.

While I genuinely regret that this process has taken significantly longer than any of us would wish, I am also aware that the judge is doing all that he can to ensure that the concerns which the family have raised with him during the process are followed through to the greatest extent possible. I understand that Judge Haughton has been in contact with the O'Farrell family throughout his scoping exercise.

I am informed the process is now at the stage of seeking comments on various sections of the report from the parties named in it, including my Department. I also understand that Judge Haughton has been in touch with the O'Farrell family regarding this matter.

Additional information not given on the floor of the House

Following receipt of responses from all relevant parties, it is understood that Judge Haughton will be in a position to finalise his report. My Department will continue to provide all necessary assistance to the judge and I look forward to receiving his final report in due course.

Following receipt of the final report, in line with established process, the advice of the Attorney General will be sought on publication and any other issues arising.

21 October 2021

Deputy Brendan Smith: I thank the Leas-Cheann Comhairle and the Minister for her reply. My question has been framed in the background that on 14 June 2018 we all voted in this Chamber calling on the Government to establish a public inquiry. As we all know in this House the O'Farrell family has worked tirelessly seeking justice for their only son and brother. The State failed them in the manner in which the death of Shane was investigated, prosecuted and in the manner in which the family's complaints around the investigation and prosecution was handled by the Garda Síochána Ombudsman Commission, GSOC.

Justice has to be done in regard to this exceptionally good, young man who was killed by a driver who should not have been at liberty at the time. At that time, the person who was driving that car had 42 previous convictions and was on bail in respect of several offences. He had breached the conditions of those bail bonds and was serving suspended sentences which should have been activated had the courts been informed of his convictions. It is a litany of dysfunctionality and a terrible injustice to a fine young Monaghan man.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: I thank the Deputy for his question and thank him also for the work that he has done on this issue.

It is, of course, open to the judge to recommend the establishment of a statutory or non-statutory inquiry. I will await the recommendation of Judge Haughton in his final report before making any decision on further inquiries into this matter. I do not wish to pre-empt any advice which the judge considers appropriate in the circumstances following the scoping exercise.

12 o'clock

To be clear, the Government is not opposed to the possibility of a further inquiry into this case if that is what the judge recommends. No restrictions have been placed on him in that regard. Like every Deputy, I want questions to be answered to the satisfaction of the O'Farrell family.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We are out of time but the Deputy might wish to make a brief closing remark.

Deputy Brendan Smith: I would like the scoping exercise to be completed as soon as possible. I hope we will then have the public inquiry I believe is warranted.

Written Answers are published on the Oireachtas website.

Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Iarraim ar gach páirtí na srianta ama a thabhairt dá n-aire.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Mar Theachta Dála atá i mo chónaí in aice leis an bhfarraige, tá aithne agam go pearsanta, agus beidh ag Teachtaí eile chomh maith, ar na mná agus fir chróga atá mar pháirt den gharda cósta agus a chuireann iad féin i mbaol go minic ar mhaithe le sláinte agus sábháilte daoine eile atá i dtrioblóid ar an bhfarraige. Ar an drochuair, tá amanna ann nuair a bhíonn baol agus dainséir na farraige móire róláidir. Ní thugtar buíochas ná ómós d'fhoireann an gharda cósta minic go leor ach conas nach féidir fearg a bheith ort agus tú ag léamh an dóigh

ina gcaitheadh le teaghlaigh fhoirne Rescue 166 agus iad fágtha le costais dlí mar gur throid Ro-inn an Aire ina n-éadan ag an bhfiosrúchán. Tá sé náireach agus caithfidh an tAire é a cheartú.

On 14 March 2017, Dara Fitzpatrick, Mark Duffy, Paul Ormsby and Ciarán Smith, four members of the Irish Coast Guard, tragically lost their lives in the line of duty while supporting a rescue mission off the coast of Mayo. Its accident investigation unit was drawn in to carry out an investigation into what had happened and the publication of that report is still pending four years later. As the Minister stated in response to parliamentary questions here previously, the delay in the publication of that report is the result of the establishment of a review of that investigation, which we understand has been carried out at the behest of the helicopter operator, CHC Ireland.

The Minister appointed that review board. In order to have their interests represented, the families of those who tragically lost their lives quite understandably hired legal representatives to represent them at the board because they feared there would be an effort to assign blame for the accident to their loved ones. Their legal bills are now mounting, to the tune of hundreds of thousands of euro, because the Minister's officials in the Department of Transport fought against them successfully to ensure their legal costs were not awarded to them. This is scandalous.

RTÉ reported yesterday that the chairperson of the review board, Patrick McCann, has acknowledged the contribution made by the families' legal representatives at the review. It reported he had acknowledged that the families had little choice but to have legal representation given the highly technical nature of the proceedings. Despite the chairperson and sole member of that review team saying that, the Minister's officials took the most callous approach in dealing with this issue and fought the families at the review board. How on earth can the Minister's officials argue against the awarding of legal costs to these families and why did he allow that to happen? Why did he not intervene? It is an horrendous way to treat these families of four people who died in the line of duty, trying to save others.

I have one simple question for the Minister. Will he reverse this decision and ensure the families involved are awarded their legal costs in respect of their representation at the review board?

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications(Deputy Eamon Ryan): Our thoughts on this whole issue go to the families of those people who tragically lost their lives while doing the great public service of putting themselves in danger on others' behalf. It is absolutely in all our interest that the families are not put into any further difficulty or stress to add to the tragedy they have had to cope with. It would be scandalous if we were fighting against the paying of such costs but that is not true. I am confident that following the completion of the review group's work, and what I expect to be the imminent publication of the full report from the Chief Inspector of Air Accidents, that will be resolved quickly.

More critically, we will also look to learn the lessons contained in those reports so that the families of other people in our air rescue system will have confidence that we learn lessons, that we recognise the critical work they continue to do day in, day out and that we minimise the risks they take. How the State manages the issue of costs is always a complicated system but there will be no attempt by the State not to look after the families. We will ensure the issue of legal costs is resolved quickly. I have asked my officials to engage immediately with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform to ensure we make that possible. I have also

engaged with the Minister at that Department, Deputy Michael McGrath, and he is of a similar view. The matter will be resolved quickly. It should not in any way distract from the core issue here, namely, recognising the great loss of loved ones that those families suffered. Looking at why it happened and what we can do to ensure it does not happen again has to be the centre of our attention, rather than the legal costs. That will not be an issue in the coming days and will be resolved quickly.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I am glad to hear there is a change of tune but it should never have got to this point. The Minister said what I said was not true. Did the Department oppose the applications by the families' teams to the review board to have their costs covered? The review team made a determination on this. In part of its determination it said: "... it would have been difficult if not impossible for the Commander's family to represent its own interest and the late Commander's interests without legal representation". Members of the families talk about their hurt and being dragged into a process which is not of their making as it was the helicopter company that brought the review and say that the Department strongly objected to the costs being covered. Will the Minister reiterate, in clear terms, that the costs of the families of the four people who lost lives in the line of duty will be covered by the State and that it is a burden and a worry about which they no longer have to worry?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: My Department has not strenuously fought against the payment of such costs. We received the review report on 1 October. We had to check its contents with the Office of the Attorney General to ensure we were able to pass the report to the stakeholders, including the families. As soon as I was given the all-clear for that from the Attorney General's office, which I believe was on 14 October, we signed off the next day and made sure that the report went to all the stakeholders, including the families. The original investigation report is not subject to direct control from the Department as it is an independent procedure, but I expect that now will be allowed to be shared with the stakeholders in a similar way. The issue of costs were addressed in that report and at no stage did the Department strenuously fight against that.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Did the Department object to the application?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: No. As I said, I have already engaged with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform to make sure that we can engage with the families and ensure that this issue is not something to add to the terrible hurt that they have experienced in this affair.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I ask the Minister to provide information on the status of the carbon budgets and a clear timeline for the publication of the carbon budgets and the climate action plan. With just over a week to the start of the crucial climate talks at COP26 in Glasgow and with only nine years to the 2030 deadline for the achievement of our ambitious and welcome 51% reduction target, what is lacking is a sense of clarity and urgency in the Government's response in respect of its proposed measures to deal the climate emergency and to show how we are going to achieve our emissions reduction targets. Everyone I speak to in the renewable energy sector and people involved in this are concerned about the lack of implementation measures, the lack of urgency and the lack of clarity.

We were led to believe that the carbon budgets would be published in the first week of October, before the fiscal budget. It would have been preferable if we could have seen those budgets aligned. It would have been useful to have been able to scrutinise budget 2022 in the context of our vital climate action targets alongside the carbon budgets, but we were unable to do so. Now there are reports this week that the proposals of the Climate Change Advisory Council are

likely to be published next week, but the Dáil and Seanad will not be sitting next week. It will be well into the commencement of COP26, therefore, before we will be able to have a debate in the Oireachtas on these crucial documents regarding the crucial measures in the carbon budgets and in the climate action plan.

There is also a lack of clarity on other key measures we need to take regarding climate change. There were reports yesterday that the just transition commissioner will not be placed on a statutory footing, as was promised in the programme for Government. What is the position on that? There are also real concerns about the announcement in budget 2022 of the removal of the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland, SEAI, grant for plug-in hybrid electric vehicles. This grant had already been reduced in July from €5,000 to €2,500. We agree with the need to incentivise the move to fully electric vehicles, and I welcome the budget announcement of the extension of the grant in that regard, but there is still a lack of clarity and a lack of notice to people who might have made decisions on making a move to more environmentally-friendly transport and who are now faced with this change.

We must ensure that there is public buy-in for the measures necessary to tackle climate change. We have to ensure that people, particularly in rural areas, are assured about decisions and can have confidence in them. We have to bring people with us. That is crucial in advance of COP26. All of us, including those who will be on Merrion Square tomorrow at 1 p.m. for a pre-COP26 climate action protest, want to see real clarity, certainty and urgency from the Government.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: On the timelines with regard to carbon budgets, we have to be careful here because the Climate Change Advisory Council is independent in the way it has been established and in the way it sets out its work. However, I understand it is meeting on 25 October, which is next week, and I hope and expect, subject to it being satisfied with its process, that it will be able to issue the first of the two carbon budgets for the first and second five-year periods bringing us to the end of the decade. I expect it will also publish supporting documentation to show the research that has been undertaken in the Climate Change Advisory Council to justify the approach it will recommend to the Government. The appointment of the full complement of four final members of the Climate Change Advisory Council had to await the enactment of the Bill before it could be done under proper statute. There was also the drafting of regulations, which we have now agreed. That allows the council to progress with its carbon budgets to outline which greenhouse gases we account for. That had to be done first before the council could then publish its budget.

Once it does that, we expect that very quickly - 3 November in the following week is my indicative timeline - the Government will consider a draft climate action plan which we will issue in response. We have been working a great deal on this in advance. That will contain extensive details. Similar to the previous plan adopted by the then Minister, Deputy Bruton, it will contain a wide series of actions and main chapter headings setting out the strategic direction we need to take in this area. It is transformative beyond compare because the 50% reduction in emissions requires us to completely change our energy system, transport system, land use and agricultural system and industrial systems for the better. We can and will do this.

Much of the work that has been done has fed into some of the key measures that have been put in place in the last month. The key emphasis in Housing for All on town centre first and compact development was informed by what we know we will have to do on the transport side in our carbon budget. In the national development plan there were just two Departments which

had full clarity on their ten-year capital programmes - €35 billion in the case of the Department of Transport and €12.9 billion in the case of the Department of Environment, Climate and Communications. We needed that clarity to be able to give the sectors the Deputy mentioned certainty about the scale of investment the Government will have to make and, in many cases, the back-up scale that will be needed for other investments. A huge amount of work has been done. We will have it in time to go to COP26 with a draft climate action plan from Ireland to give it a sense of where we are going to proceed. However, the real challenge now will be implementing it at the speed and scale that are necessary to meet the correct calls of concern from the climate strikers.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I entirely agree with the Minister about the necessity for urgency and the scale of the challenge facing us. I am somewhat dismayed to hear that it will be 3 November and later in November before we will see consideration by the Government of the draft climate action plan and publication of the carbon budgets. That appears to be quite significant slippage, particularly as COP26 will have started on 31 October. It is a real concern given that these are measures which have had to be in preparation for a long time. We all are well aware of that and of the section 6A timeline for the carbon budget, which was for the period commencing last January. We know, therefore, that this is something that has been in preparation for a long time. It is simply not good enough to see this slippage into November. I accept what the Minister said about the advisory council, but it is unfortunate to see that long, ongoing delay.

I would like a response on the other issues I raised regarding other measures that also require clarity. We also have to emphasise the huge opportunity that lies ahead of us in moving from fossil fuel bases. That is an opportunity we must grasp with positivity as well as urgency.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I accept the Deputy's point about the date. To be honest, the decision was whether to go out straight away, the day after the Climate Change Advisory Council hopefully publishes its budget approach. I thought that was inappropriate and it was better to give that a certain amount of time. In addition, the Dáil would not be sitting and I would prefer to come back to this House on 3 November, which is in plenty of time for when the serious negotiations in the COP take place in the second week of November. Therefore, it will be in time for that.

On the specific issue the Deputy mentioned in terms of plug-in hybrid vehicles, it is absolutely appropriate that we focus the resources we have on the switch to 100% electric vehicles rather than plug-in hybrid vehicles. There is considerable research which I will share with the Deputy separately, showing that the emissions reductions from the plug-in hybrid sector are not significant because of behavioural issues and so on. It is far better to focus the resources we have on the switch that is now taking place at speed and scale towards 100% electric vehicles. I believe that is the right policy choice.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: The partition of Ireland is the most damaging event in the history of Ireland since the Famine. It set in train decades of second-class citizenship for nationalists and Catholics in the North of Ireland. It institutionalised discrimination and state violence and sundered thousands of villages, towns and communities throughout the Border region. It also hammered the social and economic development of Ireland and has seen the loss of thousands of lives. Even today because of partition, the Tories, who know nothing about Ireland and care nothing about Ireland, still have an enormous influence on how we run this country. Indeed, they can determine how people and products move around our nation.

The President of Ireland, Michael D. Higgins, made a decision not to attend the event scheduled to take place in Armagh city today. He stated that it was inappropriate to attend. Of the events title, the President said that it was not a neutral statement politically. He stated, “What began as a religious service or reconciliation is now the celebrating, the marking... [of] the partition of Ireland and the creation of ... [North of] Ireland.” The President is a scholar of Irish history and has a record second to none on reconciliation. We, in Aontú, believe he made the right decision. It is a decision that is supported by the majority of Irish people. I cannot think of another country on this planet that would be involved in the marking, the celebration or the commemoration of the partition of its own country. It is a peculiarity of the Irish psyche that we are even having this discussion here today.

The Government could have presented a united approach on this issue, but instead it disagreed with the President’s decision. It has contradicted the words of the President. Does the Minister think the President was wrong? Do the Government’s actions not implicitly indicate that it believes the President’s actions were wrong? I believe that today the Government is snubbing the President of Ireland by going against his decision and attending the partition commemoration ceremony. How can the Government square the circle? Irrespective of what euphemisms or language the Minister might use in this situation, if the President was right not to attend the event due to its political nature, why is it right for the Government to be represented there?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I am loath to interrupt the Deputy while the clock is running, but he has repeatedly mentioned the President. There is a long-standing practice that Members should not draw the President into any argument or ask the Government to comment on the President. I ask the Deputy to bear that in mind.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: I will bear that in mind.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I was going to wait until the end but he has repeatedly done it.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: How can two arms of the Oireachtas take opposite decisions at the same time and for both of those decisions to be considered the correct decision? It is absolutely impossible. In the words of the former Fine Gael Minister, Paddy Donegan, is this Government not a thundering disgrace?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: A Leas-Cheann Comhairle, I very much take on board your words of warning in this regard. However, in this case I think we are on safer ground because in this I am absolutely certain there is no difference or any controversy with regard to the President’s decision. The Government fully accepted and understood that his decision in this regard was taken absolutely properly. His role on this issue is not in any way being called into question. It never was, from the very start of this becoming a controversial matter.

Under our Constitution, the Government and the various arms of the Oireachtas have different requirements, obligations and considerations. In this instance, the Government has decided that the that the Chief Whip and the Minister for Foreign Affairs would attend. The Minister for Foreign Affairs is engaged on an ongoing basis in the North. While absolutely acknowledging the President’s decision and his rightful approach, the Government felt that did not preclude the Government sending a representative and it was appropriate for us to do so.

On the wider issue, I will be in Belfast myself this afternoon, attending a British-Irish Coun-

cil meeting. Going back to the Deputy's original commentary about the effects of partition, I come from a similar viewpoint in the sense that I would prefer to see our island united. That would bring benefits beyond compare, too many to quantify. I also voted in that referendum to remove the articles in our Constitution. The provisions of the Good Friday Agreement recognise various different traditions and various rights on this island. We are all committed to work within the institutions set up under the Good Friday Agreement and provided for under our Constitution to try to bring reconciliation and optimise relationships, not just North-South but also east-west.

That is one of the reasons Government has been considering events like this and other events in which we also engage. We engage in the North South Ministerial Council meetings all the time to the best of our ability. We engage in the British-Irish Council in a way that is absolutely appropriate. I would like to see that extended further. The other provisions of the Good Friday Agreement give us opportunity, particularly at the time of Brexit when it is not just the partition between North and South but we are also contending with the major difficulties that Brexit brings, to use the institutions and have ongoing contact in the spirit of the Good Friday Agreement and in the spirit of the Constitution. The Irish people passed a referendum to amend our Constitution committing us to work with all parties in the North and to work with the British Government. That is what is happening today both at the British-Irish Council and with the attendance of Ministers at the event in Armagh.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: There is no doubt that reconciliation is critical, but I think there is a misunderstanding in this State about what reconciliation means. Reconciliation is built on pluralism and by definition pluralism accepts there are differences and respects those differences. Reconciliation is about reaching out the hand of friendship. It does not mean that we have to dress up in each other's political clothes. Pluralism does not mean that unionists have to attend a 1916 commemoration. It certainly does not mean that nationalists have to attend a commemoration of partition.

In recent weeks the Government has engaged in verbal gymnastics. There has been a desperate search for a euphemism to hide what is actually happening here. What we see are two mutually exclusive and opposite actions happening and the Government claims they are both in agreement. By definition of physics it cannot be that the two decisions going in opposite ways can be in agreement at all. I do not think anybody is being fooled. Even Deputies from the Government parties are calling this out at the moment. While I welcome the Minister's opposition to partition, can he point to any actual examples of Government efforts to end partition since his party came into power?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: The shared island unit within the Department of the Taoiseach is a prime example. One of the things we did with the shared island unit was to start engaging with environmental NGOs and others in the North, recognising that the shared island is a shared environment. Pollution and issues like climate change recognise no borders. Brexit gives rise to concerns that we could end up with two different standards of environmental protection, including habitats protection, that could drive a further wedge and create a new border which would be terribly damaging. We have been using that mechanism as a means to try to get an all-island approach to how we look after the environment. I cite the work we are doing today on transport. I have been working directly with Nicola Mallon on an all-island strategic rail review, investigating how we might run a rail line to Letterkenny from Derry, for example.

Yesterday I attended a European conference in Ostend on a shared approach to offshore

wind energy. I could go on all day outlining examples of how we work in that way. That is the work that delivers best on our aspirations.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: I welcome yesterday's announcement on agriculture. I agree with convergence, as outlined in Pillar 1. With Pillar 2, there is much concern among the communities that deliver LEADER that there is a shortfall of approximately €70 million. This is at a time when communities and especially the agricultural sector are stepping up to the mark when it comes to climate action.

In this regard, last Monday a group of us from the agriculture committee visited Devenish Farm in Meath. We spent five or six hours going around the farm looking at how it measured hedgerows and carbon on the trees and how it used different types of grasses. It is a carbon-neutral farm. It is one of the main farms of eight or nine throughout the world picked so different universities can study these matters. To put it simply, it is a private entity.

There are a couple of points between agriculture and climate action. In light of developments we have heard of from the people involved with LEADER and their view that there is a shortfall, will the Government pick up that gap to ensure this programme, which is vital to rural communities, will be delivered?

A private company is able to nail down the amount of carbon sequestered in trees or hedgerows by using light detection and ranging, LiDAR, systems on a helicopter. In the past week or two, I have heard that Teagasc, which gets a lot of money from the State, and the Government are not looking at hedgerows in considering the carbon tonnage sequestered around the country. We are looking at carbon budgets but we still do not know where we are starting because we do not know what is sequestered. It is a damn bad way of doing things and puts pressure on people.

The agricultural community does not mind stepping up to the mark but it does not want to have to act with false figures. Why has the Government not brought in expertise from Devenish Farm, which has done all this work, to help Teagasc or the Government itself to formulate more accurate figures?

My final question relates to electricity supply and power. The Minister stated in the past week in an interview with the farming section of the *Irish Independent* that he would not rule out the reopening of Shannonbridge and Lanesborough power stations. Will he elaborate on this and explain what he means?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I thank the Deputy for his questions. They cover two different matters so I will start with his first point. I also visited the farm he mentioned in Louth last month. Sorry, it was in Meath. There is a big difference. I was very impressed. The mapping of soils and what goes on is very impressive. Similar to what I have seen and heard about the UCD Lyons Farm, there is use of mixed sward grass systems that is a game changer because it is more resilient in flood and drought conditions. It has deeper root systems and it is a game changer because it brings a significant reduction in nitrogen use and cost. I understood when I was there in September that they had been able to get their sheep to market five or six weeks quicker. They compared flocks on the mixed sward grass versus the normal perennial rye grass sward. As any farmer knows, getting animals to market that much quicker gives a hell of an advantage. I absolutely agree with the Deputy that the farm is a good example of how good environmental practice is going to be good for farming. A key element is knowledge about the soil, including quality and farming with different soils.

The final CAP payment is still in consultation with stakeholders and others. The final design of the new Common Agricultural Policy scheme is yet to be agreed. To my mind it is a significant step in the right direction of paying farmers for good environmental services in both Pillar 1 and Pillar 2. When my party members sat where the Deputy is now, we spoke about much of what is now contained in the plans. Hedgerows are critical but we spoke many times about giving farmers the ability to plant trees while still farming. This might involve planting a number of trees per hectare and recognising this as a green measure to allow a farmer meet the requirements for payments.

That is a really good example of how we could meet our carbon budgets and improve farming while giving farmers payments for the ability they have to be flexible and know their land best and what goes best in what place. That is instead of covering a farm with clear-fell monoculture forest. We should allow farmers to use their smarts for areas they may not use now but which may be good for a bit of forestry. What we spoke about is now starting to be a paid enterprise.

I do not have the full details for the LEADER budget but my understanding is the allocation in the revised CAP plan is similar to what was in the previous seven years and that there is not a decrease. I have to check that and come back to the Deputy. As I stated, the final details of the CAP payments are subject to consultation. It will be December before they are completely finalised. I will reply to the electricity supply query later.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: I thank the Minister. We have spoken about this many times but talking about it and doing it are two different things. My understanding from the people involved with LEADER for many years is that it will be approximately €70 million or €80 million down. Will the Government make up that deficit if it exists? It is a simple and straightforward question.

We have spoken about hedgerows. I drive every day from Galway and for every yard of the road, there are plenty of hedgerows. My understanding is they should be counted for sequestration purposes. My understanding was that we were going down that road and we would have it done. I have heard in the past week that this will not be one method of offset and farmers will not have this as a mitigating measure when there are so many hedgerows around the country. There is no point foisting something on farmers if we do not know the accurate figures before we start. The Minister might comment on Lanesborough and Shannonbridge before the lights go out.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: Stopping the lights going out is our critical concern. The Deputy knows there has been much public commentary about this because we had two large gas plants down and auctions that had not delivered new back-up power, meaning we are very tight for the next number of years. I do not believe the details are finalised but in speaking with the ESB and others, it seems the ESB is looking at those two former stations. I understand one of them is starting to install some of the battery back-up systems that will give us the sort of capability to provide energy security. It means that in peak hours, such as the two-hour peak between 5 p.m. and 7 p.m., we could have back-up capability to be able to reinforce the grid and keep voltage and frequency stability. There are many skills in the midlands in managing the grid and those two stations may well be very critical and useful in providing that back-up and system management services that electricity systems now need. It is in that regard I made the comments to a newspaper two weeks ago.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: What about the trees?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I will have to come back to the Deputy about the trees on another day.

Ceisteanna ar Reachtaíocht a Gealladh - Questions on Promised Legislation

Deputy Pearse Doherty: In its wisdom, the Government in July pegged rents to inflation. That was at a time when we were warning about rising prices and my colleague, Deputy Eoin Ó Broin, said this measure was too little, too late, and tenants would be left at the mercy of unpredictable and high inflation.

Three months on, what has happened? It is exactly as we said. Inflation is now running at over 4.3%, meaning a tenant subject to a landlord's review today could see the rent pushed up by 4.3%. Somebody in Dublin paying the average rent of €1,848 per month could see the rent increased by a landlord by over €950 per year. Does the Minister agree the Government has made a dog's dinner of this matter? Does he agree that the Government must implement the proposals Sinn Féin has advocated for years now? Will the Government introduce a rent freeze to cover the next three years and bring in a refundable tax credit, which would put a month's rent back into renters' pockets?

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications(Deputy Eamon Ryan): The Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, has introduced five Bills in this House on the rental sector. While much of this legislation may have related to Covid emergency measures, there is no shortage of ambition to address the rental crisis. I understand the Minister now intends to progress, with the greatest urgency, a specific new renters Bill to address headline inflation rate being above 4%, a development that was not expected. He will introduce a Bill in the House in the coming weeks that will address the issue, in recognition that we have to give protection to renters at this time of high inflation.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Just like you did in July.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I raise an issue relevant to the climate crisis and our biodiversity emergency. It is about water quality in Dublin Bay, in particular. Will the Government provide a timetable for the introduction of an amendment to Statutory Instrument 79 of 2008, the bathing water quality regulations? On foot of a meeting I had with a great organisation, SOS Dublin Bay, we ask that an amendment be introduced to provide local authorities with the discretion to determine the bathing season for the purpose of monitoring water quality at beaches and swimming areas. We believe this is an important issue to ensure we move away from the highly restrictive swimming season definition, currently 1 June to 15 September, provided in the regulations. Local authorities, such as Dublin City Council and Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council, should instead be given discretion to ensure the monitoring of water quality all year around, where relevant and necessary. This would greatly improve our public amenity in Dublin Bay and biodiversity, and it would tackle the climate crisis.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I agree with the Deputy. I swam in Dublin Bay the weekend before last, and I now have an ear infection. I am now wondering if the two are connected.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I am sorry to hear that. I swam there on Sunday and I have no infection.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: This is a public health issue.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: Yes.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: Thousands of people are swimming throughout the year. Last weekend, the water temperature was still high for this time of year, perhaps as a consequence of climate change. No matter how cold the water gets, swimmers will bathe throughout the winter. I agree with the Deputy that we need to give greater flexibility to local authorities in defining the bathing season. It does not end in September; perhaps it did 20 or 30 years ago except for a small handful of hardy people, but that is no longer the case. The same applies across the country. There are huge benefits to be gained from swimming in our waters throughout the year. We need to know what the water quality is and continue with ultraviolet radiation of water coming from the water station in Poolbeg, as an example of what the implications are. I will come back to this matter specifically. I do not have the details to hand on how we could make an amendment to the statutory instrument. However, I support it and hope the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, will advance it.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: We will see you on the South Wall.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: Yes.

Deputy Holly Cairns: I welcome the announcement by the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, of an additional €1.15 million for specialist eating disorder teams. However, due to years of underinvestment, it is an understatement to say this service falls far short of what is needed. No funding was allocated under the national eating disorder treatment plan in 2020, and of the €1.6 million allocated in 2019, not one cent was spent. There are just three impatient beds for eating disorders in the entire country, all of which are in Dublin. People with severe eating disorders are forced to travel to the UK for treatment. Yesterday, I was contacted by a deeply concerned family member of an adolescent with severe anorexia who cannot get the treatment she needs publicly or privately here. What assurances will the Minister give this family and so many others who have been in contact with my office that they will get the care they need? It is disgraceful that we have only three impatient beds.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I agree with the Deputy that this is an issue of great concern. There has been a significant increase in the number of cases in recent years and coming out of Covid. This is one indicator of the effects Covid has had on the broader public's mental health. It is an acute issue. The Deputy's argument, which I am inclined to agree with, is that this is a funding issue rather than a legislative omission. The health budget has increased to more than €22 billion. For the first time ever at a Cabinet meeting I have attended at this time of year, we did not consider a Supplementary Estimate for the health budget. The budget allocation given to the health service should provide for the targeting of this area, which I support.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: There has been a lot of talk from this Government about rewarding workers and providing them with a better deal after all they did for us during Covid. There are many complexities to that and we expect announcements and so on. One issue the Government could resolve is to give workers the right to be trade unionists and represent other workers in their jobs without suffering victimisation. In that regard, I raise the case of a shop steward working on a site on Cork Street where public housing is being built and on which the

contractor is Sisk. He was sacked five days ago simply because he raised issues about overtime being docked from workers on spurious grounds. On his arrival at work the next day, he was told there was no work for him, even though the site is in full swing. This is a public site on which public housing is being built, where a shop steward for the Independent Workers Union was sacked. I ask that Minister look into this case and, more generally, does something to protect trade unionists and shop stewards who are simply acting on behalf of workers.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: It is difficult to comment on a specific case. If the Deputy sends me the details, I will look into it. I agree with the general point about supporting the role of and acknowledging the need for and benefit of trade unions in our country. The strength of our country is that we have a partnership approach in which trade unions have a critical role to play. When the rights of people are infringed, as in the example provided, we need mechanisms to protect them. Trade unions have a valuable and important role. I do not disagree with the Deputy's general argument but I cannot comment on the specifics of the case.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I will send the Minister the details.

Deputy Cathal Berry: The Minister will be aware that, thankfully, a significant number of people throughout the country are now microgenerating electricity from photovoltaic, or PV, solar panels on their homes, farms and businesses. They are doing this for two reasons, namely, environmental and financial. However, they are supplying surplus energy to the national grid and are not receiving remuneration for it. When does the Minister expect these fine people will be properly remunerated for the service they are providing? Given that so much spare roof space is available for solar panels on farms throughout the country, does the Minister agree that there is potential for us to drastically reduce our climate emissions while, significantly, providing an additional income source for hard-pressed farm families?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I agree with the Deputy that there is huge potential for a further income stream for farms and householders, particularly when fossil fuel energy prices are so high. The more solar panels we put on roofs of farm buildings, houses and businesses, the better. This has been a source of real frustrations for me. We hoped to have this over the line by the summer. It has been delayed by difficulties in processing the complex European legislation through the Office of the Parliamentary Counsel. I had a meeting with the Commission for Regulation of Utilities, CRU, last week. I was reassured that by early January, all the necessary instruments should be in place. The CRU held a consultation on the approach two or three weeks ago. It is being finalised and will be in place in January. We will then consider grant and other support systems to enhance it. It makes a lot of sense.

Deputy Michael Collins: The SouthDoc overnight service in Castletownbere, which serves the people of Ardgroom, Eyeries, Allihies, Adrigole and Glengarriff, as well as Lauragh in south Kerry, has been non-existent for the past six weeks. In spite of numerous communications received from the Minister from Health, Deputy Simon Donnelly, during these weeks indicating that the issue had been resolved, the truth on the ground is that last night there was no out-of-hours doctor service in Castletownbere. It seems the people of the Beara Peninsula will, once again, be without a GP service overnight during the coming weekend. What is wrong here? The only remedy the HSE provided was to send a doctor without a car to cover some nights recently. As there is little or no public transport on our peninsula, the only way we figured this doctor could get to a house if he was called out was to thumb a lift. This is beyond a joke. Can the Minister imagine the people of Dublin being told today that they would have no out-of-hours doctor service for the weekend ahead? There would be a national outcry and

the issue would be resolved in minutes. I ask the Minister to personally intervene in this mess and to provide a full-time out-of-hours SouthDoc service for the people of the Beara Peninsula immediately.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I can imagine the real concern not being able to get a GP out of hours is causing for the people of the Beara Peninsula. From my understanding, we are having difficulty in even getting a GP in many areas, let alone an out-of-hours service. That is a real concern. What is the problem within our health system? Many doctors are qualifying in our universities, at real expense to the State in many cases. It is right that we meet that expense but we are not able to get the number of GPs we need to meet our basic needs, in which I include out-of-hours services for areas such as the Beara Peninsula. I will pass on the details of the specific issue on the Beara Peninsula the Deputy is concerned about because that is the most immediate issue, but there is also a wider strategic question as to why we are finding it so difficult to get GPs to develop their careers and their practices in rural areas.

Deputy Michael McNamara: You can get a vet but not a GP in rural Ireland.

Like the Minister, I look forward to the plant at Moneypoint becoming a green energy hub. I hope hydrogen will be manufactured there using energy generated by harnessing the power of the Atlantic. In the meantime, it is slated for closure in 2025. The Minister suggested that decision might be revisited given the energy shortages. Will he give us an update on that? At the very least, will he assure us that we will not be importing energy because if we import energy, we will be importing energy generated from coal? Britain has ramped up coal-powered stations in response to the energy shortage. France and Germany also have such stations. In the short term, what is going to be done about our energy shortage? Will Moneypoint be part of the solution? Will the Minister assure us that we will not be importing coal-generated power from other countries?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: In answering an earlier question, I mentioned that we have a problem with energy security. Some of our gas-fired power stations have been down. It is likely that Moneypoint will continue to operate up to 2025 to provide back-up power when the wind is not blowing or other gas-fired generators are not available for any one of a variety of reasons. I do not envisage it operating beyond 2025. I will be pushing my Department, the Commission for Regulation of Utilities, CRU, which is the energy regulator, and others to try to ensure we have the flexible open-cycle back-up capacity needed to give us balancing power, rather than having to rely on Moneypoint. Neither Moneypoint nor the station at Tarbert are suited to that role. The plants were designed to run constantly rather than to be switched on and switched off. They take a long time to heat up and do not work well in that sort of flexible back-up role.

If I may finish with one further point, the Deputy mentioned energy importation. As I mentioned earlier on, I was at the North Seas Energy Cooperation conference yesterday. All the talk at that conference was about Ireland having opportunities for export because, particularly on the west coast, we have that power-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We will have to take this up again. We are eating into-----

Deputy Eamon Ryan: -----and we should be, and are, thinking about how to export it.

Deputy Michael McNamara: I agree, but in the short term-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We are eating into the time of others. I call on Deputy La-

hart.

Deputy John Lahart: In recent hours, the Garda Commissioner has gone on the record saying that proposed legislation to overhaul oversight of An Garda Síochána would lead to him spending more time reporting to oversight bodies than overseeing policing and leading the service. He said that the policing, security and community safety Bill 2021, as it currently stands, would lead to dysfunctional micromanagement and that the Bill would grant powers to the proposed new Garda ombudsman which would be disproportionate and unconstitutional and which would not withstand an expensive and time-consuming test in the courts. Does the Minister agree that it is an unhealthy sign in our democracy that the Garda Commissioner feels unheard by Government and is compelled to address an Oireachtas committee to this effect? Is the Government listening to the Garda Commissioner's concerns?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: The Government has always listened to the Garda Commissioner. My understanding is that the legislation the Deputy is concerned about is at the pre-legislative scrutiny stage. That is probably the best place for all of us to discuss this. Members of the Government parties are on the committee as well as members of the Opposition. Part of the role of the committee's pre-legislative scrutiny is to provide an opportunity to listen to the Garda Commissioner. That is the system working appropriately. I would listen to his words with real care. I would also listen to the questioning of the Government representatives on the committee.

Deputy Joe Carey: Regional air connectivity is vital for business and tourism on our island nation. The strategic Aer Lingus Heathrow route has returned to Shannon Airport on a temporary basis while the runway at Cork Airport is being refurbished. It is critical for business, tourism and regional development that the three return flights a day from Shannon to Heathrow are restored as soon as possible. I welcome the provision of €90 million in the recent budget to restore and underpin strategic routes. Will the Minister indicate to the House when he expects the Shannon-Heathrow route to return to three return flights a day, incorporating an early morning flight and a late evening flight, which are vital for business and tourism connectivity?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I agree with the Deputy about that route and others. For Shannon in particular, the connection to Heathrow is a vital part of connectivity for business and other interests in the region. I listened with interest to the radio this morning as various industry and university representatives spoke about how the region is still strong. The industrial estate in Shannon is still a really strong attractor of talent but that talent needs to be able to connect to other places. The Government included a significant package of supports for the aviation sector in the budget. The follow-on from that as to how Aer Lingus and others deploy their fleets is a matter for them. We do not run the airlines. I agree with the Deputy and expect that the supports that have been provided will see a return to more frequent services. I believe the Deputy said there were previously three services a day from Shannon to Heathrow. I would think that will be a very attractive prospect for the airline as well as the region.

Deputy Johnny Guirke: We knew before the pandemic that drugs had taken a hold in every town and village in the country. Over recent weeks, prominent figures in the GAA have highlighted gambling, drug use and addiction within the sport. We can be sure that these issues are not restricted to the GAA and will be evident across all sports. Will the Government work with all sporting bodies in the country to examine this issue and see what strategies and supports can be developed to assist our athletes when they find themselves in personal turmoil due to addiction and are in need of our support?

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Deputy Eamon Ryan: I will ask the Minister of State, Deputy Feighan, to answer that question.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan): I thank the Deputy for raising this very important issue. We are now midway through the term of the national drugs strategy, Reducing Harm, Supporting Recovery. We are looking at a health-led approach because, unfortunately, drugs are in every town and village in the country. The Garda and all stakeholders are working as hard as possible. There is already a lot of collaboration with local organisations such as the GAA. We are only too delighted to work with them.

I addressed the issue of problem gambling in the Seanad this morning. We hope that we will be dealing with the gambling industry and the Department of Justice to introduce measures which provide money for counselling and supports for those suffering with gambling addiction. Again, it is insidious and is to be found in every town and village in the country. Online gambling is a very significant issue. I thank the Deputy for raising these two very important issues.

Deputy Thomas Gould: Last night, while the Minister and his Government were in here voting against renters and for landlords, five young people in Cork were forcefully, illegally and violently evicted from their home. This was not just an illegal eviction. The father of one of the girls staying there was knocked to the ground and put in a stranglehold while trying to defend his daughter from being evicted illegally. The landlord wanted to evict these young people in order to put the property on Airbnb to make a quick buck. It has gone beyond greed. As a result of this Government's inability to protect renters, landlords think they are above the law, above humanity and above morality. Will the Minister and his Government finally stand up, protect renters and stop these illegal and violent evictions?

I o'clock **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire:** On the same issue, it was a disgrace to see-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: No, you cannot come in on the same issue.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: The Government will stand up for renters. I do not know the specifics of the case but what the Deputy has said would raise real concerns. I presume it is a matter for the Garda or others to investigate. My colleagues, the Ministers, Deputies Catherine Martin and Darragh O'Brien, and others are examining ways in which we get the balance right in terms of Airbnb. For too long, it was about the interests of the short-term Airbnb-type approach versus the need of local communities to be able to rent property. That is one of the examples where we will examine changing the approach. It is not to say "No" to Airbnb-----

Deputy Thomas Gould: It is happening today. People are being evicted from their homes.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Let the Minister respond.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: -----but rather make sure it is part of a balanced approach which protects renters.

Deputy Alan Dillon: We need further action on the upgrading of the R312 from Castlebar to Bellacorick. As the Minister is aware, Mayo County Council received €850,000 this year under the specific improvements grant scheme to progress safety upgrades specifically for the Glenisland bridge replacement and road alignment project. While the new bridge is very welcome and will soon be opened by the Minister of State, Deputy Naughton, much more needs to be done to improve the overall safety of the road. The R312 serves as a vital artery to large

parts of north-west Mayo. It serves a key route to Bangor Erris, Belmullet, the Mullet Peninsula and Blacksod Bay. Attention will soon turn to the remaining stretches of road that are quite simply unsafe for regular users of the road. I ask that the Minister's Department, along with Mayo County Council, respond to requests for future upgrades on regional roads like the R312.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I thank the Deputy. I am aware that the Minister of State, Deputy Naughton, is due to open the upgraded bridge in Glenisland, which is very welcome. We need to invest in safety and connectivity to the likes of north-west Mayo, which needs good access. My understanding is that in recent weeks, Mayo County Council has sent my Department some proposals on further upgrades to the road. We have not had time to consider them. That is the current situation. The upgraded bridge will be opened and we will then look at further proposals.

Deputy Chris Andrews: I wish to highlight the ongoing plans of apartheid Israel to expand illegal settlements in strategic locations which will cut the West Bank in two and separate Jerusalem from the rest of Palestine. Five hundred and forty new homes were approved recently in Har Homa. These settlement expansion plans are designed to disrupt Palestinian territorial continuity and bury hopes of a two-state solution. Will the Minister raise this issue with the Cabinet and ensure that Ireland uses its position on the UN Security Council to sanction apartheid Israel for these plans?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I do not think this is an issue that divides us. There is widespread concern in the House about the fate of a lot of Palestinian communities in the West Bank and, if I am using the right term, the effective annexation, a term which was used to describe some of the new settlement patterns. We share that concern and express it on the international stage and within Cabinet discussions there would be a similar perspective. I agree with the Deputy. This is an ongoing concern for every Member of the House.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: Recently, the HSE made cuts to primary eye care for medical card patients. Under the medical card scheme, a patient can get an eye test every two years, or on a yearly basis if there is a medical need. This was written into the contract opticians have with the HSE. Opticians in Tullow, Carlow and Bagenalstown have contacted me to tell me how they have used the scheme to examine patients with eye issues that can be monitored locally rather than requiring a hospital appointment the wait for which, as the Minister knows, can be lengthy. This scheme is not being continued. I do not understand the confusion. In the budget we extended dental care to all medical card holders, which I welcomed. However, people who have medical cards will now not receive eye care. I am constantly highlighting the fact that some doctors are charging people with medical cards for blood tests. This is unacceptable. We need to make sure that those who have medical cards, who are the most vulnerable, are looked after. During the pandemic some dentists did not take patients with medical cards. Can we look at changing the contracts with the HSE? What is happening is unacceptable and absolutely ridiculous.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I accept the concerns the Deputy has set out, but I wish to provide some detail. Additional funding of €10 million has been provided in budget 2022, on top of the existing level of service provision of €56 million. This additional allocation should enable progress to be made in addressing issues around service provision for medical card patients in 2022, which are the sort of measures the Deputy is concerned about. I understand that under the dental treatment services scheme, DTSS, which provides dental care free of charge to medical card holders aged over 16, services are provided by independent dental practitioners who have

a contract with the HSE. It was always the intention of the Department to undertake a complete review of that contract when the new national oral health policy was launched. The Covid pandemic has caused the roll-out of the policy to be delayed and the proposed contract review to be deferred. As I understand it, it is still very much the intention to address the long-term issue.

Deputy Denis Naughten: Project Ireland 2040 set a home retrofit target rate to see dirty fossil fuels taken out of our home heating systems by 2035. However, based on the rate of home retrofitting announced in last week's budget, it will now be 2050 before that is actually achieved. Yet, in order to reach our 2030 carbon budget goals we need to remove these fossil fuels from heating systems before the end of the decade. How much new money is going into retrofitting schemes next year? Why is there a 50% shortfall in what was actually committed to in 2018?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: The biggest shortfall in the past year has been due to the Covid pandemic. We made a decision, in respect of retrofitting in people's homes, that it would not be possible in the first half of the year.

Deputy Denis Naughten: I am talking about next year.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: There is a significant further increase in funding for next year. There is €109 million for the warmer home schemes. I understand the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage has allocated €85 million for local authority housing. From memory, I understand approximately €120 million has also been allocated. A significant budget is available. That will not be the constraint. The first constraint will be in the public uptake. The second constraint will be the availability of workers. That is why the State is also investing significantly in apprenticeship schemes. The Minister, Deputy Harris, is putting in place measures in SOLAS and other training systems so that we can develop workers. Budget will not be the limiting factor in the next two to three years. We need to ramp things up and then scale up beyond that.

An additional €60 million is being provided for a loan support scheme for householders who will raise finance for their own homes. The Oireachtas joint committee set out the level of ambition. I understand the target is 500,000 houses during this decade. The Deputy is right; it would take three decades under that timetable. If at the end of that every single home is insulated that will be of huge benefit not just in terms of climate but also health.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Ten thousand people will march on the streets of Navan on 30 October in support of our accident and emergency department. The HSE is determined to close it. While there has been a stay of execution for a few months, this is not good enough for the 210,000 people who live in County Meath. Accident and emergency and ICU departments are the front line in the battle against Covid, yet the Government is closing accident and emergency and ICU departments in Navan. Waits of ten or 11 hours are not unusual in Drogheda's accident and emergency department and the staff of Connolly Hospital Blanchardstown protested because of conditions in their accident and emergency department just last week. Will the Minister commit to overturning the Government policy to close the accident and emergency department in Navan? Will he commit to the proper funding of the accident and emergency department in order that people can get timely treatment when it is needed?

Deputy Duncan Smith: There is a crisis in the Irish dental industry and access to dentistry. We are seeing it most acutely in the exodus from the DTSS but the reasons for it go much

deeper and are much more fundamental. The Minister said he is committed to reviewing the scheme but there is no real evidence of this, despite saying that work began in 2019. When will the Government start taking this seriously? It is very important. Many people do not have access to dental services. When will the scheme to update the Dentists Act 1985 be ready?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: In regard to Our Lady's Hospital, Navan, my understanding is that the HSE is clear on the transition of Navan to what it calls a model 2 hospital. The policy approach is based on very good medical and scientific advice. It involves major expansion. I understand from the figures I am provided that capital works are under way this year to bring a second theatre into operation as part of the increasing of ambulatory and day care surgery capacity at Navan hospital from approximately 2,500 elective surgical procedures to 5,000.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: The Minister should not listen to the people who tell him that. The policy is dangerous.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: Every medic to whom I talk says that when there is specialisation, volume is got through and hospitals are designed in order that they have real expertise, there are real benefits and-----

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: There is no alternative pathway.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Let the Minister respond.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: The argument made by the health system - we have to charge the HSE with the optimising of the forms of hospital we have - is that this model 2, and I think Navan hospital is the last of nine hospitals which have been transferred and changed in this way-----

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Those decisions have been disasters.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I believe that getting that next tier down of hospitals is critical to getting them expanded and getting them doing more work. That is, I understand, what will happen in Navan, subject to medical advice.

Lastly, I do not have the details Deputy Duncan Smith is looking for but I will ask the officials to provide them in order that he has that information.

An Bille um an gCúigiú Leasú is Tríocha ar an mBunreacht (Uisce faoi Úinéireacht Phoiblí) (Uimh. 2) 2016: Tarchur chuig Roghchoiste [Comhaltaí Príobháideacha]

Thirty-fifth Amendment of the Constitution (Water in Public Ownership) (No. 2) Bill 2016: Referral to Select Committee [Private Members]

Deputy Joan Collins: Tairgim:

Go gcuirfear an Bille faoi bhráid an Roghchoiste um Thithíocht, Rialtas Áitiúil agus

21 October 2021

Oidhreacht de réir Bhuan-Ordú 180.

I move:

That the Bill be referred to the Select Committee on Housing, Local Government and Heritage pursuant to Standing Order 180.

Cuireadh agus aontaíodh an cheist.

Question put and agreed to.

Sitting suspended at 1.12 p.m. and resumed at 1.52 p.m.

Breast Cancer Awareness Month: Statements

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): I am pleased to mark breast cancer awareness month and to discuss this important topic. At the outset, I wish to acknowledge the great commitment of those working in cancer services in hospitals, screening services, community services and the charitable and voluntary sectors. This has enabled the continued provision of quality care to individuals during the Covid-19 pandemic and following the cyberattack in May.

Cancer prevention is a cornerstone of the National Cancer Strategy 2017-2026. Prevention aims to improve the overall health of our population and offers the most cost-effective, long-term approach for cancer control. The proportion of the incidence of cancer attributable to modifiable lifestyles and environmental factors is estimated to be in the 30% to 40% range. Modifiable lifestyles or environmental risks exist for many cancers. Of these, smoking is the most important. Others include excess body weight, physical inactivity, alcohol consumption and sun exposure.

Prevention measures are promoted by the Government as part of the overall health and well-being initiatives under the Healthy Ireland programme. Initiatives such as breast cancer awareness month bring a renewed and targeted emphasis on prevention. It presents opportunities for us all to promote breast awareness and spurs us on in our efforts to promote the message across the population that people can impact significantly on their own risk of developing cancer.

Breast cancer is the most commonly diagnosed invasive cancer among women in Ireland. It affects approximately 3,500 women every year as well as a very small number of men. Breast cancer is the second leading cause of cancer deaths among women in Ireland. However, survival rates are improving significantly. The latest breast cancer statistics from the National Cancer Registry show that five-year net survival for breast cancer patients improved from an average of 70% for a diagnosis in the period 1994 to 1999, to 85% in 2011 to 2015. This represents an approximate halving of the five-year mortality risk over that time. As these figures predate the introduction of the current national cancer strategy and the improvements made in recent years, it is expected that the next set of figures will show a further substantial improvement.

The vision of Ireland's national cancer strategy is that we will strive together to prevent cancer and work to improve the treatment, health and well-being, and experiences and outcomes

of those living with and beyond cancer. It is about preventing cancer across our population, diagnosing it early, providing optimal care to people and maximising their quality of life.

Each year, approximately one third of all breast cancers diagnosed in Ireland are detected through BreastCheck. I am happy to report that routine screening appointments in BreastCheck are returning to normal despite the impact of Covid-19 and the recent cyberattack. Approximately 86,000 women were screened between January and September of this year. Unfortunately, due to nearly a year of screening time being lost because of the impact of Covid-19, it will take longer to get through the current screening round, that is, approximately three years when it normally takes two. However, this is still within international norms, as Ireland screens more frequently than many other countries. People who have been waiting the longest will generally be invited first. The National Screening Service is working hard to return breast screening to two-year screening and to doing so in a safe manner. It should be noted that, even when screening was paused, the programme continued to operate follow-up clinics, providing support to the symptomatic breast cancer services.

Additional funding of €10 million was provided for cancer screening in 2021. This is helping to increase capacity. This investment includes two new mobile screening units for BreastCheck, located in Donegal and Dublin, with a third mobile unit coming on stream in 2022. In line with commitments in the programme for Government, BreastCheck is currently implementing an age extension project that will see all women between 50 and 69 years of age being invited for routine breast screening. As with all of our national screening services, BreastCheck delivers its services in line with international criteria for population-based screening programmes that are kept under constant review.

As part of breast cancer awareness month, the National Screening Service and the HSE have launched an extensive national media campaign to highlight key details about symptom awareness, breast cancer prevention and screening during Covid-19. BreastCheck provides a great deal of information on its website, *breastcheck.ie*. This includes educational materials to encourage people to be aware of general breast health and information on the common symptoms for which they should seek medical advice.

All individuals are encouraged to attend for their BreastCheck appointments when they are called. Sometimes, people may be a little apprehensive or put it off for whatever reason, but it is important that they take up their appointments when they are offered. Early intervention is key.

BreastCheck has launched a campaign that aims to inform the public about any delay in appointments and to highlight the Covid-19 protective measures that are in place at screening locations. Before an appointment, a text message from BreastCheck is sent to confirm the appointment details. In this way, someone can rearrange an appointment if necessary and BreastCheck can offer the initial appointment to another person in the community.

Diagnosing cancer at its earliest possible stage is a critical first step in achieving higher survival rates, reducing treatment severity and improving patients' quality of life.

2 o'clock

Patients who recognise suspicious symptoms and seek early medical intervention are generally more likely to have less advanced disease, less severe treatment and better outcomes. When cancers are diagnosed at stages 1 and 2, longer-term survival prospects are considerably better than for patients diagnosed at stages 3 and 4 of the disease. The five-year survival rate is

94% for people diagnosed with stage 1 disease and 19% for people diagnosed at stage 4.

Each of the eight designated cancer centres in the State has a symptomatic breast disease clinic, with a ninth clinic operating in Letterkenny University Hospital as a satellite of the service in University Hospital Galway. Approximately 42,000 new patients attend these clinics every year, having been referred by their GP. Between January and September this year, GP e-referrals for breast cancer were at 130% of the 2019, pre-Covid, rate.

The national cancer control programme continues to monitor closely trends in numbers coming forward to diagnostic services and the level of attendances for appointments for treatment, with a particular focus on urgent cases. The total number of new patients seen across symptomatic breast disease clinics between January and August 2021 was 98% of the figure for the corresponding period in 2019. Patients are triaged as urgent and non-urgent. Attendances at urgent symptomatic breast disease clinics from January to August 2021 were at 115% of 2019 levels, while attendances at non-urgent clinics were at 82% of 2019 levels. Furthermore, the total number of new cancers diagnosed in symptomatic breast disease clinics from January to August 2021 was 104.6% of figure for the corresponding period in 2019. All the statistics, as we can see, are going in one direction.

The national cancer control programme is currently developing a model of care for hereditary cancer, covering the identification and assessment of those with possible hereditary cancer risk, referral for counselling and testing when indicated, and co-ordinated surveillance when required. Increased staffing has been provided to the hereditary cancer service in St. James's Hospital, including a consultant in cancer genetics. In November last year, the hospital commenced a trial of a remote genetics testing provider, with the aim of improving turnaround times for testing during the Covid-19 period.

As previously indicated, breast cancer has very good survival rates. In fact, people with a diagnosis of breast cancer account for almost a quarter of all those living with and beyond cancer in Ireland. An extra €1.91 million is being used this year to continue the development of survivorship services, including psycho-oncology services, to improve the quality of life of those living with and beyond cancer. An additional €20 million was allocated for the continued implementation of the national cancer strategy this year, with €1.8 million allocated specifically for breast cancer services. This funding will drive improvements across all stages of the cancer continuum. In addition, there is funding of €12 million for the restoration of cancer services to 95% of 2019, pre-Covid, levels. This funding is being used to support hospitals in addressing backlogs, extending clinic times, providing additional clinics, increasing diagnostic capacity and providing locum and temporary support. I am delighted that the commitment of the Government to the implementation of the national cancer strategy is further emphasised by the allocation of an additional €20 million in budget 2022.

I take this opportunity, in breast cancer awareness month, to encourage people to attend for their BreastCheck appointments. If anybody, of any age, has concerns about cancer, I urge them to go to their GP, who will arrange appropriate follow-up care. As somebody who was called for a BreastCheck appointment a couple of years ago when I turned 50, I was apprehensive going for my first scan. We are all conscious of undressing in front of healthcare staff, but I was met by a lovely nurse. It is very important to go for the scan and it is such a relief when you get the results. Of course, some people do not get the result they want but, fortunately, early intervention is key. We all have friends and relatives who have had results that were not as good as they should have been but who have been able to get the treatment they need. I en-

courage everyone to go to screening appointments. I know all my colleagues in the House will encourage anyone who receives a BreastCheck appointment to go and have the check done. It only takes a few minutes and people will be glad when they have it over and done with.

The message I really want to give today is that our cancer diagnostic and treatment services are open and our healthcare staff will provide people with the care they need. I give way to my colleague, Deputy Murnane O'Connor, for the few minutes remaining in this slot.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: I thank the Minister of State for sharing time. Every October, we receive a wealth of information about breast cancer, with people dressed in pink engaged in fundraising and celebrities speaking about their breast cancer experience, but we still see women arriving at clinics not knowing much at all about the disease. One in seven women in Ireland will be diagnosed with breast cancer. Due to Covid-19 measures, the screening programme is nearly a year behind. This is a devastating situation and we must do something about it. I welcome the Minister of State's commitment in this area, against the background of the major disruption that has taken place during the Covid crisis.

Awareness surrounding breast cancer is incredibly important because early detection, often through screening, can catch the disease when it is most treatable. If that early screening is not available, we have a massive problem. Breast cancer is the third most common cancer in Ireland. Sadly, between 2015 and 2017, an average of 719 women and five men died of breast cancer in this country. In terms of survival, National Cancer Registry data show that the probability of women diagnosed with breast cancer surviving for five years was more than 82% in the period from 2010 to 2014. International comparisons show Ireland has improved its ranking over time in terms of survival rates for a number of cancers but, as I understand it, this is not so much the case for breast cancer.

BreastCheck, the screening programme for breast cancer, is only open to women aged 50 to 69. Every year, approximately one third of all breast cancer cases diagnosed are detected through the programme. The onset of the Covid-19 pandemic resulted in invitations for BreastCheck screening being suspended in March 2020. While all symptomatic breast disease clinics remained open and accepted referrals, they are operating with a reduced capacity. BreastCheck services resumed in October 2020 with reduced capacity due to Covid measures and there was a 69.6% reduction against expected activity. Fewer mammograms have been carried out in 2021 than would otherwise be the case. This is a concern, but I am delighted the Minister of State has given a commitment on funding, which will, we hope, see a return to a situation where as many mammograms as possible are carried out.

The national screening service has highlighted that we have lost nearly a year of screening, which I know the Minister of State has undertaken to rectify. We must enhance the BreastCheck service and encourage patients who have been afraid to ask about worrying symptoms to come forward for screening at a symptomatic breast disease clinic. In June this year, representatives of the Irish Medical Organisation, IMO, told the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Health that there is a growing backlog of patients waiting for urgent, time-critical diagnosis services and treatment services while, for reasons connected to the pandemic, life-saving screening services are falling below the annual targets. The full impact of the Covid-19 crisis on cancer care may be years away but we can do something now. We can increase investment in this area, which will enable us to have a meaningful awareness discussion.

I am one of the women aged over 50 who has been screened for breast cancer under the

BreastCheck programme. It is a relief to be checked and it is important that all eligible persons who are called for screening avail of it. As the Minister of State said, there is always a fear around going for the scan. Like her, I encourage everyone who is called for BreastCheck screening to attend. In the long term, early intervention is key.

Deputy Patricia Ryan: We are nearing the end of October, which is breast cancer awareness month. Breast cancer is one of the most common cancers in women, with almost 3,500 women diagnosed every year in Ireland. It is important to highlight, as the Minister of State has done, that men can also be affected by breast cancer.

Being breast aware and understanding how to check your breasts effectively each month is crucial to spotting the early signs of cancer. Thanks to the work done to increase awareness of the early signs and symptoms, as well as improved treatment options, breast cancer now has a five-year survival rate of 83%. It is a disgrace, however, that most of this work is carried out by charities, which have to fundraise for the majority of their income because of the failure of Government to provide vital services. There are currently almost 28,000 women in Ireland who have survived breast cancer. Since 1987 the number of women who have died from breast cancer has decreased by almost one third and in women under 50 it has dropped by almost a half. That is very good news and we are all delighted by it. However, despite clinical advances, breast cancer stories are still often rooted in the diagnosis and treatment of the disease. Much of the ground that had been gained pre-Covid has now been lost. Fewer than 100,000 people were checked under the State's three cancer screening programmes in the first half of last year due to Covid-19 restrictions. This compares 500,000 people who were screened in 2019 and suggests that we are significantly behind in our screening for bowel, cervical and breast cancers. Covid-19 has had a significant and negative impact on cancer services, causing many patients to present late or avoid appointments. Screening services were down for much of the pandemic and missed annual targets by 44% to 70% while chemotherapy and radiotherapy services operated at 80% to 90% of 2019 levels. It is difficult to know how many people did not present to GPs in 2020 when they should have but it is estimated from surveys to be anywhere from 15% to 25%. We need a massive screening catch-up programme. Early diagnosis is crucial to a better outcome and everyone who is diagnosed with cancer should be given a medical card.

A lady came to my office last month who had found a lump. She was told she would have to wait for up to four months to have it removed. Luckily she was referred to a plastic surgeon and was told she would only have to wait for six weeks. Imagine the worry and the sleepless nights she suffered, trying to keep her household going while coping with such a diagnosis. On top of this, she fell through the cracks because of a communication issue between her consultants. It was not until I wrote to the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, that the fire was put under everyone and everything was sorted. Her operation was carried out this week. I would like to wish her well and to thank the Minister of State for her intervention. However, people with cancer should not have to contact their local Deputy, who follows their case up with a Minister of State at the Department of Health, in order to get the treatment that they really need.

The system is broken and it is an absolute disgrace, in a modern democracy, that we have such a broken system. Urgent investment is needed in cancer screening, diagnostics and treatment to catch up on delayed and missed diagnoses. Sinn Féin in government will step up investment in the National Cancer Strategy by €20 million to provide funding support for cancer prevention and early diagnosis, surgical and medical oncology, physiotherapy oncology, rapid access clinics, radiotherapy, survivorship and investment in genetics research, diagnostics and treatments. We will also invest a further €10 million in cancer screening services which are

currently operating at full capacity. They cannot catch up on missed screenings over the last 18 months without additional capacity. Oncology consultant posts must be prioritised when filling the 600 new consultant posts funded in the last budget. It is about time the Government gave this issue the funding and attention it deserves. Lives depend on it. Like the Minister of State, I am in my 50s and have attended BreastCheck clinics a few times and it is vital that we encourage everyone to do that.

Deputy Pauline Tully: For the last few years I have requested Cavan County Council to light the courthouse in pink for the month of October to highlight breast cancer awareness. The council has always obliged and I am thankful it for that. It was not my initiative but that of a woman with stage-four breast cancer. She is an excellent advocate for breast cancer awareness and is very focused on making women aware of the signs of breast cancer and of the importance of checking their breasts regularly. She has spent years undergoing treatment and is still doing so but is always good humoured, positive and thinking of others. I want to pay tribute to her for all the work that she does.

She has also advocated for the extension of BreastCheck and feels strongly that it should be expanded to those aged 40 and over. She points out that if this had been the case, she would have been diagnosed earlier and would not have had to go through all of the treatment she has endured. There are also potentially major savings to the State from early diagnoses and I hope that additional investment in screening programmes will be provided. Women must be screened and if the HSE is not willing to provide mammograms, it could provide ultrasounds which can be just as effective. From the age of 40 onwards hormonal changes are happening in the body and it vitally important that women are screened while these changes are happening. A high volume of breast cancer cases are estrogen driven and a mammogram will pick this up. For women aged 25 to 40, an ultrasound is effective and non-invasive. For women over 69, an ultrasound can pick up changes in the breast tissue. According to Breast Cancer Ireland nearly one quarter or 23% of women diagnosed with breast cancer are between the ages of 20 and 50 while approximately 36% of women diagnosed with breast cancer are over the age of 70. In that context, all women need to be checked and screened regularly. GPs could play a bigger role in this area. Some GPs, no matter what one attends for, will offer to do a breast check. It would be good for all GPs to consider doing that if possible.

I am also concerned about a potentially high number of undiagnosed cases due to Breast-Check being suspended during Covid. It is alarming that disruptions to cancer screening programmes caused by the pandemic may lead to people presenting for treatment at much later stages of the disease. A year has been lost as a result of Covid-19 and that will take years to address. The pandemic and the HSE cyberattack have both had a negative impact on screening and, indeed, are still having an impact. That said, capacity issues have existed for a number of years so it is not accurate to blame all delays on Covid or the cyberattack.

A major effort must be made to make screening accessible to all women. I have spoken to many disabled women who often find that when they present for screening they cannot be accommodated and have to wait for another appointment. Nobody should have to wait. There is also concern about the lack of medical oncologists. I understand that there are only 41 such specialists when it is estimated that 100 will be needed by 2028. There are also shortages of radiation and surgical oncologists and haematologists. Serious efforts must be made to address this problem.

I also wish to acknowledge that breast cancer is not just a women's problem. Men are also

affected, with one in every 200 cases of breast cancer in a man. This form of cancer can effect one in 1,000 men. I understand that cannabis use is a common cause of breast cancer in men and awareness of this must be increased.

Deputy Imelda Munster: October is breast awareness month. This is a very positive initiative in terms of promoting awareness and ensuring that everybody is breast aware. Early detection is absolutely vital when it comes to breast cancer because it saves lives. It is very important that everybody knows how and how often to check their breasts, what changes to look out for and what to do if one notices a change. In 2020, 3,704 cases of breast cancer were diagnosed in Ireland. Breast cancer is the most common invasive cancer in women. One in seven women in Ireland will receive a breast cancer diagnosis in their lifetime. On a more positive note, the mortality rate has fallen by 2% each year between 1994 and 2016. Behind every case number is a woman, or in rarer cases, a man, their family, friends and community. Prevention strategies around looking after our general health and early detection through self-checks and screening are vital. We must invest in preventative healthcare, awareness, early diagnosis, screening, community supports and treatment services.

Sinn Féin recently launched a health policy document in which we pledged an additional €20 million for the National Cancer Strategy to ensure continued improvements in cancer prevention, diagnosis and treatment. We also pledged an additional €22 million for cancer screening services to improve access and capacity. Screening is absolutely central to responding to breast cancer. Earlier this week the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Health heard that cancer services are facing significant challenges arising from the pandemic, the HSE cyberattack in May and historic capacity issues which were flagged as far back as 2018. The committee also heard that there is anecdotal evidence that people are presenting in the more advanced stages of the disease as a result. While screening rates are back to pre-pandemic levels, the fact remains that restrictions had a devastating effect on screening services, with Professor Fidelma Flanagan, lead clinical director for BreastCheck, saying that the service lost a year and that it will take years to recover.

We need to consider expanding the ages at which we screen. At the moment, only women aged between 50 and 69 undergo screening, as this is when women are at the highest risk of developing breast cancer. The cases reported for women under 50 and over the age of 69 are lower than for those in the screening age group but they are still significant. We need to be mindful of breast cancer at different stages of life and we need to review the screening ages in line with the incidence rate.

At a meeting of the Joint Committee on Health this week, Professor Fidelma Flanagan said that because cancer incidence is low in the under-45 age group screening is not advised but that BreastCheck is considering expanding screening to those aged under 50 and over 70. I hope this can be done and the Government invests in the service to allow it to happen.

In other European countries, the approach to preventative care involves people being given an appointment for a breast check and other vital check-ups. Anyone who does not attend a first appointment receives a second appointment notice in the post and failure to attend that appointment means a third appointment must be paid for. This acts as an incentive to avail of preventative measures from an early age.

Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne: Long before Covid 19, crucial targets in the national cancer strategy were missed relating to timely access to diagnostics, surgery, radiotherapy and screen-

ing. We are in the middle of the State's third national cancer strategy and services are still under-resourced, including breast cancer services.

This month, as it is breast cancer awareness month, it would have been prudent, moral and entirely possible to announce a budget allocation for the restoration of many cancer services, including expenditure ring-fenced for additional screening to ease the anxiety experienced by so many women over the past 19 months. However, the budget did not do that. The Irish Cancer Society's justified ask of €45 million was abjectly ignored and just €30 million in additional funding was given. This is not just for the national cancer strategy but is to be spread across the development of myriad national health strategies. This is massively missing the mark. Sinn Féin's alternative budget would have allocated €42 million directly for cancer services. Early detection is indisputably important, as is timely access to treatment.

At a meeting of the Joint Committee on Health this week, BreastCheck representatives told us that screening was back on track. A quick visit to the commentary under BreastCheck social media posts shows dozens upon dozens of testimonies from women who are not so confident in the resumption of services. They include a testimony from a woman who has been waiting for seven months, having been referred by a GP after presenting symptomatically. Women are feeling ignored and dejected, and are frustrated by the situation.

I will mention one woman in particular in Clare. Ms Margaret O'Connor has been brave and patient and has ultimately been let down by the handling of screening services. I have submitted parliamentary questions on her behalf to try to get some form of accountability about how this situation has arisen. Ms O'Connor does not understand why she was not informed that screening had stopped. She has attended her mammogram every year. However, the service just stopped and she did not have access to a mammogram for 18 months. Worse still, she was not notified, there was no consultation or communication and no information was inputted on the website. Ms O'Connor would have gone for a private screening but instead was left in the dark battling rising anxiety. She knew something was wrong and eventually, a ball of nerves, she went to her doctor. Unfortunately, she had aggressive breast cancer. By the time comprehensive screening took place, it had unfortunately spread to her lung and liver. Ms O'Connor has said that the last year of her life has been a living nightmare. The registry is currently 12 months behind, which means that if a woman has not had a screening over the Covid period, she may have to wait another year, which will be three years in total without screening. Investment now in upscaling early detection measures is far more economically viable, as well as being better for our people.

Deputy Duncan Smith: I thank the Whip for allowing this matter to be added to the clár this week. I am on the Business Committee but we all know who ultimately sorts out the schedule for the week, so I thank the Whip.

I welcome the opportunity to speak about and mark breast cancer awareness month. Unfortunately, breast cancer has touched the lives of many of us in this House and people throughout the country. It has had a devastating effect on lives and anything we can do, as the Parliament, to raise awareness is important. What is ever more important is that we use our powers as legislators to ensure that Ireland offers best-in-class healthcare, including access to screening and diagnosis.

While today we may focus on discussing the many issues women face in getting diagnosed and having treatment, we need to ensure that coming out of the pandemic we take another look

at healthcare in the country. For too long, women's health and well-being have come second in Irish healthcare. While breast cancer has had so much investment that outcomes are positive for many, we need to ensure equal access to good cancer care for anyone who gets the devastating news of a cancer diagnosis.

We know that early detection is vital in the battle against all cancers. Screening is an essential, and sometimes life-saving service. However, we need to ensure that our screening programmes are properly resourced. BreastCheck screenings fell by two thirds in 2020 due to the pandemic and we are told it could take up to three years to clear the backlog that has built up. The Government needs to commit to providing additional resources to clear this backlog and seek to reverse the recent extension of the screening interval to three years, bringing it back to the recommended two years. We need to make clear that this backlog does not involve people waiting for a statutory document, such as a driving licence or passport. These backlogs are about people's lives and ultimately a backlog like this that is not addressed speedily will end up with people becoming very ill and, unfortunately, dying. This is absolutely urgent and should be a priority.

Without routine screening there is a risk of delayed diagnosis for women. Women will have delayed diagnoses that could have been treated sooner. Women who will be diagnosed at a later date may need to have a more aggressive form of treatment because of the suspension of testing. We cannot have this happen and I urge the Government to consider investing in our BreastCheck capacity. It is of vital importance that, as we get our health services back and running, we ensure that what is preventable is prevented.

Breast examinations are highly important, as are mammograms. Many charities do extraordinary work in raising awareness about the signs and symptoms of breast cancer and encourage regular self-examination. However, the Government must do more to assure women that if they feel they may have symptoms, they will be treated in a quick and timely manner. I say this because of the very sad testimony of the late Sarah Harding who gave us her experience of discovering she had breast cancer. The world was left shocked earlier this year when the former Girls Aloud singer Sarah Harding died from breast cancer in September at only 39 years of age. In a newspaper interview before her death, she said that due to the pandemic she put off going to the doctor when she first suspected she had symptoms. We need to ensure that no woman ever feels this way. Sarah Harding's untimely death has shone a light on the importance of making women of all ages more breast aware and ensuring they all have access.

The Government should look at working with social media influencers on the signs and symptoms of breast cancer to encourage young women to attend their doctor if they are in any way concerned. The waiting lists these young women are likely to experience must be dealt with as an urgent priority. While younger women are less likely to be struck by breast cancer, we know that 23% of diagnoses occur in women under 50 years. This has been raised by previous speakers. In recognition of this, we should look to extend the BreastCheck service to younger women to encourage and embed a culture of prevention within our health service. We have seen from the free at the point of access operation of PCR testing across the country that if we provide services that can accommodate the numbers required and remove the financial barrier, more and more people are likely to avail of them. It gives people confidence and allows us to capture more cases within all age groups as early as possible.

I will touch on one other point today that has been raised by Alcohol Action Ireland which reiterated today that the provisions in the Alcohol Act 2018 would help to inform consumers of

the link between alcohol and all cancers, including breast cancer. Alcohol is responsible for one in eight cases of breast cancer. Approximately 12% of all breast cancers, or 300 cases per year, are associated with alcohol consumption. We can come to the House and make statements but there is legislation that would directly impact these statistics. It has passed this House but has been left in limbo. Why can the Government not implement this legislation as soon as possible? What is holding us back from bringing it forward? We speak often in this House about projects and legislation that will have impacts years down the line but we have in this legislation something that can make a difference right now.

We have had far too many cases of poor treatment and poor service in women's healthcare in Ireland. We need to deliver progressive and proactive actions so that in years to come we do not look back and regret that when we had the opportunity to make real tangible change in healthcare for the women of Ireland, we did not deliver. If we continue in this vein, we will continue to have horrible stories of late detection and missed diagnoses, and we will have condemned another generation of Irish women to a service that falls far below par. Women across Ireland deserve so much better than what our health service has delivered for generations to date.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I am glad to have an opportunity to speak on this subject at this time because it serves to remind us all of the importance of early detection and treatment, and of the availability of the appropriate services.

I am not sure whether my colleague is returning. I had two minutes or something.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: At this point, the Deputy has 11 minutes.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: Well, I have been-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I believe the Deputy will rise to the challenge.

Deputy Sorca Clarke: Give it a go.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: We dealt with this subject in committee just two days ago. It was a timely visit to the subject. I compliment the Minister and Ministers of State on their work in this area, particularly at that this time and coming as it does in the wake of the difficulties with the reliability of screening and the reviews of screening that did not work out to the benefit of quite a number of women. In those circumstances, we have learned lessons. At least I hope we have.

One or two points come to mind. Almost invariably as public representatives, we get telephone calls from constituents who have sad tales of diagnosis to tell. It is an appalling time for a woman. It is a time when her breath is taken away by what lies ahead. That is why it is important, now more than ever and in the wake of Covid and what has transpired over screening, to have a dramatic response and to recognise that the women's cases are important, notwithstanding all the competing demands. In the eyes of those affected, the demand is the most serious they will face in their lifetimes. They know that. They feel talking to somebody is a help because the burden is shared. They are quite right.

Scientifically, we have learned a lot over the years. The medical world has learned a lot very quickly about Covid. There is a good case to be made for treating all forms of cancer, particularly breast cancer, in the same way as Covid because, to deal with threats of their magnitude,

it will be necessary to concentrate on the necessary research as and from now. I have no doubt that if an adequate investment is made in the research, it will yield dividends in a short time. Again, this relates to Covid and the experience we had of it. One normally expects ten years to go by before a response of the kind made to Covid can be made, but that did not happen; there was a concentration, and it brought results. The same applies to breast cancer. It is timely to remind ourselves about the work being done and the experiences we have had, and also to recognise that, by the end of the second quarter next year, the health services will have caught up with the Covid backlog. I ask the Ministers to do everything they can to ensure there is no diminution of the struggle or battle against the disease in the intervening period.

My colleague has returned to the House. She might tell me when to stop.

Deputy Emer Higgins: Whenever the Deputy wants.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I will continue for a couple of minutes, with the permission of the Leas-Cheann Comhairle.

It is important that we mark this occasion. It is important that we learn from what has happened in the past. It is equally important that we spend money strategically and redouble our efforts to deal with the issue from here on in. We must encourage investment to deal with it.

Cancer care is being given by many in constituencies up and down the country. Very many of the services are voluntary. In some such cases, as in my constituency, volunteers have fallen victim to the disease, which makes it even more poignant. Notwithstanding their efforts to help others, they found they had become victims themselves.

I recognise the efforts the Minister and Ministers of State have made and with which they need to continue. They should try to ensure that as we face the problems associated with the usual winter illnesses, such as overcrowding in accident and emergency departments and hospital bed shortages, the BreastCheck system will not be allowed to falter or diminish in any way. The service should be delivered in such a way as to give the best possible results to the women who rely on it.

Deputy Emer Higgins: I thank Deputy Durkan for sharing time.

Members will have to bear with me because I am breathless. I ran across from a committee vote but I am really glad I made it because this is such an important topic to discuss. I am thankful for the opportunity.

The pandemic has posed many challenges in delivering breast cancer services. Receiving a diagnosis of breast cancer has to be one of the most unthinkable results but regrettably the pandemic, coupled with the HSE cyberattack, made detecting it and administering care and treatment even more difficult. I commend BreastCheck on the welcome news that it has returned to pre-pandemic levels of assessment but it is important to acknowledge just how difficult the past 18 months have been for those living with cancer. As we heard yesterday at the Oireachtas health committee, breast cancer remains the most common cancer among women in Ireland. It is the third most common cancer in Ireland after skin and prostate cancers. Sadly, one in seven women will be diagnosed with breast cancer in their lifetimes.

We are all aware that breast cancer also affects men. Some 37 men are diagnosed with breast cancer every year in Ireland. Last year there were 600 fewer breast cancer detections,

but not for the right reasons. It was not because breast cancer rates are reducing but because there was less screening and detection because of Covid-19. That is really frightening when one thinks about it.

As we know, early detection and prevention are vital in the treatment of breast cancer. Amazingly, BreastCheck is responsible for a 9% reduction in mortality from breast cancer overall. That is why I welcome that screening services have now returned to normal.

Beyond healthcare, many of those currently going through treatment heavily rely on community networks and support groups to keep them going, both emotionally and mentally. I recently joined members of the Lucan Women's Network in Corkagh Park to mark breast cancer awareness month and raise funds for the Marie Keating Foundation. Lucan Women's Network is a superb local group supporting equally superb national organisations but unfortunately organisations such as the Marie Keating Foundation, the Irish Cancer Society and Breast Cancer Ireland have been devastated by the pandemic. They could not continue at the same capacity with their boots-on-the-ground fundraisers, such as Daffodil Day and the Great Pink Run, but just like many of the breast cancer patients they support, they showed their resilience. They ploughed on with virtual and socially distanced fundraisers. However, limited fundraising led to limited funding, and that means capacity has become limited also.

In budget 2022 an extra €20 million was earmarked for the national cancer strategy. While I am aware that this has been broadly welcomed by many cancer organisations and charities, I join the Irish Cancer Society's calls for clarity on the additional funding that will be made available to help to eliminate waiting lists for cancer services. As we heard at yesterday's health committee meeting, these waiting lists are the nub of the problem. They feature across much of the health service. Having a streamlined system for assessing and treating patients has to be of the utmost importance to all of us.

The personal financial cost of having breast cancer is not talked about enough. The Irish Cancer Society has conducted research into the financial impact of having cancer and has found it is twofold. The financial factors include additional costs and, in many cases, a reduction in income. Regarding the additional costs associated with having cancer, the Irish Cancer Society's report of 2019, *The Real Cost of Cancer*, concludes that the average additional cost is €756 per month, with many patients facing outgoings of up to €1,000 per month. The report notes that, on average, a cancer patient faces an income loss of over €1,500 per month as a result of having to leave a job, work for fewer hours or, as is sometimes the case, close his or her own business. I welcome the extension to the drugs payment scheme in the budget, which will help those going through treatment for breast cancer. I support further extension of the financial supports available to those going through cancer. I was very pleased that a grant of €500 was announced to go towards the cost of wigs for women who lose their hair as a result of chemotherapy. Practical supports such as that can make a real difference.

The most important message we can get across today to all women is to, please, attend their screening appointments and be breast aware. They should know the signs to look out for and check themselves regularly because, as we know, early detection is key. If you do not know what you are looking for, you should take five minutes to check the HSE website, and make a habit of it. Thankfully, the mortality rates of breast cancer are decreasing, but early detection is the key. The more awareness there is among women and men about what to look out for, the better the outcomes will be for everyone. Breast cancer awareness is an important tool in early detection and I welcome the focus that breast cancer awareness month is creating here in the

Chamber and outside it in communities. I congratulate all of the organisations that are doing so much to promote cancer awareness and to support people through cancer diagnoses.

Deputy Sorca Clarke: I am conscious that although this disease predominantly affects women, it also affects men and we should not intentionally or otherwise exclude those men who are diagnosed every year with breast cancer. I do not believe there is anyone in the House who does not support the screening programme. I certainly support it. I have had cause to use a BreastCheck clinic outside scheduled appointments and a plan. I remember the fear and anxiety in the pit of my stomach in that time between the visit to the GP and the visit to the centre, the staff of which were absolutely remarkable and I give them full credit for that.

Although great progress has been made in raising awareness, particularly in the area of self-examination, early detection, diagnosis and treatment are vital. However, people only have control over one of those factors, that is, being breast aware, as Members speak about consistently. They have no control over diagnosis or treatment. It strikes me as inherently cruel and cold that people, predominately women, are told that they need to take responsibility and take these actions, and that we will show them how to do so and educate them, but, as Deputy Wynne stated, they are then told to wait three years. That strikes to the bone. While the onus is put on women and the information is provided, there simply is not the support needed at the other end to make it a speedy process and ensure the waiting times for a mammogram, ultrasound or anything else are appropriate.

There are 5,568 people awaiting outpatient appointments for breast surgery. Those are real people with real lives and families who are not only in physical need, but are dealing with the emotional impact that comes with such a diagnosis. Although BreastCheck may be back on track, the lack of capacity in the service was flagged as far back as 2018 and that has nothing to do with Covid or the cyberattack. Of course, these waiting lists do not exist for those who happen to have means or private health insurance. The doors open much quicker for them. Again, that strikes me as cruel and cold. We need to sort out the waiting list system. There needs to be a strategic plan to deal with that current backlog, predominantly of women, because this cannot be allowed to continue.

Deputy Martin Kenny: I am grateful for the opportunity to speak on this topic, October being breast check awareness month. We are grateful for the success of the BreastCheck programme and it is important to mention that it has been very successful and saved thousands of lives. So many women and families are grateful for that success - that they were checked in time, got adequate treatment and their lives were saved. If there had been delays, that would not have happened. The Minister of State, Deputy Butler, referred to the difference between getting in early at stage 1 or 2, compared with stage 4. The difference is day and night. That reality is something of which so many people are aware, yet people have to wait so long for treatment. That is one issue that needs to be dealt with urgently. We must ensure people are dealt with quickly.

Yesterday evening, the House heard statements on gender equality. Nothing goes to the core of gender equality more than the issue of women's health. Nature lets us men off very lightly. That is the reality and we are conscious of that. I refer to the age category for whom this screening is carried out. It is targeted at women aged over 50, who may be going through menopause, but the truth is that almost a quarter of cases occur before that age. That needs to be recognised. There is also the issue that breast cancer can be a hereditary disease. It is certainly the case that members of certain families have a great tendency to develop breast cancer and need to be

checked. There is a need to put a programme in place in that regard. I understand there is a programme in place but many women, and even many GPs, are not aware of it. Many GPs do not know that when one member of a family has been diagnosed with breast cancer, they need to refer the other women in the family to that programme so that they can be checked early. A circular needs to be sent to GPs in that regard to ensure they are aware of the programme and know what they are doing.

The Minister of State referred to lifestyle issues, which are something of which we must be conscious. I am sure every woman is conscious of them. However, there are lifestyle issues over which women have no control, such as those relating to poverty or stress levels, and which also have an impact on their health. For many women who are struggling to make ends meet and pay the mortgage and do not have enough money to get schoolbooks for their children, those stresses in their lives mean their mind is crowded and they do not have the time, energy or focus to be able to look after their own health. That needs to be acknowledged.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: I very much welcome these statements and the opportunity to mark breast cancer awareness month and raise issues of concern, but also to give credit where it is due. There is no doubt that the breast cancer services are very good and improving all the time, notwithstanding the difficulties in the past couple of years. It is an element of the overall cancer strategy which, again, has taken very much the right kind of approach. It is not perfect by any means but, notwithstanding the issues relating to inadequate funding that need to be addressed, the approach that was taken some years ago in setting up this strategy, identifying centres of excellence and making the case very strongly for the need to have a clear strategy in place and following it is the right one overall. It was certainly encouraging that representatives of BreastCheck and the national cancer control programme appeared before the Oireachtas committee on Tuesday and, in the main, notwithstanding what has been happening in the past couple of years, the news from both of those organisations was good.

We all know that breast cancer is a significant cancer. It is a significant thing for all women in terms of concerns regarding their own health. It is very much up there as one of the main areas of concern for women. It is a concern for most of women's lives. As Members know, the risk of developing breast cancer very much increases with age. There is also the hereditary factor. It is something that can dominate people's lives. All of us - women in particular - are conscious of that, its danger and its implications. It is something about which we are all very sensitive, and understandably so, because it is the most common cause of invasive cancers among women in this country. One in seven women in Ireland will be diagnosed with breast cancer at some stage in their lives. That is a very high figure. There are approximately 3,500 new cases each year and the national cancer strategy predicts that figure will rise through the next 20 years or so. The indications are that the figure will rise to more than 4,500 cases per year in that timeframe. That has significant implications in terms of resources, location of services and all those kinds of things. It is not good enough to set up services and keep funding them the way they were funded the previous year. Obviously, funding has to take account of growth in population and increases in prevalence. We can never afford to sit on our laurels in relation to that.

The incidence of breast cancer has increased over time, which is a matter of concern. It increased by 2% per year between 1994 and 2008. The incidence rate has levelled off since 2008. That is partially due to improved detection rates, which have been very good. BreastCheck is an essential element of that. Mortality rates decreased by 2% each year between 1994 and 2016. The reason for that is earlier diagnosis, improvements in treatment and a general raising

of awareness in relation to the issues around breast cancer.

The Oireachtas Joint Committee on Health discussed the issue earlier this week. We had representatives from the national cancer control programme in with us. They made the point that approximately one quarter of breast cancers may be preventable through modifiable behaviours and environments. That is something that has only recently come to be realised by people. The representatives made the point that the first line of defence against breast cancer is a more healthy lifestyle. That underlines the need to place a greater emphasis on encouraging health awareness and promotion. Thankfully, a good bit of that is happening through Healthy Ireland, but we need to do more in that respect.

Obviously, smoking has an impact in relation to incidence rates of breast cancer, as does maintaining a healthy weight. As a country, we are really struggling with obesity levels and many people are overweight. There needs to be a far greater focus on this area. There is also a link between alcohol consumption and breast cancer. I asked one of the representatives attending the committee meeting a few days ago to quantify the increased risk associated with even the moderate consumption of alcohol. The additional risk of developing breast cancer is put at between 10% and 12% as a result of the connection between alcohol consumption and the development of breast cancer. While self-examination, awareness and all of that is really important, and that point must be stressed, maintaining a healthy lifestyle, a healthy weight, in particular, and reducing our consumption of alcohol are also important.

There are many issues to discuss in relation to breast cancer. We must address the issue of the time lost as a result of the Covid pandemic and the cyberattack. We must also ensure that younger people are dealt with as early as possible where there is evidence of the presence of hereditary factors.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: When we speak of cancers in this House, we hear that they come to nearly every home. It was breast cancer that came to our house. While my mam tried to stay very strong while she was dealing with it herself, I will probably never forget the kick in the stomach that many of us felt in the house, and also the huge sense of relief when five years had passed following her treatment. That is a story or journey that not every woman gets to make. However, breast cancer is a very treatable cancer, and it is a journey that screening really helps to prevent.

Being able to mark it here in the House is most important because we should not forget the huge success that BreastCheck has been. It is true that we are ranked 16th out of 24 EU countries and we can still do better, but it has been a success and it links into the success of the national cancer screening programme. It was a very difficult political decision to take, and often the Government had to outline the concept of a centre of excellence and set out why it would help outcomes. I know the Taoiseach, in fairness, played a strong part in that when he was Minister for Health at the time, as did others in medical leadership. I think the presence of medical leadership around that debate helped persuade many people that it was the right way to make progress.

Today is about marking the success of that and encouraging as many people as possible to participate in the screening process. We must also look at the lessons that can be learned from the breast cancer screening programme and how we can apply that to other screening programmes. Screening is incredibly beneficial for some cancers and some diseases, because we know there are two sides of the screening process. It is not always the case that it should

be applied to every cancer or to every illness, and that is a clinical call. The work being done by the national cervical cancer screening programme is equally important, as is the work being done on prostate cancers.

We need to look at the learnings. One of the issues in the current programme is encouraging as many people as possible to avail of an appointment if one is made. There are many stories out there and there are women who can tell their stories of how the screening programme has been really beneficial to them. All I can do is encourage people to take up the offer of an appointment if it is made. There have been delays as a result of Covid, and as we played our part in many different ways, attending your appointment is the best way of helping others who are waiting on an appointment.

I will not labour the point as the bells have started ringing for a committee and I have to run and attend it. I apologise. However, I wish to take the opportunity to thank all the staff in the national cancer screening programme. It is an incredibly beneficial programme. We should do anything we can in this House to support it, including increasing the funding, which was done in the previous budget.

Deputy Patrick Costello: I am pleasantly surprised to find that I have a lot more than just five minutes of a speaking slot. I am not sure I will need all of it, which will probably be good news to the Minister of State.

I wish to start by echoing the thoughts of many in the Chamber on the success of Breast-Check and the screening programme. I acknowledge the hard work done by the staff of Breast-Check, the positive impact that has had on homes across the country and the lives that have been saved by it. Indeed, Deputy McAuliffe made the point that cancer can come to any home. However, we also need to look at the issue of delays, and the time lost due to the Covid pandemic and the cyberattack, as Deputy Shortall mentioned. Delays in screening lead to delays in diagnosis, which leads to delays in treatment and can lead to more significant time lost. It is time lost that loved ones and families can have together. It is incumbent on the Government to continue to take the steps that we have been taking to support the services to deal with this backlog and get back on top, so that the success that BreastCheck has had can continue to grow. We must deal with the backlog and deal with the time lost to ensure that no family loses a loved one.

Many of the constituents I have spoken to in relation to breast cancer view the issue through the same lens that they view women's healthcare in general. I am conscious of the protesters who were outside Leinster House in recent weeks, protesting about the restrictions on maternity care. Thankfully, we are seeing a lifting of these restrictions and development in that area. As a result, I am not sure the complaints I wanted to make in that area are still valid, but the changes that are happening are happening slowly.

3 o'clock

We need to look at ensuring that all women have safe and reliable access to all aspects of healthcare, whether it is maternity care, BreastCheck or abortion services, which we will be looking at in the upcoming legislative review. It is very important to ensure safe and consistent access.

I am also conscious that, as we speak, representatives from the All-Island Cancer Research Institute are appearing before the Joint Committee on the Implementation of the Good Friday Agreement. This highlights the areas where we can work closely with others to fight back

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against cancer. Just as I ask the Ministers of State to ensure not just BreastCheck but other screening programmes get the funding they need to catch up on the Covid backlog, I also ask that valued institutes, such as the All-Island Cancer Research Institute, do not suffer because of Covid, Brexit or anything else and that the good work they do can still be supported and can still contribute to fighting cancer.

I will leave it there. I thank the Ministers of State. I also thank my fellow Deputies for all of the extra time.

Deputy Chris Andrews: This October marks the 36th annual breast cancer awareness month. Like previous speakers, I acknowledge all of the staff who work in the cancer screening programmes. They carry out their work with huge empathy, care and professionalism and I acknowledge this. When breast cancer awareness month was first launched, the message was simply to promote breast screening throughout the population as one of the most effective weapons in the fight against breast cancer. Screening has proven to be instrumental in the early detection of breast cancer. It has also been proven to lower the numbers of women dying from breast cancer. Each year, approximately 3,500 cases of breast cancer are diagnosed. One in nine women will develop breast cancer during their lifetime. This is a stark and concerning statistic. It is something that highlights the need to carry out the screening programme and breast cancer treatment.

A total of 1 million cancer screenings have not taken place across Europe since March 2020. Screening not taking place can lead to later stage diagnosis which most likely will have worse outcomes. The challenge is to increase the number of screenings. Thanks to increased awareness of breast screening, survival rates are on the rise and mortality rates are decreasing. It is important to acknowledge this. There are many amazing charities, such as the Marie Keating Foundation and Breast Cancer Ireland, that do incredible work in promoting awareness of breast screening and providing support for those receiving treatment.

Recently, a close friend of mine, Gemma Devoy from Leo Fitzgerald House, began treatment for breast cancer. Gemma is just 35 years of age. I know there is science around it, but for me this highlights that the screening age needs to be lowered. On hearing of the financial difficulties faced by women receiving treatment, Gemma set herself the task of raising €1,500 for the Marie Keating Foundation to help other women like herself getting treatment. As a true reflection of the strong inner-city community she comes from, the community rallied behind her and her cause. There were events such as bingo and more than €20,000 was raised. While it is a stressful time, there are also many positives that can come out of it.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: As the Minister of State knows, there are few families in Ireland that have not been affected by breast cancer. As Deputy Andrews said, it affects one in nine women. This is an enormous proportion of the population when we think about it, particularly if we were to put all of those women in one place. We must also remember that one in 1,000 men will be diagnosed with breast cancer in their lifetime. It is incredibly important during breast cancer awareness month to raise awareness of the importance of being breast aware and for people to get themselves checked if they notice any change.

The reduction in screening during the course of the pandemic is concerning for this reason. Only 56,000 women were screened in 2020 compared with 170,000 in 2019. We urgently need to arrest this decline. There was a significant reduction in breast cancer diagnosis last year. That is not because breast cancer has gone away; it is very likely because women have not been

able to access screening. A year without accessing screening could be a year living with an undetected problem and a lot of worry and stress. Some women have felt discouraged from going to get themselves checked because of the pandemic.

People might have seen in *The Irish Times* an article in which Niamh O'Donoghue from my locality in Cork sharing her story and encouraging women to trust their gut and go to the doctor when they feel something is not right. Niamh discovered a lump. She said she felt healthy and initially put off seeking medical attention. When she did go for testing in the early summer, she was diagnosed with breast cancer at the age of 29. She has been incredibly courageous in sharing her story publicly in the hopes of raising awareness and encouraging other women to go and get checked. This is what I expect these statements are about. Our objective is to ensure people take the opportunity.

We are also urging the HSE to make sure that there is no step-back in provision and that everything is followed up and there are as many appointments as necessary. We have an excellent BreastCheck facility in Cork on the Infirmary Road. I encourage everyone to get checked. I wish Niamh the best of recovery and I hope her treatment goes well. As she has said, it does not matter what age someone is or how healthy they feel. If people are feeling healthy and well and something does not feel right they should go and get checked. It is an issue of gender equality and equal equality to appropriate healthcare. Women need assurances from the Government that the resources are being put in place to ensure their health needs are met.

Deputy Gino Kenny: It is very apt that we are having this discussion on breast cancer awareness month. This is an issue close to the hearts of many people. I do not think there is anybody in the Chamber or the country who has not been affected by a loved one, friend or family member being touched by breast cancer. The world was touched by the ravages of breast cancer when Sarah Harding died seven or eight weeks ago. She was only 39. It was a terrible loss for her family and the world.

Yesterday, at a meeting of the Joint Committee on Health, the national cancer control programme gave details on an overall strategy on breast cancer. I found it very informative. Anybody who listens to it will have found it very informative. Breast cancer is very pervasive in this country.

I am slightly disappointed with something that was missing from the statement made by the Minister of State. This is with regard to the age of screening. I know it has been extended upwards to 69 but there is real merit to lowering it from 50. In Sweden and other countries in the European Union, it has been lowered to 40. Because it has been lowered to 40, particularly in Sweden, death rates have decreased by 26%. There is merit to lowering the age of screening. The Minister of State may come back on this.

The good news is that the chances of survival of those women and some men who are diagnosed with breast cancer are extremely high because of diagnosis and treatment. Over the next 20 years, breast cancer will increase by 25%. This sounds alarming but it is because of better detection and diagnostics. It is welcome. I have been speaking to many women under the screening age who are quite concerned about it. They want it to be lowered. At present, one quarter of all cases of breast cancer in Ireland are under the age of 50. They are under the radar of screening. This has to be addressed very quickly.

In March, People Before Profit submitted a motion on this with five points. These included

lowering the age of screening to 40, diagnostics for younger women, triple assessment which is very important and keeps emerging, revision of the criteria for the BReast CAncer gene, BRCA, testing, which is also very important, and an education programme in schools on breast examination. Earlier detection gives better outcomes for everybody.

The screening programme is good. It has obviously been disturbed because of the pandemic and everything has been thrown up in the air. I appeal to the Minister of State on the screening issue. Even the experts who appeared before the Joint Committee on Health on Tuesday said there is definite merit to this and gave another critique as to why the check is at 50 years of age, which I understand. There is definitely merit, however, in lowering these checks to 40 years of age. If that is the case, we can prevent the spreading of the disease and help in the saving of women's lives.

Deputy Cormac Devlin: I thank the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, for her attendance and for her opening remarks on breast cancer awareness month. I welcome the opportunity for all the Deputies in the House to join with many other colleagues to discuss this very important issue. Breast cancer remains one of the most common causes of invasive cancer in women in Ireland, after lung cancer, and is the second most common cause of cancer deaths among women.

It is estimated that approximately a quarter of breast cancers may be preventable through modifiable risk and environmental factors. The first line of defence against most disease, including cancer, is prevention through a healthy lifestyle. Breast cancer awareness is an important tool in the early detection of cancer. The focus that breast cancer awareness places on this is very welcome. Approximately 3,500 new cases of breast cancer are diagnosed each year and the National Cancer Registry predicts that it will rise to 4,650 by 2045. One woman in seven in Ireland will be diagnosed with breast cancer in her lifetime. For each of these women, her diagnosis brings with it a worrying and uncertain time for her and her family.

I thank the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, again, for the earlier update, including that the national screening service and the HSE have an extensive media campaign planned to highlight key details about screening during Covid-19, breast cancer prevention and symptom awareness.

Breast screening is one of the key strategic tools we have and breast cancer was the first of the cancer services to be centralised by the national cancer control programme when it was established. Breast screening provides an opportunity to detect breast cancer at an early stage and thereby diagnosing mortality and stage of disease at diagnosis. Screening targets those people most at risk of disease based on best scientific evidence and international expertise. BreastCheck invites well people for screening, which is a non-urgent service. Each year, approximately one third of all cancers diagnosed in Ireland are detected through BreastCheck.

I recall when I was a member of the regional health authority that there was a concern in BreastCheck that people who were being invited were not showing up to their screening. I use this opportunity today to say to women that if they are being invited, they should please use that invitation because it is important.

BreastCheck, along with the other cancer screening programmes, was temporarily paused last year due to the impact of the pandemic. The capacity of BreastCheck was also impacted by the cyberattack on the HSE. The programme has done a significant amount of work to support the safe resumption of breast screening and the focus of resumption includes the management

of capacity across the whole of the screening pathways, which includes a follow-up assessment and treatments.

Routine screening appointments are now returning to normal with approximately 59,000 women being screened between January and July this year. The programme exceeded the target of 49,000 women and more than 10,000 participants were screened in August alone, which is very welcome. However, as Professor Flanagan, BreastCheck's lead clinician, told the Oireachtas Committee on Health, interruptions caused to the screening programme by Covid-19 may result in some cancers going undetected. I reiterate it is critical that women take up their appointments.

I welcome the expansion of the screening that is included in the programme for Government that will see all women aged 50 to 69 years of age invited for routine screening. This and other commitments in the programme for Government to improve health services for women and the general population are very welcome.

Deputy Colm Burke: I thank the Minister of State for her presentation today and for dealing with and highlighting this issue by having this debate during breast cancer awareness month.

The BreastCheck screening programme plays an important part in improving outcomes for breast cancer under the national cancer control programme. It is important that we acknowledge the dedication, commitment and hard work of all those involved in this programme but also the work of the doctors, nurses and administrative staff within our hospital system who provide the care and treatment.

Over 3,500 cases are identified each year. This is going to continue to rise in the coming years and, in particular, there is a change in demographics in that we will have a greater number of women over the age of 50. It is therefore important that we continue to give the necessary support for this service.

It is interesting to see the change in these figures. In 2000, there were 973,700 people over 50 years of age. This figure is now 1,629,400. If one takes it that the breakdown between men and women in these figures is 50% each, that is a growth from 486,000 in 2000 to 814,000 in 2021, which is a very significant change. It is therefore important that we continue to increase the funding each year in this area because the number of people that require the care will continue to increase.

I greatly welcome the decision by the Minister of State and the Department to make an additional €21 million available for the programme in 2021. It is important to note that one in seven women in Ireland will be diagnosed with breast cancer. That is the reason why at all times that adequate funding must be made available and that the appropriate services are in place both in respect of the screening programme but also in the treatment that is required.

Over 40,000 women are referred to breast clinics by their GPs. Of those referred, approximately 3,000 will receive a diagnosis of breast cancer. Of those who are identified with breast cancer, approximately 85% will require surgery and 70% will require radiotherapy. It is important then that there are no delays in access to the treatment that they require.

I note that there have been challenges, in particular over the past two years, as a result of Covid-19 and the cyberattack. This placed major strains on the service both in the screening programme and in the care plan for patients. As outlined earlier, there will be an increase in the

number of women over 50 years of age and it is important, therefore, that we have an adequate number of staff to deal with the screening programme and the follow-on treatment that is required at all times for those who are identified with cancer.

There is a challenge in recruiting sufficient numbers of radiologists and this is an issue which requires priority. How can it be made more attractive for people to train and work in this area? There needs to be an engagement with all sections of the healthcare sector. This is not just a problem in Ireland but is one throughout the world. It is important therefore that we continue to review the services that are available and make whatever changes are required to deliver the full national cancer strategy.

I will now deal with the issue of Covid-19. It was interesting to read in a recent article that approximately one person in five has been adversely affected by Covid-19 and the Covid lockdown. In particular, in the case of a family where the mother or partner is identified with breast cancer, that is another added difficulty and there is a need to give not only support to the person requiring the treatment but also to the family. We must keep this in mind when dealing with this issue.

It is also important to highlight that breast cancer can affect men and I understand that an average of approximately 37 men per annum are identified with cancer. It is important that we get information out on that issue also.

As to people not being able to turn up for the BreastCheck appointment, I welcome what the Minister is doing in respect of the importance of turning up for the appointment and if one cannot turn up, of notifying the service. There is nothing worse than a service being available and people not availing of it because there is then a waste of time, in that the people who should be there are not there. I understand from the presentation during the week at the health committee that of the people who did not turn up, approximately 30% turned up subsequently. The importance of this service needs to be highlighted and that we need to get the information out there. We should also highlight the issue that breast cancer can also occur in a younger age group and therefore affects women in all age groups. A major campaign to get this information out there should also be carried out. I thank the Minister of State and the Department and all of the people involved in the programme. It is important that, as the numbers identified with cancer continue to increase, the services be there to meet the demand.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this important issue. As numerous Deputies have said, there is barely a household breast cancer has not affected, not to mention their extended families. I worked in cancer diagnostics for years. There is no screening programme for many cancers but there is one for breast cancer because we have a very good diagnostic tool and an effective treatment in many cases. That provides us with a great opportunity and we must make the most of that opportunity. Numerous Deputies spoke about Covid, the cyberattack and the impact that has had. It is really important that we get back on track and, in fact, go beyond. Participation rates in the national cancer programme, the centres of excellence and the various screening programmes have fluctuated. Some of that relates to resources while some relates to capacity. We need to strive to continue to improve and I am sure the Minister of State will want to do likewise.

A number of Deputies spoke about raising awareness, as we are doing with this debate, and reiterating the call to people to attend their appointments for screening. We also need to understand why people are not attending and whether there are patterns within that. That would be of

benefit. We also need to consider extending the scheme to younger age cohorts.

Deputy Martin Browne: I am grateful for the opportunity to address the House as part of breast cancer awareness month. The key message I wish to convey relates to the importance of availing of the screening programme when the offer is made to individual women but also to the need to act on any suspected symptoms or concerns. As Deputy Martin Kenny said, the screening age should be reduced to 40. I recall attending a meeting where that was one request that really came across from the women in attendance.

Covid-19 has, of course, impacted on the range of services available in the health service, especially during 2020. The commitment, however, of those involved in the national cancer control programme saw a change in direction during those months. The programme targeted those most of risk as well as those presenting with symptoms or suspected symptoms. Thankfully, since then, the rate of screening has seen some improvement, and last month, the Breast-Check screening service returned to pre-pandemic levels. Even so, the fact remains it will take some time to address the backlog left by Covid. That has been confirmed by a number of the agencies involved that appeared before the Joint Committee on Health earlier this week.

As in other areas in the health service, it is important that supports and funding be put in place to deal with the backlog experienced in this area. Timely intervention is needed and that requires investment in staffing, but right now it is important that anyone who either is offered screening or has concerns because of symptoms or suspected symptoms not hold back or delay. We all need support when faced with certain issues. Anyone who is apprehensive about accepting or making an appointment should look to family and friends for that support. They should not try to deal with it alone.

Breast cancer was discussed this week at a very insightful meeting of the health committee and I take this opportunity to highlight some of the key messages that were given. Breast cancer is the most common and pervasive cancer among women. Each year, 3,500 new cases are diagnosed, although the National Cancer Registry estimates that by 2045, that will have increased to somewhere in the region of 4,650. Incidence rates increased by 2% each year between 1994 and 2008, due in part to improved levels of detection. The increase has largely levelled off since 2008, which is good to hear. The majority of breast cancers are diagnosed through symptomatic breast clinics, to which about 42,000 women are referred each year by their GP. Roughly half of these are triaged as urgent referrals. The rate of cancer among those triaged as urgent is 10%, as opposed to 1% of triaged as non-urgent.

With all these figures in mind, I reiterate breast screening is one of the most effective ways to detect breast cancer at an early stage before symptoms develop. If someone has symptoms, they should not wait for an invitation but seek a referral from their GP to symptomatic services.

Deputy Peter Fitzpatrick: Breast cancer awareness month is an opportunity for everyone to reflect on the impact of cancer, not only on our immediate lives but also on the wider general public. While researching in preparation for this debate, I was disappointed by our response to breast cancer during the Covid pandemic. The bottom line is we are now one year behind in the screening process. I shudder to think how many lives will be lost as a result. Breast cancer is the third most common cancer in Ireland, after skin and prostate cancer. Each year, more than 3,500 people are diagnosed with breast cancer, and the National Cancer Registry predicts this will figure will have increased to 4,650 by 2045.

Breast cancer is predominantly a female disease, and one in seven women will be diagnosed with breast cancer in her lifetime. It should be noted men can also get breast cancer, but it is much rarer. In fact, just over 35 men in Ireland are diagnosed with breast cancer each year. It is estimated that in the period 2015 to 2017, 724 people died of breast cancer in Ireland, of whom five were men.

Survival rates, as in the case of other cancers, are greatly increased with early detection. National Cancer Registry data show that the probability that a woman who has been diagnosed with breast cancer will survive the following five years is more than 80%. Our record in survival rates from breast cancer is one of the worst in Europe. In fact, we are ranked 16th of 24 EU countries in this regard. This is not acceptable and the Government must do more to improve it.

BreastCheck is the Irish screening programme for breast cancer. Breast screening helps find cancer at an early stage, and early detection makes cancer easier to treat and gives a much better chance of a successful outcome. To put this into perspective, up to the end of 2020, BreastCheck had delivered almost 2,000 mammograms and detected more than 14,400 cancers. Each year, one third of all breast cancers diagnosed in Ireland occur through the BreastCheck scheme. In light of these statistics, it is clear how important this programme is to women's health.

The Covid pandemic has caused great damage to Ireland but I fear even more damage is coming. Due to Covid, BreastCheck screening was suspended in March 2020. Services only resumed in October of that year, and even then, they were with greatly reduced capacity. At the time, I did not agree with this for I feared we were only creating more problems for ourselves down the road. The HSE's annual report of 2020 stated that only 56,270 women had received a complete mammogram, representing a massive fall of almost 70% when compared with previous years. That is shocking.

Why was this allowed to happen? Surely this programme was an essential service. Certain types of businesses were allowed to remain open, yet one of the most important screening programmes in the country was suspended. We need an explanation for this. We have been told screenings are about one year behind. What plans have been put in place to bring the screening programme up to date? As has been stated, early detection of breast cancer can be the difference between life and death. How can we get early detection when the programme is running a year behind schedule?

Full capacity was restored in September 2021 but this is not good enough. We need to increase the programme's capacity as a matter of urgency to reduce the backlog. The Minister, Deputy Donnelly, has stated, "In the light of Covid, clinical priority was given to referrals triaged as urgent." This is not good enough. The whole point of cancer screening is early detection. Even more worrying were the comments of Dr. Clive Kilgallen, chair of the consultant committee of the Irish Medical Organisation, who told the Joint Committee on Health that Covid-19 has had a significant negative impact on cancer services. He also stated there is a growing backlog of patients waiting for urgent, critical diagnostic services and treatment services.

I am grateful for the opportunity to speak during this debate and raise awareness of the backlog in breast cancer screening. Both the Government and the HSE need to ensure these screening services are brought back up to date in order that there can again be early detection of breast cancer. The message is that if you are in doubt, get it checked and please attend your appointments.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: It is shocking that during the time of this debate so far about ten people in the State will have been diagnosed with cancer. It shows the prevalence of the illness and the damage it does annually in this country. I was one of those statistics about a year ago. Thank God, I am back to full health at present. I was both lucky and unlucky. My diagnosis was delayed because of Covid, but I have a brother who works in the sector. He is a professor in cell biology and when restrictions lifted he noticed the lesion and urged me to go to a doctor, which could well have saved my life.

Breast Cancer Awareness Month is an integral part of our war on cancer. The message for every man and woman in the country has to be that if he or she notices a lump, strange spots, a mole or things that have changed, he or she must not waste time and get checked absolutely immediately. Timely diagnosis and treatment are radically important. There has been great frustration throughout the country that, in many ways, diagnosis and treatment have been significantly delayed even though cancer is the biggest killer in the country. Some of the statistics I have looked at recently are quite startling. The statistics of the national cancer registry dating back to 2019 found that Ireland's five-year survival rate for breast cancer is 82%. This is poor by European standards. If one is diagnosed with breast cancer in Sweden, one is 7% more likely to survive for five years than if one is diagnosed in Ireland. If one is diagnosed in Britain, one is 5% more likely to survive for five years than if one is diagnosed in Ireland. We have much work to do to reach the European standards.

The divide is not just geographical in this regard. There is also an economic divide in our country. Last week, I tabled a question for the Minister for Health, Deputy Stephen Donnelly. In his reply he indicated that currently in the State there is a differential of a whopping 12% in the five-year survival rate for breast cancer in respect of whether one has been diagnosed and treated in a private hospital or a public hospital. That is a startling fact. There is a radical two-tier practical effect on one's ability to survive cancer depending on where one's diagnosis happens and whether it is a private or public hospital. Women diagnosed with breast cancer in a designated cancer centre have an 85% chance of survival for five years while those diagnosed in what is termed as an "other public hospital" have an 81% chance of survival for the first five years but those diagnosed in a private hospital have a 93% chance of survival. These statistics go back to 2019.

In certain hospitals, for example, when a woman is going for a biopsy they reassure her before diagnosis by scheduling chemotherapy sessions for the following day. The woman has an appointment to hear the results of the biopsy and she also has an appointment to get chemotherapy the following day, just in case, even before she has had a diagnosis. This gives the strong impression that the health service is on the ball, is super efficient and is doing everything it can to make sure treatment starts soon. However, I have spoken to women who are in a different situation. One woman I spoke to got the bad news and presented for the appointment the next day only to find out it was a consultation and no treatment would be administered. She had to wait six weeks before the first session of chemotherapy started. I know of many other people who were waiting longer for chemotherapy and treatment to start for serious cancers.

I have just left a meeting of the Oireachtas Committee on the Implementation of the Good Friday Agreement at which representatives of the all-Ireland cancer research organisations gave very valuable information. They said that one of the key things that hampers their ability to research is the lack of a digital identifier for patients in the South. They are dealing with paper documents and they are unable to find out exactly what is happening to individuals with regard to their cancer treatments.

Deputy John Lahart: I thank the Ministers of State who are present today to hear these statements and comments. I am a member of the Oireachtas Committee on Health and this week, as part of Breast Cancer Awareness Month, we were fortunate enough to meet experts from the breast screening services and the national cancer control programme. They included Professor Fidelma Flanagan, Ms Fiona Murphy, chief executive of the national screening service, Professor Arnold Hill and Dr. Martin O'Sullivan. If anybody wishes to listen to that meeting of the health committee last Tuesday, it was a very fine interaction between Members of the Oireachtas and the experts. Most of the questions asked by the public representatives were answered. Not all of them were answered so I have a few I would like to follow up on with the Minister of State. The guests did commit to forward papers to the committee on some issues, and I look forward to receiving them.

There is some good news before I ask the questions. It was the Taoiseach who, in his role as Minister for Health a number of governments ago, introduced the national cancer strategy. We have that to thank for the fact that statistics demonstrate that while breast cancer incidence is expected to increase, as the committee heard and as other colleagues have mentioned here, mortality rates have been dropping consistently year-on-year by 2%. Obviously, we need to do more and would like that to be greater, but from 1994 to 2016 that trend has been downward by 2% per year. It is small but at least it is downward.

A couple of the key messages, and some of them have been referred to by other Members and were also referenced by the experts before the health committee, are the messages of prevention and awareness. Approximately 25% of breast cancers are preventable through modifiable risks. There is also the message that the three previous speakers mentioned about taking up one's appointment when one gets it. Over 20% of people not taking up their appointment is quite dramatic, notwithstanding the excellent efforts that the health specialists are making to ensure people are reminded through text messages and so forth of the fact that they have an appointment. I reiterate the message from my colleagues on all sides of the House that when women receive the text or notification with their appointment date and time, they should take it up. However, there are modifiable risk factors and environmental factors, the usual ones, that heighten the risk of a woman developing breast cancer.

The committee also discussed the age cohorts that are enabled to access the breast screening programme, because there are many questions about that among the community. Some colleagues at both Oireachtas and council levels have raised them with me. They are quite mainstream questions and they are the questions to which we did not get granular answers. I will list them explicitly. There are those who might say that every young woman should be entitled to access the BreastCheck screening programme. Very reasonable answers were given to that suggestion. There are issues to do with the age cohort of women who generally are more vulnerable. From the menopause age onwards was one of the indications given. It was also said that adopting a national universal screening programme could cause more anxiety among the female population and do more harm than intended when set against the improvements it wants to do, the service it wants to provide and the alerts it wants to provide to people. The answers and the interaction we had with the experts on that were very meaningful and useful to the public.

We were told there are international standards and principles at play in respect of all ranges of cancer screening, not just breast cancer, and Ireland does its best to adopt and meet those international standards. Some queries were raised. We screen the 50 years to 70 years age group, but some countries do it for women under 50 years old and some do it for women under 45 years old. Almost no country in the European Union screens women under 40 years old. I

understand that the European Union recommendation is that 45 years upwards would be the ideal. Hopefully, the Minister of State might be able to respond on when Ireland might hope to achieve that. I understand the incidence of breast cancer in women under 30 is one in 200. For every 200 cases of breast cancer, only one is a woman aged under 30. However, there is anecdotal evidence indicating that may not tally. While we had the mortality rates, they were not broken down by age group. It would be very useful to have the information in tabular form for how many women, very regrettably, passed away in recent years aged from 20 to 30; 30 to 40; 40 to 50; 50 to 60; 60 to 70; and over 70. There seems to be difficulty in accessing that information. I have tabled a number of parliamentary questions on that. The people involved and advocates have found it well-nigh impossible to access that information. That information needs to be made public, not to alarm people but hopefully to reassure them.

I was very heartened by the answer I got to a parliamentary question on widening the age cohorts for breast cancer screening. I was informed that the national screening advisory committee, NSAC, is having its first annual call later this year and that will open up applications for proposals for new population-based screening programmes and modifications to existing programmes, such as a reduction in the age of those eligible for screening. According to the NSAC, applications along those lines will be welcomed from the public as well as from the HSE, health professions and other professional bodies. The Minister of State might be able to inform us as to when that will be launched. That would be very interesting given that it is a first call. It will allow those advocates, who have concerns about women of a particular age not being able to access breast screening programmes, to put forward their views and their anxieties along with their on-the-ground experience of dealing with women, particularly young women, who are diagnosed with breast cancer.

Before I ask my questions, I pay tribute to the professionals who have kept the screening programme going. Clearly, it had to close during the Covid restrictions, meaning that only three months of screening was done in 2020. As it is a very intimate procedure, that was necessary to protect both patients and front-line medics. As a result, even though they have gone full throttle this year and I think 15,000 breast screenings were completed in September alone, it is behind by 120,000 breast screening procedures. It will be 2023 before we catch up on those breast screenings. If a woman was due a breast screening procedure a year ago and it has been delayed, we are all concerned over the impact of that delay on her health and her mental health. I appreciate the major efforts being made to catch up.

The health committee also discussed the impact of the cyberattack. The diagnostics and the radiological procedure are technology based. The cyberattack had almost as big an impact on the breast screening programme as the Covid pandemic had. It was important that those issues were made public.

While I understand that the Minister of State might not be able to give answers to these today, I would like answers subsequently. Of the approximately 690 deaths annually from breast cancer, how does that break down by age group, particularly those aged 49 and younger? It seems very difficult to get that information.

Of those women eligible for the BreastCheck programme at the age of 50, what percentage need to wait to get their appointment? What is the maximum waiting time? What is the minimum waiting time? I would like tabulated information on the average time from a woman making appointment to when she is called. What is the maximum waiting time for a first breast check? For example, could a woman be waiting until she is 52 or 53 before getting called?

How is the GP education being rolled out? The high-risk screening unit at St. James's Hospital is an excellent facility. How many such clinics are operating in Ireland? We need to ensure that GPs know to refer a woman presenting with symptoms of breast cancer on for further assessment even if they present in their 20s or 30s. Anecdotal evidence would suggest that because many of these women are very young, they sometimes felt dismissed by their general practitioner when they raised concerns after following the normal kinds of personal procedures they are advised to follow of checking whether they have lumps.

Deputy Michael Collins: I am delighted to get the opportunity to speak on the 36th annual breast cancer awareness month. It is a major issue throughout the country. Many people have spoken today about the breast screening programme falling behind. I feel there is always a way around these things if we make the effort. As early detection is of such importance, one way of speeding this up might be to consider a 24-hour service, seven days a week to see if we can catch up and clear the backlog.

I commend the very good cancer services we have. Today we are talking about the importance of early detection of breast cancer and the importance of people not missing their appointments thereby leaving themselves vulnerable. I commend the doctors, nurses and staff in hospitals. Sometimes in the most terrible situations of palliative care we forget those people who do so much for people.

One thing that we have not looked at here today is people who end up getting cancer. It is a terrible shock and horror. No home in Ireland has not been affected by it. My mother died of cancer more than 20 years ago, aged 54. Even today it affects me personally. It affects everybody else because it is a major blow to a family.

People often come to my constituency office looking for a medical card. The word "cancer" should trigger something in the medical card section. A person with cancer should be allowed to have a medical card at least for the time he or she is going through the illness and, please God, comes out the right side of it. In many cases that could be 12 months. A hard-working couple might have had two incomes in the home. If one of them needs breast cancer or any cancer treatment, it gives rise to major costs but they still do not get a medical card. The extra cost is a terrible blow and a terrible infliction, particularly in cases where there are young children at home. There is a worry about the cost of medication and other costs. I commend the services. I do not want to be looking at anything here in a negative sense. If the State is to be seen as caring, we should seriously look at giving a medical card to everyone who is diagnosed with cancer for that period.

I would like to mention the supports and services that are available. I thank the CEO, David O'Brien, and the chairman, Neilie O'Leary, of Local Link Cork for their Cancer Connect service. I am also involved in it. Cancer Connect volunteers collect cancer patients every day from Castletownbere, Drimoleague, Dunmanway, Bandon, on the other side of the Mizen Head down into the Skibbereen and Clonakilty and bring them all the way to Cork. It is part of the Cork Local Link but it has a Cancer Connect service. Other car drivers volunteer to take patients who need one-to-one treatment for cancer to Cork University Hospital. They do brilliant work so that patients are in and out and not held up. I commend that fabulous service.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: Today I have swapped my Limerick mask for "Granagh Backs Amanda". Amanda is a woman in her early 30s in the parish I am from, Granagh. This weekend, on 24 October, the vintage clubs and community around Limerick and where Amanda

is originally from, in Newtown in Cork, have joined for a fundraiser for her. Amanda has been receiving breast cancer treatment and has four children along with her husband, Daniel. Amanda's children have special needs. I have four children too and we all know how hard it is when there are two healthy parents to rear four children. When the mother of children with special needs is going through treatment, it brings out the best in everyone in trying to help.

I am involved with several vintage clubs, including those in Greybridge, Charleville and west Limerick, and we are a family. There are many more, including in Ballylanders and Kilmeedy. We join together when there is a fundraiser for somebody in need. This Sunday, 24 October, that is what we are doing. My mask was made by local people to back Amanda. Anybody might have cancer detected and go through treatment. I thank the front-line services for everything they do for such people. The shortfall is when people come home and need help. That is what we are seeking to improve as a community. I cannot thank the people in counties Limerick and Cork enough for what they have done for Amanda and what we will do on Sunday. We are only a small community but such effort is mirrored across the country. Communities are great. The campaign is "Granagh Backs Amanda". The parish has lifted behind her and she knows the whole community is with her. She knows she has help in getting supports for her family.

I have been involved with many charity runs for people who have not survived and there are too many of those to mention. Many of them wanted to get their affairs in order but were not able to do so because of financial issues. Many runs and much community effort were expended to help. I would like something put in place for families bereaved through cancer. There should be something to help the financial position of families immediately afterwards. There should be something in place to help. Communities do this already, and they do absolutely fantastic work. I thank every volunteer in Ireland for what they do in the community around them. I emphasise what it means to people when they know their friends, family, relations and community are helping them. It gives them a massive lift.

Deputy Thomas Pringle: I thank the Ceann Comhairle for the opportunity to speak to this very important issue. Being the third most common cancer in Ireland, it is likely that we will all have had mothers, grandmothers, aunts, spouses, sisters or daughters affected by breast cancer at some point in our lives. This is a disease that affects us all and one that has taken too many too soon. I take a moment to acknowledge all those diagnosed with breast cancer, all those undergoing treatment, the family members and friends of those affected, breast cancer survivors and doctors and nurses who do such a great job to assist those affected, especially over the course of the pandemic.

The Covid-19 pandemic has been a difficult time for many but especially for those affected by cancer. It is incredibly alarming that due to Covid-19, the screening programme for breast cancer is almost a year behind schedule. It has been said time and again that early detection of cancer is extremely important to ensure a better chance of survival and more treatment options. Women whose breast cancer is detected at an early stage have a 93% or higher survival rate in the first five years.

Why, then, are we not ramping up the funding of BreastCheck, especially now that the screening programme is so far behind? Significant funding must be provided urgently to deal with this backlog and if we are to properly ensure early detection, the screening programme must be expanded to include those under 50 as well as those over 70. This proposal is being considered by the Joint Committee on Health and I encourage every Deputy to support it in any

way possible.

In my constituency of Donegal, the number of women waiting for breast cancer screening has risen to 6,800 according to new figures from the Health Service Executive. This is an absolutely shocking figure. The BreastCheck service is facing major backlogs due to Covid-19 and although screenings resumed in Donegal last October, they were suspended again in early 2021 due to high levels of virus in the community and did not resume until August. This backlog must be addressed immediately.

The fact that women must travel long journeys across the county for these checks must also be addressed. There were incidents lately of women from Inishowen being sent to Donegal town for BreastCheck appointments. For those who do not know the geography of Donegal, that is a journey of over an hour and a half. It might be easier to be sent to Belfast than Donegal town from Inishowen. In this case, a woman would travel for at least three hours for the BreastCheck appointment. That is for those with cars because there are no bus services or alternative transport available. I take this opportunity to thank Ms Betty Holmes, chair of Donegal Action for Cancer Care, for raising and helping to rectify this matter.

When BreastCheck was being rolled out initially, we in Donegal had been left to the back of the queue as usual. When the first check had been rolled out for Donegal women, women in the east of the country were already getting their second and in some cases their third cycle of the check. Women went ahead and organised a bus from Donegal to Belfast to get checked and at least three cancers were detected at that time. They were dismissed by the head of BreastCheck for taking action themselves but if they had waited for the health service to recognise Donegal, some of those women would have died, sadly. The women of Donegal have been completely left behind once again. In order to address this, I call on the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine, Deputy McConalogue, to stay true to his word and ensure the Government puts a BreastCheck unit into Buncrana.

I would love to see a national roll-out start in Donegal for once and then we might get fair treatment, once and for all. If the women of Dublin had to wait four to five years to see the roll-out reach them, it would be the last time it would be done in that way. I also call on the HSE to keep the BreastCheck unit in Donegal town permanently. We need a number of locations for such checks because of the county's size.

There is no doubt BreastCheck services save lives and this breast cancer awareness month, I urge the Government to do all it can to prioritise breast cancer services. I know the Minister of State is doing this but we must ensure the backlog is cleared quickly. We cannot wait until 2023 or whenever it is for the backlog to be cleared. Clearing the backlog immediately will mean people will survive when they might not do so otherwise. It is vital and I know the Minister of State will do his best to make it happen. We need support from all of the Government to bring this about and ensure a roll-out happens leading to women getting the service they deserve.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan): I thank the Deputies for their contributions on the very important topic of breast cancer awareness. October is breast cancer awareness month but our commitment and alertness to any indicators of breast cancer should extend year-round.

As Minister of State with responsibility for public health, well-being and the national drugs strategy, I encourage all to be aware of what they can do to reduce their risk of cancer and other

diseases through a healthy lifestyle, as many Deputies have said. As stated earlier by the Minister of State, Deputy Mary Butler, the proportion of cancer incidence attributable to modifiable lifestyle and environmental factors is estimated to be in the 30% to 40% range.

Smoking is by far the most significant risk factor. The HSE Quit service provides personalised free support by phone, email, text message and live chat to people who want to quit smoking. Our efforts to reduce smoking levels will continue through information sharing, as well as through taxation and legislative measures.

The link between alcohol consumption and cancer has been well established. National Cancer Registry Ireland data indicate 7.5% of breast cancer is attributable to alcohol intake. The evidence is also clear that reducing alcohol consumption will reduce the incidence of cancer. The aim of the Public Health (Alcohol) Act 2018, which has been mentioned, is to achieve a significant reduction in the consumption of alcohol in Ireland and, therefore, in the associated incidence of cancers and other alcohol-related harms.

4 o'clock

Overweight and obesity are associated with multiple health issues, including breast cancer. The obesity policy and action plan aims to reverse obesity trends, prevent health complications and reduce the overall burden for individuals, families, the health system, wider society and the economy. Additionally, Ireland's national physical activity plan aims to promote increased physical activity levels across the population. Physical activity confers multiple health benefits and can significantly reduce the risk of a range of diseases, including cancer. Exercise continues to be important for patients throughout the cancer continuum. Through the healthy Ireland programme, we are supporting people to stop smoking, moderate their alcohol intake, lose weight, eat healthily and take more exercise so that they can live healthier and more fulfilling lives.

I am happy to report that routine screening appointments are now returning to normal in BreastCheck, despite the massive disruptions caused by Covid-19 and the ransomware attack on the health services. Approximately 86,000 women were screened between January and September this year, well in excess of the original target of 63,000. September's BreastCheck attendance figure of 16,000 is in line with the throughput in September 2019, before the onset of Covid.

As outlined earlier, the Government invested a further €10 million in the national screening service this year. This funding will support the development and opening of new BreastCheck units and the recruitment of more staff to enhance capacity across the service. An extra €20 million was allocated for the continued implementation of the national cancer strategy this year, with €1.8 million allocated specifically for breast cancer services. Funding of €12 million was allocated this year for the restoration of cancer services in the context of Covid-19. This is being used to support hospitals in addressing backlogs, such as running extra evening and weekend clinics, extended working days, virtual clinics, increasing diagnostic capacity and providing locum-temporary support. Symptomatic breast disease clinics are among the main beneficiaries of this funding.

The continuation of cancer services throughout the Covid-19 pandemic is testament to the great commitment shown by dedicated hard-working healthcare staff who have continued to give expert compassionate care to our loved ones with cancer, with invaluable guidance

provided by the HSE's national cancer control programme. I also acknowledge the vital role played by community and voluntary sector organisations in supporting cancer patients and their families through the Covid period. Such organisations being readily accessible can have a positive impact on patients' quality of life, especially as their cancer journeys do not stop when they complete their main treatment. On a broader level, I note the close co-operation between the Irish Cancer Society and the national cancer control programme which is to the benefit of patients.

As indicated, cancer services continued to operate, although at reduced capacity due to the need for appropriate physical distancing and infection control measures, throughout the Covid period. At all times, there was a particular focus on urgent and time-sensitive cases. In the earlier period, there was a major emphasis on encouraging patients who had concerns to access cancer diagnostic services and to attend appointments. Thankfully, patients are now coming forward, and, indeed, attendances at urgent symptomatic breast disease clinics from January to August of this year were at 115% of the 2019 level.

The Government is committed to the implementation of the national cancer strategy to the benefit of patients. This is again illustrated by the allocation of a further €20 million in budget 2022. An important message to everyone is that BreastCheck screening and our symptomatic cancer diagnostic and treatment services are open and our healthcare staff will provide the care people need.

In breast cancer awareness month, I encourage all women to be empowered when it comes to their breast health by regularly checking their breasts for changes and attending BreastCheck screening appointments when called. All Deputies who spoke noted the importance of early diagnosis. I ask people not to put this off. Also, irrespective of age, if people have any concerns about cancer, I ask that they go to their GP who will arrange appropriate onward referral and follow-up care.

I thank Deputies Murnane-O'Connor, Patricia Ryan, Tully, Munster, Wynne, Duncan Smith, Durkan, Higgins, Clarke, Martin Kenny, Shortall, McAuliffe, Costello, Andrews, Ó Laoghaire, Gino Kenny, Devlin, Colm Burke, Darren O'Rourke, Martin Browne, Fitzpatrick, Tóibín, Lahart, Michael Collins, O'Donoghue and Pringle. I do not have enough time to go through all the points raised. I thank my colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy Mary Butler, for all the work she has done. Most people recommend that if in doubt, get it checked out.

Deputy Gino Kenny highlighted how, in Sweden, people from the age of 40 years are screened and, resulting in a 20% decline in death rates. That is an interesting statistic and I thank him for raising it. Deputy Pringle raised the issue of people having to travel for an hour and a half from Malin to Donegal town because they do not have access to a service. That issue needs to be addressed and I thank him for raising it.

Deputy Ó Laoghaire raised the case of Niamh O'Donoghue. Deputy Richard O'Donoghue spoke about Amanda who has four children and all the great work done by fundraisers. We need these support services. They are provided not only by the HSE and the Government but also by family, friends and the community. At times like this, it is important to thank members of the community for the support, love and time they give people, especially women who are diagnosed with breast cancer. It is a great assurance to people. I thank the Minister of State, Deputy Mary Butler, for the work she has done. This debate has been important in getting so much information on to the floor of the Dáil.

An Ceann Comhairle: That concludes statements on breast cancer awareness month. I thank the Ministers of State and the Deputies who partook in what was an interesting and, no doubt, very important debate.

Covid-19: Reframing the Challenge, Continuing our Recovery and Reconnecting: Statements

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): Printed copies of my speech will be ready shortly. They are on their way over. It is hard to believe that it has been 607 days since the first case of Covid-19 was detected in Ireland. Little did we know what was ahead of us - a pandemic that upended our lives and changed the way we lived, worked and socialised. This disease has shattered lives. It has taken well over 5,000 of our loved ones from us. It has caused great fear, frustration and disruption.

In healthcare, it has taken a very deep toll. Our healthcare workers have made great sacrifices. Many are tired and depleted. Many became sick themselves or provided care to their colleagues. Many more people are waiting for non-Covid healthcare. At the same time, our healthcare workers have been incredible. There has been record investment and funding for new developments and our healthcare workers have turned this investment and funding into record numbers of new beds and staff during the pandemic.

The vaccine roll-out has been a success. More than 7.4 million doses have been administered since the programme began in December last year. Around 90% of the eligible population are now fully vaccinated. Ireland has a vaccination rate that is among the highest in Europe. Our vaccine roll-out has proven what our health service can do when we all work together. There is greater confidence in what our health service can achieve. As I travelled around the country visiting testing centres and vaccine centres in recent months, the pride that healthcare workers have in our health service was clear and palpable. We can build on this positivity as we face into winter and the task of tackling waiting lists.

The pandemic also shone a light on issues that have blighted our health service for far too long, including a dearth of critical care or ICU bed capacity and a poorly resourced public health infrastructure. Before Covid arrived here, we had just 255 critical care beds. We invested €55 million in that this year and will have 321 permanently funded beds by the end of this year, or very early next year. That represents an increase of approximately 25%. We are going to add more beds next year, resulting in a 33% increase in permanent capacity between the start of the pandemic and the end of next year. Are more ICU beds needed? They absolutely are. I have brought a plan to Cabinet outlining further plans to significantly increase capacity.

Our public health teams were significantly under-resourced when this pandemic hit. Public health doctors were not given the recognition they deserved and were the only medical specialists who could not progress to consultant status. This impacted our ability to recruit and retain candidates. This dispute had been going on for decades. The Government resolved it by reaching an agreement with the Irish Medical Organisation. I was delighted to see advertisements for these consultant posts appearing in recent weeks.

Last year, I committed to a significant investment in public health when I announced plans

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to double the workforce by recruiting an additional 255 permanent staff at an annual cost of over €17 million. In a highly competitive employment market, created by the pandemic, I am very pleased to share that the HSE has filled 196 of these roles to date, increasing staffing levels in our public health system from 254 to more than 450 employees. I know everyone here will welcome that.

Like many countries, we have deployed a wide array of measures to battle Covid-19 over the past 18 months, including masks, social distancing, local restrictions, travel restrictions, testing, contact tracing, guidance on improved ventilation and more. We are still deploying some measures like mask-wearing but lockdowns, which sometimes, unfortunately, involve the cessation of non-urgent healthcare, are not a long-term sustainable solution. Fortunately, safe and effective vaccines were developed in record time. These vaccines are key to turning Covid-19 into an endemic but controlled communicable disease. Only one human disease, smallpox, has been completely eradicated. Others, such as the flu, measles and cholera, slowly became endemic. Since the vaccines are remarkably effective in preventing serious disease and death, they can serve as our conduit for control. Many experts believe that the harm from endemic Covid may ultimately fall somewhere between that of flu and other coronaviruses that cause the common cold but, as we all know, the world is not even close to that point yet.

What is to be done? I want to reiterate the case for everyone to be vaccinated. We are a highly vaccinated country and yet we are seeing that Covid can still create tremendous pressure on our health service. We have 448 people in hospitals with Covid and 88 Covid patients in intensive care. Of course, every one of the beds taken up by those 448 people in hospital with Covid reduces the capacity in our hospital system. As is to be expected, we are increasing our efforts to promote the vaccination of those not yet inoculated. There are approximately 360,000 adults who are eligible but who have not chosen to get vaccinated to date. We are looking at what additional measures can be taken to increase uptake among this group, including pop-up vaccination clinics, which will begin in early November in local election areas where uptake is still low. Ongoing engagement is also taking place with industry and civil society organisations to improve uptake among vulnerable workers and migrant communities.

I appeal to those who have not yet been vaccinated to please step up and get vaccinated. I ask them to do so for themselves and for everybody else. Our waiting lists for planned care, which includes everything from hip operations to scoliosis procedures, are far too long. I am determined to tackle these lists and to bring the same rigour to doing so as we have brought to the vaccine roll-out but we need everyone to play his or her part. To those who are unvaccinated, the decision not to get vaccinated is helping this virus continue to spread. The most recent figures I have are that more than half of those with Covid in intensive care are unvaccinated. This means ICU beds are not available to sick patients waiting on urgent surgery and we have to cancel operations for children and adults in need of urgent hospital treatment and procedures. I met Nursing Homes Ireland this morning, as I am increasingly concerned about the rising number of outbreaks in nursing homes, as are those living and working in and running our nursing homes. To those who are unvaccinated, I ask them to please think again. I ask them to get the facts, to follow the science and to protect themselves, those closest to them and everyone else in the country who has fought so hard for the gains we have made against this virus.

As we have seen throughout the course of the pandemic, Covid-19 continues to be a volatile and unpredictable opponent. The disease incidence in the country is high and has deteriorated significantly in recent weeks. Taking into account this situation, the Government this week made a decision on the way forward. Our approach continues to be to move forward care-

fully and steadily with the reopening of our society. Sectors of our society and economy have reopened in recent months and they have stayed open, and we need to ensure this remains the case.

On Tuesday, following public health advice from the National Public Health Emergency Team, NPHE, the Government agreed that the remaining aspects of the hospitality, entertainment and night-time economy could reopen. Given the deteriorating trajectory of the disease, this reopening is taking place accompanied by comprehensive protective measures and the wide and robust use of the digital Covid certificate.

Our booster vaccine campaign will play a vital role in offering continued support to our most vulnerable. The national immunisation advisory committee, NIAC, has now recommended that a booster dose of Pfizer can be offered to everyone aged 60 and above who has completed their primary course of a Covid-19 vaccine. My Department and the HSE are now implementing these recommendations. NIAC will continue to examine new evidence regarding booster doses for other groups. I believe there is a strong case for healthcare workers. We are engaging closely and continuously with NIAC on that, and we will follow the evidence and science and look forward to its ongoing deliberations on this.

I wish to finish with another appeal to the hospitality sector. It is essential, if we are going to continue opening up safely, that the Covid pass is used and enforced. We all know that the majority of operators in the hospitality sector are doing the right thing. However, an unacceptably high number are not. The data we have on enforcement and the survey results from patrons going to pubs and restaurants suggest that about two out of every three pubs and restaurants are doing the right thing and are enforcing the pass but one in every three is not and that has to change. We have to have more compliance. There are things the State can do, and I am sure we will discuss some of that during this debate, but it is imperative that the sector steps up and ensures that those regulations and that compliance are followed.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I thank the Ceann Comhairle for the opportunity to speak today on the challenges that we still face in this pandemic. The announcements made by the coalition leaders on Monday regarding the new format of the reopening of our society and economy have some welcome elements but have also caused additional difficulties, especially for businesses and workers. I will focus on a small number of areas.

First, the guidance given with regard to the return to workplaces constitutes what can only be described as mixed messaging, and that is me genuinely being kind. The announcement that a full return to workplaces may not be possible until next spring will mean little to workers who have already returned to full on-site working since September. Many of them can and should work from home but have been requested by their bosses to go into workplaces despite seeing no need for it. While the public health advice is still for people to work from home where possible, the reality for many workers is that they have been summoned back. They want to continue to work from home. Without explicit guidance or a legal right to request remote or home working, the decision on the return to on-site working is solely in the hands of employers and managers. There is a power imbalance in these situations and, as a result, a lot of workers are back in what are effectively full workplaces, even though many can and should be working from home or remotely. It is not good enough for the Government to say that a full return to offices will not be possible until spring without ensuring that workers can continue to work remotely. In the absence of a legal right to request remote working, the Government must give a detailed and written outline of what is expected of workers and employers over the coming

months regarding the return to workplaces and remote working. I hope that will be forthcoming immediately.

I also ask the Minister to enlighten us as to why bar counters are still off limits. Mr. Donall O’Keeffe from the Licensed Vintners Association, LVA, and Mr. Padraig Cribben from the Vintners Federation of Ireland, VFI, have queried this in recent days. The measure does not seem to make any sense to the public or those in the pub trade and I hope there is scope for it to be revisited in the interests of common sense. I have said many times that my belief and experience is that when the guidance is clear, easy to understand and logical, people will follow it. Where it is not, that creates doubt and causes problems, not just for patrons in these premises, but for workers as well.

Is it the intention of the Government, in conjunction with Fáilte Ireland, to restate the guidelines that weddings in hotels and guest houses have to be finished by 11.30 p.m.? In the past number of days, many couples have contacted me to seek specific information on this because they have been informed by their wedding venues that the Fáilte Ireland guidance states that weddings have to finish at 11.30 p.m. There is some discussion in the media about the guidelines being different. People want to be able to celebrate and follow the rules, but the rules need to be clear.

Throughout the announcement on Monday, when the Taoiseach, Deputy Micheál Martin, the Tánaiste, Deputy Varadkar, and the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, were at their respective podiums, they repeatedly referenced personal responsibility. The reason I mention this is because it is the public who have displayed the sort of personal responsibility that some, even in this House, have been lacking. They are displaying personal responsibility every day. They have chosen to be vaccinated in huge numbers. They wear their masks. They wash their hands. They have done everything that has been asked of them, yet when a camera is put in front of the Taoiseach or the Tánaiste, they fire back that the public needs to do more.

Maybe the Government and the people in it could and should have done more. Maybe the Taoiseach could have not voted through a recruitment moratorium in the health service last time he was in government. Perhaps he could have been more careful when establishing the HSE. Maybe the Tánaiste could have sanctioned the building of more hospital beds. Maybe he could have tackled the recruitment crisis in our health service when he was Minister for Health or, indeed, when he was Taoiseach. The list goes on.

In the few minutes remaining to me, I want to raise with the Minister the case of Mr. Nadim Hussain, a man who is on hunger strike in a direct provision centre. This young man is scheduled to be deported. I will not get into the rights and wrongs of this case, but I want to say that in the midst of a global pandemic, when our case numbers, while worrying, are low compared with other countries, it is unconscionable that somebody would be deported. I ask the Minister to please raise this case with the Minister for Justice and consider the plight of this man who is on day eight of his hunger strike. As I said, I do not want to get into the specifics of the case but I ask the Minister to please take a look at it.

Working together on solving something requires a high level of humility and self-awareness. I implore the three leaders of the Government to be mindful of this.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: This week was meant to be a happy occasion for the entertainment sector, in particular, given the reopening after nearly two years of lockdown when we

did not have as much of the vibrant cultural life we had before we all went online. Instead, it is all confusion, contradictory messages and gobbledygook. 100% is not 100% is the message people have got. People can sit and maybe stand, but only stand on a seat or stand next to a seat. People cannot stray or mingle and, God forbid, cannot dance unless they are in a nightclub. While in nightclubs, masks will be required, that is not the case when dancing, drinking or eating. It is not clear, some wags would say, if it is allowed to wear the face off a partner - or somebody else's partner, maybe. There are a lot of questions. They have been posed since the announcements on Tuesday. If a concert is held in a nightclub, can there be dancing? Nobody sat down and looked at the practicalities of the stupid guidelines that have been mentioned and which are still being written, seemingly.

There is and always has been a chance that the Government might not fully reopen if the Covid numbers were on the wrong trajectory. That is what planning for eventualities is about. While we have been told that all will be revealed and clarified in the latest Covid-19 guidelines, they are like the fourth secret of Fátima. They are still hurriedly being cobbled together as I speak. On Tuesday the overview of public health measures and exemptions from the Department stated that the guidelines would be developed only for nightclubs. What is it to be? What happens to the venues and performers who sold tickets for gigs involving standing room or promised their clientele the chance to dance based on the advance pronouncements Government Ministers made about reopening? What about the nightclubs due to open tomorrow? How will they be able to comply with guidelines which still have not been written, never mind published? We are hearing stories of bars and venues that have hired new staff in preparation for reopening, with events being sold out in advance, now faced with laying off those same staff and not opening at all. Sarah O'Keeffe, a constituent of my colleague, Deputy Ward, summed it up perfectly when she said that a multitude of gig tickets have been sold over recent weeks assuming that they will proceed at 100% capacity and that to impose a requirement for indoor gigs to be fully seated, giving the organisers three days' notice, is financially unviable and logistically impossible. To do this to an industry that has desperately sought to engage with the Department to come up with reasonable solutions and to ensure maximum safety at these events is absolutely reprehensible. The Government has had months to plan for various possibilities and it is inexplicable that it has only one plan and that there was no plan B. What were all the oversight groups and the recovery task force doing during this time? What were the Ministers' Departments doing in this time?

The only clear message musicians and performers are getting from the Government is that their pandemic unemployment payment, PUP, is being cut. Next week a large cohort of musicians and industry workers will receive their last pandemic unemployment payment. They have already seen their payments decrease, despite having no work to go to. We know that this industry will not recover until next summer. Tá ár bhféiniúlacht mar náisiún ag brath air. Tá ár n-earnáil turasóireachta ag brath air. Tá meabhair ár sochaí ag brath ar an tsiamsaíocht - an ceol, an rince, an ragaireacht agus an gliondar. Dá bhrí sin, caithfear cinntiú gur féidir leis na ceoltoirí, na rinceoirí agus na healaíontóirí an fód a sheasamh chun nach gcaillimid iad de thairbhe neamhairde, dímheasa ná easpa tacaíochta ón Stát. Ba é an Stát a dhún earnáil na siamsaíochta síos sa chéad dul síos agus, dá réir, tá ualach air í a chothú go dtí go mbeidh a gnó go hiomlán oscailte athuair.

I do not believe the Government appreciates clearly the gravity of the crisis in this sector. Musicians and performers are leaving the industry in their droves, and no wonder: as I said, their PUP is being cut. Many promising artists are now thinking of emigration. That would be

a shame and a scandal and it would be on the Government.

Deputy Réada Cronin: It would be ridiculous to stand up here and not cite the growing number of new cases and hospital and ICU admissions. Reframing the challenge of Covid-19 is difficult in the context of our current figures. Our children are of particular concern in the context of Covid itself, long Covid and the wider impacts on their physical, mental and emotional health. It is hard to believe that while the Government is committed to retrofitting our schools under the EU energy performance of buildings directive, to include ventilation for health reasons, this plan has not been advanced. Once it was evident that Covid-19 was airborne, safe and warm ventilation in schools should have been acted on with urgency, and I urge the Minister to speak to the Departments of Education and the Environment, Climate and Communications about that and get going on it.

On a wider basis, where vaccine protection is possibly waning and the seasonality of the virus seems to be waxing, we have to make special efforts to encourage and to protect outdoor activities for our children. I believe a special commitment has to be made to this to make sure our children can access outdoor activities as safely as possible because they need them for their health and well-being. They need one another, their friends and their sense of community, and being outdoors is both possible and doable. If we could put half as much thought and talk into looking after our children as we have put into getting the population into licensed premises to consume alcohol, society would be the better for it. Reconnecting is important but it must be a reconnection that is safe and considered in the context of where we are, not where we imagined or hoped we would be. I would like to see a real and firm commitment on the part of the Government to put our children first in schools and to make their lives safer. I believe this can be done because where there is a political will there is a political way.

Finally, on this, the day that partition and the blight it inflicted on our island nation is being commemorated - shamefully, in my opinion, and notably without Uachtarán na hÉireann nó Banríon Shasana - we have to consider the impact partition has had on our Covid experience and outlook and the challenge we faced because of that. Instead of the necessary all-island approach we needed, both sides, North and South, had one hand tied behind their backs. That is no way to proceed to protect our people. Partition is a challenge that must be rectified before another pandemic hits, and we would really want to get on with that.

Deputy Chris Andrews: There is one issue I wish to raise that is affecting sporting communities and that is the continued confusion around the use of clubs' dressing rooms and showers. Last month, from 20 September, dressing rooms were due to be reopened across the board following guidelines from Sport Ireland, yet in late October, with the cold and dark evenings well and truly set in, a number of dressing rooms and changing rooms across the country remain shut and there is a lot of confusion. I have heard reports of different sporting national governing bodies, NGBs, having conflicting policies on changing rooms, despite using the same changing rooms. There is a multi-use facility whereby one code will allow use of the changing rooms and one will not. We cannot have one rule for one sport and a separate rule for another sport. It makes no sense at all, and guidance on this needs to be given. We need clarity and sporting groups need clarity. We cannot continue to have teams changing in car parks in the cold and wet winter months ahead. Strong communication and leadership from Sport Ireland and its affiliated governing bodies could put an end to this.

Another issue of concern to clubs around the country is that of volunteers. We need to have a plan from Sport Ireland for the engagement and re-engagement with sporting volunteers

across the country. As everyone out there involved in local sports knows, volunteers are the backbone of youth sports and adult sports and are the lifeline of every club in the country. The past 18 months have been very tough on those volunteering within local clubs. Clubs across my constituency - I am sure this is a national trend - are finding it hard to attract and maintain a network of volunteers due to additional pressures from this pandemic. That needs to be taken into account and we cannot afford to have volunteers drifting off. Sport Ireland needs to be proactive on this.

Deputy Duncan Smith: It is good we have the opportunity to discuss this today, given what was announced earlier this week. This virus has turned the entire world, including our country, inside out and we have seen some unbelievable responses to it that are a credit to the nation and to the State, not least from our health workers at all grades, but also from our retail workers, our delivery drivers and everyone who from day one to this, the 607th day, and beyond has been at every single front line that exists in this country. It is an absolute credit to them.

A lot has been said about the announcement the other day, and I do not necessarily want to focus too much on that. This is an opportunity to speak about what are now becoming the more systemic issues in this virus, the pandemic and our healthcare system in general.

We are at a stage now where many of our healthcare workers have been fully vaccinated for longer than six months. I will not jump into the science of the efficacy of vaccines and the waning of vaccines because the science is not agreed on it, and I am no scientist. It is prudent that our healthcare workers are included in a third vaccination booster scheme as soon as possible. The hospital cases are going up. The ICU cases are high. Given the resources that are put into ICU, I understand that ICU beds will always have high capacity. They are constant resources. We are not to be distracted either by anything that comes back on that from the HSE or from the Minister, Deputy Donnelly, because a high percentage of people who are in ICU are in there with the virus. That is a reality and therefore, we are on a precipice with ICU capacity.

It is not just a case of making sure we have more beds, we must also make sure that if we have to bring surge capacity into ICU we also have trained ICU staff for those beds. I am new to this brief and I am learning all of the time about the skills set that is needed. It is not just any nurse or any worker in the healthcare system that can be plucked from another section to work at an ICU bed. It is a specialist skill. Do we have those skill sets ready to go should we need them? I am not convinced we do. I am deeply concerned about the trend of losing healthcare workers for myriad reasons. Pay is one reason. Pay versus the high costs of rent, mortgage, living expenses is another. We need a real strategy around this. It affects all grades of healthcare workers. We cannot continue to train thousands of healthcare workers for them to go out to the Emirates to work there for a number of years. That is not a good model for our healthcare system and it is not a good investment of State money into this wonderful human resource we have here. This is the challenge. It will require difficult decisions and difficult conversations. It is the reality and we must start addressing it. It is attractive for many to go to work in a tax-free economy and come back with X amount for a deposit on a house. This is not why we built our universities and training centres with regard to healthcare staff. We want to train people to come and work in our acute hospitals, in our primary care settings and in our community care settings. This is not just about nurses and doctors. We also need physiotherapists, speech and language therapists and the whole gamut. This is where we are at. I am not taking pot shots here. This is the systemic stuff that we need to look at.

I am delighted the Minister referenced those people who are unvaccinated. This is the real

elephant in the room. As far as I can see there are two types of unvaccinated persons. We know the majority of people in our hospital beds and acute settings at the moment are unvaccinated. There are people who are genuinely hesitant. We have all dealt with them and we know them. A lot of them are vulnerable people and we need to do something to encourage them and to give them confidence that they need to get this vaccine. There are the others out there, however, who are outside this gate who are preying on those people. There is blood on their hands and they are costing lives. They are ripping apart families with their misinformation and their targeting of vulnerable people with untruths about the vaccination and the vaccination programme. I do not have the answer but we cannot continue like this. We need to find something. I believe we are united across the House, across politics, and across society that we cannot allow such an element in our society to cause this damage with such lies and with such vehemence. Ultimately, some people who are lying in ICU beds now are old or vulnerable people who might be parents listening to their grown-up children spew this misinformation into their ears, and they are dying because of this. We saw the tragic case of Joe McCarron in Letterkenny Hospital as being the most public case, but this is happening elsewhere too. This is an important point.

Covid can twist and turn. We are entering into the winter season. There is a fear about the seasonality aspect. It is not only about this virus as we also have the flu season. We encourage all people to get the flu jab where they can. The reality is, however, that the flu jab still costs money. If a person needs to book a flu jab now, a lot of pharmacies or other places where it can be obtained, are booked out. We called for a free flu vaccine last year and we call for it again this year. It is not going to happen at this stage but we need to encourage people to get the flu vaccine in order to mitigate any bulge in our hospital service over the winter.

We are prepared if this virus turns around. We supported the extension of the framework for restrictions through the winter should that happen. We hope it will not. Encouraging news broke online today with regard to the third booster from Pfizer. It will be interesting to see where that goes. We will all work together. People look to this House and to the Government for a lead on it. Hopefully, with the resources and the right kind of decisions, this lead can continue to beat back this virus.

Deputy Joe Flaherty: I will take this opportunity to acknowledge the vaccination team at Newtownforbes in County Longford. I am aware the Minister visited there a number of months ago and that he was greatly impressed with all that he saw. As of 3 p.m. today the centre has administered 27,600 vaccines, and that number is set to rise further as the centre remains open with its walk-in clinic today until 8 p.m. this evening. They also have two further walk-in clinics planned for next week to capitalise on people having some free time during the midterm week. The centre has also confirmed to me this afternoon that booster vaccines have thus far been administered to 208 people in long-term residential settings, and they have also run a series of very successful immunocompromised clinics. I thank the Minister for ensuring that we had a dedicated clinic in the county, and the terms of the lease on the Clonguish GAA venue have now been extended until next March, which is also reassuring. We have had the naysayers saying that Longford would be overlooked, but the Minister assured me this would not happen on his watch, and I am thankful to the Minister for that.

There has been a remarkable effort of camaraderie and professionalism on show at the Longford centre as the staff there have really put country and community first. I would be remiss if I did not single out in particular the efforts of the manager of the centre, Carmel Braden, who has done tremendous work. The people of Longford rightly take tremendous pride in our vaccination campaign, and we are indebted to the staff at the Newtownforbes centre. It is important

to acknowledge that here today. I believe the House is in agreement that we are facing into exceptionally difficult and challenging times this winter with regard to healthcare. This will be compounded further by the omnipresent challenge of Covid. I spoke earlier about our pride locally in the very successful vaccination campaign in Longford. I also commend our GPs and their staff who played a Herculean role. Early on in this battle we would have argued for a role for our local pharmacists in the vaccine roll-out, and once they got the call they were not found wanting. Collectively they have administered an incredible 320,000 doses across 2,000 pharmacies nationwide. The events of this week emphasised that Covid is not going away any time soon. The sustained roll-out of the vaccine boosters is critical if we want to stay ahead of this fast-paced and mutating virus. The winter flu is now upon us, with first cases being reported. It will undoubtedly bring further pressure on our GPs, their staff and hospitals. We need to mobilise every battalion available to us in the battle against Covid. There are several pharmacies in County Longford, by way of example, who are capable of rolling out 200 boosters per week. It would be remiss if we did not involve them in the fight. The vaccine booster campaign gets under way in earnest next week. It would be an oversight if we did not include our network of pharmacies. I believe excluding pharmacies will serve only to slow down the vaccination process and will deprive people, and particularly those whose immunity is challenged and who would clearly benefit from the Covid booster shots. It is also critical that the booster vaccines are made available to front-line workers, including pharmacists and their staff, as a matter of priority and particularly in light of the worrying increase in infection numbers in recent days. I hope the Minister will take this on board in the coming days.

I agree with some speakers that there was certainly a degree of mixed messaging around this week's announcement on the continuation of restrictions, but to a point. I emphasise that two weeks ago we expected we would exit restrictions in their entirety. The reality is that this is a very fast-moving and mutating virus. You cannot go into a bookshop and ask for a book on how to deal with a Covid pandemic because none has been written yet. A lot of this is happening on the hoof. Decisions are being made in this manner and we have to understand and make allowances for that, but there is a worrying narrative emerging in some sections of our community to the effect that retailers and those in the hospitality sector are being reckless in some way and even profit driven. I can say hand on heart that the vast majority of business owners have behaved impeccably and have led by example throughout the pandemic. I include their staff. I have seen pubs and shops right across County Longford and the midlands generally transformed to ensure public health and that the welfare of their staff and patrons would be put front and centre. This has been an incredibly difficult time for retail and hospitality businesses. In Longford, I have seen at first hand the lengths to which they have gone to reopen and put their public health responsibility front and centre. It is worth noting that, since the outset of the pandemic, which is now 18 months ago, nine pubs in the county have closed. The impacts of Covid will be far-reaching, not only in respect of the health service and our personal health but also in respect of our society and economy generally.

I have yet to attend a premises back at home where I have not been asked to produce my Covid certificate. I saw at first hand where a restaurant missed out on doubtlessly much-needed business when it correctly asked a patron for a Covid certificate. The staff were harangued and abused by the individual, who then walked off and decided to post on social media that he or she had been refused a meal, which was entirely untrue. I received emails from people wondering how they could go about complaining about businesses they perceived to be in breach of Covid regulations, including for not asking for Covid certificates. In those instances, speaking to the businesses should probably be the first port of call. It is important we acknowledge that a great

effort has been made by retailers and those in the hospitality sector. It should not go unnoticed. I am aware that public health should come first and inform all our decisions, but in the coming days, particularly as we see nightclubs reopening, we need to prioritise as much as possible what will be the needs and nuances of the hospitality and retail sectors over the coming months. These months will be vital for both sectors.

Deputy Thomas Gould: This is the weekend of the jazz festival in Cork. It is one of the biggest, if not the biggest, weekends of the year for restaurants, hotels, bars and nightclubs. When the businesses were told restrictions would be lifted on 22 October, just in time for the weekend, they were delighted. It presented a good opportunity and it really lifted people's spirits. On Tuesday, however, all this was brought into doubt. Now, at almost 5 p.m. on the Thursday before the jazz weekend, people still do not know what is happening. As we speak, the industry is trying to get clarity from the Government on what is going to happen. It is crazy that businesses are in this position the day before the weekend. There is utter chaos and confusion over what is happening. It is devastating not just for the business community and its staff and suppliers but also for the customers who have booked hotels and tickets for concerts and other events, in addition to those who have made plans and who are looking forward to this weekend. This is not the first time this has happened.

I am all for following the public health advice and have stated that publicly, but nobody should be finding out about new restrictions on Twitter or the day before an event. It is not good enough. The announcement, like many others, was leaked right, left and centre, but leaks are not good enough when dealing with businesses, staff and people's lives. It is just not fair on businesses, workers, suppliers and customers. It must not keep happening like this.

I wish to mention Nadim Hussain, who is currently on hunger strike in the direct provision centre on Kinsale Road in Cork. Maybe the Minister might ask the Minister for Justice, Deputy Humphreys, and her officials to consider Nadim's case. It certainly merits consideration.

Deputy Martin Kenny: We all recognise and understand the great work that has been put in. I pay tribute to everyone in the health services, including those in the vaccination and testing centres, who are still doing their work. They are often forgotten. We have almost become accustomed to the vaccination and testing services being in place but their staff are putting in a huge effort, as are the staff in our hospitals and all the other front-line staff. The immeasurable effort made to fight this virus should not go unrecognised or unmentioned.

Having said that, the position on the proposed opening up this week has resulted in a tinge of disappointment for many. We understand the numbers have gone up, which has had an influence, but the difficulty is that people were given a sense that all restrictions would be removed. Putting that into the public domain left us open to a big problem given the possibility of its not happening. That was the mistake made. I hope the Government will acknowledge it was a mistake to have allowed a sense that all the restrictions would be removed to become the consensus. Everyone thought all the restrictions would be gone in the middle of October. I did not believe that was ever going to happen.

The hospitality sector, which was mentioned already, is under particular pressure because it needs to prepare and to know what restrictions will be in place, how businesses will operate and how they will deal with staff. They have made all their preparations but the reopening was pulled out from under them at the last minute. There is justifiable anger in the sector as to how to deal with that. That said, we all recognise that the virus is something we have no control over

unless we do exactly what needs to be done and take the measures seriously.

The vaccination effort that has been made in Ireland has been second to none. There are large numbers of people who have ensured they got the vaccine. We need to consider booster vaccinations for as many sectors as possible and as quickly as possible. I am sure the Government will acknowledge this is a global pandemic and that we need to reach everywhere in the world with vaccines, particularly developing countries, where vaccination levels are very low level.

Those who work from home need more clarity and need to be engaged with more. They have now been told by many of their employers that they need to return to full-time work or go back into the office or an environment that could be quite congested and crowded. There is concern in this regard. It would be useful if we had direct guidance from the NPHET, but eventually from the Government, on the exact position on this. There is some confusion. Some workers are being told they need to go back to work. The workers themselves do not particularly want to and feel they can continue to do their jobs from home quite adequately. They feel they have done a lot of work and made many sacrifices over the pandemic, and they fear returning to the work environment, particularly as they see numbers rising. This is an issue that the Government could deal with as quickly as possible.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: What is happening regarding Covid is very disappointing. It is a genuine setback for individuals, families and the country generally. The starting point at this stage should be determining why we are in the situation we are in and why the numbers are going out of control and trending so high, given that we have had a really successful vaccination programme.

It is important to note the points that were made by NPHET in its letter. It states that, in a pessimistic scenario, there will be 800 to 1,000 in hospital by late November, 150 to 200 of whom will require intensive care. It expects 2,000 new admissions to hospital and more than 300 admissions to intensive care units between now and the end of the year. It states very clearly that since early October, case counts have been following the pessimistic scenario. On the basis of the studies that have been done and NPHET's assessment, we are in the pessimistic scenario. That means a more than twofold increase in the number in hospital with Covid and a doubling of the number in intensive care. All our hospitals are at capacity. The NPHET letter is painting a dire picture for the health service. Questions arise as a result that the Minister needs to answer.

5 o'clock

In many ways, this should be a questions and answers session, rather than statements. The first question is why, given that we have one of the highest vaccination rates in Europe, if not the world, and we have had the longest lockdown in Europe, we now have one of the highest rates of the virus. Can the Minister explain that? Can anybody in NPHET or elsewhere explain it? There is supposition in respect of some of it and possible theories being put forward but we do not have anything definite regarding why this is happening. Although we have figures on a geographical basis in terms of local electoral areas, we are not getting any of the kind of qualitative data we used to get regarding how these outbreaks are occurring, where the places of transmission are, why the outbreaks are happening and what are the super-spreader events. Is that information available somewhere? Have the public health doctors gathered that qualitative information? Is it just that we are not hearing it? If we want to respond to this surge, we need

to have that kind of information to know what should be done.

Another question that arises is what exactly we are going to do to reverse the trajectory of cases. It is going only one way at the moment, in a very concerning trajectory. What exactly is going to be done to bend that curve, as we used to say last year? How are the figures going to be brought down? I am not hearing anything from the Government in respect of how that will happen. The figures are going up significantly across the board and society is opening up more. What is likely to happen then? What are the projections? Does the Minister accept the projections set out in the letter from NPHET? It points to a pretty dire situation in hospitals. It is all very well for the Taoiseach and others in government to tell us that it is down to individual responsibility and one has to act responsibly. Of course, people have to act responsibly. The vast majority of people are actually doing that and have worked really hard at it, but the Government has a serious responsibility as well.

Let us look at the mitigating measures the Government should be bringing in and using. The whole issue of ventilation was hardly mentioned at all. There was a measly allocation of CO2 monitors to schools, but there was no advice or direction in that regard and no investment in air purification systems. Equally, there has been no advice, direction or requirements in respect of ventilation for workplaces or hospitality. It is significantly remiss of the Government to ignore that because we have known for a long time that the virus is airborne.

I refer to antigen testing. An expert report published today confirms what we were told by Mark Ferguson in his expert report last March. Why has there not been wider usage of antigen testing? Why has the Government not provided advice and direction to people on the use of antigen tests? Why is it not setting any standards in respect of antigen tests?

Obviously, there is also the issue of enforcement. Covid certificates are fine and it is a good idea that they are used, but why are they not being enforced properly? The Minister knows from his own figures that one third of establishments that were checked were not enforcing Covid certificates. What about all the other settings? What about travel? We heard from the CMO that when he was coming home from holidays last week, he was not asked to produce any documentation at Dublin Airport. Other people have had the same experience. Anecdotally, it is being said all over the place.

Ventilation, the wider use of antigen testing and proper enforcement are the responsibilities of the Government. They are not anything that individuals can do. They are the responsibilities of the Government and, to a large extent, the failure to deal with those three key areas are significant contributory factors to the position we are in today.

Deputy Brendan Smith: I agree with the remarks of my colleague, Deputy Flaherty, regarding the outstanding success of the vaccine programme. On other occasions when we spoke here or in the convention centre, Members questioned the roll-out of the programme and some initial delays, but the plan and programme the Minister laid out and stuck with has proven very successful. I compliment him, his senior officials and the personnel in the HSE on the very successful vaccine roll-out programme. I take the opportunity, as Members on all sides of the House have done, to quite rightly pay tribute to all the clinicians involved in administering the programme, as well as the people of various professions within the area of healthcare, including GPs and pharmacists, who administered the vaccine in their own premises. I compliment the volunteers and the retired people who went back at this time of crisis to give additional capacity to the HSE. I spoke to various people in my county and in County Monaghan who had retired

and did not think they would work again in the health service but went back because they saw it as an opportunity to contribute once again to helping people who were in a vulnerable position.

I was administered two doses of the vaccine in the centre in Cavan. It was a joy to be there on each occasion and to see the joy on people's faces when they got the vaccine. I recall well that early on in the programme, those aged over 80 or over 70 got a new lease of life when they got even the first dose of the vaccine. It meant a bit of freedom for them. It has been so important. Everybody involved, including the Minister, all the personnel in the Department and the HSE and all those in the vaccination centres, GP practices and pharmacies, deserves great credit on what they have done to date and what they continue to do. We cannot say that often enough.

Initially, there was plenty of criticism. Most of us put that in a constructive way but it turned out for the best. It is to be hoped that there will be a similarly successful roll-out for the booster vaccine. I hope the Minister will be able to push that out as soon as possible because I know many people are anxious, particularly those working in healthcare and delivering services at the coalface, often to vulnerable people, and they want to get the booster jab as soon as possible.

Deputy Kenny mentioned the importance of ensuring the whole world gets the vaccine. The Taoiseach stated recently in the House that we need to have international solidarity on a global vaccine supply. That is very important. Those of us who spoke on this issue this day last year did not think we would have such a successful roll-out. It shows what can be achieved when the global community gets together and governments throughout the world put resources into dealing with a pandemic or any particular disease.

The Joint Committee on the Implementation of the Good Friday Agreement spent several hours today speaking to the people who are developing an all-island cancer research centre. They appreciate the support of the Minister and that of the Northern Ireland Minister of Health, Mr. Robin Swann. They explained to the committee what has been done on an all-Ireland basis since the Good Friday Agreement and the first memorandum of understanding in the early 1990s. They told us that it is now not just an all-Ireland project, it is a transatlantic one, in collaboration with major centres of excellence in research in the United States, as well as linking up with colleagues in Europe. That shows what can be done when research is done on a collaborative basis and people do not work in silos but, rather, work together, striving for the common good.

I listened to the Minister being interviewed on "RTÉ News: One O'Clock" on Tuesday. The one thing that struck me - Deputy Shortall referred to it as well - was when he quoted the figure that one in three establishments was not implementing the regulations in respect of the Covid certificate. Like all others present, I have been doing very little socialising for the past 15 or 16 months, but in any hostelry I visited in my own county and my constituency, I was asked to produce my Covid certificate and it was checked. It was not just a case of showing the certificate on my phone; it was checked properly. It is most disappointing that in towns with 30 establishments, ten of them are not implementing the law of the land. That is just not acceptable, especially in the context of the 20 establishments that are doing it well and properly. There can be no easing up in that regard. The Health and Safety Authority, HSA, the HSE and whatever other statutory agencies are involved must be firm in ensuring that the regulations that are in place for the benefit of everybody are adhered to. If one operator is enforcing the regulations strictly, then all should, because it is for our benefit. People are happier to be asked for their Covid certificates when they go into a premises. Deputy Shortall referred to Dr. Tony Holohan coming through the airport and not being asked for the relevant paperwork. I have

heard similar anecdotal stories, although I have not been to an airport. If employees of the State are not implementing the law, it does not set a good example to people in the private sector in respect of implementing the regulations. If people going through airports are required to show details of where they are coming from or going to, or are required to show their Covid certificate, there is no excuse for not showing it. I sincerely hope that people will act responsibly. The overwhelming majority of people are happier if they are asked for their travel documents or their Covid certificate. The overwhelming majority of people in business and going about their daily lives, for example, going out to socialise for a night or whatever it may be, want to be comfortable and know that they are in a place that is safe and hopefully free from the virus.

I understand why the Government took a cautious approach on Tuesday. It was the right approach to take. Unfortunately, the figures changed for the worse relatively recently. It was sobering to hear Dr. Holohan say on the radio this morning that there are 86 patients in ICU, with hospital admissions increasing and pressure mounting on the hospital system. We are going into winter so, hopefully, that pressure will not exacerbate problems with the system. We all know that the personnel working in the healthcare system, whether it is in the community, residential homes or hospitals, have been under enormous pressure over the past 17 months.

Within our own parliamentary party, we discussed the whole area of mental health and how the pandemic has placed additional pressures on people. I know that our colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, has worked extremely hard to put in place additional resources to improve the delivery of services. I believe there is funding in the budget this year for re-configuring and enhancing supports in response to the challenges posed by Covid, and further improvements in developments in child and youth mental health will continue. That is much needed. The Minister of State outlined that a proportion of the additional funding will allow for the enhancement of child and youth mental health services. That is all welcome and necessary. Both the Minister and the Minister of State have outlined the different initiatives that have been taken in support of the work of NGOs, including the provision of information lines, text lines and *yourmentalhealth.ie*, and all of the additional supports that are necessary for young people who are going through difficult times.

Unfortunately, in my own county, a young man lost his life very recently. His parents and siblings spoke very well on the local radio about how their family member was subject to consistent and different forms of bullying and how they were anxious for the statutory agencies and Departments to take a new approach to the whole area of the crime of bullying, and at least put in place some confidential lines to ensure that there is a cross-government and a cross-agency approach so that this area can be addressed. We know of the bullying that is happening on social media, unfortunately. It is a blight on society. Many young people are being bullied constantly. As least when we were at school, there was a fight in the school yard over football, hurling or whatever, and we went home and it was over. You did not get a lot of sympathy at home if you complained about somebody pushing you and kicking you in the shins. It did not matter. When you got out of the school yard, whatever messing was going on finished. Unfortunately, now, in far too many instances, the bullying is continuing online with detrimental consequences. I think of that fine young 18-year-old, Eden Heaslip, who lost his life following consistent bullying.

I hope that the Minister's Department will play an active part, along with other Departments, in ensuring that there is a cross-government and cross-agency approach to try to tackle the whole area of bullying, particularly of young people. It is bringing additional pressure on mental health services. Obviously, if we can prevent some of the misbehaviour and misdeeds

that are happening, it will improve many people's quality of life and it will also save lives. I know that there is no simple answer, but I would hope that the Minister's Department could be central, along with the Departments of Justice and Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, to a whole-of-government approach taken to ensure that the requests and suggestions of families, who have gone through so much in their lived experience of the awful loss of a young person and do not want to see it happen to others, could be taken on board in the hope that it will help avoid such loss of life or suffering to individuals. It is an area that we need to address as a matter of urgency. Person-to-person bullying is happening, but online bullying is happening to a much greater extent. It cannot be tolerated any more. The social media companies must be taken on in a big way. The Government has promised the establishment of a media commission. I sincerely hope that that commission will have the powers and the resources to tackle head-on the misbehaviour of the international media companies in what they allow to happen online.

Deputy Paul Donnelly: In moving forward to some sort of normality when all of this is done, we need to ensure that those in our communities, the communities we represent, and those most at risk, are not forgotten as we recover and reconnect. The people I am talking about are the thousands who worked through the pandemic and volunteered in the community. Throughout the pandemic and when we were in strict lockdown, I was part of an incredible organisation, both within the GAA and outside of it, through Fingal County Council, that delivered meals on wheels and picked up people's medication. So much incredible work was done right throughout the pandemic. Each and every one of those actions that was taken was a real gift to the community. As I know people really want to believe that we are coming out the pandemic, I want to use this time to thank each and every one of those who volunteered and, indeed, who continue to volunteer. I regularly check my emails from Fingal Volunteer Centre through Fingal County Council, and the amount of work that is still ongoing is phenomenal.

As we move forward with the easing of restrictions, those operating many of those services that local people relied upon, such as crèches, dance classes, sports clubs, afterschool and community cafés and community centres, need clarity and a sense of where we are going with this. They need to know what they can do and what they cannot do. Unfortunately, every time there is an imposition or an easing of restrictions, there is a lack of clarity for a period of a number of days following the announcement. People look at the restrictions and struggle to understand where their group, organisation or crèche fits into it, and what is required of them. For example, those running a community centre might ask whether they can have indoor gatherings, how many are permitted and what activities can be run. The reason they are apprehensive, struggling and annoyed is that much of their funding relies on people using the services. It is really important that we get clarity on the issue over the next while and that we ensure that those operating the community centres and facilities get clarity in that respect.

Deputy Pat Buckley: I listened to the Minister's opening comments earlier. I am not here to bash anybody. I thank all the front-line workers. We could spend 20 minutes naming all of the jobs.

I am worried about clarity and the short notice. We have the jazz festival in Cork this weekend. I have been speaking to many business owners who were planning for additional hours. It is hitting that sector again. I want to flag this. This debate is about reframing the challenge, continuing our recovery and reconnecting. Reconnecting is getting back to where we were. I have listened to many of the contributors to the debate and mental health has been mentioned. With regard to reframing the challenge and continuing our recovery, I have to bring up a par-

ticular issue again. The Minister will be black and blue from listening to me. In the middle of a pandemic, when mental health issues are off the Richter scale, we are closing the only mental health facility in my town in east Cork. I know the Minister has reports from the HSE but I have told him before and I will tell him again it is misinformation. The people are suffering. If we lose this service in east Cork, it will never come back. If we are trying to move forward, how is it prudent to close a centre that never had a Covid case or a suicide? It has long-term care, short-term care, a respite service and a mental health day service. All of a sudden, whoever calls the shots decided this is the right thing to do. It is absolutely ludicrous and I appeal to the Minister. If I could sit down with him for ten minutes and go through this with him, I would give him the truth on it.

In the short time I have left I will say that we are not going in the right direction. I appeal to everybody to adhere to a common sense approach. Please listen to the people outside but please listen to us in here when we raise genuine concerns. It is not about bashing the Government all of the time. I worry when something is working right and it has been a complement to society and the community that somebody in another power or entity decides to shut it down or fix something that is not broken. I thank the Minister for his patience.

Deputy Mick Barry: I will start by making a point on hospitality and the situation we will have tomorrow. In the past 24 to 48 hours, we have heard from the hotel industry, the restaurateurs and the publicans. The group we have not heard from very much in the media, and I challenge the media on this, is the workers in the hospitality industry. In some ways this is not surprising. Those workers are generally not organised. They are in non-union workplaces. Many of them are in anti-union workplaces. Some of them will be going back to work with different feelings and emotions.

Someone sent a text to a radio debate I was at last night looking forward to being able to pull a pint again and hearing the beat of the music. That is completely understandable. There will also be concerns about health and safety. This is not surprising when we see the way some publicans in particular have acted in recent weeks. The idea of checking Covid certificates at the door whereby people flash their phone and in they go has not been exceptional. A Covid blitz is being organised over the weekend. This is good. I encourage workers to have conversations among themselves and discuss what steps they might be in a position to take to defend their own health and safety if their employers are negligent in this regard. Workers can make a difference on this.

While I am on the subject of workers, I welcome the comments of the deputy chief medical officer, Dr. Ronan Glynn, on working at home where possible over the winter period. Many workers will welcome this statement. The feedback from employers is more mixed. Some employers are fine with it and will go with it. Others do not like it but will go along with it reluctantly. There are others again, and not one or two, who will stand against it and push back against it. Again, I encourage workers to discuss it among themselves, organise among themselves and push back where it happens. There are unions that people can join. My office is available if workers need help or advice in this regard.

We have almost 100 people in ICU. We have almost 500 people with Covid in our hospitals. Clearly a surge is taking place. Even if we had a very strong health service it would come under pressure from that surge but not to the same degree as our health service is coming under pressure. This is not a comment on our health service workers who have been magnificent. It is a comment on successive Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael Governments which have left our hospitals

in a position that they should not be in, with a lack of beds, including ICU beds. There is still need for action on this front.

I want to make some points on people who are unvaccinated. To be clear, I am pro-vaccination. The benefits of vaccination can be seen by the situation in the hospitals and ICUs. The percentage of people there who are vaccinated is far less of a percentage of that cohort than the percentage who are unvaccinated. I appeal to people who are unvaccinated to get vaccinated or at least to have conversations about it, in particular with medical professionals.

I have listened carefully to radio debates over the past 24 hours. I participated in one last night. I want to voice a note of concern. I do not want to see a situation where Government spokespersons, however subtly, try to divert the anger, confusion and questions that are there from the Government and on to the shoulders of people who are unvaccinated. The media should watch this carefully and call it out where it happens. It is not in society's interest to create a pariah group. The Government should not attempt to go down that road.

Covid passes were to last until October. They are now being extended for the winter. Covid will be with us for a number of years. The WHO has said this recently. Is the Government aiming to make these a semi-permanent feature of Irish life? There would be serious civil liberty implications if that were the case. I want to put a marker down on this.

On the issue of a Covid bonus, I would say the Government kicked it to touch in the budget. It has been very quiet on the matter this week. Workers will not accept crumbs from the table with one day of a bank holiday. There needs to be a real Covid bonus for public sector and private sector workers. This includes the low paid who helped get us through the pandemic on wages we would hardly be able to pay rent on. The minimum wage should be increased to €15 an hour.

The question has come up as to whether we should have boosters in Irish society when people have not been vaccinated in Africa, Asia and Latin America. Why is there a scarcity of vaccines? The industrial capacity is there to provide vaccines for everyone in the world. It is because we have production for profit and not production for need. We need a waiver on the patents from the World Trade Organization. We also need public ownership of the pharmaceutical industry and production for need. This can only be done on the basis of a socialist plan of production internationally. This is what is needed.

It is positive that antigen tests are coming more into the picture now. Why does the Government have a stockpile of only 2 million? It has been obvious for a long time that they would play a role at a certain point. There should be tens of millions of these tests. We need tens of millions of them. They should be freely available. Urgent steps need to be taken to resolve this issue now.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: The number of people on trolleys in University Hospital Limerick is still very high but has decreased to 27. It is not the top Trolley Watch figure today, which is welcome news. There are 40 confirmed Covid cases in the hospital. They are putting pressure on isolation beds. Nine of these patients are in ICU. It is said that almost six in ten people ending up in hospital are unvaccinated or not fully vaccinated. It is said that 52% are fully unvaccinated, 5% are partially vaccinated and 2% of cases are unknowns. We have to get a campaign going to persuade people to continue to be vaccinated. I welcome the booster programme that is coming on stream and I hope it will spread to all the age cohorts. It is of

great importance.

I will spend my time discussing the just published interim report of the rapid testing expert advisory group, chaired by Professor Mary Horgan. The Minister will be aware that I am the Chairman of the Committee on Transport and Communications, which has been pushing for antigen testing since December last. We produced a report seeking rapid antigen testing for aviation. We held various public hearings with all of the interested parties, including the Chief Medical Officer, Dr. Tony Holohan, various aviation experts and the Minister for Transport. We very much welcomed the announcement establishing a rapid testing expert advisory group four months ago.

I welcome that there has been a programme on rapid antigen testing but I am somewhat underwhelmed by advisory group report. I accept that it is an interim report but I would have liked to have seen more progress around the terms of reference, including that it “Support Government departments”. There has been some engagement with Departments, specifically the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, but there appears to be no engagement with the Department of Transport. That is very disappointing.

The terms of reference include that the advisory group support Government Departments “in the design and assessment of pilots”. There have been some pilots. It was to provide “guidance to Government departments on the use of rapid tests.” The report appears to be based on developing a risk assessment model to assist in supporting the use of rapid antigen testing. There is no timeframe for having that particular framework in place. I welcome a risk-based model, as I always do, but the purpose of rapid antigen testing is to assist PCR testing. It is not a stand-alone test. It is used for screening in the tourism sector, nightclubs and so on to contribute to reducing infection rates.

Rapid antigen testing detects people when they are at their most infectious. PCR testing detects people across a much wider range, whether they are infectious or not. PCR is the benchmark but rapid antigen testing has a role. We need to see the final report and we need a timeframe for putting in place the risk assessment model. The report is looking at a model to be based on the background risk of SARS-CoV-2 within the population participating in an activity; the risk of SARS-CoV-2 transmission associated with the activity or setting; and the most appropriate testing approach to best mitigate the risk. We all know that PCR is the gold standard. I would like to see more pilot programmes and more engagement between advisory the group, which has been up and running for four months, and the Department of Transport, as well as other Departments. It should set out a programme.

Members of the public have started to use rapid antigen testing. The chair-designate of the Dublin Airport Authority appeared before the Joint Committee on Transport and Communications yesterday. He uses rapid antigen testing for his own purposes, as do the staff where he works. My worry is that people will escalate their use of rapid antigen testing. I would like that to be done in a co-ordinated and structured way. The basic model is in place but I would just like to see more urgency in implementing it. This is a welcome first step and I commend the Minister on that. However, I would like to know when the risk assessment model will be in place.

The conclusions of the report do not give dates in respect of when rapid antigen testing will be introduced. We have no concrete dates as to when it will become a formal part of the toolkit

for detecting Covid-19. Rapid antigen testing has a place in nightclubs, restaurants and schools. It is complementary. My worry with this report is that it appears to compare antigen testing with PCR testing. They are not comparable tests. PCR is the gold standard and is very successful but we cannot use PCR tests to screen people because it costs too much and takes too long.

I will present an example to the Minister. If someone is flying in having taken a PCR test, the result will be available in 24 hours. Given that the virus escalates so quickly, someone could take a PCR test 48 hours before a flight and by the time that person gets on the aeroplane, he or she may be heavily infected with Covid-19. The rapid antigen test would detect that. I see rapid antigen testing as stand-alone.

The terms of reference of the advisory group, which I greatly welcomed, refer to supporting Departments seeking to deploy rapid tests in their respective sectors, supporting them in the design and assessment of pilots for their respective stakeholders and supporting them in developing standard operating procedures. These are all very welcome tasks. The group was also to maintain a list of currently validated tests for guidance.

The EU is beginning to do that. It was also to monitor rapid tests in development and those emerging on to the market.

I wanted the Minister, in addition to PCR testing, which is the gold standard, to bring in antigen testing along to assist in the detection of the virus. This is a low-cost model. PCR is very good in detecting at any range but I wanted to use rapid antigen testing to assist. If these tests are not 100% accurate, that is fine, but if they detect one person who is highly infectious, particularly in settings like nightclubs or live venues where we have seen pilot testing, they will be of great benefit.

I ask the Minister to ensure there is engagement with all Departments, including the Department of Transport. I would like to see the risk assessment model being expedited. The report states:

To address the first component, [This is about the population] ... HIQA and University College Dublin have developed an algorithm which can provide a time-updated estimate of the risk of someone who is ... positive attending an activity/setting.

The expert advisory group is looking at the type of risk and setting a person is going in to. In many cases, for example, in live venues or nightclubs, PCR testing will be impractical. Rapid antigen testing has a key role to play in these settings because it can be done just before people enter and highly infectious people can be detected. This is nothing new. The Joint Committee on Transport and Communications has been front and centre on this from day one. We see that the biggest mistake is that people compare PCR with antigen testing, which are two totally different tests. One complements the other or, to put it another way, the PCR test is effectively the engine and main driver. It is the mother bee and the antigen test is basically the ground worker, the bees working away assisting the queen bee. They should not be viewed as like for like.

The report notes that a rapid review evidence synthesis being conducted by researchers at SPOR will examine the evidence for each of the other two components. That needs to be expedited. I fully agree on the risk-based model but I am worried that we are putting PCR testing up against antigen testing. PCR testing will win every time on the overall spectrum. Antigen is there to assist PCR. I would like that to be front and centre in the final report that will be provided by Professor Horgan and her colleagues. I would also like to know when the report

will be published and the risk-based model put in place. We need to get practical. PCR is the Mercedes and antigen is the Mondeo, but the latter complements the former, not *vice versa*.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: Like Deputy Gould, I briefly raise the case of Mr. Nadim Hussain, who is on hunger strike and ask that the Minister for Justice give it her attention and see whether she can assist.

School leaders and boards of management feel isolated. They can hardly get hold of the HSE and they feel completely abandoned by the Department of Education. The changes in respect of self-isolation were expected. Making children who were asymptomatic and had received negative tests self-isolate was completely disruptive and did not make sense. It came as a surprise, however, both to me and to school leaders, that contact tracing and risk assessment would be removed completely. School leaders, students and parents now feel they have been left in the dark.

I have written to NPHEH officials on this, as I have done throughout the pandemic. Briefings with party health spokespersons have been facilitated, yet education has been a fairly core issue and we have never had a briefing from NPHEH. I do not know why that is. I have heard nothing in response to my latest request. I wanted to ask them about these changes and what they will mean on the ground in schools. There are still little details that need to be worked out and schools are trying to figure out exactly what the changes mean. Parents, students and school staff have questions and we need the Minister for Health, Dr. Tony Holohan and the Minister for Education to be front and centre in answering them.

I am hearing from schools they have been told they are not allowed to tell parents if there is Covid in their child's class, yet that is exactly what is done in the case of chicken pox and a number of other illnesses. This is wrong. Parents deserve to know, particularly families who have vulnerable children or adults at home. They deserve the information in order that they can take a decision that suits their family and their health risks. It helps no one to pretend there is no Covid in schools. It does not help teachers, parents or students to be kept in the dark in regard to a public health issue within the school community.

The Minister stated, at the time of these changes being announced, that they would be kept under review. The Government, throughout this pandemic, has been keen to find a middle ground. Will the Minister and his colleague, the Minister, Deputy Foley, revert to NPHEH and try to find a middle ground? Will they explore with NPHEH how they can ensure schools will get the support they need to retain access to well-resourced public health teams, risk assessment and contact tracing while preventing schools from being disrupted, without requiring the unnecessary exclusion of healthy children, as was the case previously? That did not make sense. Education continuing without disruption is of the highest priority to me. Knowledge is power and there is a lack of knowledge out there at the moment. Sinn Féin and I will be bound by any public health advice but knowledge and data are the key here. We are in something of a vacuum and the Minister should engage to explore the options at this stage with NPHEH and the Minister, Deputy Foley. I urge her also to end the substitution crisis, which is having an impact on the issue, by extending panels to the entire country and ensuring banked hours are returned.

In recent days, there have been changes to the access restrictions in maternity hospitals and hospitals in general, although not all the issues have been resolved. There seems to be a strange, arbitrary distinction, which the Minister identified, regarding established labour. That is completely wrong-headed and needs to be resolved. Nevertheless, I commend the campaigners on

the progress that has been made. They have been relentless and the protest made a significant difference. I am glad the Minister, the HSE and the hospitals listened, although there are issues that have yet to be resolved.

Finally, we have spoken a great deal about ICU beds and my party is very critical of the fact that no additional ICU beds have been added beyond what was already announced. That is a matter of serious regret. It could cause us great challenges and I want it to be addressed. I am very concerned about step-down beds, too, because they are all part of the same jigsaw. In Cork, we are down 20 or 30 community step-down beds since before Covid. The new beds that were supposed to have been built at St. Finbarr's Hospital have not come to pass and I believe they have not even been started. We urgently need modular step-down beds because they will mean beds can be freed up in the hospital. There are so many patients there who have nowhere to go because there are no community step-down beds. If we can resolve that, it will free up an awful lot of beds and capacity. I am very worried about the danger of huge trolley counts at Cork University Hospital, CUH, this winter. Step-down beds in the community and modular units are the key to resolving that.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: The Government made some seriously important decisions this week regarding Covid and restrictions and, true to form, it did not provide any space for a debate. There has been a democracy deficit in this country since Covid emerged. The elected representatives of the people have been sidestepped in respect of most of the important decisions that have been made. It is only because I called for a debate during the Order of Business on Tuesday that we are having one and it is being held at a time when most Deputies have gone home, which is a disgrace.

The Government stated in September that NPHET would be wound up in the middle of October but that is now completely off the agenda. Paul Reid stated in August that once we had hit 80% vaccination rates, we could fully reopen. That milestone has come and gone and been ignored. Ireland is now the most vaccinated nation in Ireland, with a 92% adult vaccination rate. Ours is the longest and most severely restricted country in Europe. It has cost more here than in almost any other country in Europe; in fact, *per capita*, it has cost twice the European average to deal with Covid in this State. Still, we have the seventh highest incidence of Covid in the European Union. The Government's policy is failing radically when it comes to Covid.

The truth is we are in a very dangerous place now. The Government simply does not know what is happening. It has been blindsided by what is happening in society. I listened to Professor Luke O'Neill on the radio this week admit they do not know what is happening. Evidence is rapidly accumulating that suggests Covid is spreading between people who have been vaccinated. Nobody could have foreseen or second-guessed that and I do not suggest the Government was out of place in that regard. Dr. Cillian De Gascun has stated that while vaccination reduces the risk of Delta infection, fully vaccinated individuals have viral loads similar to those of the unvaccinated and can efficiently transmit infection. Vaccinated people are catching and transmitting Covid and ending up in hospital and ICU and, tragically, some are losing their lives.

Do not get me wrong: vaccines significantly reduce mortality and morbidity. They are a significant tool in dealing with Covid, but transmission among vaccinated people is happening in this country at a rate far higher than anybody expected and that creates very significant problems for the Government. The first problem is that the Government has put all its eggs in the vaccine basket and is allergic to antigen tests, which is causing massive damage to our country. The Government's opposition to the proper use of antigen tests is, in my view, criminal. It is

shocking.

Under the Government's law, a person who has been vaccinated but has Covid is allowed into a pub or restaurant and allowed to spread the illness to other vaccinated people. By contrast, a person who has not been vaccinated but has received a negative antigen test and is Covid free is banned from the hospitality sector. Despite that being phenomenally discriminating, segregating and so on, the policy simply is not working.

I agree with what a previous speaker said. There are hundreds of thousands of people in this country whose civil liberties have been taken away. There is a two-tier citizenship and they are being othered for something that is not having the desired effect. In television and radio studios for the past year, Deputies and Ministers have stated that they are completely in favour of antigen testing, that they are looking into it and that it will be rolled out soon, yet here we are, 12 months later, and there is practically no difference in what is happening. It is not being rolled out. There is a chasm between the language the Government is using and the actions it is implementing. It is a prime example of government capture - Ministers saying what they think people want to hear, but not implementing it because the Civil Service tells them not to.

NPHET is in a small minority of national public health organisations in the European Union in its opposition to antigen testing. Antigen testing is widespread throughout Europe as a means to stop Covid spreading in hospitality. It saves lives, it allows businesses to function and it is non-discriminatory. Take Denmark as a comparison. Denmark has a lower vaccination rate than Ireland has. It has had no hospitality restrictions since September. It had a vaccine plus antigen pass when it opened hospitality fully in May. That has been dropped since September. It has a Covid incidence rate that is one third of this State's rate. It is absolutely damning. The difference has been that Denmark is antigen testing radically. Even in the plans the Government promoted this week, antigen testing is still largely aspirational. The Government states that the HSE should implement a programme of Covid-19 antigen testing, but this only applies to people who are identified as being fully vaccinated close contacts. That is a small number of people. The Government is posting it out to these people. It reminds me of the iodine tablets issued by a former Fianna Fáil Minister, also from Wicklow, a number of years ago.

The Government's plan states that the rapid testing expert advisory group has been requested to provide a view as to the potential utility of voluntary self-testing. It also talks about requesting the rapid testing expert advisory group to examine the potential role and feasibility of rapid testing. We are talking about views and feasibility 12 months after the rest of Europe successfully engaged in rapid antigen testing, using it as one of the tools to mitigate against Covid. For me, this is the equivalent of the Donegal Catch fisherman saying "they're keeping my idea on file. In a filing cabinet." It is the most frustrating thing I have seen. I have listened to the Minister's colleague Deputies and the frustration in their voices about this. It is an absolute disgrace that the tests are not being rolled out. It is costing lives, costing health, costing the economy and costing civil liberties in the State.

I wish to speak briefly about capacity. Capacity in the health service has hardly shifted. The Government and the HSE are seeking to close the ICU and emergency beds in my local hospital in Navan, despite them being on the front line in the battle against Covid. I admit there has been a stay of execution in the past week, but it is still the priority of the Government. The Minister mentioned unvaccinated people being the cause of waiting lists in his speech. I hope I am not misinterpreting what he said. The Government and the partners in government own the waiting lists in this country.

I also refer to the immunity cliff that is happening in the State. We are calling for the Government to quickly allow booster shots to be made available in nursing homes throughout the State. They should be given to both the staff and residents of the nursing homes. The idea that it is only for people over 65 years old while there could be people there who are just under that age does not make sense. We must ensure that the nursing home sector is not the epicentre of the next wave.

Finally, I fear that if the Government does not implement widespread antigen testing it will be looking at the other tool that it knows well, which is deepening restrictions. That would be a disaster for this country.

Deputy Colm Burke: I thank the Minister and all the Deputies for their contributions to this debate. It is important to discuss the various challenges that exist. While 92.4% of people over 18 years of age have been fully vaccinated, unfortunately, in this case vaccination does not give immunity. Earlier, my colleague outlined how one can be fully vaccinated but still be a carrier of and contract Covid-19. That is the challenge we have with Covid-19.

We are not far from going into a third year of dealing with this issue. It started in March 2020 and it is now over 20 months in which staff have been on the front line dealing with large numbers of admissions, particularly to the intensive care units. It is important to acknowledge their commitment, dedication and hard work over the last 20 months and the way they have dealt with the pandemic. It is important to acknowledge their contribution. As we confront the new challenges over the past number of weeks, they still have to deal with very difficult situations.

As there is still a large group of people not vaccinated, it is important to convey a message to encourage them to take the option of vaccination. I understand from the HSE that over 1,000 people per day are being vaccinated. Can we get that number up to 2,000 or 3,000 per day over the next two to three weeks to help improve the number of people who are vaccinated? One concern I have relates to obstetrics-gynaecology. A medical consultant recently advised on social media that she had seen ten patients in a clinic, nine of whom had not taken the vaccine. A special effort is required in respect of that cohort, women who are pregnant or who want to get pregnant, to convey that the vaccine should not in any way cause any type of restriction or damage. It is important to get the message out to that cohort to ensure that if a woman is coming into clinics regularly over the six or seven month period, she will not put anyone else coming into those clinics at risk, and to ensure the woman can feel that she is not putting the baby she is carrying at risk either. It is important to get that message out.

The challenge now is that, according to yesterday's figures, the number of people in ICU is 86, with 14 admitted over the 24-hour period up to yesterday, and the number of people in hospital is 464, with 54 admitted in the preceding 24-hour period. It is a huge number in a very short period of time. According to the figures for the last seven days, over 155,000 people were tested and 8.9% got a positive result. That shows the virus is continuing to spread and the number of people contracting it continues to increase. We all need to convey the message about being more careful, wearing masks, keeping one's distance and all the other precautions that must be taken.

With regard to the hospitality sector, the figures we have seen relating to HSE inspections are not welcome news. Two thirds compliance is not good enough. That means one third are not fully compliant. Where one third of the people in the hospitality sector are not compliant,

it means they are now contributing to us possibly facing into another closure. They are the net losers by not complying fully with the regulations at this stage. That is disappointing.

6 o'clock

They are also putting themselves, their employees and the people who are attending their restaurant or bar at risk. People should not frequent premises where they see no checks are in place. If we want to deal with this pandemic, we need to ensure that the regulations are complied with inasmuch as they can be.

It is interesting that we have now decided that people over 60 should get the booster vaccine. I welcome that more than 123,000 people aged over 80 have already received that booster. We need to continue to work on the cohort of people who have not received a first vaccination, let alone two.

The difficulty with antigen testing is that it is not foolproof. A very good explanation was given recently about the difference between antigen testing and PCR testing. Someone could get a negative result on an antigen test today and be positive on an antigen test in three days' time, whereas a PCR test today will show up as positive because the degree of infection is at a lower scale initially and it increases as the days go on. That is difficulty with antigen testing. It would be welcome to use it, but it does not provide a comprehensive result. That is the difficulty that any establishment would have in using antigen testing.

While much work has been done, this is a new challenge and we see something new every day. Four, six or eight weeks ago, we did not expect to be in the position we are today. Unfortunately, we now have those numbers of patients in ICU beds and in hospitals. We need to see the numbers contracting the virus level off and then start to reduce again. I do not believe we have reached the maximum level of people contracting the virus and that is the difficulty we will face over the next two to three weeks.

It is important to ensure that all those who work in the healthcare sector get full support and that where needed, additional resources are provided. I agree that we also need to ensure we have an adequate number of step-down beds in the coming months. We have much catching up to do in all areas of healthcare, in ensuring that people who are on waiting lists for elective surgery can be dealt with in a timely manner. I thank the Minister for the work he is doing.

I join my colleagues who have raised the issue of Nadim Hussain in the direct provision centre on the Kinsale Road, Cork. It is a very serious issue. While I know it cuts across a number of Departments, something needs to be done on that issue and I ask the Minister to take it on board.

Deputy Michael Collins: I thank the medical staff who have been at the forefront and worked tirelessly throughout the pandemic in community hospitals and general hospitals. I commend them on their bravery despite the difficulties they have experienced. While these people are professionals, what they have seen must have been terribly traumatic for them. Often, they were away from their families and it must have been difficult. We can only say, "Thanks", but sometimes thanks is just not enough.

The pandemic has exposed what is wrong in our hospitals and our nursing homes. Many of the community hospitals need to be up to a standard and those standards were set many years ago. I know that because I am chairman of the Friends of Schull Hospital. I commend the

former Minister, James Reilly, who, during his term in office, provided the funding to Schull Community Hospital to allow it to reach the required HIQA standards. It is probably the top community hospital in Ireland.

Unfortunately, Clonakilty hospital did not get those funds with devastating consequences for many families during this pandemic. It also had devastating consequences for many of the staff in that hospital, through no fault of their own, because the hospital simply did not have the funding to achieve the standards required. Since the onset of the pandemic, it has yet to receive any funding to rectify this situation. The approach appears to be to shut down beds rather than allowing beds to remain open in a safe manner. The standards were very clear. Ten or 12 years ago we felt that Schull Community Hospital was not up to that standard. We were very worried about how it would be brought up to that and how we would get the funding for it. We fought bravely and thanks to James Reilly and others, we were lucky enough to get the funding and the hospital was brought up to a tremendous standard.

Unfortunately, any hospital or nursing home that was not brought up to that standard was found out very quickly. Not only has the HSE failed, but the Government has failed to give the funding for Clonakilty Community Hospital. If the Minister is not able to answer me today, he might be able to come back to me and tell me if the funding has now been provided to bring that hospital up to the required standard so that if there is a continuation of this pandemic or another pandemic the patients in that hospital will be given the respect they deserve. It serves a large community in Clonakilty, Timoleague, Barryroe, Courtmacsherry, Ballinascarty down into Bandon and back from Rosscarbery into Skibbereen. It covers a large terrain. Many people have used the step-down beds in that fabulous community hospital. However, it does not meet the standards and the same is true for other nursing homes. It came at a very high cost to people's lives.

Last week I spoke to a lady who badly wanted to visit her mother in Bantry General Hospital. When there are additional Covid cases, the hospital is required to be closed to visitors. I understand the need for that; there is no disrespect to the hospital. However, there needs to be some mechanism for the families to communicate with their loved ones in the hospital. There is nothing worse than to be parted from a loved one, such as a mother or father. Sometimes they may have dementia and the concern is they may think they are being abandoned. It was a great relief when a lovely member of staff helped her to communicate with her mother even though it was only for ten minutes. Surely even if it is not a medical professional, somebody can provide a person with a phone or a tablet, go to the patient and talk to the loved one at home for those ten minutes a week. It is a small thing to ask but it is very important for people who cannot visit a loved one in hospital for a long time.

Having 1 million people on a waiting list is an extra scourge on people who need hip, knee and other surgical procedures. I think we should consider opening hospitals 24-7. We need to find a way to alleviate this because if the pandemic ends, those 1 million people will become 1.1 million or 1.2 million. Where will it stop?

I must now to discuss the services that were lost and are being lost. Earlier I raised with the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, the issue of the SouthDoc service in Castletownbere. I appreciate that the Minister, Deputy Stephen Donnelly, communicates back to me but someone is giving him false information because he has told me that it has been resolved. The professionals in Castletownbere have told me there was no out-of-hours SouthDoc service last night and there will be no out-of-hours SouthDoc service in Castletownbere over the weekend. If

that happened in Cork city or Dublin, there would be a national outcry. It is frightening that the people from Ardgroom, Lauragh, Glengarriff, Adrigole, Allihies and Eyeries have no out-of-hours service. It is not fair. They got a solution and a gentleman came but he had no vehicle. The only way he could go to a house was to hitch-hike in the middle of the night. That does not make sense at all and there is no sense of reality.

I know CoAction is outside the Minister's brief but it deals with people with intellectual disabilities and it is closing one of its homes in Castletownbere in the next three to four weeks. Three people with intellectual disabilities are losing their home after the past 30 or 40 years in that community. Some of them are 50 or 60 years of age. Will the Minister speak to his Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, who communicated with me to say she would try to resolve the position but I have heard nothing since? It is not good enough in a pandemic that these people may be taken 120 km or 130 km away to a different home. These people must be respected.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I will start on a positive note and thank the Minister for coming back to me about compliance. He said he would do it and he did. The level of compliance is worrying. I have six minutes so I will make a few points but I wanted to start by thanking the Minister.

From the beginning I asked for a human rights approach on this topic. I thank Deputy Tóibín for asking for this to go on the Clár Oibre. I have asked repeatedly in a proactive manner that the Government would come back to us in order that we can engage on this process. I will make my comments, as I always do, in the knowledge and recognition that we have had 5,369 deaths, with 88 confirmed cases in ICU and 448 cases in hospitals. I make my remarks firmly in the recognition that we are dealing with a very serious crisis with Covid-19.

From day one, however, I have been most unhappy with the way the Government, including the previous Government, has dealt with this matter. In the beginning I gave my full support to the draconian legislation on the strict understanding it would be a partnership and the Government would come back to us in an open, honest and accountable way. I have watched with dismay how we speak about opening up nightclubs and what appears to be a "Cinderella" dance licence where it is safe to dance after midnight but it is not safe to open respite services in Galway. We are into the second year of the pandemic with no respite services because they are not safe but, theoretically, I could go dancing in a nightclub if I had the energy. I presume that could happen after midnight tonight.

The Irish Council for Civil Liberties, ICCL, has clarified matters in a press release. It is becoming extremely difficult to raise any questions in this country about civil rights or alternative views in dealing with the pandemic. The Irish Council for Civil Liberties qualified that it is a pro-vaccine organisation and went on to note it supported the vaccine programme roll-out. It states, however:

At the same time, we respect everyone's right to bodily integrity and privacy in relation to their health. We believe vaccination, and all medical treatment, should be a choice.

I believe that as well and that vaccination should be voluntary. The strong message should be to encourage and not demonise but, unfortunately, the Minister's speech continues that narrative. The Taoiseach did this as well and it is an unacceptable narrative. The Irish Council for Civil Liberties argues this could be counterproductive but I believe it is counterproductive. The Government legislation on vaccines has created an infrastructure aimed at segregating and

risk-scoring individuals on their health basis and the Irish Council for Civil Liberties warned in July that this set a dangerous precedent. I fully agree with it.

We are 18 months into the pandemic and there is no evidence of any human rights impact assessment by the Government of Covid-related legislation, despite repeated calls from me, the Irish Council for Civil Liberties and others. As I said, I have constantly called for a proper debate, reasoned and rational, on this topic so we can inspire confidence.

Like the cross-party committee on Covid-19 response, I have asked for an urgent investigation into the deaths in nursing homes. I note with horror that those numbers are increasing again. I feel a little sympathy for the Minister because I have read the eight-page letter from NPHET, which has three or four pages of appendices. I note what it states and it is of extreme concern. It states “disease incidence across the country is high and increasing” and “in summary, the epidemiological situation in Ireland indicates a worsening disease profile with the future trajectory very uncertain”.

The letter indicates five criteria that are essential before we move to opening in a full manner and yet NPHET goes on to agree with the Minister that we should be opening up. Of the five criteria, we have achieved one, which is that “at least two weeks having passed from the attainment of at least 90% vaccination”. The Minister has told us that is now 92%. The letter goes on to speak about hospital and critical care occupancy and we utterly fall down on that. We also fall down on public health capacities. Of course, NPHET also speaks about the absence of a new variant of concern and how everything becomes unpredictable if that occurs. We have control over hospital and critical care occupancy and public health capacity but we have failed utterly on both of those, although I recognise the Minister’s efforts in increasing capacity.

This immediately brings to mind the question of private hospitals in Galway. Galway city has two closed wards and the head of the Saolta University Health Care Group, Mr. Tony Canavan, was on the radio recently telling us those two wards had been closed because of Covid-19. This hospital was in crisis continuously before Covid-19 and it is much worse now. The staff are at breaking point and my heart goes out to them. We have two private hospitals, however. We have spoken about everything we learned about taking over private hospitals and using them but they have not been mentioned anywhere. It is extraordinary. There are two hospitals, one of which was seriously under capacity when Covid-19 started. I would not say it did well out of Covid-19, and that is a bad way to put it. It was used, theoretically, but remained under-utilised. Will the Minister tell us about that?

Perhaps the Minister might also tell us about the absence of respite services in Galway. If we have 92% of the eligible population vaccinated, where are the respite services? I see I am benefiting from a stopped clock.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh): It has been stopped for a while.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I will send letters I have to the Minister and the Ministers of State. They are from 21 October and 24 September. I do not expect them to deal with them during my speech. They show what we are dealing with.

In dealing with two agencies in Galway, the Health Service Executive states that the waiting list for children in respite services is 34 weeks, for enhanced services it is 14 weeks and for adult services it is 45 weeks. These are the low figures. We asked the service to break down the agency from zero to three months up to four years. At the end of that we have 89 adults wait-

ing more than four years. Something may be wrong with the reply but I am only reading what I have relating to respite services. I can pick from the range. Eight adults are waiting two to three years. Six are waiting for 12 to 18 months. There are also data on children.

Getting that information alone has been a marathon and it was with the help of the Department that we got it. It is truly shocking that people were waiting so long prior to Covid-19 and during the pandemic for the most basic services. I have seen this in Galway because I am on the ground all the time. It is amazing what people are dealing with when it comes to care. They are saving the State a fortune and they love the people with them, who are very vulnerable. They have absolutely no respite.

After seeing this I witness a discussion on “Cinderella” licences and whether people can dance after midnight. This demonstrates a split in our population, which is totally unacceptable. We saw this happening in the beginning, gently and insidiously, when people over 70 were told they had to stay in their houses. Months later it was argued that was not really said but we encouraged people to stay in their houses. We are doing the exact same thing again and ignoring that the five criteria set out in that very long letter from NPHET have been ignored one way or another.

It seems we should have learned and I must keep asking why we are not learning? Why are we not learning that we cannot put all our eggs in one basket? NPHET has even said that in the letter because it raises the possibility there could be another variant and existing vaccinations may not deal with the current variant. Nevertheless, somebody is writing speeches for the Minister and other Deputies to demonise those who make their decision in the full knowledge of what is best for them while complying with all the rules. I have no time for somebody who does not comply with the rules, such as wearing a mask or endangering people. Ultimately, it is a decision for the person. We are, therefore, persisting in this decisive manner and ignoring what is really happening. We have ignored the absence of a human rights assessment of any legislation passed. We are debating today without any regulations before us, unless I am wrong and they have been published. I am speaking in a vacuum.

Very little information has been provided on ventilation. Over the past few years I have stayed in hotels where the window did not open because building regulations allowed that, although not in the hotel I am currently staying in. We have allowed a system to develop whereby ventilation has not been built in as a necessity.

We have refused to consider antigen testing and have failed utterly from the beginning in regard to testing and tracing. Now we will demonise and isolate people and turn one against the other, when it is totally unnecessary.

How does the Minister stand over the confusion and contradictions? Nightclubs are set to reopen, but respite care is still closed. We are all in this together and yet we are going to divide and conquer. A negative Covid test is sufficient for unvaccinated people to travel to Ireland, but is not sufficient for indoor dining. The issue of CO2 monitoring was raised by other Deputies.

I could go on given that I have been given the benefit of extra time, but I will not. It is extremely difficult for me to go out and to inspire confidence with the confusing and contradictory messages we are getting and their divisive nature.

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I thank the Deputies for contributing to this important debate this evening. I welcome the opportunity to hear from colleagues as to

what is and is not working, and where more needs to be done.

I will begin with the excellent contribution from Deputy Connolly. Some of the points she raised have also be raised by other Deputies this evening. Deputy Connolly referred to people who have chosen not to be vaccinated. She quite rightly said that this is voluntary and people must have a choice, which is true. However, many of us are familiar with the phrase that “with freedom comes responsibility”. We must bear that in mind when we say people have the freedom, which they do, not to be vaccinated. The issue is not about whether they chose to be vaccinated. It is not about whether they chose to protect themselves. If they chose to leave themselves at risk of serious illness or death, that is their choice. I do not think it is the right choice, but it is their choice to make. As the Minister for Health, I have to deal with the implications of that choice as do those working in the healthcare system. I am not making any value judgments; I am providing the facts.

Let us consider adults, that is, those aged 18 years and over. Approximately 6% of them are not vaccinated in any way. Some 94% of the adult population are either fully or partially vaccinated. That provides a huge amount of protection against hospitalisation and, in particular, admission to an intensive care unit, ICU. We considered all ICU attendances over several months - from April to October - and we found that 70%, seven in every ten, of Covid patients in ICU we not fully vaccinated. At present, there are 88 people - 87 adults and one child - in intensive care with Covid. A massively disproportionate number of those are unvaccinated. They have chosen not to be vaccinated. We know there is a very small number of people who cannot be vaccinated for medical reasons, and we are not referring to them.

We need our ICU capacity to treat sick children and adults. An awful lot more of that ICU capacity is used for Covid for the 6% of people who chose not to be vaccinated. Is that their choice? Of course, it is. Are they free not to be vaccinated? Of course, they are. However, as the Minister for Health, I must point out that there are serious implications for the rest of society because of their choices. If we do the maths, approximately 60 ICU beds could be freed up right now and used for life-changing operations for adults and children. That is the reality of the situation. It is incumbent upon me, as the Minister for Health, to state the facts and to say to the 6% of adults, while fully respecting their bodily autonomy, that this is not just about them. It is about the people they know, their friends and family and our healthcare system. Scarce and incredibly important healthcare resources are having to be deployed because of the choices they make. That is the position and why I must make that argument as the Minister for Health. If people chose not to be vaccinated, let them make that choice knowing all the facts and the implications their choices have on wider society and our healthcare system.

There has been much good debate on many other issues, which I will try to touch on. On antigen testing, I agree with Deputies that this has a role to play. It has already been deployed. Right now, we are doing serial testing with antigen tests in a large number of nursing homes throughout the country, including my county. They are being used in hospital settings, higher education, childcare and workplaces, and individuals are using them. However, I want to go further than this and I think most Members, probably every Member, agree that we should. To that end, I set up the rapid testing expert group to help with implementation. I wish to acknowledge the work done by Professor Mary Horgan and others in that group, who have worked incredibly hard. Members will be aware I published the group’s report today. It is a very good report. Our strategy was that if antigen tests were needed at scale and disease rates rose again, we would be ready. That need has arisen and we are ready. That is partly down to the work the group has been doing with the HSE.

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As colleagues will be aware, asymptomatic close contacts will now be sent rapid tests in the post so they can test themselves. The group has put together comprehensive material, which will be shared online, for individuals, employers and organisations who want to use rapid testing. It will include training materials, videos, testing protocols, check lists, and details of the types and makes of rapid tests that are deemed to be good and where people can get them, etc. There will be a lot of information available in that regard. We are also developing a risk assessment tool anyone can use. Depending on their age, where they live and the type of activity they will participate in, people can determine whether a rapid test would be a good thing for them to use in that case. I hope colleagues will be encouraged by the progress made there.

Deputy Shortall asked whether the data on outbreaks was being published anymore. It is published by the Health Protection Surveillance Centre every Wednesday. Deputy Buckley referred to a mental health situation in his constituency. If the Deputy sends me and the Minister of State a note on that, we will be happy to look into it. Similarly, Deputy Connolly has quite rightly continued to raise the issue of respite in her constituency. I commit to following up with the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte. One of us will get back to the Deputy on that issue because, when it comes to healthcare provision and these essential respite services, anything that can be opened safely, must be opened.

Deputy Andrews asked some questions on volunteering and situations in which different organisations had made different decisions on the use of certain facilities in some sports clubs. I will revert to the Minister, Deputy Catherine Martin, and ask that Deputy Andrews be engaged with on that issue.

The issue of schools was raised, which is very understandable. I will make a few points on this. First, as I said to the Deputy as he was leaving, if the education spokespeople ask to meet with the public health experts, I am very happy to facilitate such a meeting. We need to provide all the expertise we can to Members of the House so that they can do their job. I am very happy to do that, if people would like me to.

The solution to making schools as safe as possible is for us to drive down the number of cases in the community. We are finding that children are picking up Covid more in the community than in the schools. That is down to the great work being done by the schools and by the students while in school. They deserve great credit for that. Some Deputies asked about contact tracing and why the isolation of asymptomatic contacts was stopped. This was done for various reasons. Very few of these tests were picking up positive contacts but the ten days of isolation was causing a lot of disruption for the children themselves.

I hope I have got to most of the questions that were raised. I again thank colleagues for their time and for their contributions this evening.

Child and Family Agency (Amendment) Bill 2021: Second Stage (Resumed)

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

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I will continue the debate on the Child and Family Agency (Amendment) Bill 2021, which we commenced yesterday. I believe I had just moved the adjournment

of the debate and so had not yet had the chance to say that the Labour Party is happy to support this Bill. This Bill provides for amendments that might be described as somewhat technical but which are nonetheless important. They give effect to the Taoiseach's announcement of 27 June that certain education welfare functions performed by Tusla are to return to the Department of Education. This Bill will amend the Child and Family Agency Act 2013 to provide the Minister for Education with appropriate governance and oversight of the education welfare functions performed by Tusla following the previous transfer of responsibility for those functions from the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth to the Minister for Education.

We believe that, as has been acknowledged by all of those who spoke in the debate thus far, including the Minister himself, it is sensible for the Minister for Education to be provided with a direct line for policy direction and oversight of Tusla in respect of these specific functions related to education welfare. These functions cover issues such as the home-school community liaison scheme, the school completion programme and the educational welfare service. Tusla has stated that all three of these strands share the same national outcomes, these being improved attendance, participation and retention. These programmes might be described as not letting children fall through the cracks in education. That is very important.

It was welcome to hear the Minister's words on the Bill and the purpose behind it yesterday. It would also be helpful to hear from the Minister, Deputy Foley, in the near future as to how she intends to take on these new functions, although it is clear these roles will still be performed by Tusla.

I will address a number of themes that emerge from the Bill and its purpose. The first of these is the importance of smooth transitions in the transfer of functions and roles between Departments, including oversight of bodies such as Tusla by Departments. Upon the formation of this Government and the establishment of new Departments, departmental responsibilities were rejigged. That always happens after the formation of a government. Responsibilities move between different Departments. However, there is always a period of transition and this can cause serious difficulties. I have certainly been made very aware of this in the last few months by a number of constituents who have contacted my office because their children have effectively fallen through the cracks. There has been a difficulty in identifying which Department is responsible for the welfare, education or care of a given child. There can be interdepartmental issues in the case of, for example, a child with particular needs who requires support not only from HSE services, but also from Department of Education services. This can cause difficulties. The division of functions related to special education, children, disability and other responsibilities between different Departments and the transitional period arising from the transfer of significant functions between Departments has, on more than one occasion, resulted in no Department taking ownership of certain issues that arose. I have spoken with the Minister and other Ministers about particular cases in which this has happened.

I acknowledge that there is a particularly big transition under way with the disability function being transferred, to a great degree, from the Department of Health to the Minister's Department. We are also seeing certain functions of the Department of Justice that relate to children and equality transferring to his Department. It is just something we all need to be conscious of. There is potential for gaps to emerge where such big transitions are taking place within the Civil Service. Everyone would acknowledge the importance of a smooth transition and of ensuring that there are arrangements in place that make lines of responsibility clear.

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Tusla is accountable to the Department of Children, Disability, Equality, Integration and Youth and to the committee that works with it, a committee on which I now sit. With this new transition under the Bill, there must be assurances that duties transferred to the Department of Education will not go without scrutiny and that there will be a smooth transition. Perhaps the Minister might address how that transition will be managed? How are these new responsibilities to be transferred to the Department of Education? How quickly can it be done? The timing of transitional arrangements is also important.

It is particularly important that we see arrangements put in place to ensure a smooth transition in this year of all years, when we have seen such an enormous impact upon children as a result of the devastating Covid pandemic. We know that, in September 2020, Tusla data showed that more than 12% of primary school children had missed more than the permissible 20 days per year. Given the prolonged closure of schools due to Covid-19 and the necessary restrictions associated with it, it is more important than ever to ensure that children do not fall behind or get lost in the system. Will the Minister speak further about the school completion programme? Does he anticipate it being affected by this change in designated responsibilities? How can we ensure that there will be a smooth transition?

I will address the issue of the impact of school closures on children in some more detail. Recent reports have shown that some 4,500 students and young people did not return to school when they reopened following Covid-19 closures last year. There is no doubt but that contained within that alarming number are vulnerable students or students facing particular disadvantage who may have become really disengaged as a result of the closures and the great difficulties so many children and students experienced in having to work from home or having to be home-schooled. The term “home-schooling” was very much a euphemism. In many households, that was very difficult to achieve. We have seen research from the Institute for Fiscal Studies, the Economic and Social Research Institute and Trinity College Dublin, among others, which has examined the effect of school closures in Ireland and found evidence of a widening of inequality and of significant learning loss. We have all heard from individual families and constituents about the impact of school closures on their children, in particular children with additional needs. There have been some heartbreaking stories from parents about children regressing with slowdowns and delays in reaching developmental milestones, in particular children with additional needs. That is of real concern.

Research has also identified stresses on children arising from parental unemployment due to a loss of livelihood because of the Covid pandemic. As we now have a cautious return to workplaces, we will see more difficulties with parents and households trying to manage this transition.

While the Covid learning and support scheme is most welcome, we are concerned that it does not go far enough to ensure that those young people who are most at risk of becoming and staying disengaged from school and education are supported. Temporary increases in hours are not adequate unless backed up by ongoing investment. Budget 2022 could have taken the opportunity to expand the DEIS scheme, in particular, to include more schools which could benefit from the school completion programme.

In the debates on budget 2022 we said that instead of the €500 million in tax cuts offered by the budget, the Government could have made a radical change in our education system to make it truly free, tackle literacy issues and take more sustained and targeted action to tackle educational disadvantage. In particular, I and the Labour Party education spokesperson, Deputy

Aodhán Ó Ríordáin, spoke about our disappointment and frustration that we did not see more done on the catch up children scheme, which we have been calling for as long ago as February. We called for investment of about €100 million, which would be necessary to ensure we truly make up to children what they have lost out on through prolonged school closures, including the loss of educational and extracurricular opportunities, such as sport and other engagement in activities that would foster their development. We do not think the Government's funding is sufficient to ensure that there is adequate catch up, in particular for children who have been most severely disadvantaged.

The funding allocated by the Government falls short by about €50 million. The funding allocated equates to just €50 per child to make up for over 18 months of disrupted learning. In the Netherlands, by comparison, €2,500 has been allocated per child. Even in Britain, despite all of the critiques most of us make of its current Government, there is an allocation of £1 billion for a catch up for children fund, equating to £85 per child.

There has been research in Ireland on the effect of school closures and the need to ensure that we make up to children what they have lost out on. We have seen similar research in other countries. In Britain, the Education Policy Institute calculated that significant investment is needed to ensure that children do not fall any further behind.

We know in Ireland the enormous role education has played in the economic progress the State has made in the past 100 years. We know that educational disadvantage and inequality lasts a lifetime and is correlated with quality of life determinants such as health outcomes. We all know it to be true that investing in the education of children cannot start early enough. I have been to the fore in calling for a Donogh O'Malley moment. The Minister might recall that 55 years ago this year, the then Minister for Education, Donogh O'Malley, made the enormous and fantastic announcement that children would be entitled to a free secondary school place and that secondary school education would become free. At the time, this was seen as a very radical and unprecedented move because until then it was thought that children only had a right to a primary school place.

Just as that radical intervention was made, which became so significant in Ireland's economic and social progress since then and in our development as a nation, we now need to see free preschool education in the same light. We need to have the same radical intervention to ensure free early years places for every child are made available and that it is just a matter of course that all our children have access to the same educational and developmental opportunities in the vital early years.

I heard from constituents across Dublin Bay South during the by-election campaign during the summer about huge issues with the provision of childcare places and the scarcity of places. As we know, crèches and childcare providers have had to close during the pandemic. Many have found it unsustainable to remain open. Even where crèches and childcare providers have stayed open, the cost to parents of those childcare places has significantly increased.

I spoke on the debate on the citizens' assembly recommendations on gender equality yesterday and referenced an email I received from a constituent who told me a crèche in my area raised its fees on the day of the budget, the very day the Government announced a very welcome new funding scheme for childcare to be put in place from next September which would tie new funding mechanisms to a commitment that crèches would not raise their fees. That announcement, while welcome, does not do anything for parents who are now facing significant

hikes in fees. It does not do anything for providers who have told us it is not sustainable to keep crèches open.

I spoke to the owner of a crèche in my area who would have liked to have stayed open, and desperately wanted to stay open. They knew they were letting down parents and children who rely on the service, yet they could not see a way to remain open. We have heard from professionals and staff working in childcare how unsustainable their position is. SIPTU's Big Start campaign identified serious problems with low pay in the sector and concerns about pay driving professionals out of the sector, which contributes to the difficulty in childcare services staying open. These are real concerns.

We are failing parents and professionals and staff in the sector. We are failing providers with our current *ad hoc* system which has far too high a reliance on private providers. The State effectively takes no role in guaranteeing the availability or affordability of childcare places for children. This means we are failing children. We need to move very swiftly to a new model of childcare provision in Ireland.

The Labour Party, in particular Labour Party women, have been to the fore in promoting an equal early years campaign to ensure that we have a public universal childcare system in this country. That would have a game changing effect on our society. It would have the sort of effect the Donogh O'Malley moment had 55 years ago in guaranteeing children a place in secondary school. It would have an impact not only for our children, who would be guaranteed equality of access in early years to education and preschool, but would also have a transformative effect for women, men and gender equality in Irish society.

That takes up the theme we addressed yesterday in the debate on the citizens' assembly recommendations on gender equality. We know that in Ireland we have very low participation rates of women, in particular mothers, in the workforce. All of us know in our constituencies, and family and friend groups, that many women tend to give up work, or move to part-time work, because of difficulties with accessing and affording childcare. This, coupled with our gender pay gap of 14%, is driving women out of the workforce who may wish to remain in it if they were given the necessary supports to do so. This, of course, has an impact on gender equality.

I will conclude by saying that we welcome the Bill and will support it. It is largely technical in nature. We welcome the sensible moves it makes, but there is a bigger picture around the provision of supports for children, in particular those facing the sort of disadvantages Tusla and other State agencies are seeking to address and tackle.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I am glad to have an opportunity to speak on this important Bill. From my experience dealing with welfare issues in respect of children, there are one or two things to note, one of which is continuity. Continuity is hugely important to the child. Children are at a very formative age and, particularly if they have had disturbances in the past, are very conscious of who they are dealing with and become very quickly alert to what the attitude is and where they are and where they are going. They therefore need reassurance. They also need continuity in respect of whatever treatment they get, whether it is psychological treatment, attention of a particular kind or education. It needs to be consistent. A psychologist once explained to me that in a child's life six months could be a very long time, the equivalent of four or five years to an adult. I think that is why when we look at it from that point of view we realise more than ever that the important things to the child are continuity, confidence in the system and

recognition that the system is on the child's side and will help and support him or her and that there will be a voice to give advice and a listening, sympathetic ear in order that the child will know where he or she is going and have some idea as to what to expect in the future. One of things I have noticed over the years is that simple follow-up action, whatever that action may be and whatever is required, must be continuous and seamless and there to access through the least effort because, again, we are dealing with the welfare of a child. In some cases there may well be reticence within the home or the institution or whatever the case may be and the child may then be at a crossroads. If one thing is certain, it must be that when children have confidence that somebody is on their side, they can go forward in the clear knowledge that not everybody dislikes them and, if they have particular problems, they will get help with them. They need reassurance, and that reassurance is hugely important when it comes to making progress. Fundamental to that progress are continuity and support.

The last point I will make is about any delay. Deputy Bacik referred to this earlier in the context of Covid. Anything that interrupts the stream of the system of assistance or support or whatever else will cause a problem for the child unless that reassurance comes through again. It is important we recognise that this Bill is an improvement and will produce that continuity and ensure that that theme continues. This will happen at a time when the child is in a learning mode. There is no sense in having one part of the child's treatment in one Department and another part of the child's treatment in a different Department. It does not make for good administration, confidence or the best possible assistance to the child. It is hugely important, as we proceed from here, that the issues that might have arisen or that have arisen in the past in respect of seamlessness are addressed and, as a result of that, that the welfare of children in general will benefit. As public representatives, we come across the issues that arise fairly regularly. We may say two or three cases at a given time does not seem a lot, but to the individual households and the individual children who are affected and find themselves in those situations they are huge lifelong issues that may never go away. The manner in which their situations are treated at that time is of critical importance. I believe this Bill is the right decision and goes in the right direction and I am happy to support it. If I had other things to say, I would be only too willing to say them. I support the Bill entirely.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh): That must be a first, Deputy Durkan.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: It must be.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh): You finished within your time. That is very good. Go raibh maith agat.

Deputy Réada Cronin: I wish to reinforce what my comrade, Teachta Ó Laoghaire, talked about yesterday when we were discussing this Bill and the importance of the home liaison programme and the school completion programme. The home school liaison officers often save futures and sometimes even save lives. They can be the lifeline not just for a child but for whole families and the younger siblings coming up behind the child. They can iron out even the difficult wrinkles and help the child and the school discover what both need. In certain cases they can provide support to parents who might be struggling through no fault of their own. I know of one such co-ordinator who went on to hold DIY classes and furniture making classes specifically for mothers, building community and resilience where previously those mothers were isolated. In the time of Covid, when many students have fallen behind and others are barely hanging on and have lost out in terms of the education system, these programmes and the support they bring are even more critical than usual.

It is very hard to consider the number of schools that are locked out of the system due to the failure to expand the DEIS system, especially band 2, in recent years. The Minister can therefore imagine how disappointed our party was that this lack was compounded in budget 2022, making no commitment to extend the home school liaison and the school completion programmes to more schools, given their proven capacity to change and enrich young lives. In contrast, in our alternative budget we made provision for 100 additional home school liaison co-ordinators, with €5 million in additional funding for school completion. I know from talking to teachers in north Kildare that there are concerns that students who need extra support to stay within the system and to thrive once they have done so will not be able to get it. Some 4,500 children across the State did not go back to school after the Covid closures last year, so if there were ever a time to ramp up the support for these programmes and to enhance them, that time is now. The future of so many children and young people depend on them.

It is clear there is major work to be done to support all students but especially vulnerable students who missed in-class learning during the various lockdowns. I believe technology poverty was exposed during that time as some families had an array of equipment and connectivity to choose from while other children had to take turns to do classwork or submit homework with a parent's mobile phone. When there were home offices in spacious houses with a suite of laptops, iPads and tablets to choose from, things were difficult enough. When families were confined to overcrowded conditions, often with in-laws, aunts and uncles or grandparents, the divide in our education system became more apparent, the experience for children and families in such situations even bleaker. I expect, too, that quite a number of children would have longed for school as a refuge and the dignity and safety in the well-off leafy suburbs.

I agree with my comrade, Teachta Ó Laoghaire, that the Covid learning and support scheme, CLASS, recently announced by the Minister, though welcome, is not enough and does not go far enough. The small number of additional teaching hours involved are unambitious and in no way in keeping with the breadth or depth of the need. Equally, those few teaching hours are in no way sufficient to address the effects, many of which have yet to manifest, on a child or class and will therefore need to be enhanced.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh): Go raibh maith agat.

Deputy Réada Cronin: I apologise. I thought I had five minutes.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh): No. There are three minutes in these slots.

Deputy Matt Carthy: Five.

Deputy Réada Cronin: Yes, we were told five.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh): Three minutes is what is indicated in front of me. When Deputy Martin Browne is called, he will have three minutes as well.

Deputy Réada Cronin: It has changed from yesterday. Okay. I apologise.

Deputy Martin Browne: I will talk faster.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh): You will have to talk fast, Deputy Browne. You are well capable of doing that in Tipperary. Before you speak, Deputy Devlin may take the Government slot.

Deputy Martin Browne: Deputy Devlin will not take up all his time, will you, Deputy Devlin?

Deputy Cormac Devlin: I welcome the introduction of the Child and Family Agency (Amendment) Bill 2021. The purpose of the Bill is to give full effect to the Taoiseach's announcement on 27 June 2020 that oversight of certain education and welfare functions would return to the Department of Education. Those functions, namely, the functions vested in the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth or under the Education Welfare Act 2000 and the administrative functions in respect of the administration of the home liaison scheme and the school completion programme, were transferred to the Minister for Education by the transfer of functions under SI 588 of 2020 with effect from 1 January 2021.

7 o'clock

Tusla, the Child and Family Agency, is responsible for the delivery of these services under the Child and Family Agency Act 2013, through the Tusla education support services, TESS, and the alternative education assessment and registration service, AEARS. The Child and Family Agency Act 2013 currently provides for the governance and oversight of Tusla by the Minister for Children, in respect of all Tusla functions.

The proposed Bill will amend the Child and Family Agency Act 2013 to provide the Minister for Education with the appropriate governance and statutory oversight in respect of education welfare functions exercised by the Child and Family Agency. It will provide the Minister for Education with appropriate powers to provide policy guidance, direction and prioritisation parameters for Tusla in respect of education welfare matters. From 2021 onward, the funding for the education welfare functions performed by the Child and Family Agency is to be provided by the Minister for Education, all of which is welcome.

As noted, the Child and Family Agency Act 2013 provides for the governance and oversight of Tusla by the Minister for Children. This is also a good opportunity to consider how Tusla is working and serving the needs of Ireland's most vulnerable and families. Coincidentally, the CEO of Tusla was with us at the Committee of Public Accounts this morning. One aspect that stuck out was the very high rate of turnover in frontline staff. The Minister is familiar with that. We have some 500 social workers currently in Dublin and it seems 100 of those, or about 20%, are new recruits. This very high level of turnover raises questions about the culture, management and resources within the organisation. I have no doubt that the people joining the organisation are committed to their role and do good work, but I cannot help but wonder if they are being let down by the system as a whole. In our engagement this morning, in fairness, the CEO of Tusla committed to looking at different aspects of how the organisation responds to service users. This is crucial. Given the feedback that I and other Deputies have received, certainly over the past months in this House and particularly in the height of the pandemic and during the post-pandemic period, there is big room for improvement. Are there sufficient senior social workers available to supervise and support those new staff, that 20% of new recruits I spoke of? Within An Garda Síochána, a sergeant and experienced gardaí are always on hand to support new recruits, as they usually work in pairs in the community. I do not expect the Minister to reply on this matter today but it would be good to see some comparative statistics published, and perhaps the Minister can ask his officials to review the recruitment and retention issue and send on the information if possible. Ultimately, it is the children and families who suffer where there are insufficient social workers, or where there is a high turnover of social workers.

I am personally aware of one case where a vulnerable mother is currently on her third social worker in nine weeks and has been unable to see her children in that time. She has had to retell her story of domestic abuse each time to each social worker, while wondering if she will be believed. This is simply not good practice. She has struggled to send information to Tusla as the social workers will not provide email addresses, and in one case told her no mobile number was available. This is actually contrary to what we heard from the CEO this morning at the committee, whereby every single member of front-line staff has a mobile phone. If the State is paying for that then surely there must be a better form of communication. I am happy to send on the information to the Minister, but I would be worried if this was happening on a wider scale than that.

We were also told at the committee today that social workers are not even provided with business cards by the agency. It was as if this was a revelation to the CEO. I am aware that he has only been in the role for 24 months, but this needs to change. I do not believe that such a small operational issue should need to be raised on the floor of the House, but such is the importance and simplicity of that request I feel I have to do so.

I would also like to raise the lack of family support workers in Dublin to supervise court ordered access visits. The service is under the Department of Justice via the Courts Service. These are important to de-dramatise court ordered visits and I would like to see them introduced in Dublin. I ask the Minister to raise this with his colleagues.

I would like to see more information about the research being carried out by Tusla on the outcomes of cases across various socio-economic communities to ensure equality of treatment for all children. Can copies of the reports be forwarded to the committee and if not why not?

Deputy Martin Browne: I thank the Minister for bringing this Bill forward. It makes sense finally to move educational and welfare supports and the school completion programme back to the Department of Education. Due to the very nature of the school completion programme it should not have been under the auspices of the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth.

Education is an extremely valuable resource. It is a fundamentally unique and important resource that needs to be delivered based upon the requirements and the needs of the child. Only by understanding this at an official level can we ensure that the children in economic or socially disadvantaged situations can have that latent talent nurtured. If this can happen, then such potential can be tapped into and transformed into something that can prepare the child for his or her future. It can enable the child to shape that future in a way that will benefit the child throughout life.

The school completion programme is very important in ensuring that educational attainment is acquired by the young people in the different circumstances I refer to. This is an incredibly important programme for primary school children, for post-primary young people who have been identified as at risk of leaving school early, or for those who have left school early but have not transitioned into employment, training or college. The programme is aimed at stopping children and young people falling through the cracks, and especially at an age when ceasing education can have a huge impact on their future lives. It is also at an age when the capacity and potential of a child can prevent that damaging situation from occurring.

These are some of the reasons I believe the Bill to be important. The school completion

programme must be child focused for it is this young person who will absorb that educational process in a way that can unlock the potential in that child. Since coming under the jurisdiction of Tusla, however, the focus of which I speak can become diluted in the overarching remit of Tusla and healthcare, and it can veer away from the child-centred and education centred approach. This can lead to situations in which a child who could otherwise have accessed the programme is not recommended a place. The Minister for Education's main focus is providing for the educational needs of children with all types of requirements and support needs, and I believe that our children must be best served by giving this level of governance and oversight of the school completion programme to the Department of Education.

While I have the opportunity I will also speak about delivering equality of opportunity in schools initiatives, DEIS, through which the school completion programme provides schools with key supports. For many schools in my constituency the DEIS programme is hugely appreciated and is seen as a very important factor in the education of children.

I have recently been in contact with the principal of a primary school in Tipperary who feels that many of the issues they face are in keeping with schools who are characterised as DEIS. That school principal is looking for support and advice in relation to becoming categorised as a DEIS school and is also anxious to see the results of the ongoing process around redefining the DEIS programme.

Schools are a fundamental part of every community in the State and, as such, engagement with these communities and updates on the progress being made in the development of a refined DEIS programme would be welcome.

Indirectly, I give that message to the Minister today. I urge the Minister for Education to engage with all stakeholders in our communities, as I believe there is a certain shortcoming in this regard.

Debate adjourned.

Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): 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) Deputy Matt Carthy - to discuss ongoing delays in the issuing of passports; (2) Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire - to discuss the delays in processing primary medical cert applications; (3) Deputy Kathleen Funchion - to discuss child abduction; (4) Deputy Colm Burke - to discuss the provision of additional fibre broadband infrastructure to premises that do not have a fibre broadband connection in place; (5) Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív - to discuss providing equitable funding from the local government equalisation fund to Galway County Council to deal with the funding crisis and to ensure it can hire adequate staff numbers; (6) Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh - an géarghá de tuilleadh Gaelcholaistí chun freastal ar an éileamh san ardchathair; (7) Deputy Thomas Pringle - to discuss the next steps in relation to the Brandon report and the actions of the HSE in response to it; (8) Deputy Joan Collins - to discuss concern in mainstream schools where special education teachers are used to teach classes where teachers are absent; (9) Deputy Réada Cronin - to discuss the crisis in GP care in north Kildare;

(10) Deputy Barry Cowen - to discuss the need to ensure that measures to enhance competition in the energy sector are implemented and enforced; (11) Deputy Martin Browne - to discuss the need to secure funding for the remainder of track renewal on the Ballybrophy railway line; and (12) Deputy Martin Kenny - to discuss the issuing of work permits and visas for workers from outside the European Union related to the construction trade.

The matters raised by Deputies Carthy, Ó Cuív, Collins and Ó Laoghaire have been selected for discussion.

Child and Family Agency (Amendment) Bill 2021: Second Stage (Resumed)

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

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: On the face of it this seems like a reasonable Bill. I am sure that it is well intentioned and maybe it is the right thing to do. If I understand it correctly, it is to give the Department of Education some input and oversight with regard to the work of Tusla and educational welfare. That is pretty much it. With things having been transferred one way, and then transferred back another way, one would be forgiven for thinking it is a bit of pass the parcel and a moving around of deckchairs on the Titanic kind of thing. I am not saying that is the case but when we account for the substantial issues – or, more to the point, the human beings, including the affected children and their families – we realise the importance of what Deputy Durkan was talking about, which is the need for things to be cohesive, continuous and integrated across Departments. When talking about the welfare of the vulnerable, particularly those with disabilities or special needs, we realise there is a real problem. Let us just start with that. There are many children with special needs and disabilities who are being let down badly. They cross over departmental demarcation lines because, of course, human beings do not fit neatly into a departmental silo, whether it is the Child and Family Agency, the Department of Education or the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage. I will move on to the issue of housing because people with a disability or special needs, when they reach a certain age, need to be housed. That is another area that becomes important. These elements need to be joined up.

The sort of correspondence that I and, I am sure, the Minister receive from families with children with disabilities and special needs points to a distinct lack of cohesion and integration. There is often a lack of willingness on the part of this or that Department, or a section of a Department, to take responsibility because it is always someone else’s responsibility to sort these things out. That worries me. In that regard, let me give the Minister an example. The matter has been brought to his attention but the example dramatises it quite a bit. It would probably be best if I read directly the words of the mother of a vulnerable child in the category in question because she wants to communicate them to the Minister specifically and also to the rest of the Government. I will not mention names. Whether the Minister has seen the correspondence, I do not know. I have raised the issue once before, with the Taoiseach, who said he would bring it to the attention of the Minister. The correspondence is instructive, and what it describes is pretty awful.

My name is [I will not state the name] and my child’s name is He has a diagnosis of autism and also a learning disability. He is an extremely vulnerable child. He is 17 years of

age. For the last three years now, the Child and Family Agency, Tusla, have been involved in our lives. In March 2019, I had no other option but to place my vulnerable special needs child in voluntary care with the Child and Family Agency due to very violent abusive behaviour at home, linked to his condition.

Let us not forget that 17 is schoolgoing age. To my knowledge, the youth has not been at school since. The email also states:

This has been a horrific ordeal for my son. He was placed in a mainstream residential unit in Wexford. This placement broke down in May [of this year] due to dangerous behaviour and property damage. I was then told either to take him home or to put him into a homeless hostel in Blanchardstown. I took him home in May of this year. Tusla provided no support for nearly ten weeks. The guards invoked section 12 and put him back in care of the Child and Family Agency due to an extremely serious incident in the home. I then refused to sign a voluntary care order and decided to go to court as I felt they were trying to throw my vulnerable child into homeless services when in fact he needed and still needs special care.

My son has so far been in two homeless hostels, a hotel and a semi-independent living apartment. None of this is suitable or appropriate. This matter is going before the court. I have made very serious complaints to the Ombudsman for Children and to Tusla. I have been advised by my legal team to contact you [that is me]. I am in desperate need of your help. I need this matter brought before the Dáil as a matter of urgency. My child's life depends on it as he is at serious risk of death due to misadventure. His disability is not being recognised and the correct treatment is not being provided.

My son and I are being denied our constitutional rights. The Child and Family Agency are neglecting my very vulnerable child. This needs to be highlighted in a most serious way. I have been asking for over two years for an ASD unit [a residential ASD unit, but the youth is still in homeless accommodation and wandering the streets]. He is being abused and brutalised on the streets.

The mother holds the Child and Family Agency responsible. The email was written in September. The lady wrote subsequently. In this regard, it seems there may have been some correspondence with the Minister's office.

My email is in response to an email received by my solicitor from the office of Minister O'Gorman. I want to know when would the Minister be in a position to intervene given the fact that Tusla is a Government agency and we have proven over and over again before a court that Tusla are not fulfilling their constitutional duties to my son, a special needs vulnerable child. These are the facts. Maybe the Minister would comment if my child ends up dead.

If Minister O'Gorman is the Minister for children in this country, then surely this matter will be taken very seriously by the Minister now that it has been brought to his attention. After all, he is the one with the platform in the country to be voice of the children and highlight the very serious failures to children in this country.

It was noted in the Minister's email that a placement was identified for my son, and he wished us all the best. Well, that is very nice but I seem to remember receiving a similar email from the Minister the last time I got a placement, which then subsequently broke

down because it was not suitable.

I want the Minister to know that we really have not come far from the time of the industrial schools. The only difference now is that children are not put in these schools – they are thrown on the streets by our own Government agency to be exploited, battered, brutalised and forever traumatised because we do not have the facilities or services or correctly trained people to deal with these vulnerable, mentally ill autistic children. It is absolutely disgusting that nothing is being done.

There is more but I will not carry on as I believe the Minister gets the flavour. It is very disturbing. From talking to the mother, I regard it as beyond belief that the vulnerable child is being thrown into homeless accommodation. It is beyond belief that anyone is in homeless accommodation, but it is absolutely unacceptable and beggars belief that a child on the radar of the Child and Family Agency and with the acute needs in question – he has a severe form of autism – is in such accommodation. We have to have the services. What is occurring is not acceptable. It is fair for the mother to say we have the modern-day equivalent of the industrial schools if we do not provide the required services and essentially have a young and vulnerable child thrown to the wolves.

It will not be hard for the Minister to find out what correspondence there has been between his Department and the family in question. I ask him to do so as matter of urgency. The matter points to something bigger, which the mother finishes her email with: the lack of services and trained staff who know how to deal with these circumstances. This is apparent in the area of autism and special needs across the board. I am referring to people not getting the assessments they are legally entitled to. When they do get their assessments and their needs are identified, they are not getting the services.

There are a few problems, one of which is silos that want to absolve themselves of responsibility. The reason is often that they lack the resources. They want it to be somebody else's problem and things get pushed around. The parcel is passed. Would passing it actually solve anything? The approach should be needs led. We have to start with the needs and then provide the services necessary to meet them. Our doing so must not be based on what suits a particular silo or on the spreading of resources across the areas of need so thinly that they do not provide the support required. As Deputy Durkan said, these are life-changing issues because if you get the support, it makes all the difference in the world for you, your family and your future, but if you do not get it, the damage can be permanent and sometimes fatal. We do not talk enough about when children move out of school or are at the threshold of doing so. We have talked quite a lot, and rightly so, about early intervention and school, but the moment comes when the child moves beyond those things or is on that threshold. We have to do this. Ireland has signed up to the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. We actually have an obligation to do this, not that we should need a UN convention to tell us to do the right thing - we should just do it because it is the right thing to do.

I am not an expert on these things, but I am aware of a situation that sheds light on this issue. It may not provide all the answers, but I got an astonishing response on it. A person from my constituency who was studying psychology and wanted to work in precisely this kind of area, caring for the vulnerable, contacted me. She was trying to do a doctorate in psychology and described to me the extraordinary difficulty she is having, as a person from a relatively modest background who does not have a lot of financial means, in progressing to the point where she has a doctorate and can work in this area, providing supports to children such as these. I raised

that issue in the House and it went viral. I have not received as much communication on an issue for years. So many people out there said this woman was absolutely right.

There are loads of young people who want to work in these areas but it is being made so difficult to do so, even at the level of getting a doctorate, that they all go off to Germany, Utrecht or Belgium to study. Many of them do not come back because they do not have to pay fees there and the accommodation is affordable, whereas here in Ireland it is made difficult for them. They cannot afford to live here. They want to work here and help young and vulnerable children, as well as older vulnerable people, but they cannot do so. They are qualified and intelligent and they do not want to leave this country but we are not able to retain them because life is made so difficult for them. Surely we should be able to put all the talent and human ability we have in this country that could meet the needs of those vulnerable children and other vulnerable people to that use. It should not be rocket science, yet there is a failure to do it. That brings in another Department, namely, the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, which is potentially another silo, unless we can join these things up. In theory, the Bill is about trying to join a couple of dots, so my party and I will support it, but the Minister hears what I am saying. I hope he hears what I am saying about the particular case I have raised and will respond on it.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): If the Minister does not have a copy of that letter, it would be helpful for the Deputy to give him one.

Deputy Patricia Ryan: I will shorten my speech, as have the rest of the Sinn Féin speakers on this issue. Sinn Féin fully supports the Bill in seeking to move all educational welfare supports and the school completion programme, SCP, back to the Department of Education, where it should have always remained. The programme is a key support for schools under the delivering equality of opportunity in schools initiative and was previously administered by the Department of Education. In 2016, the SCP came under the umbrella of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs. The Bill is important because it transfers the overall administration of this vital early intervention programme back into the Department of Education.

During its time under the jurisdiction of Tusla, the focus shifted from a child-centred approach to a more Tusla-based philosophy. This meant that a child's family circumstances were being considered when a decision was being made on whether the child should be given access to the programme. This change in focus meant that children who could previously avail of the service might not be recommended for a place.

The SCP proved its worth following the school closures in the past 18 months. Many students fell far behind while school buildings were closed. Recent reports indicate that almost 5,000 students did not return when schools reopened following the Covid-19 closures last year. Many of these were vulnerable students who became disengaged during the closures. Although the Covid-19 learning and support scheme, CLASS, recently announced by the Government is welcome, it does not go far enough to ensure that young people who are at risk of becoming disengaged are supported and included. More resources need to be invested to save the young people who are falling through the cracks. On a personal note, as the mother of a child who was failed by the educational system due to a health condition, I fully understand what that is like. He did not and still does not have the opportunities that other people of his age can access. These are opportunities that young people need and should be available to them. I ask the Minister to ensure that things improve in that area.

Deputy Martin Kenny: The Bill represents an opportunity for a fresh start for the State's educational support services, including the school completion programme, the educational welfare service and the home school community liaison service. The SCP in particular needs to be placed on a firm footing in terms of its structure, governance and funding. What steps will the Department take to bring that about? Within what timeframe can we expect to see improvements in order to ensure consistent, structured and appropriate supports to vulnerable children and young people?

One of the most important factors in keeping vulnerable people on the straight and narrow is ensuring they remain in education and are part of the education system. In my portfolio as Sinn Féin spokesperson on justice, I regularly come across this issue. So many of the people who end up on the wrong side of the law and in prison do not have high levels of educational attainment. That is one of the issues that need to be considered. The issue of lower levels of education needs to be dealt with, particularly in the communities where people are most vulnerable. In many places throughout the country, young people grow up in volatile and turbulent family circumstances, do not have the kind of supports they need at home and end up very quickly dropping out of school and into the wrong company, as people say, although sometimes the child himself or herself can be the wrong company. That happens because of the difficulties that exist in such situations. There needs to be support throughout all of that for young people who may not be as academic or good at school as others and find school difficult and onerous. They can easily get into a situation that can lead to a turbulent and chaotic lifestyle that can end up in difficulties. We need to do everything we can to ensure that does not happen. For some young people in those circumstances, the simple reality is that they are let down by the absence of State services to keep them in school and ensure they can complete their schooling and go on to have at least some semblance of a normal lifestyle.

Of course, school completion does not have to occur in the usual school setting. There are many examples of various settings where this happens, such as at the Cork Life Centre. It specialises in supporting young people to finish their education in a non-school environment. Although I understand the Bill is more technical than a policy approach, it is important that we highlight initiatives such as the Cork Life Centre and similar settings where children can attain the applied leaving certificate, as well as the other vehicles that support and work for young people. This move to ensure that we have proper structures in place will only work if those structures are properly funded and resourced. We must ensure that this happens.

Deputy Paul Donnelly: I understand that this is a technical issue. It is important that we discuss the issues around the provision of services for children in education and how they support students and their families. I worked for the school completion programme for 16 years and for Tusla for four years until I was elected. I am very proud to have worked for both organisations. They continue to provide an incredible service to young people and their families. I still have strong links with many of the people that I worked with.

I strongly believe that there must be continued close collaboration between the school completion programme, educational welfare officers and the home-school community liaison. Furthermore and importantly, there also needs to be continued close collaboration with other agencies, particularly in relation to Meitheal and how that operates. I would like to know how this will be actioned into the future. With the move from Tusla to the Department of Education, it is critically important that those connections are kept.

I started off in the early school leaver initiative, which commenced in 1999 and which was

the forerunner of the school completion programme. In the beginning, the essence of the early school leaver initiative and the school completion programme was around working from the ground up. It was not a top-down project. The idea was that each individual community and school had the autonomy to be able to deliver a programme that suited the needs of the children and students at the time. I hope that the Department of Education will allow this to happen as it will have oversight and give direction in the area.

It would be remiss of me not to mention resourcing. I know that many Deputies have raised the issue of resources. I am concerned that the funding is being transferred from the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth to the Department of Education. I am concerned about how that is going to operate and how it will be ensured that appropriate funding is provided. Members will recall that during the collapse of the so-called Celtic tiger, funding for the school completion programme was cut by over 30%. What that really meant was that we lost project workers, which resulted in a lack of one-to-one connection with students. That is how you build up a relationship with somebody. If somebody is struggling in school, you build up trust and a relationship with them and work to be able to support them.

I am not sure what is happening with the clock; it seems to be going a bit awry. I think it is trying to catch up with me in the context of how quickly I am trying to get through this. Perhaps I will get a bit of leeway if there is time.

Deputies mentioned services for children. These are critical, particularly as there are so many students. I am speaking as somebody who worked in the area. I worked day in, day out in schools across Coolock and the Darndale area. Trying to connect people to services was a nightmare. In the context of early intervention and school age teams, when a parent believes that something is not quite right and they go for an early intervention, they should not be told that there is a two- or a two-and-a-half-year waiting list. They may find themselves going through early intervention and getting the assessment, only for the child to age out of the early intervention system on reaching five. The child will then transfer to the school age team and the parent may be told that there is another two-and-a-half-year waiting list. As a result, from the time that the parent believes the something is just not right to the time they get access to a service, it could be four, five or six years. The whole essence of early intervention is early intervention. It is what it says on the tin. Unfortunately, however, the resources are not there to be able to deal with that.

I want to mention one particular service. It is a service for teenagers who have additional needs and are on the spectrum. They still do not have access to a full service yet. We are opening pubs, nightclubs and restaurants fully, yet parents trying to access a service in Dublin 15 have been told that it is not ready to open. It has gone from a three-day service to a four-day service and full five-day service is still not available. That should not be happening. If everything else is opening, I see no reason why that service should not open. I will send the details onto the Minister; hopefully, we will be able to get it sorted.

I hope the Minister of Education is correct when she says that the transfer of these functions is going to provide a renewed opportunity for services and greater integration. It seems a bit counterintuitive that things can be switched from one Department to another. I hope it works, and I look forward to seeing how the change will happen. I wish everybody well with it, because at the end of the day, it is about young people and students, and ensuring that we have a service in place that is fit for purpose for the most vulnerable children in our society.

Deputy Thomas Pringle: As an aside, perhaps we should take all Bills on Thursday evenings because they would progress very quickly. I was supposed to speak when the Bill reappears on the agenda the week after next or whenever and then I informed that I was to contribute at 8.15 p.m. Five minutes ago, I was told I was due to speak now. We would get through Bills very quickly if they were all taken on Thursday evenings. I cannot say why that might be.

I thank the Ceann Comhairle for the opportunity to speak on the Child and Family Agency (Amendment) Bill 2021. Largely, the proposed Bill is to be welcomed. I understand that the need to transfer the powers relating to the educational welfare function of Tusla to the Minister and Department of Education seems like a reasonable and logical step. It makes complete sense that educational welfare issues would come under the Department of Education. However, I would like to express my concern of certain functions being covered by two Departments. While the technical aspect of the proposal may appear to be an effective distribution of regulation and oversight, I would be interested in seeing how this will carry through in practice.

The reality is that while the amendment will transfer particular powers to the Department of Education, Tusla will still come under the umbrella of both the Department for Education and the Department for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth. The amendment makes it so that the funding and budget for educational welfare will be exclusively within the remit of the Department of Education. However, the reality of many situations involving Tusla is that there is often crossover between sections and areas. In instances which attract the need for Tusla intervention, including, but not only involving, educational welfare, how do the Ministers propose to ensure efficient and effective inter- and cross-departmental strategies? We have seen how cross-departmental responsibility has not worked well in the past, and I would be doubtful about how it may work better in this case.

We have seen instances where it has been difficult to identify which issues come under which Minister and which Department, with the unfortunate result of neither taking the responsibility in some cases. It seems common for Departments to just pass the buck, and I have a real and justified fear in thinking this is what is going on, or will go on, in this case too, without any impact on the Ministers in question. With interdepartmental issues, there is a real potential for gaps to appear and for important issues to fall through those gaps. We need to make sure we are taking all the steps necessary to ensure that this does not happen here.

While the amendment makes sense on paper, I would like clarification on how it will work in reality, particularly as it is unlikely that all cases will fall solely within the remit of educational welfare and thus the Department of Education alone. I would also like to stress the importance of a cohesive and smooth transition and an efficient and effective transition period. It is essential in ensuring that this actually works well.

Tusla's education support service, comprising its three service strands of the home-school community liaison scheme, the educational welfare service and the school completion programme, is incredibly important, but I would like to see a further effort to see these services extended, especially in my constituency of Donegal. I note a lack of schools involved in the school completion programme in south Donegal. It is important to work with pupils, students, parents, schools and community support services to encourage and improve attendance, participation and retention across the country. I would hate to see Donegal children being left behind in the context of this issue. The Minister, Deputy Foley, has stated the transfer of educational welfare functions provides a renewed opportunity for these services. I hope that she is right on this and that the transfer of powers will allow for more supports to be accessed by children and

families who are referred to educational welfare services in Donegal. Access to education is a child's right and this right should be extended to all children in this country, including those in the north west.

Overall, I support this Bill. However, I would like to see my concerns taken on board and addressed as there have been real flaws in how interdepartmental issues have been addressed in the past. This needs to change in order to properly facilitate the future transitioning of powers from one Minister to another. It could possibly be addressed through amendments to the Bill. The Government has constantly rebelled against having to report back on how Bills operate in practice but this is a case where such an amendment could be very important to see how the Bill works in practice. It is necessary to make sure there is oversight from the Dáil or somewhere that it is working and delivering the intended results. This is the reality of all of these Bills. It is vital when we are speaking about children's education that it works smoothly and well and in everybody's interest. I am grateful for the opportunity to add these few words on the Bill.

Deputy Sorca Clarke: I recognise that a lot of the Bill is an exercise in housekeeping. Do I think what is being proposed is perfect? No, I do not, to be very honest. It represents a real opportunity that will need to be monitored carefully. The return of the educational welfare service, the school completion programme and the home liaison scheme to the Department of Education makes common sense. Sometimes this is missing when it comes to legislation.

I know it has been touched on by other speakers but I want to speak about the benefits and the potential of the school completion programme. The reason I want to focus on this is because I want to speak from my perspective as somebody who was an early school leaver. I left school after I did my junior certificate for myriad reasons. Ultimately, I did my leaving certificate when I was 21. I went on to study with the Irish Tax Institute, the Association of Chartered Certified Accountants, the Institute of Certified Public Accountants and a variety of others. There is no doubt in my mind that the long and winding road I took to my career in auditing could have been made a hell of a lot more straightforward had there been access to a school completion programme. I would very much like to see others benefit from the resources and skills that a school completion programme can bring.

Recently, I spoke to the transition year students in Columba College in Killucan in County Westmeath. What struck me about the class was not only the range of personalities in it but their engagement and their wanting to be in school. They are not just there coasting. They want to learn. This is not always the experience of young people in our secondary schools. Often, and I have seen it in my constituency of Longford-Westmeath, where there has been an event in family life, often sadly due to the death of a sibling or a parent, it throws a young person into absolute chaos. One of the main consistencies in any young person's life at that stage is school. For me it makes sense for the school completion programme to be a major part of restructuring that young person's life and keeping him or her on the road to the next point. It is simply about keeping these young people on the train and getting to the end of it.

There is a role for school completion programmes in all of our schools because nobody is exempt or immune from unexpected events or unexpected trauma. If we can identify a child who is struggling or perhaps slipping at a much earlier stage, perhaps due to an event or a learning difficulty, the response will be an awful lot more effective the quicker we can put it in place. We know, because we see it time and again, that when a young person starts slipping it can lead to a cycle whereby if they are struggling in school they struggle with homework and if they are struggling with homework they struggle in school. They get caught in a cycle of negativity.

There is also a role for homework clubs in these situations where there is access to somebody who can be an additional support.

We also need to recognise, and I saw it as a former member of the Longford and Westmeath Education and Training Board, that in many cases the successful completion of school has nothing to do with exam results. Simply completing school is the result. This does not happen by chance. It takes a lot of work by the school, school completion workers, the parents and the students themselves. It is vital for these young people to be able to say they have done this and to be able to stand up and say they have achieved.

When we look at Covid and the impact that Covid has had on our educational system, I firmly believe the school completion programme will become a much more needed resource as we continue to go through and out of Covid. We have heard of the thousands of children who have not re-engaged in formal education. This is not something anybody in the House wants to see. Where there is the potential for this not to repeat itself, or the potential for these young people to come back into an educational setting, we should be taking it with both hands.

As a Deputy, a parent and an early school leaver I will be deeply concerned in the coming years if we do not see additional resources being put into the school completion programme. If it is properly invested in, the level of return on that investment in terms of the positive impact it will have on these young people's lives and on our future workforce cannot be overestimated.

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman): I thank all Deputies for their contributions today and yesterday and for the detail in which they have looked at the Bill. Some of the contributions have focused very much on the legislation. Some of them have been on broader issues that are relevant to the work of the Department, other Departments and the work of State agencies.

I acknowledge the case that Deputy Boyd Barrett brought to my attention. It has not crossed my desk directly yet. I have been in touch with some officials in the context of this debate. I understand the individual in question has a placement at present. I will look into this and I will communicate with Deputy Boyd Barrett early next week, as I said to him earlier.

At the beginning of Deputy Boyd Barrett's speech, he made a point on the importance of Government and State agencies acting in a coherent way. This is what we are trying to achieve in the Bill. There was an incoherence in the issue of the educational welfare service and the various facilities that flow from it being overseen by Tusla and subsequently by the Department rather than the Department of Education. We are looking to rectify this. Many Deputies spoke about silos. They exist but it is also important to recognise that when the Government recognises them and looks to solve them it is a good thing. I appreciate the support across the House for what we are doing.

Before moving away from Tusla, there was discussion of resources by Deputies Devlin and Boyd Barrett. Undoubtedly, Tusla deals with some of the most vulnerable children and families in society. This is why an additional €40 million has been allocated to it in this year's budget. An additional €66 million was allocated to Tusla in last year's budget. This was the biggest single increase the agency had ever received. This was because I recognised the complexity of the cases the organisation deals with.

A significant number of Deputies discussed the key elements that will be transferred, including the educational welfare service and the school completion programme. Deputies Clarke

and Funchion discussed it, as did Deputies Paul Donnelly and Ó Laoghaire. It is about trying to get better alignment with the wider policy measures being taken in the Department of Education. This is why it is important that policy control over the educational welfare service and the school completion programme will now be set by the Department of Education rather than my Department. While they will still operate under the remit of Tusla, the policy direction will be set by the Department of Education. We all agreed that that is correct. As the Acting Chairman said, essentially, this is all about the individual child and that has to be our focus.

There is no question of any cuts or impacts on the budget and I want to make that quite clear. We are not doing this work of transfer to try to undermine these services but are doing it because we see the value of these particular services.

Speaking to what Deputy Pringle said, in ensuring that we are joined-up in the delivery of the service, Tusla's aim is to integrate the service delivery and it will continue to do that because Tusla will still produce the one corporate plan and annual business plan and in that it will have to demonstrate how it is delivering the objectives that we are seeking, which will come from the Department of Education in respect of the educational welfare service and the school completion programme and how these align with the wider objectives that the organisation pursues across the rest of its functions, where the policy is primarily set by my Department. Again, that link and oversight, which Tusla will continue to have, is tied in by such functions as Meitheal and Tusla have in that integrated role in service delivery. I am confident that we can do that but in the final instance oversight remains in this House and in the ability of Members to raise questions with myself and the Minister for Education on the success of what we are seeking to achieve.

It is important to recognise that responsibility for these services has already transferred to the Department of Education and we are making the legislative provision now, but, under a statutory instrument that kicked in from the start of this year, responsibility for the educational welfare service has been with the Department of Education. We are putting the strict long-term legal framework around a process that has taken place and that I believe it is working, while noting that all education services have been impacted by Covid-19 this year.

A number of Members, including Deputies Patricia Ryan and Cronin, spoke about the additional supports we give to those who are most vulnerable and DEIS is probably one of the best examples of this. It is important to note that an additional €18 million was provided for the DEIS programme in 2022. In a full year that will equate to an additional €30 million. That is a 20% increase in funding of DEIS, which is one of the largest increases that it has had in one budget. That emphasises the commitment of this Government to rolling out and growing the use of DEIS as a real means of tackling educational disadvantage. I know, having been the chair of the board of management of a DEIS band 2 school, the great importance of the home school community liaison officer in visiting families, engaging with them and making them feel comfortable in discussing issues they may have been having in their child's engagement with school and in building up that very important relationship of trust. Other Members also spoke about the important role of the home school community liaison officer. I am proud that we have been able to grow the allocation in this regard in this budget and I look forward to being able increasing that in future budgets.

In the context of the treatment of children, a number of Deputies mentioned the other supports we provide, particularly in the area of childcare. This is something that was spoken about by Deputy Bacik and I am again pleased that we are able to announce significant additional

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investment in the early years care of €69 million next year, which will grow to more than €200 million in 2023. That will enable us to ensure that and an employment regulation order, ERO, coming from a joint labour committee works to ensure proper rates of pay for childcare professionals who have been working with inadequate rates of pay for so long. I know the welcome that SIPTU and the Big Start campaign have given to this long-term commitment to fund the sector. I do not deny that a great deal more has to be done in that area and I will be the first to say that. We need to continue to grow that level of public investment in our childcare services.

We have put a significant amount into childcare services during the Covid-19 period and all childcare services are entitled to draw down the employment wage subsidy scheme, EWSS, without having to prove the 30% turnover rule. That was an important exception I was able to negotiate. It deeply frustrated me, therefore, not as much I am sure as I am sure it frustrates parents, when I hear Deputy Bacik speaking of childcare providers increasing their fees at this time because the EWSS pays for 80% of their staff costs and 50% of their overall costs right now. I do not understand any way in which childcare providers would need to raise fees right now considering the level of State support that had been put in. That is why when we introduce the new core funding model next year, we are saying that there will be a *quid pro quo*, or an exchange in this regard. That exchange is the commitment not to raise fees. That is the first time that this State will ever be able to provide some element of regulation of the fees that are paid. We are stepping up in providing significant amounts for services so they can improve quality. A key way of doing this is to pay childcare professionals properly but there is an exchange for that, which is the commitment not to increase fees. I look forward to engaging with the sector. I spoke to representatives following the budget and I will continue to engage with the sector in how we operationalise that. That means that in future we have put some money into the national childcare scheme this year, but in future, when additional money is put in to the NCS, it will be put in to immediately reduce the cost of childcare for parents, and that investment of State resources will not be eaten up immediately by a fee increase but will make a difference for parents.

I welcome the support across the House for this legislation. It is small but important and I look forward to engaging with Deputies further on Committee and Report Stages. I thank the Acting Chairman.

Question put and agreed to.

Child and Family Agency (Amendment) Bill 2021: Referral to Select Committee

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman): I move:

That the Bill be referred to the Select Committee on Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, pursuant to Standing Orders 95(3)(a) and 181(1).

Question put and agreed to.

Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

Passport Services

Deputy Matt Carthy: The Acting Chairman will know that one of the most bizarre aspects of Irish politics is the engagement that elected representatives often have with the passport service and it is not something that I am terribly comfortable with. I should make it clear that people should not have to contact their Deputies to get their passport on time. In my experience, those who do get in touch with me on passport inquiries generally do so out of desperation. Their stories in recent days and weeks have been disappointing, to put it mildly. They have recounted their engagement with a system that can only be described as dysfunctional over the past number of months.

In April, the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Deputy Coveney, told the House that the then backlog of 89,000 applications would be cleared by the end of June. A fortnight after that deadline had passed the backlog had grown to 95,000. As of late September, the backlog had increased to 130,000. I hope that the Minister of State will be able to provide us with up-to-date figures this evening.

I am sure that the staff in the Passport Office have been working exceptionally hard through all of this but there is a serious systems failure that has led to this point. It seems incredible that the Department claims that more than one in five applications is incomplete or requires further information. I want to put on the record the experience of one of my constituents. This gentleman and his wife were due to travel to Meugorje yesterday and were going on their own personal pilgrimage. They submitted their passport applications on 15 September.

8 o'clock

In his wife's case, it was a simple renewal. She received an estimated issue date of 14 October. As his passport had expired 11 years ago, which shows how unique this trip was, his was treated as a new application and he was told his passport would not issue until 23 November.

He contacted me to plead that something be done. On 1 October, I sent an urgent passport query, attaching his flight details, and did not receive any response. Following numerous attempts to call the Passport Office phone line, I re-sent the urgent passport query on 13 October - again, no response. On 15 October, I contacted the Minister's office and a very helpful official undertook to contact the Passport Office on behalf of this man. Only then did I receive an acknowledgement by email, which just told the applicant to monitor his phone and emails. Both my constituency secretarial assistant and I again tried numerous times to contact the Passport Office in regard to this case.

On 19 October, the day before the couple's trip was due to begin, we once again contacted the Minister's office. On this occasion, we were referred back to the public phone line, which we had not been able to get through to up to that point. My secretarial assistant eventually got through to the public line, at 4.25 p.m. on the day before the scheduled flight, but the person who answered would not provide any information and, in fact, terminated the call. The man did not get his passport in time, while his wife, who had been provided with an estimated issue date of 14 October, did not receive hers either. They still have not received their passports. It is difficult to describe the upset this ordeal has caused the couple without detailing their very

personal reasons for wanting to travel to Medjugorje. I can only say their upset and hurt is very real and will be long standing.

What is the Minister of State's proposal to ensure no other family will have to go through such an ordeal in the coming days and weeks?

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Malcolm Noonan): I sympathise with the family's circumstances. It is a very difficult case. I offer the following response on behalf of the Minister for Foreign Affairs.

As the Deputy will be aware, the operations of the passport service were severely disrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic, as were many other Government services. Emergency passport services were maintained during the pandemic, which required staff to be on site to process and issue passports. On that basis, and taking account of the Covid protocols in place at the time, 67,000 passport books and cards were issued between January and May of this year. Since May, more than 400,000 passports and passport cards have been issued, meaning that in total almost 500,000 passports and cards have been issued to date in 2021. Almost 45% of passports for simple online adult renewals issue within one business day, while more complex applications take a bit longer.

As regards turnaround times, the current passport processing times, provided that all required documentation has been provided and is in order, are ten working days for simple adult renewals, 15 working days for complex renewals, 40 working days for first-time applications on Passport Online and eight weeks for An Post's mail-in Passport Express service. The passport service is experiencing high demand for first-time passports. Of the 140,000 applications on hand, more than 65,000, or 45%, are first-time applications. These first-time applications take longer to process than a renewal application. To protect the integrity of the Irish passport, first-time applications require careful processing to validate the identity of the applicant and his or her entitlement to Irish citizenship for the first time. Additionally, in the case of children, the consent of guardians must be validated.

In line with the continued scaling-up of services, the Passport Office, in Mount Street, Dublin 2, opened its urgent appointment service for the renewal of passports on 27 September 2021. This service is available to people who require passport renewal at short notice and opt for this fee-based service to do so. To avail of this service, members of the public can visit the website of the Department of Foreign Affairs. The urgent appointment service ensures that for those who unexpectedly require an urgent turnaround or a passport renewal, an option is available that is transparent, predictable and clear. It means applicants can book their appointment, safe in the knowledge they will have their passport within a day or a few days.

Turning to staffing, the Department of Foreign Affairs has assigned 126 officers to the passport service to date in 2021. In addition, 50 officers were internally reassigned to the passport service during the period of peak demand in the summer. The requirement for social distancing in the workplace continues to have a significant impact on the capacity of the service to operate at normal levels. The Department is currently focused on recruiting additional staffing to meet expected demand for passports in 2022 and ensuring adequate staffing levels in the passport service. This work takes account of evolving requirements related to Covid restrictions and includes engagement with the Public Appointments Service and a number of internal HR processes. Budget 2022 included an investment of an additional €10 million in passport services in response to the increasing demand for passports both at home and abroad.

I urge citizens to check their passport well in advance of any planned travel to ensure they can apply for a passport in plenty of time. The Passport Online service continues to be the fastest and most efficient channel for passport applications.

Deputy Matt Carthy: I am disappointed the Minister, Deputy Coveney, is not here. I thank the Minister of State for his response, although it was not even up to date. I am dealing with a family who are due to travel on Thursday next. They have been told their baby's passport will not issue in time, even though it will have been in the system for eight weeks. My office was told earlier by the special helpline that has been set up at the Department that the current timeframe is actually ten weeks.

I have been listening to the excuses relating to Covid since April, when the Minister gave that commitment in respect of the then backlog. This is not happening anywhere else in the western world that I am aware of and I have checked with former colleagues in the European Parliament. No other European state is dealing with such a backlog. It is unfathomable to most of the colleagues I spoke to that people would have to contact their elected representative to find out when their passport will issue.

In respect of the information the Minister sent us earlier about a Department helpline, that helpline will be pointless if cases such as these cannot be addressed. If the responses to queries are simply a rehashing of information on the website, it will be a waste of resources and will only add to the frustration people are going through. The purpose of such a line must be to assist the Department in receiving details of urgent cases and then being able to act accordingly.

The Minister of State, on behalf of the Minister, stated additional staff were assigned to the Department during the summer. Will he tell the Minister to reassign them to the Passport Office to clear this backlog? These are tragic human stories. It might sound mundane, given we are, in some cases, talking about holidays, but there are reasons behind all this and people should be able to expect a reasonable service, which they pay for in terms of their passport delivery. Will the Minister of State bring that message as forcefully as he can to the Minister?

Deputy Malcolm Noonan: The Passport Office continually examines how to improve processing times, including by examining the process for the verification of supporting documentation for first-time applicants and addressing delays that have been experienced by customers as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic and the high demand seen in recent months as international travel has resumed. There has also been an ongoing process of reform within the Passport Office since 2016. Enhancements over recent years mean that Passport Online can now be accessed by first-time applicants, both children and adults, in Ireland, Northern Ireland, Great Britain, Europe, Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the US. All Irish citizens, including children, can use the online system to renew passports from anywhere in the world.

The Irish passport is one of the most secure in the world and one of the most effective in granting our citizens visa-free access to most countries. Recent reforms have improved our fraud detection capacity following the introduction of new facial recognition technology, which improves the efficiency and integrity of the passport system. In addition, the passport card has recently been upgraded with a SealCrypt barcode strip on the back. The next major element of reform in the programme is to replace the core technology underpinning the passport service. The current system was launched in 2004 and will be replaced by a more modern integrated system. Detailed design-----

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Deputy Matt Carthy: With respect to the Minister of State, he is not answering the question.

Deputy Malcolm Noonan: Detailed design and implementation will begin in the coming months-----

Deputy Matt Carthy: That is a joke. It is not answering the question I asked.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): The Minister of State to continue without interruption.

Deputy Matt Carthy: He is talking about facial recognition. I am talking about families who are waiting for their passports.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): The Deputy is out of order.

Deputy Matt Carthy: No, that is outrageous. It is not what I asked about. A Deputy has raised genuine questions and he is getting an answer to a question he did not ask.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): Deputy, if you do not allow the Minister of State to answer, I will move on and there will be no answer.

Deputy Malcolm Noonan: I ask the Deputy to allow me to conclude. I know the response I am giving in my concluding remarks does not give him the answer he requires. Certainly, I will take these matters back to the Minister and the Department. The Deputy made his case very well on behalf of the applicants. It is deeply upsetting for families when they are making plans and travel arrangements. I said in my opening remarks that it is very important that people make their plans early and ensure their passports are in date.

With regard to the specific case, the backlogs are there and it is vital that they are cleared. The staffing issue is one I will refer back as well. It is vital that all resources are put in place to ensure that members of the public have access to their passports in the time that has been directed and set out in the recommendations. However, I take the point the Deputy is making about this specific case.

Local Authorities

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire Stáit as teacht isteach cé go bhfuil díomá orm nach bhfuil an tAire Tithíochta, Rialtais Áitiúil agus Oidhreachtá anseo anocht. The problem with the current system of distribution of the equalisation fund is that it is neither open and transparent nor equitable. Persistent questions from me over the years have failed to get the rationale behind the current system. This has left a number of councils underfunded, even with the distribution under the equalisation fund, and they now have an ensuing crisis in services and staff levels, which is seriously inhibiting their work.

The report of the expert committee established by the previous Minister to examine the amalgamation of Galway City Council and Galway County Council came to the conclusion that both local authorities in Galway were underfunded and that this issue needed to be addressed forthwith. In fact, even though it was in favour of amalgamation, it said the funding crisis had to be dealt with first. In Galway County Council, where the crisis is more extreme, it has left

virtually no staff to look after planning enforcement throughout the county. It has resulted in a situation where the planning officers dealing with planning applications have to deal with twice as many applications as equivalent planning officers in the neighbouring county deal with. There are no staff, or a totally inadequate number of staff, to deal with housing adaptation applications, mobility aids and so forth. While the Department is offering an increasing number of grants to local authorities under various schemes, both rural and urban, other sections are finding it very hard to progress their applications in a suitable way, thus stymieing the development of the county.

County Galway stretches from Ballinasloe - on my way home tonight I will be halfway home when I get to Ballinasloe - to Inishbofin, Cleggan, Clifden and Ballyconneely, which are 160 km apart. In fact, uniquely, when one is driving there one has to go through another local authority to get to the western half of the county. It also stretches from Milltown and Dunmore in the north to Gort and Portumna in the south. A huge area of land is losing out, and it is creaking under the current system. I pay tribute to the staff who have soldiered on, but who are now at breaking point. The reality is that it is sometimes very hard to contact the staff, through no fault of theirs. They are just too busy trying to fire fight in getting planning permissions and planning decisions dealt with.

I am sure the Minister of State has been given a very fancy script. I received a reply to a parliamentary question today which gave me a lot of twaddle about 15%, the local property tax, LPT, and so forth. I am telling the Minister of State to go back to the Department and examine how it arrived at the system for distributing the equalisation fund. If he cracks that one, he will have cracked a greater mystery than I have ever seen anywhere else. Agatha Christie, Sherlock Holmes or the whole lot would not crack the mystery of the equalisation fund distribution, which dates back about ten years and has left Galway strapped for cash.

Deputy Malcolm Noonan: I thank the Deputy for giving me the opportunity to outline the Government's supports for local authorities, with particular reference to Galway county. As the local authority budgetary period will shortly be under way, my Department has notified Galway County Council and all other local authorities of local property tax allocations for 2022 and of a separate allocation as a contribution towards the additional costs that will arise in 2022 as a consequence of the national pay agreements and the unwinding of the financial emergency measures in the public interest, FEMPI, legislation. The allocation in respect of Building Momentum - A New Public Service Agreement 2021-2022 is €4.44 million for Galway County Council and its objective is to reduce the cost of pay and pensions next year. In light of the Deputy's concerns about staffing, I trust it will be welcomed.

Turning to the funding position more generally, LPT was introduced to provide a stable and sustainable funding base for the local authority sector, helping to provide greater levels of connection between local revenue and associated expenditure decisions. LPT broadens the tax base by reducing the level of central funding required by local government. Local retention of the LPT began in 2015 and since then the overall principles and allocation methodology have broadly remained the same. Currently, 80% of LPT is retained in the area in which it is collected, with the other 20% supporting equalisation for local authorities with LPT bases lower than their funding baseline. The programme for Government, Our Shared Future, commits to bringing forward LPT reforms, including providing for all money collected locally to be retained within the county. This will also be done on the basis that those counties with a lower LPT base are adjusted via an annual national equalisation fund paid from the Exchequer, as is currently the case.

Across all schemes and funding sources my Department provided €51.1 million in 2019 and €82.9 million in 2020 to Galway County Council. The increase in 2020 was due to an increase in capital funding for housing as well as funding in respect of the Covid-19 commercial rates waiver and for additional expenses and lost income linked to the pandemic. Galway County Council also received a once-off allocation of €1 million for 2021. This money was linked to the operation of municipal districts and was subject to a small number of requirements, including that the funding be divided equally among the municipal districts. My Department is currently reviewing correspondence issued by the council in respect of this funding to determine if each of the conditions have been complied with.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: In the Local Authority Times, a publication of the Institute of Public Administration, IPA, two researchers came to the following conclusion:

Equalisation is a key element of a country's inter-governmental fiscal arrangements where functions and funding are decentralised to subnational government. Although Ireland is a highly centralised country with limited responsibilities and powers devolved to local authorities horizontal fiscal imbalances exist and persist. Ireland has a system of equalisation transfers but we believe that the current model is not fit for purpose.

They continued to construct a more equitable and logically based fiscal model. The Minister of State seems to be saying today that we know it is unfair and that there is no justification. No justification has been given to me today as to how the equalisation fund was arrived at. However, it is proposed to blackmail people in Galway with the same value of house to pay more money before we undo an objective injustice. That is what the Minister of State is telling me and it is totally unacceptable. In addition, this would not solve the problem of the inequity because it is much deeper than that.

The second point is that this mechanism of raising it was actually meant for extra services, all other things being equal, not as a mechanism to cover up for an unfair system coming from the Custom House. At the end of the day, it will not address the fundamental issue which is that there is no basis in logic to the present system. If an individual suffered in this way, a case would already have been taken to the Ombudsman and the inequity would have been put right.

A Programme for Government - Our Shared Future commits to reform in funding of local authorities. What has been done to date other than tinkering at the edges? The LPT reform has nothing to do with funding local authorities; it is about how much the public pays. We need comprehensive reform now and not at some date in the future that is constantly deferred. The cumulative damage done to Galway County Council is already very serious.

Deputy Malcolm Noonan: As has been set out in the circular from the Department, when additional information on the updated LPT is available the process will be re-examined. While it is unfortunate that the process cannot take place in advance of the local authority budget process in November, the timeline involved takes account of the needs of property owners and the Revenue Commissioners in conducting re-evaluation. As part of this process, my Department will review relevant material, including the report compiled by the Whitaker Institute of the National University of Ireland Galway and other reports on local authority funding which have been published in recent years. The Department will also engage with relevant stakeholders. Notwithstanding that, any examination of funding following the LPT re-evaluation exercise is not intended to be a substitute for the statutory role of elected members and their responsibilities under the Local Government Acts.

The Deputy has raised a critical point about the future funding of local government and revenue-raising abilities as seen in other countries, where local authorities have the ability to set up energy supply companies and be involved in revenue-raising activities. I cannot give an update of the work of the Minister of State, Deputy Peter Burke, within local government on those elements.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: Why is he not here?

Deputy Malcolm Noonan: I am here on his behalf.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: If the Minister of State, Deputy Noonan, cannot answer, why is he here?

Deputy Malcolm Noonan: It is important that we consider those issues.

We should be giving consideration to participatory budgeting where members of the public have a say in how their LPT revenue is spent. All those elements are critical in taking ownership of the revenue that is raised by local government and giving people a say in how it is spent in their own communities. My own local authority issues a newsletter to every household to inform members of the public how their money is being spent, and the projects and other important work it is doing in communities. I will take back the Deputy's comments to the Minister of State, Deputy Peter Burke.

Special Educational Needs

Deputy Joan Collins: First, I welcome that the Minister of State, Deputy Madigan. At the beginning, I thought that the Minister of State, Deputy Noonan, was going to answer all the questions. It is becoming a feature that Deputies are submitting their questions and are not getting the replies and a Minister of State-----

An Ceann Comhairle: The Minister of State, Deputy Madigan, is always here for any of her issues that are being dealt with.

Deputy Joan Collins: That is why I welcome her being here. That is why I said it.

I am not here to have a go at the Minister of State. I want to express the frustration of parents whose children are losing special education hours. One parent who contacted me said that her son lost two days of special education teaching this week. The loss of one-to-one teaching to help him with social skills and extra reading will leave him further behind and regressing. This parent makes a strong point that mainstream autistic children are often forgotten about. Special needs assistants and special education teaching hours make it possible for them to get to school.

Another parent this week told me that a special education teacher was put in to cover for five days for a full-time teacher who was out sick, meaning that this young boy missed five days of special education teaching. Normally, these hours would be banked for future use if the special education teacher could not fulfil the hours that week. It is a seriously worrying trend in mainstream schools at present due to the shortage of substitute teachers or where teachers are absent and a special education teacher is used to teach the class.

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During the peak of the pandemic when this used to occur, the school was allowed to bank these missed hours when a special education teacher was in a classroom to ensure that the hours lost were not at the expense of the children who rely on the special education teacher for resource hours. This practice now appears to have been revoked and I seek clarification on that. Vulnerable children are losing out on vital resource hours with no option to make up lost time.

Minister of State at the Department of Education (Deputy Josepha Madigan): I thank the Deputy for raising the issue. I will always endeavour to respond Topical Issue matters that are relevant to me. This matter is partly the responsibility of the Minister for Education, Deputy Foley. The special education element comes under my remit.

I recognise the challenge that schools are facing regarding the wider issue of substitution. I will come to the special education issue in a minute. The Department has put in place a range of measures to provide enhanced substitute cover in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. These include a major expansion of the primary schools substitute teacher supply panels, which now employ almost 380 teachers and provide substitute cover to over 2,500 primary and post-primary schools across the country. Further work is under way to enhance the operation of the panels to help with substitute teacher supply.

The national substitution portal service for primary and post-primary schools, *subseeker.ie*, is operated by the Irish Primary Principals Network. The Teaching Council and the Minister, Deputy Foley are working closely on this. The council has emailed 111,000 teachers asking if any of them are available for substitute work. I understand that 70,000 of those 111,000 teachers work full time and 40,000 work part time. Therefore, there should be capacity among those 40,000 teachers for some of them to be available to work. They have also allowed for teachers who were on a career break to carry out unlimited substitution work. That provision did not exist previously.

In addition, those who are job sharing will be in a position to carry out substitute work on the days of the week when they are rostered off. That is another new measure that has been introduced. There are also some new initiatives relating to student teachers completing their professional master of education studies. They may be in a position to fulfil short-term substitute vacancies.

All of those measures are extremely important but specifically around special education teachers, there has been a bit of misperception and there has been no withdrawal of any provisions. Effectively, special education teachers will be used for the purposes for which they should be used. During Covid-19, as a measure of last resort, where teachers were in a difficult position, a special education teacher could be used to cover teacher absences and where teachers were unavailable. We now have a successful vaccine roll-out and there should be a reduced level of absenteeism compared with the past. We should see those teacher absence levels reduced and there should not be an issue around using special education teachers in that way. It is really important to me as Minister of State with responsibility for special education that those special education teachers are only used for the hours for children with additional needs, as the Deputy has said.

In the recent budget we allocated 980 new special education teachers, with 620 of those for mainstream, new and developing schools, and 360 of them for special classes. They have a pivotal role in looking after children with additional needs.

Deputy Joan Collins: I thank the Minister of State. I am aware there is a problem and a bit of a crisis in the 3,300 schools around the country and they are finding it very difficult to get substitute teachers to cover absences. I raised the matter last week with the Tánaiste. A particular school had cover for one absent teacher and could not get other cover. This is happening in many schools. The Tánaiste spoke to colleagues in Blanchardstown and Castleknock, where the same thing was happening and there was a possibility of closing classrooms because a teacher could not be procured. I do not know if the special education teachers are moving to cover that problem.

Will the two boys I spoke of get those hours back or get resources from a special education teacher? One boy lost five days this week and two days last week. It is a key issue. Will the Minister of State confirm that will happen?

Deputy Josepha Madigan: On the question of substitution in general, I have outlined the measures being taken. There is the question of hours being lost. One of the schemes we introduced is the Covid Learning and Support Scheme, CLASS, at €56.2 million, which is to help children who lost time during Covid-19. That is in addition to the summer provision and the supplementary scheme at Easter. If children with additional needs have lost hours, as the Deputy mentions, although I will not comment on individual cases, it should first be brought to the attention of the principal of the school. He or she could liaise with the Department if there is an issue and they cannot work it out internally within the school. The case could also be brought to the attention of a special education teacher.

As I have said, there should be sufficient substitutes. The Minister, Deputy Foley, has looked at this in terms of expanding substitution and the substitute portal so as to make teachers who are job-sharing, those on career leave and in other schemes available. It is about getting more people, and particularly those part-time teachers, to register on the substitute portal so they can assist. No child should be losing hours.

There must be a way of working this out. I suggest the people affected contact the school and if there are any issues, the Deputy can let me know so I can follow up also. The National Council for Special Education has local special educational needs organisers on the ground. I know the matter is very close to the Deputy's heart and I heard her bring it up with the Tánaiste. If there are any issues, she could speak to me again about it.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy and Minister of State for dealing with that important matter.

Primary Medical Certificates

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: This matter has been raised a few times, although I am not sure if it was raised very recently in the Oireachtas. The primary medical certificate is primarily about adapted vehicles. That is the most common reason people require it. It is relevant where people have a disability or suffered a long-term or permanent injury that means they required a specially adapted vehicle. It is crucial to people's independence, dignity and quality of life.

The Minister of State knows there have been developments in this area. A Supreme Court decision in June 2020 caused the Department of Finance to suspend planned assessments and

appeals until further notice, pending legal advice. That pause lasted until January this year, if I recall correctly. Covid-19 also had an impact. The combination of these two events meant both the initial hearing and appeals processes saw very significant delays. I know there have been efforts to clear the backlog but I have heard from people on the ground and those working in the system that there is a backlog of initial applications but the backlog for appeals is very lengthy. I know one case from the west of Ireland was told in recent months that a cancelled appeal would not be rescheduled until some time in 2022. The waiting list for applications is several months in Cork and appeals are between seven and eight months.

People with disabilities should not have to wait a year or two to know whether they can afford to have their card adapted or to purchase an already adapted car. That is not right and this has a major impact on their quality of life. It can hold back their independence. In many cases the disability could emerge quickly, such as in the case of injury or rapidly progressing illness. All of a sudden, a previously completely independent person has to wait for this process and there is nothing to be done to speed it up. All the actions such people can take they would have discharged and the process has been taken from their hands.

What is the latest information? I have an anecdotal sense of it from on the ground in Cork and cases I have heard about in other parts of the country. I have also heard from people working in the service. Will the Minister give a picture of where we are nationally and the progress in clearing the backlog not only in applications but also in appeals? What is the plan to ensure that big backlog of appeals in particular can be cleared so these people can get their primary medical certificate, get on the road and get to shops or visit relatives? That is what this is about. We are talking about their independence, dignity and ability to get on with their lives.

An Ceann Comhairle: It is a very important matter.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan): I thank the Deputy for raising this very important matter today. I am glad to take the opportunity to set out the position regarding the assessment process for primary medical certificates.

A primary medical certificate is a requirement for the disabled drivers and disabled passengers (tax concessions) scheme. This scheme is underpinned by statute and comes under the remit of the Department of Finance and the Revenue Commissioners. The extent of the involvement of HSE community medical doctors in the scheme relates to making a clinical determination as to whether an individual applicant meets the specified criteria.

Following a Supreme Court decision of June 2020, the assessment process for primary medical certificates was suspended at the request of the Minister for Finance. On the enactment of the Finance Act 2020, which provided for the medical criteria in primary legislation, the Health Service Executive, HSE, was informed that assessments could recommence from 1 January 2021. This has proceeded in the context of restoring services in a Covid-19 environment.

The Health Service Executive community services has developed a prioritisation framework, which enables staff to be deployed where necessary. The ability to hold assessments for primary medical certificates has been affected by, among other factors, the key role played by community medical doctors in the national Covid-19 response. The Health Service Executive has confirmed that community medical doctors and their teams were predominantly deployed to the Covid vaccination roll-out in residential care facilities and other healthcare settings. Community doctors were also required to undertake school immunisations, which were identified as

a priority for the HSE.

If an applicant's case clearly meets the strict criteria that govern the primary medical certificate, a community medical doctor may be in a position to grant it, with supporting documentation from a consultant, without an in-person assessment. However, the majority of applications are not clear cut and need an in-person medical examination to make an adjudication. The HSE has informed me that progress on assessments has been made, with more than 1,270 assessments undertaken up to the end of June this year. I am glad to outline the background and current position on this important matter to the House today. I acknowledge what the Deputy said in that these people want to get on with their lives, get into their cars, do their shopping, meet their relations and travel again. I hope this may be of some assistance.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: I suppose there is good in that response, but it does not deal with all the issues. This process does not seem to be running at full steam. While there has been some progress made in the backlog, the community medical doctors are also doing many other jobs which puts demands on the resources. The other issue which has not been addressed is the delay in the appeals, which is a key part of the process. People are waiting lengthy periods of time for their appeals to be heard, which is also holding them back, and many of these appeals can be successful.

We have come across cases in my constituency office where the criteria might be too severe. I have come across cases involving people with fibromyalgia, and as a result have mobility difficulties, but who do not currently qualify. There are parents of children with profound learning difficulties and related conditions, who do not qualify even though the children, in some instances, are at risk of rapid movements or require a large amount of space to get out of a car. I wish to flag that they do not always qualify either.

I ask that the Minister of State to take my primary concern back to his Department. While I understand there are significant delays with the initial applications, there is also an issue in regard to the appeals, which needs to be addressed. I ask that the Minister of State take that point back to his Department so we can get this issue addressed. I acknowledge the objectives are not wrong. However, the issue is about the urgency at which it is being addressed. It does not involve the most enormous category of people, but the impact it has on their lives is enormous and it holds them back.

Deputy Frankie Feighan: I accept the impact it has on people's lives and I hope the appeals will be dealt with more urgently than they have been. As I said, some 1,270 assessments were undertaken up to the end of June this year. I assure the House that if an applicant's case clearly meets the strict criteria that govern the primary medical certificate, a community medical doctor may be in a position to grant it, on the basis of supporting documentation from a consultant and without an in-patient assessment. This may go some way in providing clarity and help. However, the majority of applications are not clear cut and need an in-person medical assessment to make an adjudication. In the context of providing health services within a Covid environment, and the related public health restrictions, the HSE is continuing to make progress with the assessment process for primary medical certificates. As the Deputy said, perhaps it is not going at full steam. Now that many people have been taken off Covid duty, perhaps we will be in a better position to get the process up to full steam.

Statistics (Decade of Centenaries) Bill 2020: Second Stage [Private Members]

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: I move: “That the Bill be now read a Second Time.”

Gabhaim buíochas leis an gCeann Comhairle agus tuigim go bhfuil spéis ar leith aige sa Bhille seo. Gabhaim buíochas leis an gCoiste Gnó as é seo a roghnú ón lató chun deis a thabhairt dom an Bille seo a phlé, An Bille Staidrimh (Na Deich mBliana de Chomórthaí Céad Bliain), 2020. In ainneoin leasú an Rialtais atá seafóideach, tá súil agam tar éis an phlé seo go mbeidh tuiscint níos fearr ag an Aire Stáit agus ag an Rialtas i gcoitinne ar bhunús an Bhille seo. Is é seo an t-am ceart chun na foirmeacha agus na doiciméid eile a bhaineann le daonáireamh 1926 a fhoilsiú ina iomláine go digiteach, chomh tapa agus is féidir.

It is an opportune time to have this discussion. I call on the Minister of State to withdraw the ridiculous amendment to defer the Second Reading to the end of next year. This is contrary to the purpose of the Bill. I do not know what the problem is. It is not as if the Department could not foresee this fine Bill, as this is the sixth such Bill to be put forward since 2010. The Government can vote for it or against it, but I ask that the Bill is not strangled with a year’s deferral. The Government should have the courage to embrace and adopt an Opposition Bill, albeit one that has been lifted from the Bill first moved by the former Seanadóir, Labhrás Ó Murchú, in 2010. It was later submitted by the current Ceann Comhairle, Deputy Seán Ó Feargháil, in 2013. I took up the gauntlet and published it after the election of 2016.

An Ceann Comhairle: It was obviously inspired.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: It was inspired. The Ceann Comhairle was indisposed to move it again in 2016 because he accepted the position of Ceann Comhairle. My colleagues in the Seanad, Senators Warfield and Ó Donnghaile, also moved the Bill.

When it was first debated in the Seanad in 2011, it was defeated, regrettably, by the then Fine Gael-Labour Party Government Senators. I hope it will pass through this House and the Seanad. The Bill has no financial or political implications. The Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media, Deputy Catherine Martin, in a parliamentary question reply last week, stated “a capital allocation of €5m has been provided for”. There will, therefore, be no additional cost for the purpose. She also stated that detailed preliminary work has already been carried out. The only logjam I can see in this is caused by the Statistics Act 1993 restriction. This Bill seeks to suspend that restriction - the 100 year rule - as a one-off on a special heritage notice, in this case, on the basis of it being the decade of centenaries. It would be appropriate that we mark the decade of centenaries with the publication of the census records. In 2016, as part of the run up to the 1916 centenary, we published the military service pension records. No one will deny how successful that was and how often they were accessed. It would be on a one-off basis in the interest of historical, familial and genealogical research, especially given the period it covers.

The material should be made available online, as proposed by Labhrás Ó Murchú in 2010, and even before that, as intended by the then Senator, Maurice Manning, in the Seanad in 1993. When debating the Statistics Bill, he put forward an amendment to reduce the restriction timeframe to either 50 or 70 years. He sought to reduce it to 70 years, while others argued to reduce it to 50 years, before the publication of files. If that understanding had been there, people would have better understood the damage of partition. Maybe Ministers would not be echoing Paddy Donegan’s undermining of the then President when he said he was a “thundering bollocks”

and a “fucking disgrace”, to correctly quote him. That was what, in fact, he said. Others have a different version of it. He was always correct when he said he did not say what the papers said; he said more. They should not have attended the celebration of partition, an invitation to which today’s incumbent in the *Áras* rightly turned down. To switch back to the central point of today’s Bill, I ask why now? Why would anybody want to move this at this stage? I have been a member of all of the iterations of the all-party decade of centenaries committee since the then Taoiseach, Bertie Ahern, scrambled to set it up in advance of the 90th anniversary of the 1916 Rising. I believe it was in 2005, or perhaps even 2004, that he established that committee. It has trundled along since. It has sometimes done fabulous work and, on other occasions, it has done very little.

I have a great interest in watching relatives, historians and genealogists looking at what we are producing and releasing. I mentioned the military pension records. As a result of the advent of computers and the Internet, we have been able to grant access to far greater numbers throughout Ireland and the world to our pension records, the 1901 and 1911 census records, newspaper archives, Bureau of Military History documents, parish records and much more than we ever imagined, even back in 2010 when Labhrás Ó Murchú was putting together his Bill or, before that, when Maurice Manning was arguing his case in the Seanad in 1993. In some ways, what we have been able to do through digitising records and putting them online is to democratise history. People can find out about their families, their past and the role of their ancestors in their local areas.

There seems to be an insatiable appetite for this material. It is like the film “Short Circuit” in which there was a robot going around saying “Need input, need input”. People ask me whether I can find certain information for them. They probably ask the Minister of State the same thing. It is the worst thing you can do to give people a bit of information because they will come back for more and more. However, when you give them the tools and show them how to access the material online themselves, away they go. They are then on a journey. So many families have managed to find bits of their own history they could never have dreamed of finding 20 or 30 years ago.

An interesting aside in all of this is the great interest in history. We have seen this in the State commemorations of the Easter Rising, the Lock-out and other events. It shows that people are interested in history and highlights the cultural naivety of decisions to downgrade history as a subject in schools.

Access to the 1901 and 1911 census returns has been available for public research for approximately 50 years. The digitisation of these returns by the National Archives has provided a wonderful national heritage resource. It is freely available via the Internet, which is key. I do not know how many hits the site gets but I know the figure is phenomenal, into the millions. This has been a phenomenal success and has greatly increased the interest and awareness among the diaspora. This often has benefits for tourism as members of the diaspora discover more of their ancestral links to Ireland.

At the time of the passing of the Statistics Bill through Seanad Éireann in 1993, the then Senator, Maurice Manning, put down an amendment on Committee Stage to reduce the period of closure to 50 years. I am sorry; I said 70 or 75 earlier. This amendment was designed to allow for a 1926 census of population to be opened for genealogical and family historical research. However, this amendment was withdrawn at the request of the Minister of the time, based on the promise that he would consider a 70-year closure period. No ministerial amend-

ment was presented when the Bill passed All Stages in the Dáil on 7 July 1993. We have been stuck with that period since, blocking the release of these records. This is despite efforts to change that and campaigning by the Genealogical Society of Ireland in particular. I welcome the society's input in this Bill.

The census records available thus far obviously cannot reflect the societal effects of the upheaval that followed those momentous events. After 1911, the next census was taken in 1926. That is a gap of 15 years. This occurred because no census was carried out in 1921 as a result of the turbulent nature of the country at the time. The Lock-out is therefore not reflected, nor are the many people who left Dublin and other places to look for work elsewhere as a result of it. In many cases, they joined the British army. The founding of the Irish Volunteers, the Citizen Army, Cumann na mBan, the split in the Irish Volunteers, the outbreak of the First World War and the four years of war that followed, the deaths that occurred and those who did not come home to Ireland but settled in Britain afterwards, British army recruitment, conscription and the enlistment of hundreds of thousands of Irish men, approximately 50,000 of whom died in that war, would all be reflected in those census records. The 1911 census could be compared with the 1926 census to see the effect these events had on certain areas. We know some of the effects but we could then see it family by family.

This period also covers the Easter Rising, the leaders' executions, internment, the release of prisoners, the revival of Sinn Féin and the IRA that paved the way for the 1918 general election, the extension of the franchise, including its extension to women for the first time, and the movement of women in Irish society and in Britain, which was huge because they were depended on to keep the factories running in Britain. After the war, there was another great movement as they moved back. It would also cover the period in which more than 25,000 people died of the Spanish flu. Given that we are going through a pandemic, it would be interesting to see what we could learn about that.

The restriction imposed on access to information contained in the census of population 1926 also prevents historians, statisticians and genealogists from interrogating the illuminating primary source this census represents. The impact of An Chéad Dáil, the effects of the tan war from 1919 to 1921, the Civil War and the establishment of the Irish Free State and the state in the North, that is to say, partition, would all be reflected in some way or other, as would the movement of people out of Ireland or around Ireland when the State was founded. The new Irish Free State held its first census in 1926 at the height of a worldwide economic depression. A lot of emigration would therefore be reflected in the census. It is important that we look at that and not delay any further.

One other matter that would interest me greatly would be how the census reflects what happened in the Gaeltacht areas. There is another missing census, the 1925 census which was carried out in all Gaeltacht areas, which are mainly on the west coast. This was carried out by Coimisiún na Gaeltachta. There was a census of every single household taken. The records are missing, although the reports remain. A census of every single household in these areas was taken to determine whether they were Irish speakers or not. Imagine being able to compare that to the 1911 census or even to today's censuses with regard to areas in which Irish was and is predominantly spoken. We would learn an awful lot. Cá bhfuil an daonáireamh sin? Cén fáth go bhfuil sé ar strae? D'fhiafraigh mé den Choimisinéir Drew Harris cá bhfuil sé toisc gur bh é An Garda Síochána, a bhí díreach bunaithe, a rinne an daonáireamh seo. Chuaigh gardaí go dtí gach uile theach in ainneoin the turbulent nature of the country at the time agus thóg siad taifead ní hamháin de na daoine ach de na ba, na caora agus gach rud eile. Tá an tuairisc spéisiúil ach

bheadh sé níos spéisiúla arís a fháil amach cad a bhí ag gach uile theach sna ceantair sin agus cé chomh bocht nó saibhir is a bhí siad.

There is also a need for other documents or records that we have to be looked at and, if possible, digitised and made available. I got a few supportive letters on this when it was mentioned on RTÉ the other day. One came from a historian, Kieran McNulty, in Kerry. He explained to me that it is very frustrating trying to write a societal history of Kerry in the period when the new State was founded. He said that it is very frustrating when attempting to research the economic and social conditions in the country in the years immediately following the end of the Civil War and wished me well in trying to ensure the Bill progressed tonight.

Even at this late stage, I appeal to the Minister of State to withdraw the amendment and to allow this to progress. It is not contentious. I am not looking for a row over it. I do not think there is a row to be had. There seems to be cross-party support because, as I said, Maurice Manning had supported the idea and other Deputies and Senators have tried to pass similar legislation.

9 o'clock

It is for the betterment of all of society.

An Ceann Comhairle: Before proceeding, I should caution Members that by way of quotation, which may or may not be substantiated, Members should not seek to further coarsen the nature of debate in this House.

I am conscious that, notwithstanding the importance of the matter before us, Teachta Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire is the only other person offering. Would it make more sense that we hear Deputy Ó Laoghaire and the Minister of State then make his contribution in response and Deputy Ó Snodaigh wrap up? There is no point in going around in unnecessary circles.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: Once there is somebody to respond to the Minister of State.

An Ceann Comhairle: I do not think we could stop Deputy Ó Snodaigh.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: Notwithstanding what the Ceann Comhairle said, it was an elegant navigation of Standing Orders a few minutes ago.

The Government amendment is a particular device and I think it is the most remarkable use yet I have seen of it. The Government regularly comes to the House to say it will look at something in a year's time. It is its way of avoiding voting against something. In this instance, the specific purpose of the Bill is to bring forward the date of something that is going to happen anyway. The response of the Government is to say it will look at it in another year. It is the first example I have seen of an amendment directly contradicting the entire purpose of a Bill. That is remarkable, to be honest. Ba mhaith liom cuidiú leis an mBille seo. Bheadh sé tábhachtach agus úsáideach do dhaoine a bhfuil suim acu sa stair agus san oidhreacht, maidir leis na cúrsaí a thit amach. Baineann sé leis na scataí píosaí eolais a fuair an census 1926 a tógadh ón taobh eile den droichead, an daonáireamh roimhe sin, agus an trasnú idir gach rud a tharla le linn Chogadh na Saoirse, vóta na mban, agus an méid a thit amach ó thaobh na Gaolainne. Cé go bhfuil roinnt eolais cailte, mar a dúirt an Teachta Ó Snodaigh, agus is mór an trua é sin, ó thaobh na Gaolainne, d'fhéadfadh go mbeadh sonraí ann faoi na rudaí a tharla don lucht saothair agus do

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na ceardchumann. B'fhéidir go mbainfeadh sé leis an mbogadh ón tuath go dtí an chathair agus an obair dhifriúil a rinne daoine. Ag am an census roimhe sin, bhí cuid de na scéimeanna i bhfeidhm maidir le talamh a dháileadh ar thionóntaí, agus b'fhéidir go mbainfeadh sé leis an athrú a tharla ó thaobh úinéireacht talún freisin. A lot of useful information could be brought forward for historians and people who are interested in heritage and their personal family history. Previous censuses have played a valuable role in that regard. It would be entirely logical. As far as I can see, there is no great sensitivity or principled Government or logical objection being offered. Rather, there is a desire to say this will be dealt with at a later date.

There is a lot of useful information that could be of value to historians. It would give us a picture of the change in land ownership, language, industrial relations, the growth of towns and cities, as distinct from the countryside, the change in migration and some of the trends around the Border. It was the first 26-county census.

I wholeheartedly support the Bill, but I want to flag a particular issue of relevance to the decade of centenaries and historical information. Army pensions and records from the Tan War are relevant. I commend the previous Minister of State with responsibility for defence on dealing with one issue a family and I brought to his attention. This was case of Joe Murphy, who died on hunger strike in 1920. His family, because they fell on the anti-treaty side, were never offered a service medal. The Minister of State at the time, Deputy Kehoe, his Department and those involved in the archives ensured that a medal was finally granted to his nephew, who subsequently passed away. It was a very proud moment for him and his family. It was awarded to him in Cork City Hall about two years ago. That was very welcome.

That was an unresolved issue which was subsequently resolved, but there are still unresolved issues in respect of Army pensions and records. In October 1922, Piaras Béaslaí directed the Free State troops, referred to as the National Army, to treat the anti-treaty soldiers as irregulars and that they should not be called republicans. The impact of this was that the Army pension records of members of the IRA in the Tan War, who served during that period and attained the rank of captains, staff captains and so on, were written out by the Free State Army and Government, who set up the scheme in the first place, because of the side they had taken.

I have a particular example in mind, namely, John Joe Hegarty who was a captain in the first brigade of the Cork IRA. He was very active during the Tan War and took the anti-treaty side. His Army records do not record his rank, as is the case with many others who were in the same situation, even though their rank was earned during the Tan War, which was before the split and Civil War. I know the family and spoke to a son during the week. It is important for them that that historical wrong be righted, if it is possible. There is no reason it should not be. The records of the State should reflect the documentary evidence that exists, but that is not properly recognised by the State at this point in time in terms of people's ranks in the Tan War. I wanted to raise the issue that relates to John Joe Hegarty of the first brigade of the Cork IRA. I am sure it affects many others.

Having flagged that issue, I want to again return to the specific elements of the Bill. This is a perfectly logical Bill. I do not see why something that will happen anyway cannot be brought forward as part of the decade of centenaries to allow historians, heritage groups and families to find out about their past. Why should the reaction of the Government be to say that it will examine the issue again in a year? That does not make sense to me and I urge the Minister of State to reconsider the position and support the Bill.

Deputy Martin Kenny: I am sorry I was not here for the beginning of the debate; I was on a Zoom meeting as many of us are during these times.

I fully support the Bill. The census of 1926 would illuminate a lot of stuff that happened during the 15-year period when there was no census. During the formation of the new State in my part of the world, Leitrim, and in Border counties there were movements of populations to the North. In fact, some Protestant families moved North and then moved back again. A lot of information can be gleaned and statistics can tell us what was happening at that time. The terrible catastrophe of the First World War that affected so many people and families is also part of that. There is also the possibility of being able to use historical records of this nature to shine a light into places we do not have the same level of information about as we would have in normal circumstances. It would be very appropriate.

My grand uncle and the grandfather of the Minister of State shared a cell in Mountjoy in 1920. Many of our families interact. While they took different sides after that, there is always a sense that at one time we all stood together for freedom in this country. When we all stand together for something, an opportunity to stand together on something like this is also part of it. We can do that here. It would make sense for the Government to recognise that this is an opportune time, in this centenary year and this time of looking back on the past and trying to be measured and unifying about it, to do that and that the census of 1926 would give us information on that.

While it is important to know about history, we often find, and we certainly did when we were in school, that history is a list of dates of what happened, where it happened and when it happened. The most interesting part of history, however, is not the dates or the where and the when but what it was like for the people who lived then, how they experienced the time and what impact it had on their lives and on the lives of their families, their neighbours, the people around them and the community in which they lived. Census documents are not just a list of who was in each household; they tell us a lot of other stories as to what impact various events had. The Spanish flu was, of course, another huge event in many parts of the country, not so much in rural areas but very much in the cities and urban areas, where people were much closer together. That is where it had the biggest impact but it had a huge impact.

The fact that there were 15 years from the census in 1911 right through to 1926 tells us there is an awful lot of history in the 1926 census. Its release as quickly as possible is clearly sensible and has the backing of, I think, every sensible historian in the country. Many people do research into these things and have a huge interest in that time. It would be remiss of the Government and a mistake to put off its release for a year or any longer than is absolutely necessary. There is no necessity to put it off for a year. I therefore implore the Minister and the Government to withdraw their amendment and to support the Bill as it is before the House.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan): I move amendment No. 1:

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

“Dáil Éireann resolves that the Statistics (Decade of Centenaries) Bill 2020 be deemed to be read a second time this day twelve months, to allow for greater analysis of the complex issues concerned and for such considerations to be taken into account in further scrutiny of the Bill.”

21 October 2021

Is mór agam an deis a fháil labhairt leis na Teachtaí faoin gceist thábhachtach a ardaítear sa Bhille seo, agus gabhaim buíochas leis an Teachta Ó Snodaigh as aird a thabhairt uirthi. Is fiú i gcónaí díospóireacht chuiditheach a dhéanamh sa Teach agus tuigim an réasúnaíocht a bhaineann le moladh an Bhille seo.

I thank Deputy Ó Snodaigh for the opening address on his Bill. I concur with many of the comments he made and welcome his engagement with this project and his commitment to the decade of centenaries programme to date. Because I served with him on the same committee, I know he has been a very active and constructive member of the all-party consultation group on commemorations in its previous iteration and within the current grouping. Like the Deputy, I too look forward to the day the 1926 census is released and available to view by all.

Deputy Ó Laoghaire made some very interesting observations and talked about the decade of commemorations and the fact that on occasions many people, probably because they were on the wrong side of history in some ways, were written out of history. I think the ranks were written out for pensions records and many lost their rank. This is a matter for the Minister for Defence, but I absolutely agree with Deputy Ó Laoghaire. If those people have been wronged, it is up to us to ensure that is put right. I am delighted that Deputy Ó Laoghaire said the Minister of State at the time, Deputy Kehoe, was able to resolve matters for the Murphy family.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: Joe Murphy.

Deputy Frankie Feighan: If there are other such issues, it is in the interest of us all that they be resolved. I think we are all mature now and cop that this should be done. I would applaud anybody for bringing them to the Minister for Defence, maybe, to get them resolved. I thank Deputy Ó Laoghaire for his contribution.

As for the Army records and the archives, Deputy Martin Kenny and I share a very interesting history. I refer to the divisions of the past 100 years, with partition and so on. My grandfather, James Feely, was imprisoned and released on the signing of the Anglo-Irish Treaty. He would not have survived only for John A. Kearney, who was the district inspector in Tralee barracks and the person who arrested Roger Casement. When the Black and Tans came to assassinate my grandfather, he was saved by District Inspector Kearney. Then, in this very Chamber, Austin Stack, who was supposed to have released District Inspector Kearney from the barracks in Tralee, came into the Dáil and made spurious allegations that he engaged in mistreatment. He and his family had to leave Boyle overnight and went to London, where he rose to the rank of, I think, second in command in the Metropolitan Police. However, he was due to be put in charge of An Garda Síochána. Michael Collins had written to him to ask him. It just shows you that history and historical facts sometimes are missed. Roger Casement, from what I hear, was a very good friend of or was well treated by District Inspector Kearney. District Inspector Kearney was a republican who left the door open for Austin Stack to release him and, from what I hear, Austin Stack bottled it and years later came into the Dáil. That is recorded in a book, possibly one about the Kerry landings but I am not sure. I like to put little things like that on the record sometimes.

In the 15 years since the previous census was taken, in 1911, Ireland had gone through a dramatic change, starting with the Lock-out of 1913, then the First World War from 1914 to 1918, the Easter Rising of 1916 and the War of Independence from 1919 to 1921, which led to the Civil War of 1922 to 1923 and the partition of Ireland, starting in 1921. Just three years on from the Civil War and five years since partition was enacted, it will be fascinating to see what

happened to families within what was then known as the Irish Free State. It will be a poignant moment for many people of Irish ancestry, not just here but across the globe.

With that in mind, I am glad to confirm to the House that the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media, Deputy Catherine Martin, has committed €5 million for work on the 1926 census project to commence, thereby enabling the release of the 1926 census as scheduled in April 2026, in accordance with the Statistics Act 1993. I believe that in order for this work to happen, the National Archives, in collaboration with the Central Statistics Office, CSO, need the time they now have to ensure that this vital record set is correctly conserved, digitally imaged and transcribed. The 1926 census can then be made available to the public on 18 April 2026.

This Bill is well intentioned. I must admit, though, that the timeline would be a significant challenge. Given the growing interest in genealogy and the heightened public awareness of the history of the early years of the 20th century, the only realistic method of making the census widely available to the public is to digitise it and place it online. Census 1926 is currently the property of the CSO. The National Archives will work with the CSO under the terms of a joint memorandum of understanding, MOU, that enables the National Archives to undertake the complex work associated with providing public access in digital form to the census returns in April 2026. The MOU will cover the following areas: that legal control of the records remains with the CSO; that permission is granted to the National Archives to work on the records in the meantime; that assurances are provided to the CSO in respect of the work to be carried out on the records and the conservation and security of the records, including the requirement that the forms and images do not leave the State; that there is recognition or appointment of officers of statistics within the National Archives; what the considerations to controls around contractors viewing the records are; and an agreement that the MOU can be updated if required with the consent of both parties.

By way of example I will outline to the Deputy the precise and delicate nature of the work that the National Archives working in conjunction with the CSO will have to undertake. To enable the safe, accurate and complete digitisation of census 1926, I will outline some of the actions that will need to be carried out. Census portfolio side stitches will be removed to ensure each individual census return form can be separated, safely handled and digitised. Any dirt present will be removed to ensure that all handwritten text is legible and clear to read. All creases and folds will be removed to ensure that all handwritten text is legible and clear to read. All tears will be removed to ensure that further damage does not occur and the census return form can be safely handled during digitisation. All of the census portfolio cover boards will be retained and the unique order of the census return forms will also be retained. Following digitisation, secure archival housing for the census return forms for long-term archival storage will be required. This may include vacuum sealing the records post-digitisation for security and long-term preservation.

In 1993, it was generally accepted that 100 years was a reasonable compromise in all the circumstances, including having regard to increasing life expectancy and the need to protect the data of all individuals. As we know, there are many more people now living to more than 100 years. The Data Protection Commissioner will have to be consulted on the matter, irrespective of when the personal details in the 1926 census are published.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: I listened very carefully to the Minister of State's response. My proposed legislation does not specify a period. It provides that this must be done as part

of the decade of centenaries. As I said, the Minister, Deputy Martin, has already indicated that preparatory work has been done. We know from the previous two digitisation projects the various work that is required, although one or both of those projects was on microfiche which may be more onerous. To use the new terminology, a lot of learning has already happened, especially given the digitisation of the military pension service records in the Bureau of Military History. There is a skill set already in existence and an understanding. The Bill provides for a Taoiseach to take the required steps to allow the digitisation and release of these records ahead of schedule. The Minister of State, Deputy Feighan, referred to a schedule of April 2026. I would prefer an earlier date, which is the purpose of the Bill. The earlier the better is the view of most people.

The House should not divide on this issue. It is just a matter of accelerating the work, which can be done. We know of many other organisations that have taken on tasks just as complex as the digitisation of forms and they have been successful. Complexity is not an excuse to delay the Bill.

It was interesting to read about this matter in *Ireland's Genealogical Gazette*. It highlighted that the census of 1921 was cancelled or delayed until 1926 and here we are in 2021 delaying the publication of those records until 2026. On our delaying of this year's census until next year, the gazette states, "This was certainly an unexpected addition to the events within the 'Decade of Centenaries'." We have had a delayed census on two occasions, 100 years apart.

The aim is to ensure the information I am referring to is another part of the jigsaw. In 2013 this matter was the responsibility of the Department of the Taoiseach, because it pertained to the CSO. The then Minister of State in the Department, Deputy Paul Kehoe, stated "The Government is of the view that early publication, before vital preparatory work has been undertaken, is premature". That was eight years ago. I hope the work will have started. The Minister who is currently responsible, Deputy Catherine Martin, has already said it. It was interesting that, in the period in question, the programme for Government allowed for, or sought, the early publication of the census. The Government went back on what it had intended.

In many ways, we are where we are. Again, I appeal to the Minister of State to reconsider the amendment he has tabled and allow the granting of special heritage status. It would be on a once-off basis and would not involve any other census on which people have been given a guarantee of a period of 100 years.

A former colleague from the Seanad, Mr. Trevor Ó Clochartaigh, made the point quite well that the arrangement I seek would be once-off and that this would be the only occasion on which we would expect the State to go back on a promise it made, albeit to a lot of people who have since passed away. In 2011 there were only 400 people in the State who were 100 years old. I realise there is an ageing population but there will be very few aged 100 in 2026. Those aged 100 now were one or younger when the 1926 was taken. Therefore, the impact on their lives would be minimal, if there would be any at all. In fact, it would probably be beneficial to them to see what their parents and relatives got up to at the time in question and what they wrote in the records.

It is very interesting to look at pension records. Many families presume their fathers were this, that or the other, but they are sometimes described in unexpected ways. There may have been different holdings and different relations. The data might have us ask who a certain character in a household was in the belief he or she was not a relative. This opens a layer of interesting

facts. The release of the census data is not going to affect those in their late 90s or those aged 100 in any major way. It would be beneficial, especially given the period covered. There is no other 15-year period in Irish history that had so much upheaval and change, and that is why special heritage status has been sought and why I have linked it to the Decade of Centenaries, such that it would fall in line with the pension records, in particular, but also others. Dealing with the pension records comprised a huge undertaking. Data are still being published. In the case of pensions, data have to be double-checked and triple-checked, even more than with census records, because of the risk of material having fallen into the wrong accounts and all of that.

It is a pity the State has taken the position it has taken. The number of people who seek to gain access to the Military Archives shows there is an appetite for information. The National Archives has always sought additional moneys so it could store physical paperwork properly in order that it would be available not only to the current generation but also to future generations. Then, at least, it would not be stored in containers in Galway. I believe the barracks is where all the pension records were contained. They were damp and falling apart, and that is why there was a delay in putting some online. They were never properly stored.

The Coimisiún na Gaeltachta census has disappeared. Nobody seems to know where the documents have gone and the number of pages. Some basement in some Department somewhere has all the documents and it does not know what they are. Obviously, they have never been looked at since they were produced. An Garda Síochána denied it has the documents. The Department responsible for the Gaeltacht said it never heard of the census and the CSO said it had nothing to do with it because it was not around at the time it was taken. It is interesting how records get lost. I hope somebody finds them.

As I mentioned, there are other records. The Land Commission records from 1921 contain a huge amount of information that would be so valuable to those of us studying what happened in that period. We are in the Decade of Centenaries. There are probably other records. The State should consider how it could fund and help our national cultural institutions to digitise more of their historic documents.

Tá sé tábhachtach go mbeadh an daonáireamh seo foilsithe chomh luath agus is féidir. Níl mé ag lorg go mbeidh sé foilsithe amárach agus táim réalaíoch go leor chun a thuiscint nach féidir é sin a dhéanamh. Bhí sé leagtha síos, ámh, sa Bhille gur chuid den Decade of Centenaries a bhí i gceist ó 1913 go dtí 1923 agus go mbeadh sé foilsithe mar chuid de sin, agus is féidir leis a bheith cúpla mí deireanach, más gá, ach go dtarlódh sé. Is é sin an fáth nach dtuigim nach mbeidh sé foilsithe mar léireodh na sonraí a bheadh istigh ansin an tionchar a d'imir imeachtaí cinniúnacha, mar shampla, ar an tsochaí sa tír seo ag an am go gearrthéarmach nó, b'fhéidir go fadtéarmach. Luaim an Frithdhúnadh in 1913, bunú na nÓglach, Arm Cathartha na hÉireann nó Chumann na mBan, nó a leithéid, mar aon le Cogadh na nDúchrónach, an Cogadh Cathartha agus, fiú amháin, bunú an dá stát sa tír seo. Is trua gur ghlac an Rialtas an cinneadh moill bhreise a chur leis seo mar is an t-aon rud atá á rá aige ná go gcuirfear moill bliana air seachas go bhfuil sé ag tarlú i mbliana.

Beidh sé spéisiúil, má tá vóta air seo, maidir le roinnt daoine a bhí sa Seanad nuair a caitheadh an vóta an uair dheireanach agus féachaint ar an tslí a chaithfidh siad an vóta anseo. Bhí roinnt acu sa Rialtas ag an am agus nach bhfuil sa Rialtas anois agus roinnt eile acu ag an am sa Fhreasúra ag tabhairt tacaíocht don Bhille atá sa Rialtas anois. Beidh mé ag féachaint air sin.

Amendment put.

21 October 2021

An Ceann Comhairle: In accordance with Standing Order 80(2), the division is postponed until the weekly division time in the week after next.

The Dáil adjourned at 9.40 p.m. until 2 p.m. on Tuesday, 2 November 2021.