



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

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

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Dé Máirt, 16 Samhain 2021

Tuesday, 16 November 2021

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

Paidir.

Prayer.

Gnó na Dála - Business of Dáil

An Ceann Comhairle: Members and all in attendance are asked to exercise personal responsibility in respect of protecting yourselves and others from the risk of contracting Covid-19. Members are strongly advised to practise good hand hygiene and to observe the chequerboard seating arrangement. They should also maintain an appropriate level of social distancing during and after this sitting. Masks, preferably of a medical grade, should be worn at all times during the sitting except when speaking. I ask for Members' full co-operation, as usual, in this regard.

Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The need to build capacity in our hospitals has never been more urgent. Decades of bad government policy meant that our health service was at breaking point before we ever heard of Covid-19. Now we face the most serious health emergency of a lifetime. However, despite what the past 18 months have taught us, there is a real absence of urgency and planning from the Government. We need more beds and staff. We must dramatically improve diagnostic and theatre capacity. Incredibly, however, the Government has waited until the middle of November to come forward with its winter plan for the health service.

As far back as July, Sinn Féin and others said there was no time to wait. We called for preparations for winter to start at that point and urgently. We drafted a plan, sent it to the Minister for Health, Deputy Stephen Donnelly, and we were ignored. The Government's plan does not go far enough. In fact, it is built on the failures of the recent budget. Like the budget, the plan does not provide for one additional acute bed beyond what was already committed, nor has it provided the increase in intensive care unit, ICU, beds needed to meet this emergency. Front-line staff have been left outside hospitals protesting over unsafe staffing levels, but the plan does nothing to improve recruitment for the health service, where it can take up to six months to recruit a nurse and a year and more to recruit a consultant. How can that be justified? My colleague, Deputy Cullinane, has met with hospital managers in Cork, Sligo, Galway and beyond,

all of whom have capital requests lodged for months. They are left to wait. This means that badly-needed 50- to 100-bed expansions are delayed indefinitely. The capital approvals process does not work. It is simply too slow.

Even if we had not been hit by a pandemic, the Government's plan falls far short of what is needed to meet the challenge faced by hospitals even in a normal year. This should have been a plan for real progress and ambition. Instead, it is a plan for our creaking hospitals to stand still. The price for this lack of planning and urgency will be paid by patients left to wait on trolleys in hospital corridors. By the way, there are 409 such patients on trolleys today. It will be paid by children with scoliosis and other conditions crying out for procedures that would change their lives. It will also be paid by front-line healthcare workers, who are denied the resources to do their jobs and are left to work in stress cauldron conditions. Ní théann plean an gheimhridh sách fada. Is é anois an t-am chun an cúram sláinte a fháil i gceart. Tá níos mó leapacha agus níos mó foirne ag teastáil sa tseirbhís sláinte uainn. Teastaíonn práinn agus seachadadh uainn. We need a big step forward from Government and we need a real change. Does the Taoiseach accept the urgent need to significantly ramp up the number of beds in the system? Will he immediately address the bottlenecks in the capital approvals process so that those hospitals can press ahead with their expansions? Will he act on the call made by the Irish Medical Organisation, IMO to cut the extraordinary time taken to recruit healthcare staff?

The Taoiseach: Ní aontaím leis an Teachta ó thaobh an plean atá foilsithe ag an Aire, An Teachta Donnelly, mar is léir gur plean cuimsitheach é. Caithfear é a chur i gcomhthéacs an plean a bhí againn anuraidh ina raibh an-chuid áiseanna agus airgid curtha ar fáil do na hospidéal ach go háirithe agus na seirbhísí sláinte go hiomlán. Diaidh ar ndiaidh, tá níos mó leapacha againn anois agus tá i bhfad níos mó daoine ag obair sa tseirbhís ná mar a bhí. Is léir go bhfuil dul chun cinn le feiceáil ach, dar ndóigh, tá dúshlán an-mhór amach romhainn, ní hamháin ó thaobh na paindéime de ach tá an daonra ag dul in airde agus tá brú faoi leith ar na daoine atá ag obair laistigh den tseirbhís.

I thank the Deputy for her question, but to be fair by comparison with previous winter initiative plans - €40 million in 2016, €40 million again in 2017, €10 million in 2018 and €10 million in 2019 - last year's winter initiative plan was €600 million. That went into the base and underpins the efforts we make this year. That €600 million along with additional funding has produced 800 non-ICU acute beds, which is the largest ever. By the end of the year, that will go up to approximately, 950, which I would say is the largest increase in hospital beds in decades, and certainly in the history of the HSE. We want to do more on acute beds in 2022. A further 205 beds in 2022 are committed to and funded, and any additionality that can be brought on stream will be brought on stream.

I spoke at a recent Cabinet health sub-committee meeting. I fully understand the issue relating to capital approvals and I have asked for that to be accelerated. I have spoken to the HSE about that. We will work with the HSE in respect of capital approvals to get new elective facilities, in particular, delivered as fast as we can. In Ireland, large infrastructural projects, be they on hospitals, road or rail, simply take too long. We have to go through all the planning processes, all the conditions and so on, but it is simply taking too long to get large projects done, and I am determined that major healthcare capital projects will get done much faster.

The winter plan is essentially focusing on a core objective of emergency department avoidance by treating people at home or in the community and by allowing them to return home quickly following hospitalisation. Those initiatives include GP liaison nurses to manage direct

referrals from GPs to emergency departments; geriatric community support; enhancement and expansion of frailty intervention therapy teams models; community response teams, involving nursing and therapies in the community; community respiratory admission avoidance teams; expansion of the National Ambulance Service Pathfinder initiative; additional home support hours; and COPD outreach teams. We want to get to people before they are admitted to hospital in the first place and then, within the hospital, to have far better flows than was historically the case. That was achieved last year through a record 5 million home care hours that were provided.

The challenge facing us this year is not funding or resources, but rather getting the workers in sufficient numbers in the country to take up posts as home carers. That is a challenge. We have recruited 4,462 whole-time equivalents in 2021. Last year, it was 6,357 extra whole-time equivalents, so that means approximately 11,000 extra whole-time equivalents recruited in the guts of two years. Again, I have no issue with accelerating the recruitment processes. The funding is there. In fact, more funding was provided, meaning additional people could have been recruited if the people had been there.

An Ceann Comhairle: The time is up.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: As ever with the Taoiseach's Government, it is a case of too little and too late. The middle of November is not the time to produce the winter emergency plan, with the greatest of respect to all involved. That work should have been done in the summer. The facts are that the mistake made at budget time, where not one additional acute inpatient or community bed beyond what had been previously committed to was budgeted for, has been repeated in the winter plan. Resources and money are not everything but if he speaks to anybody working in any hospital across the State, they will give him chapter and verse as to how stretched they are and refer to the fact that resources are lacking. We need more beds, including more acute beds and ICU capacity.

We also need the capital approvals process to be streamlined. The resources held back include, for example, 96 beds for Limerick, 50 beds for Sligo, 50 beds for Cork and I could go on and on. Similarly, on the recruitment process, would the Taoiseach believe me if I told him the average recruitment time for a consultant is 562 days? It is six months for a nurse. Hospital managers across the State know this is ludicrous. This is a bureaucratic nightmare; Orwellian in its proportions.

An Ceann Comhairle: Time is up.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Rather than the Taoiseach simply expressing interest or concern in this, it is his job to ensure this is sorted and these bottlenecks caused by excessive bureaucracy can be cut.

An Ceann Comhairle: Time is up, Deputy.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: There is a lack of capacity in hospitals.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy is way over her time. Please, Deputy.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I reiterate to the Taoiseach that the funds and resources must be made available. He has failed in that regard. It is astonishing stuff.

The Taoiseach: Since I became Taoiseach we have had record recruitment to the health

service and record capital funding and beds provided. That is not enough and I am not resting on that. I want to do more. I want to accelerate capital programmes. In some cases, proposals have not come from certain hospital groups.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Is there an example?

The Taoiseach: I met Cork consultants, who were taken aback when we said funding was available if they wanted to increase bed capacity in the short term. We are there to respond as quickly as possible.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Sorry, who was-----

The Taoiseach: I made my point and instanced Cork. What tends to happen is working parties are set up and various consultants can have different views as to where particular elective facilities are to be located. They all have preferred options and there is too much analysis, which leads to a degree of paralysis. That is before it ever gets to the Department. That is something I want to cut through and we are going to cut through it to get badly needed facilities done. There will be 1,000 beds provided, more or less, by the end of this year. It is the largest number ever and the Deputy cannot ignore that. That is a fact. The money is there to recruit more than the numbers that have been recruited. I want to accelerate the recruitment process.

An Ceann Comhairle: Time is up.

The Taoiseach: If we add this recruitment to what was recruited for the vaccination and testing programmes, the figure is enormous, to be fair to the HSE.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The Taoiseach should be clear. Which hospital was it?

The Taoiseach: We should give them credit.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Which hospital?

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Catherine Murphy.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: People around the country are deeply concerned today. They are worried about the impact of the virus on their health, jobs, children's education and communities. They wonder if the small measure of normality that had returned in recent weeks is being snatched away and, if so, for how long. They are deeply concerned about the ability of our overburdened healthcare system to cope with the onslaught of cases. They wonder why, given the scale of the crisis in our hospitals, the HSE has yet to deliver the 350 hospital beds that were promised for ICUs.

The people are losing faith in the Government's ability to manage the response to the pandemic. They are concerned about the indecision and delay in the Government's response. Antigen testing has been promised for months but has yet to materialise. Ventilation has never been a priority, despite this being an airborne disease and ventilation being among the best weapons in the fight to suppress its transmission.

The roll-out of boosters has been painfully slow with little clarity on timelines for when the various cohorts will receive it. At the start of the crisis, Mike Ryan of the WHO gave some sage advice. He said, "speed trumps perfection" and "perfection is the enemy of the good when it comes to emergency management". That lesson seems to have been lost. Simple and effec-

tive measures, like antigen testing at schools, have not yet been rolled out. The overwhelming evidence that boosters would be required as part of the mitigation strategy has not been acted upon swiftly.

The Taoiseach and the Government have consistently highlighted personal responsibility and have said the onus is on people to limit their contacts and act responsibly, and that is certainly true. However, he has consistently downplayed the State's responsibility to manage the overarching response. Individuals cannot authorise antigen testing in schools, organise subsidies for antigen testing or institute a nationwide booster campaign. Individuals cannot mandate vaccination guidelines for workplaces or air purification systems in schools. Individuals cannot deliver additional hospital beds. Individuals cannot reintroduce the pandemic unemployment payment, PUP, for those who are likely to lose their jobs, even temporarily. All this work must be done by the Government. The Government has been sadly lacking and has taken its eye off the ball.

When will the booster campaign be scaled up? Will the Taoiseach give specific dates as to when each cohort will be dealt with? Why has it taken so long to roll out antigen testing, which is a no-brainer? The Taoiseach has failed to prioritise ventilation. When will he redress that? Will the PUP be reintroduced for people who lose their jobs?

The Taoiseach: I disagree with the Deputy's analysis of the country and the Government's performance in relation to Covid-19 since the onset of the pandemic. For instance, one key aspect has been the vaccination programme, which has been one of the most successful across the world in terms of speed, efficiency and effectiveness. About 90% of those over 12-year-olds are now fully vaccinated. That is no mean achievement and it is a tribute to the public, the robust debate within public media and those inside and outside officialdom who have offered opinions.

We reopened the economy substantively from March onwards, which has had a bounceback and has brought thousands of people back to work. That is a positive. We supported companies through the employment wage subsidy scheme, EWSS, the Covid restrictions support scheme, CRSS, the rates relief, and the variety of other supports we provided, including the warehousing of tax for businesses. This meant we kept thousands of businesses viable so that when we did reopen, they could start from a reasonable platform. That is something that should not be underestimated. If you talk to people, they will acknowledge that. The economic platform was very significant. We took a decision to borrow to underpin the economy in the midst of a one in 100 year event, which has borne fruit. That said, there has been a cost to the reopening. When the opportunities for socialisation are created, there will be opportunities for the virus to spread, particularly a transmissible variant of the virus that is the Delta variant. Therefore, there is a balance needed all the time and the Government has taken decisions in that regard.

On the booster programme, the National Immunisation Advisory Committee, NIAC, provides public health advice, which I am sure the Deputy will accept and has accepted from the outset, on the utilisation of vaccines, especially with regard to the booster vaccination. There have been various timelines at which that advice has been given to the HSE on the booster campaign. The booster start date for residents at long-term care facilities aged 65 years and older, of whom there is an estimated cohort size of about 30,000, was 4 October. The end date for cohort eligibility is March 2022, because the five- to six-month interval of the application of that has to be factored in. The booster programme for that group is expected to be substantially completed by the end of October. Residents of long-term care facilities under the age of 65, of whom there are approximately 18,000, are expected to have received a booster vaccine by early

to mid-December. The programme for the cohort comprising healthcare workers aged under 60 years, including those working in long-term care facilities, is expected to be completed by the end of December. There are approximately 305,000 in this cohort. There are approximately 161,000 people in the cohort aged 80 and older. Administration of a booster to this group will be substantially completed by mid-November. Some of these will not be eligible until March 2022. We are looking at the end of November or early December for substantial completion in respect of the cohort aged 70 to 79. We are looking at the end of December for those aged 60 to 69. A booster vaccination campaign for the cohort aged 50 to 59 will now be operationalised. I just got that advice yesterday evening. I also got further advice regarding those who are at a very high risk, including four in seven of the immunocompromised and those with underlying conditions.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: There is no doubt the vaccination programme was a real success, but we now know a third stage is required. People in their 70s are asking me when they are likely to even get notified of a date. Has the Government consulted the GPs on their ability to deliver this programme? The GPs are very busy at the moment as there are many things circulating in the community. Do they have the ability to do this? If not, can people be directed to vaccination centres? There is a real problem with people who got the AstraZeneca vaccine, particularly those in their 60s, because there was a 12-week gap between the first dose and the second. This means that some people did not receive their second vaccination until August.

We seem to be moving from wave to wave. The economy has been reopened but some of it has been closed down again. What is going to happen to the people who will be worried about losing their jobs this weekend? The pandemic unemployment payment is being reduced today. People will not be able to get on it again. That simply must be addressed. The likes of the national immunisation advisory committee, NIAC, have been very slow to respond to issues, including the issue of healthcare workers. Some 1,800 such workers were out sick or were self-isolating. There needs to be greater speed in giving advice when all the evidence elsewhere shows that a booster programme needs to be delivered quickly.

The Taoiseach: In fairness, I just outlined the timelines the Deputy asked me for in respect of the booster programme. If you add it all up, including those four in seven and all people aged 50 to 59, there are now between 1.97 million and 2.2 million eligible under the NIAC advice. Those figures come from the HSE. There are timelines to consider with regard to when people got their second doses. That will be a key factor. It is not as simple as considering how the first and second doses, particularly the first, were administered and the original initiation of the primary vaccination programme. GPs, pharmacies and vaccination centres will be used for the booster vaccination programme.

With regard to antigen testing protocols, agreement between the Departments of Health and Education is very close. Again, the biggest issue arising during the presentation yesterday evening and our greatest concern is non-Covid respiratory illness, especially in paediatric medicine. The most dominant issue in healthcare as regards admissions to hospital among children has been respiratory syncytial virus, RSV, and other non-Covid illnesses. I am always surprised there has not as much focus on that in public debate. It is a very significant issue for parents of children.

Deputy Paul Murphy: We are again in a crisis as regards Covid. The Government needs to acknowledge that. Our ICU capacity is in danger of being overrun. There is also the threat of Covid spreading into nursing homes yet again. The Government is once again sleepwalking

us into lockdown at Christmas. It is Groundhog Day. What is most surprising is the Government is reported to have been taken aback at the level of Covid-related hospitalisations and the situation we are now in.

Why on earth is the Taoiseach surprised? Look at the decisions his Government made that brought us to this point. After more than a year and a half of a pandemic, it has failed to increase our ICU capacity to the levels that are necessary. We are sitting at little more than half the average for the OECD and, at the rate the Government is going, it will take 13 years to reach the OECD average. After the first Covid wave passed, the private hospital capacity was returned to the for-profit sector, and now it is to be presumed the State will pay over the odds to lease them again instead of taking them permanently into the public system and using them to build a properly funded, quality, one-tier national health service.

Covid-19 is an airborne virus but the Government has repeatedly downplayed the crucial role played by poor ventilation in spreading it. We are 21 months into an airborne pandemic and there are still no legally enforceable, measurable standards for indoor air quality. It is quite incredible when you think about it. The Government refused to introduce anything other than guidance to ensure schools, workplaces and public transport are well ventilated or, where necessary, have HEPA filters, then forced people back into poorly ventilated workplaces and classrooms and onto crowded public transport. Incredibly, after refusing to supply a single HEPA filter to our schools, the Government then abandoned contact tracing and testing in our schools entirely. And so here we are again, utterly predictable and utterly disastrous. To avoid lockdowns it is not enough to rely on the vaccines, crucial though they are. We need a vaccines-plus strategy, based on the principles of prevent, vaccinate and control. We need ventilation, vaccination and vastly increased levels of testing.

At this late stage, will the Government finally take action to avoid the current crisis becoming a calamity? Will it commit to providing antigen tests for free to those who want them, as is done with the National Health Service, NHS, in Britain, to encourage widespread and regular use through the population, and expand PCR testing capacity, which is overwhelmed? Will the Government deal with the crucial issue of ventilation and follow the example of Belgium by saying every workplace needs a CO2 monitor and that CO2 must be kept at safe levels? Finally, will it make our schools as safe as possible for pupils and teachers? Will it reintroduce contact tracing and testing immediately and follow the example of Germany by introducing HEPA filters in all our classrooms?

The Taoiseach: Our public health advice has been consistent from the get-go that our schools are safe places in respect of the management of Covid-19. A total of 35,000 CO2 monitors have been issued to our schools and they are in use. As I have said, the advice is that if children are symptomatic, in terms of colds or whatever, they should not be sent to school. The biggest issue facing children is the respiratory syncytial virus, RSV, a non-Covid respiratory illness. Those are the facts right now in respect of the challenges that face our healthcare system in regard to paediatrics. It is serious where we are. Given the brief nature of this interchange, I will expand later on the situation that faces us.

The Deputy opposes the extension of the legislation that will enable us to continue with our management of Covid-19. I see an entire inconsistency in his approach, particularly given he was the strongest advocate in the House for zero Covid from the outset and he wanted a zero Covid regime for a long time. He went silent on that when it suited him.

We are doing 200,000 PCR tests a week. We have one of the better PCR systems in Europe and globally in terms of the volume *per capita* and the level of testing we are doing. We have also expanded antigen testing in different locations. Substantial work is required on the communications of antigen testing. The public health advice, as we know, from the outset has not been enthusiastic about antigen testing. We formed an expert advisory group, which has recommended a series of steps to be taken in respect of antigen, but the public health advice is still cautious in respect of it. I support the further roll-out of antigen testing, but I accept a strong communications programme is required on how, when and why the use of antigen testing is important. The use of antigen testing has been expanded in respect of close contacts and so forth. Tests are being issued and more initiatives will be taken regarding antigen testing, which the Minister will deal with shortly.

In that context, I do not accept the Deputy's criticisms as being valid on testing. In fact, we have a very robust testing system. The issue is that when we open society, socialisation increases and that creates opportunities for a variant as transmissible as Delta. We had, however, to give working people, and people generally, the opportunity to go back to work. By reopening the economy, we have created thousands of jobs. The situation now, however, as we move into the winter and with the seasonality that applies to this virus, is one where we need to take this pending threat very seriously. Collectively, as a society, we need to reduce socialisation and the Government has announced, and will be announcing, steps in respect of specific measures to add to the overall objective of reducing socialisation and contacts and rolling out the booster programme, along with other initiatives.

An Ceann Comhairle: We are way over time. I call Deputy Paul Murphy.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Someone said to me earlier that Leaders' Questions should be re-named Leaders' obfuscations. I asked three simple questions. I did not get an answer to a single one of them. Instead, I got a repetition of what is just a line that schools are safe places. Is the Taoiseach seriously saying that no transmission of Covid-19 takes place in schools? Is that why he is saying that schools are safe places? That is not what the international evidence suggests. There are children in our hospitals now with Covid-19. That is what the figures demonstrate.

The Taoiseach suggested that it is some kind of revelation that when we reopen that there will be increased socialisation and that then, of course, we will have an increased spread of the virus. Absolutely, but why did the Government then not do what was necessary to make schools, workplaces and public transport safe? That is what my questions relate to. Will the Government introduce free antigen testing? Will the Government introduce high efficiency particulate air, HEPA, filters into our schools? Will the Government also finally recognise the role that the airborne transmission of Covid-19 plays and introduce legislation to require clean air for everybody?

It is not even necessary for the Government to write new legislation. We did that in the summertime in the form of the Workplace Ventilation (Covid-19) Bill 2021. The Government will not even have to use its time to do that, because we are going to use our time next week to bring this Bill forward to ensure that everybody in a school or a workplace has a right to clean air and that-----

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

Deputy Paul Murphy: -----if a certain level of carbon dioxide is exceeded, over 900 ppm,

then action must be taken. Will the Taoiseach commit to supporting that Bill, even though the Government did not introduce it, to enable people to have safe air and to stop transmission in this way?

The Taoiseach: Why does Deputy Paul Murphy ignore public health advice and deny it every time he comes in here talking about schools? I did not repeat a line. I gave a line that we have received in respect of consistent public health advice, but he continually ignores it because it suits his propaganda approach to all of this.

Deputy Paul Murphy: What does the Taoiseach mean by that?

The Taoiseach: The Deputy does not look at this issue from a purely public health perspective. He looks at it from a party or movement advancement perspective. That is my genuine take-away. The Deputy was an advocate for zero Covid for a long time, but now he will not even facilitate the extension of legislation to give capacity for Government to do things, if necessary, in the middle of an emergency. He objects to that and makes a big deal about objecting to that.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Will the Taoiseach answer my questions, please?

Deputy Matt Carthy: He does not answer the questions.

The Taoiseach: I am answering the Deputy's questions. The Deputy ridicules the idea that public health advice in respect of schools is valid. He has just ridiculed that.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I ask the Taoiseach to answer the questions, thanks.

The Taoiseach: Regarding another of the Deputy's points, he does not seem to accept at all-----

Deputy Paul Murphy: I ask the Taoiseach to answer the questions, if he does not mind, because there are only 15 seconds left.

The Taoiseach: I have been in paediatric hospitals. I was in Clonmel hospital two weeks ago-----

Deputy Paul Murphy: There were three questions and he has not answered them.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Murphy, please. The Taoiseach without interruption.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Not a single question answered.

The Taoiseach: In the paediatric ward in Clonmel hospital, I was told that the issue was respiratory syncytial virus, RSV, in respect of admissions into that ward and the pressure that the ward was under, and other respiratory illnesses. Turning to workplaces, the Deputy knows that we have worked with the trade union movement and the employer organisations-----

Deputy Paul Murphy: Just the questions, if the Taoiseach would not mind. Please.

The Taoiseach: ----- in respect of the return-to-work safety protocols.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Please, I am trying to get answers here.

The Taoiseach: Even as we speak, about 50% have returned. Huge efforts have been made

in respect of workplaces to make them safe-----

Deputy Paul Murphy: The Taoiseach said he was going to answer the questions and he has not answered any of them.

The Taoiseach: In respect of ventilation in schools, I have said that 35,000 carbon dioxide monitors were distributed to schools up and down the country to monitor air quality and ensure that it was okay.

An Ceann Comhairle: Please, we are way over time.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Not a single question answered. The Taoiseach said that he was answering the questions and he did not answer a single question.

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Berry.

Deputy Cathal Berry: It is no secret that we are in the midst of another wave of Covid-19. The peak of that wave is some still distance away. It is also no secret that our hospital system is under severe strain and pressure at the moment. That is being felt by our front-line healthcare professionals, including our doctors, nurses, paramedics, healthcare assistants and everybody else involved. They have been fighting this virus for almost two years now. They are completely exhausted, burned out and flat to the mat. They are used to making life-and-death decisions about their patients but this is the first time that many of them are making life-and-death decisions about themselves. Even showing up for a shift in a hospital is exposing them to significant danger, suffering and distress.

There was a lot of talk over the summer about providing a recognition package to our front-line healthcare workers for the extra stress they are under but that talk has dissipated since. There was, for instance, mention of a small *ex gratia* payment and additional leave to assist in their recovery. There was even talk of an additional bank holiday to recognise the contribution of essential workers across the country and wider society. The morale of healthcare workers is in their boots and they could do with a lift or a boost. Can the Taoiseach give this House any update on that process? When are we going to get a recognition package for our front-line healthcare workers, something other than just a round of applause?

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for his question. I acknowledge what he has said and agree with it. We owe an awful lot to the front-line healthcare staff for their management of the pandemic. The most important thing people can do now to help our acute services and those who work in them is to get vaccinated if they have not done so. I urge people, without judgment, to consider getting vaccinated. The good news is that up to 1,500 people are now turning up daily for their first vaccination, which shows the campaigns are beginning to penetrate and people are beginning to respond. That is important. There is evidence that some people have missed their dates for the booster vaccination. I urge people who are eligible for the booster and get a date for its administration to get it in a timely manner.

There have been discussions on the recognition of healthcare workers at the Labour Employer Economic Forum, which involves trade unions, including the Irish Congress of Trade Unions, and IBEC. We are considering the best and most effective way we can recognise workers and their contribution during the pandemic, specifically front-line healthcare workers who have been on the front line and have faced the gravity and the real impact of the coronavirus on people in hospital wards and intensive care units. It has meant enormous trauma for many

people working on the front line. I would like to bring that consideration to a conclusion as soon as possible. Some more consideration is being given at Government level in respect of the measures we will take. We accept there is a need to recognise the contribution that has been made.

We received a presentation from the HSE yesterday evening. The Deputy is correct in his analysis about the peak of this wave of the pandemic. The original model suggested infection would peak in the third or fourth week of November. The suggestion now is that the peak will be later, in December. There is uncertainty around all of these predictions and modelling, as there must be. It will never be exactly precise. The impact is being felt by healthcare workers right now. We must do everything we possibly can to alleviate that pressure between now and the end of the year. The measures we have decided to take today will help in that regard but, collectively, we must reduce our socialisation and the amount of time we congregate. We must take up the vaccination when we are offered it. All of that will help to reduce the pressures on our hospital system. The presentation we received from the HSE yesterday evening was quite grim in respect of the challenges ahead and the pressures on the hospital system right now because unlike the first and second wave of the pandemic when we closed everything down, we have not done that on this occasion. There will be pressure to focus on the Covid-19 patients as the various scenarios that have been modelled play out.

Deputy Cathal Berry: I agree with the Taoiseach's views on vaccination and boosters, but my question is on whether we are likely to have a decision this side of Christmas on a recognition package for our front-line professional healthcare workers.

The second group of people I would not like to see ignored or forgotten about comprises the voluntary, unpaid workers who are working in testing and vaccination centres all around the country. The Tánaiste mentioned consideration being given to a small honorarium as a small token of appreciation, but there was also talk of a signed and framed certificate from an tUachtarán and perhaps an invitation to visit Leinster House or Áras an Uachtaráin for the volunteers and their families. I would be grateful to hear the Taoiseach's thoughts on that.

The Taoiseach: That is a very good suggestion. We thank the Deputy for volunteering for the vaccination programme early on. Others in the House also volunteered in various capacities to help out in their local communities. The voluntary, unpaid workers at the vaccination centres played a very significant role. They were partly responsible for creating the ethos of a community-based response to this one-in-100-year event. We have to keep reminding ourselves that this is a pandemic of a kind that has not been experienced since the early part of last century. There are many uncertainties attached to it. As a country, we must work collectively on it. As an Oireachtas, we must do so too.

An tOrd Gnó - Order of Business

An Ceann Comhairle: The report of the Business Committee is taken as read. Are the proposed arrangements for this week's business agreed to?

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: They are not agreed. At the meeting of the Business Committee, a number of opposition parties requested that the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications, Deputy Eamon Ryan, make a statement to the House on the absence of a transparent public appointments process for the members of the Climate Change

Advisory Council. The Taoiseach utterly failed in his responsibility to deal with Fine Gael in the Katherine Zappone affair. Here we are again in that he is repeatedly refusing to demand that the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, explain to this House why there was no transparent public appointments process for members of the climate council. I ask him not to rhyme off their CVs again. Nobody is questioning their skills or capacity; it is the lack of a transparent appointments process that brings them into dispute. This is utterly wrong and unfair to the members of the council. The council has a responsibility to hold the Government to account independently. The Taoiseach is bringing it into disrepute in this regard by failing to have a proper appointments process.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: In advance of Sunday's family farm protest about farm incomes, it is extremely disappointing that the Taoiseach and the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine have failed again, despite calls from the likes of Deputy Michael Collins and others in our group who have sought a debate in his House on the national herd. The Taoiseach has brought a new term into the language: "stabilisation of the herd". This is more gobbledygook. What he means is the cut to the national herd. Why would he not call it as it is? People are sick to death of the phrase "stabilisation of the national herd". On the one hand, the Taoiseach and his Minister have said agriculture is the cause of the problem, but on the other hand, they will not admit their solution and that of their colleagues in the Green Party and Fine Gael is a cut to the national herd, which is a direct attack on family farm incomes. This is why thousands of people are going to come to Dublin on Sunday. Will the Taoiseach be there on Sunday to listen to them and hear what they have to say?

The Taoiseach: First, on Deputy Mac Lochlainn's point, I find it difficult to accept the bonafides of his proposition. I do not believe he is interested in transparency at all. He gave the game away in saying I am not supposed to recite the CVs of the members because it does not matter whether they are qualified. That seems to be his implication.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: The process-----

The Taoiseach: With the greatest of respect, the Deputy's party has never observed process when it comes to appointing people when in government.

Deputy Matt Carthy: That is not true.

The Taoiseach: It is true. I can give chapter and verse on it if the Deputies want me to go through all the appointments Sinn Féin makes. All of the appointments-----

(Interruptions).

The Taoiseach: -----are characterised by the unusual coincidence that the appointees are party colleagues. The fact that people are qualified is very important. The Government has decided in respect of these members of the climate council-----

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: There is no process. It does not matter about the process, then.

The Taoiseach: That is the process, by the way. The Government is entitled to make decisions in respect of appointing people to very important-----

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: Entitled to-----

The Taoiseach: That is why governments are elected in the first instance. I genuinely think that what the Deputy is really about is-----

Deputy Matt Carthy: So there will be no debate.

The Taoiseach: -----undermining the Government every chance he can get and he is endeavouring to undermine the individuals. He said to ignore their qualifications, but their qualifications are important because they give the rationale for their appointment to the climate change council. That is why I itemised them last week for the Deputy.

Deputy Matt Carthy: They are friends of Deputy Eamon Ryan.

The Taoiseach: He obviously did not like being told how qualified they are.

An Ceann Comhairle: I will now put the question-----

The Taoiseach: In terms of Deputy Healy-Rae-----

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: The Taoiseach forgot about family farms by not getting-----

The Taoiseach: Sure I did of course.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: The Taoiseach let the cat out of the bag there. He thinks a lot about agriculture-----

The Taoiseach: The cat is an essential part of the family farm, as the Deputy knows. In any event-----

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: My God, if that is the best you can come out with-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy, please.

The Taoiseach: The Minister, Deputy McConalogue, has travelled to almost every mart in the country. He has met farmers straight up - those who might agree with him and those who might disagree with him. The feedback we have received is that people have admired his honesty, his forthrightness and his ability to be accessible to farmers the length and breadth of the country. He is not going to shout out loud and so on like perhaps can be the Deputy's wont from time to time in terms of using colourful phrases and so on like that-----

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: I am not-----

The Taoiseach: -----but he is sincere about the issue of making sure we have sustainable farming into the future. That is the correct approach to take. In terms of the next decade and how we position food production in this country in a way that manages to reduce the carbon emissions, I think we have created a roadmap now for climate change and for sustainable farming that makes sense. I am not clear on the Deputy's position on climate change at all. I know some people in the Rural Independent Group seem to be against the very concept of climate change and seem to be in climate denial. I am not saying the Deputy is, but I am saying others in his group are.

(Interruptions).

The Taoiseach: They do not believe in the climate change view.

16 November 2021

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: I live in the real world. Why are thousands of people-----

The Taoiseach: What is the real world? The real world is the world of climate change.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: Why are thousands of people coming to Dublin on Sunday?

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

The Taoiseach: Because-----

An Ceann Comhairle: We have to move on.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: Because they are worried.

The Taoiseach: I have no issue with people being worried but I can assure the Deputy we need to be balanced in how we comment on it as well and not be given to sloganeering and making assertions that are not true. I have seen all his presentations on it.

Question put: "That the proposal for this week's business be agreed to."

<i>The Dáil divided: Tá, 23; Níl, 16; Staon, 0.</i>		
<i>Tá</i>	<i>Níl</i>	<i>Staon</i>
<i>Brophy, Colm.</i>	<i>Buckley, Pat.</i>	
<i>Bruton, Richard.</i>	<i>Cairns, Holly.</i>	
<i>Carey, Joe.</i>	<i>Clarke, Sorca.</i>	
<i>Chambers, Jack.</i>	<i>Collins, Michael.</i>	
<i>Collins, Niall.</i>	<i>Harkin, Marian.</i>	
<i>Dillon, Alan.</i>	<i>Healy-Rae, Michael.</i>	
<i>Duffy, Francis Noel.</i>	<i>Kelly, Alan.</i>	
<i>Fitzpatrick, Peter.</i>	<i>Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.</i>	
<i>Foley, Norma.</i>	<i>McDonald, Mary Lou.</i>	
<i>Griffin, Brendan.</i>	<i>Mitchell, Denise.</i>	
<i>Higgins, Emer.</i>	<i>Murphy, Catherine.</i>	
<i>MacSharry, Marc.</i>	<i>Pringle, Thomas.</i>	
<i>Madigan, Josepha.</i>	<i>Quinlivan, Maurice.</i>	
<i>Martin, Micheál.</i>	<i>Ryan, Patricia.</i>	
<i>O'Brien, Joe.</i>	<i>Sherlock, Sean.</i>	
<i>O'Connor, James.</i>	<i>Smith, Bríd.</i>	
<i>O'Donnell, Kieran.</i>		
<i>O'Sullivan, Christopher.</i>		
<i>O'Sullivan, Pádraig.</i>		
<i>Ó Cathasaigh, Marc.</i>		
<i>Ó Cuív, Éamon.</i>		
<i>Shanahan, Matt.</i>		
<i>Troy, Robert.</i>		

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

chlainn and Denise Mitchell.

Question declared carried.

Sitting suspended at 3 p.m. and resumed at 3.12 p.m.

An Ceann Comhairle: Members have one minute each, at most, to put a question and there is one minute, at most, for a reply. I intend to adhere to that.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Insurance companies in Ireland are still ripping off their customers. The industry pocketed huge savings during the pandemic. In 2020, the cost of claims to insurance companies fell by 20%, but the price of premiums for customers fell by only 7% and the average rebate was a mere €17. The cost of claims is set to fall again this year but it is very clear insurance companies cannot be trusted to do the right thing and will have to be forced to pass savings to hard-pressed customers. Legislation introduced by my colleague Deputy Pearse Doherty requires insurers to pass savings to customers euro for euro, but the Government has blocked this legislation for nine months while also frustrating Sinn Féin's attempts to ban the loyalty penalty. The Government has let consumers down and the insurance industry off the hook. When will the Government end its blocking of Deputy Doherty's Bill and give ripped-off insurance customers a break?

The Taoiseach: The Government has a comprehensive programme relating to insurance reform, with the key objective of getting premiums lowered. I accept that the industry must do more to meet the needs of consumers and to get prices down. The Minister of State, Deputy Fleming, has outlined a range of initiatives that he is undertaking in respect of insurance reform and legislation. The Deputy will know about the Judicial Council and the work on awards being reduced. There has been a significant reduction in awards in the courts and that should lead to a reduction in the cost of premiums. It is something the Government will continue to focus on, as well as reform of the Personal Injuries Assessment Board, PIAB, system.

Deputy Alan Kelly: The Taoiseach will announce new measures this evening with regard to fighting Covid-19. It seems, unfortunately, we are going in a certain direction. I have a question about schools, about which I have a deep concern. The Taoiseach and I share the view that schools and early years education are a top priority. Owenabue school in the Taoiseach's constituency has told many of the parents of its children not to send the children to the school because it does not have enough teachers. I am hearing similar stories in this regard from all over the country. My wife is a teacher. Pressures are everywhere. There was a situation in my daughter's class recently where there was less than a handful of them in. Schools will fall over, so to speak. Given the complication RSV causes, will the Government consider prioritising front-line workers such as gardaí, retail workers, transport workers and, most of all, teachers, special needs assistants, SNAs, and early years workers for boosters, primarily so that the schools system does not fall over? I ask the Taoiseach to consider this seriously.

The Taoiseach: We are both agreed that throughout the pandemic we wanted to keep the schools open, basically for the health and well-being of children. Children are healthiest and it is best for their self-development when they are in a school setting with their friends. The public health advice is that schools are safe for children. On the wider issue of substitution, there is

a very good reason for teachers being out of school. The Minister has created additional panels of substitute teachers, far more than would normally be the case.

Deputy Alan Kelly: However, they are not there.

The Taoiseach: There are challenges, and I am not denying that for one moment.

Deputy Alan Kelly: Can we boost them?

The Taoiseach: Earlier I outlined the programme for the boosters. NIAC advises the Chief Medical Officer, CMO, who in turn advises the Minister in respect of who is eligible for a booster. It is an age cohort plus those with underlying conditions and those who are immunosuppressed. As of yesterday, those aged 50 and older are now eligible.

Deputy Holly Cairns: I know I do not need to convince the Taoiseach of the gender balance problem in Irish politics. Of the 18 Deputies representing our home county of Cork, I am the only woman and my colleague, Councillor Clare Claffey, is the only female councillor on Offaly County Council. If we are serious about increasing the number of women in Irish politics, we need to identify the barriers and remove them. The lack of any maternity or adoptive provisions is a glaringly obvious barrier. I first raised this with the Taoiseach in July of last year. In his response, he completely agreed with me and committed to finding a way for public representatives to take maternity and parental leave. Fifteen months later I stand before him again, but this time with a Bill in my hand which would extend maternity, parental and adoptive leave to local authority members throughout the country. Will the Taoiseach please tell me that I can count on him and his Government to support the Bill?

The Taoiseach: I see the need for the greater availability of maternity leave and paternity leave for public representatives more generally. In fairness, the Minister, Deputy McEntee, adopted a pioneering approach to that and the Government managed to facilitate it. Recently the Minister, Deputy Harris, took paternity leave, which is the correct and proper thing to do. I have not yet seen the Deputy's Bill.

Deputy Holly Cairns: I will leave it with the Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: We will give the Bill due consideration and will look at it in a constructive light. I would have thought that at local level there should be more flexibility to facilitate maternity leave for councillors.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: With the decision to impose a curfew after midnight on nightlife and the recommendations to work from home from Friday, many people who work in those areas or who depend on those areas for work will lose income and, in many cases, or lose their jobs outright. Against that background, it is completely unacceptable that today we should be reducing the pandemic unemployment payment, PUP. Not only should we not cut the PUP but also we should restore the PUP and income payments for those who will be significantly affected by this latest turn of events with Covid-19.

The Taoiseach: The decisions we will be announcing will not be very impactful on employment. Working from home, as a practice, has been demonstrated in earlier parts of the pandemic to be achievable with minimal impact on the economic performance and productivity. I acknowledge it will be challenging for some employers and SMEs in particular. I do not believe there will be reduced employment as a result of the working from home decision. Since

we reopened the economy and reopened society, all the feedback we have received has been on the number of vacancies that are not being filled. The consistent message from people in hospitality, personal services and a range of different employments is that they are finding it very difficult to recruit. Therefore, there are no plans to change the direction of travel in respect of the pandemic unemployment payment.

Deputy Matt Shanahan: During Leaders' Questions on 19 October, I questioned the Taoiseach on his commitment to deliver 24-7 cardiac care in the south-east region. He informed me then that recruitment was taking place to expand hours, that money was being provided, that service expansion was happening and that the service could build towards operating on a 24-7 basis. Further to responses to parliamentary questions on these issues, I can now confirm that no recruitment of cardiac technical personnel has taken place since 2018 no funding for cardiac expansion has occurred, and no increased nursing or radiography positions have been approved. In fact, the medical accreditations being requested for a new cardiology post are similar to asking a ministerial driver to provide Formula One racing experience, further designed to frustrate recruitment. I believe the Taoiseach's promises to the people of the south east to deliver a 24-7 service are being deliberately frustrated. What does he plan to do about it? I invite him to correct the record of the Dáil which he inadvertently misled.

The Taoiseach: On 19 October, we discussed the cardiac programme in Waterford. I received information from the Department of Health and the HSE which I related to the Deputy on that occasion. The funding has been provided. The policy decisions have been taken. I will check on what the Deputy has said today and will come back to him on it. The policy decision has been taken in respect of the expansion of the service and recruitment.

Deputy Matt Shanahan: The last recruitment was in 2018.

The Taoiseach: I am just telling the Deputy what the case is. More than 4,500 people have been recruited this year alone and 6,000 in the previous year

Deputy Matt Shanahan: Not for this service.

The Taoiseach: I will check that. They should be.

Deputy Matt Shanahan: The Taoiseach does not need to check it.

The Taoiseach: I have said we will go back to the-----

Deputy Michael Collins: Several concerned residents of Kinsale, Riverstick, Belgooly and surrounding areas have contacted me and staff in my office over the past 48 hours after it emerged that Coillte is planning to sell Ballymartle Woods. In an era when we are told we need to protect our environment and green spaces, why is Coillte, a State agency, proposing to sell these local woodlands? Many local residents use this amenity every day. Over the past 48 hours I have been told stories of the benefits of these woodlands which people use as a green space and as an amenity for walking and recreation. People find it good for their mental health and well-being. All have commented on the necessity to maintain as many green spaces in the west Cork area as possible. On behalf of the local residents, I ask the Taoiseach to intervene personally to stop Coillte from selling Ballymartle Woods and to retain these woodlands as a public amenity and green space.

The Taoiseach: I do not know whether the Deputy has spoken to Coillte about this. I will

certainly take it up. I do not believe we should be selling woodlands. I do not know the background to this or the circumstances. I will certainly follow it up with Coillte and will revert to the Deputy.

Deputy Thomas Pringle: Over recent months, I have been speaking to those in car dealerships in Donegal about problems they are facing. Because of the severe difficulties they are confronting with Brexit and the microchips shortage, car sales are in a perfect storm with lack of supply. Based on international reports, it is likely that the microchip shortage will last for the next year and possibly into 2023, which leads to the very real risk of job losses over the next six months if no action is taken. It will mean substantial job losses in every county in the country. Does the Government have any plans to implement a scheme to protect jobs in the car industry?

The Taoiseach: It is accepted there is a significant global supply chain issue with microchips, impacting car manufacturing and the supply of cars in the marketplace. We do not intervene in every sector in respect of what transpires in given market situations. When the Deputy talks of a scheme to protect jobs, is he saying it should be for the salespeople of a dealership or what is he proposing?

Deputy Thomas Pringle: Every dealership in the country is losing jobs.

The Taoiseach: If he forwards his ideas to me, we will look at them.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: Community employment schemes are designed to help those in long-term unemployment and as we know, they are absolutely brilliant for the community. There is a deep sense of frustration felt by community employment supervisors and assistant supervisors in trying to secure an occupational pension. Promises were made but I am afraid there has been no movement on this. My understanding is the State hires these supervisors and to all intents and purposes employs them.

It is my view that the State must accept a level of responsibility here. A resolution must be found without further delay. These are really hard-working people. I met some of the community employment supervisors at the weekend and it seems this process is going on and on. I ask the Taoiseach to find a solution and get this sorted.

The Taoiseach: The Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform and his officials have been involved in negotiations with those representing community employment supervisors. What was considered a breakthrough was arrived at in the matter, and it was a significant advance on anything achieved before in respect of that issue. I will revert to the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform and alert him to what the Deputy said. I thought the offer that had been made would bring this closer to a resolution.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: I will raise two related matters concerning Covid-19. There is a six-month interval between the second vaccination and the proposed booster. Has the Government considered asking the national immunisation advisory committee, NIAC, to see if the interval can be brought back to five months? It is officially six months but the committee indicated it will consider an interval of five months. The Taoiseach has already referenced a cohort, including those who got the AstraZeneca vaccine, and through no fault of their own they will get a booster much later than people who have got Pfizer, Moderna or Janssen shots.

There are 95 people on trolleys at University Hospital Limerick today, which is the highest number ever recorded. There are 45 people in the hospital with Covid-19 and nearly 30%, or

13, are in intensive care. I acknowledge the phenomenal work by staff at University Hospital Limerick. If they make a proposal for further funding under the winter plan, will it be granted?

An Ceann Comhairle: Time is up and the Deputy should only be asking one question.

The Taoiseach: We have received advice from NIAC, which has been the system from the outset in respect of recommendations on vaccination. The European Medicines Agency, EMA, is recommending the five to six-month interval and nothing lower than that. The EMA has recommended that anybody over 18 may get it. In addition to prior recommendations, NIAC has recommended a booster dose of an mRNA vaccine in order of priority for healthcare workers, those aged 16 to 59 years with underlying conditions as listed in table 5.a.2 of chapter 5.a of Covid-19 immunisation guidelines for Ireland, and all residents in long-term healthcare facilities and those aged 50 to 59 years. There are further issues in terms of----

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: I asked specifically about a five-month interval.

The Taoiseach: I know that. The intervals of five or six months are as recommended so far.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: Would the Taoiseach-----

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Alan Dillon.

Deputy Alan Dillon: I joined many nurses yesterday who were members of the Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation, INMO, at Mayo University Hospital as they took part in a lunchtime protest outside the hospital to highlight what they termed excessive workloads and staffing pressures. These nursing staff outlined that they are unable to take adequate breaks or use annual leave due to their excessive work conditions.

Despite formal grievances previously raised with the Saolta University Health Care Group, no improvements have been made to working conditions. From speaking with consultants, doctors, patients and everyone at Mayo University Hospital, the position has never seemed as bad as now. As someone who cares deeply about our hospital and the unwavering dedication of its staff, it pains me to say that. It is our hospital and it belongs to the people of Mayo and those it serves. The shocking stories of patient experiences I have heard through my office and from meeting constituents are infuriating. It is time for either an audit or review of Mayo University Hospital and for a special delivery unit to be put in place to ensure issues at the hospital can be addressed once and for all.

The Taoiseach: I take the points raised by the Deputy. The hospital currently employs staff of approximately 1,280.6 whole-time equivalents, with more than 200 additional contracted services staff. A significant overseas nursing recruitment campaign is being actively progressed by the Saolta University Health Care Group with the intention of having significant additional nursing resources coming into the service within the next three months. Interviews are ongoing and it is expected the first group of nurses from this process will start work in January 2022.

There were 55 positions approved for Mayo University Hospital, with 29 scheduled to arrive in January and 26 in March. In addition, 30 nursing staff are included in a current local recruitment campaign. It is hoped these will take up their positions in the next two months. These will include eight critical care staff and five senior nursing posts. The hospital has also increased its healthcare assistant staff by 70% and there have also been appointments to other grades.

An Ceann Comhairle: I am afraid time is up.

Deputy Martin Kenny: I raise today a consumer matter arising from Brexit. As the Taoiseach knows, many people at this time of year and throughout the pandemic have been ordering items online and having them delivered usually *through .ie* websites. They find when they are about to receive the items, there is a huge charge placed on the order and the items are either held up in customs or somewhere else. We know the basis of this is Brexit but the resolution must be found somewhere here. There is need for additional regulation of websites that use *.ie* domains so at least when consumers order their goods they are, at minimum, warned from where the goods are coming and there may be additional charges. Countless people have contacted me who have spent money on goods and who have found they cannot get them until they spend more money. If they refuse to get the goods, they lose everything. It is a serious matter for many consumers who are really annoyed and frustrated by this. We can blame Brexit as long as we like but we must come up with a solution. There should be additional regulation of those websites.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy is correct in saying Brexit is the fundamental cause of many challenges and remains problematic in causing supply chain disruption, increased costs and charges if products come from third countries outside the European Union via Great Britain, for example. People may not be aware of those costs initially. I have no difficulty with the Deputy's points and perhaps the relevant Oireachtas committee could give consideration to proposals. I will speak with the Minister in respect of consumer protection in this field and it is a fair point.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: As the Taoiseach knows, there is a major issue with An Bord Pleanála not delivering decisions in good time. There is a statutory objective, for example, of four months, and in many cases the decisions are not given within that time. I have a case of a person who applied for leave to apply for substitute consent over nine months ago and does not yet have a decision. Major infrastructure projects are taking years.

There is a planning and development (amendment) (No. 2) Bill on the priority legislative list. When will it be published and is it intended to put statutory limits on the amount of time An Bord Pleanála can take to come to decisions on all the different types of planning applications it handles?

The Taoiseach: I agree with the Deputy's comments on the length of time it is taking to get planning decisions and major infrastructural works done in the country. To that end there is a major review under way and over the next 12 months something that would ordinarily take three or four years will be done in one year. That will be led by the Attorney General and take in the entire planning code in order to get a more streamlined system.

There was a specific point around timelines and the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage is bringing forward legislation where the intention is to have specific timelines in which An Bord Pleanála will give consideration to projects. I am not sure if it is the Bill to which the Deputy referred but I will come back to him with the specific legislation relevant to the question he asked.

Deputy Bríd Smith: As we speak there is a major crisis in our hospitals. There is the term "bed blocker", which is very offensive and derogatory, used to describe people who have no choice but to stay in hospital because there is no social or care package in place for them.

As we speak, Ms Mary Corrigan, a woman in her 60s from Ballyfermot, is discharging herself against medical advice from St. James's Hospital. She has been there for eight months and was told in June that she is perfectly fine to go home but a care package for her must be put in place. They have not been able to secure one. Mary is not alone and there are hundreds of people up and down the country having to stay in hospital because they cannot get home care packages.

This system is broken and in absolute crisis. This Government must address it immediately. I noticed recently a Minister of State behind the Taoiseach, Deputy Damien English, made changes to the employment permit system for workers outside the European Economic Area so they could come in to work in construction, meat plants, opticians and horticulture. Where are the home care workers who are desperately needed for hundreds of people throughout the country?

The Taoiseach: To be fair to the Minister of State, Deputy Mary Butler, about 5 million extra additional home care hours were secured in last year's budget. The waiting times went down and the flow through the hospitals was significantly improved and enhanced. The issue now is to get workers. The funding is there-----

Deputy Bríd Smith: What do you do about bringing in workers?

The Taoiseach: You fast-track and accelerate the work permits system, and you liberalise it.

Deputy Bríd Smith: They are not included.

The Taoiseach: Health is included in respect of that and bringing people in to meet the-----

Deputy Bríd Smith: No, it is not.

The Taoiseach: I will check that again. Three priority areas are health, construction, and technology.

Deputy Patricia Ryan: Page 115 of the programme for Government contains a promise to amend the Organisation of Working Time Act, thereby bringing the Defence Forces within the scope of its provisions. What progress has been made with this? Will the scope include retained firefighters?

The Taoiseach: As the Deputy knows, the commission on the future of the Defence Forces is currently meeting to consider the organisation of the Defence Forces into the future. I will revert to the Minister on the question asked by the Deputy. There have always been exceptions pertaining to Defence Forces personnel in a range of areas because of the nature of their work and service to the State. I will come back to the Deputy on this.

Deputy Marc MacSharry: Page 114 of the programme for Government refers to the support of our Defence Forces and, in particular, singles out those who have served with pride and distinction overseas. One such corporal, who served in Eritrea, Liberia, Kosovo, Lebanon and other places, and whose father gave his life in Lebanon in 1987, was subject to a death threat from a superior in 2017 that was not adequately investigated. The corporal in question was facilitated to work at a different location from his alleged threatener, but that situation changed in recent times when he was ordered back to work. Since then, 18 October, I have been in correspondence with the Chief of Staff of the Defence Forces, Lieutenant General Seán Clancy, and the Minister for Defence, Deputy Simon Coveney. I have corresponded with them on three

other occasions since then.

Sadly, in parallel and far from acting on this in the appropriate fashion, further discrimination has been carried out against this man, who is obviously suffering greatly with stress and mental health by being forced to go back to work alongside the alleged threatener, which is totally unacceptable. I have in my hand correspondence he received telling him that he was AWOL and that his pay would be stopped. In an era when we are, rightly, looking into issues raised by the Women of Honour, I am sure the Taoiseach will agree with me that it is not acceptable behaviour when a Member of the Oireachtas brings an issue to their attention but they continue not to investigate it. Will the Taoiseach use his good offices to contact the Chief of Staff of the Defence Forces today, and the Minister for Defence, to have this discrimination investigated and rectified without delay?

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue in the House. I am not aware of the background to this case. I will raise it with the Minister for Defence in the first instance and endeavour to get the background to the case, and ensure that justice is applied and fair and due process is applied. The allegations the Deputy has made on behalf of the individual are serious. The situation merits investigation and resolution in a sensible and proper way for the individual concerned.

Protection of Children's Health (Idling of Mechanically Propelled Vehicles in Vicinity of Schools) Bill 2021: First Stage

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to provide, in the interests of protecting children's health, for an offence relating to causing or permitting a mechanically propelled vehicle to remain idle in the vicinity of a school, and for those purposes to make certain provisions in relation to the powers of members of the Garda Síochána, the provision of traffic signs and the payment of a fixed charge as an alternative to prosecution for such an offence, and to provide for related matters.

I am delighted to introduce my third Bill to the House today, the Protection of Children's Health (Idling of Mechanically Propelled Vehicles in Vicinity of Schools) Bill 2021, particularly as this is clean air week. This Bill seeks to ban the unnecessary idling of cars within 100 m of schools and to further protect the health and safety of our children attending those schools. It is a culmination of my work to date as the Social Democrats' spokesperson for climate action and biodiversity, and indeed our spokesperson for children. This legislation is in line with previous Bills I have introduced to tackle the issue of climate change and environmental damage in many different capacities. I thank the Office of Parliamentary Legal Advisers, the drafters and my parliamentary assistant, Jodie Neary, who have done a huge amount of work on this Bill.

As I mentioned, the Bill seeks to ban the unnecessary idling of cars within 100 m of schools across the country. The notion of a ban is supported by much national and international research. Emissions from cars, in transit or idling, at the school gates results in an increase in pollutants, including nitrogen dioxide, and, in particular, matter in the air. In a report by the Royal College of Physicians, Every Breath We Take, it was noted that particulate matter has been linked to suppressed lung growth in children, asthma, heart disease and the onset of type 2 diabetes. An idling engine can produce up to twice as many exhaust emissions as an engine in

motion. International studies have found that idling for more than ten seconds uses more fuel and produces more CO₂ compared to restarting one's engine. Despite the misconception out there, idling is bad for one's pocket as well as children's health.

According to the Asthma Society of Ireland, young people are arguably more susceptible to air pollution than adults due to their smaller size, their developing physiology and their closer proximity to fumes from cars. Any parent who has been in the proximity of a school can picture children in buggies and the little ones walking past cars that pump out toxins in their faces, in many instances. The society also notes that one in five Irish children experience asthma at some stage in their lives and this is directly linked to poor air quality. In fact, the Environmental Protection Agency has stated that 1,300 deaths can be attributed to air pollution quality in Ireland every year. It is, therefore, a significant health issue.

I recognise that legislation alone will not stop car idling. We also need an education piece to accompany this ban, including an education campaign to educate schools, parents and the wider school community. I truly believe that if parents really understood the damage that car idling causes their children and those attending school or in their vicinity, they would switch off those engines. An education piece would make parents think twice about driving their children to school and would encourage children to walk instead of using car transport to get there. As part of this, we need to make it safer for children and parents to walk and cycle to school.

Many schools are already committed to introducing no-idling zones as part of campaigns to combat air pollution caused by cars left running when dropping off and collecting children at the school gates. During clean air week in November 2020, dozens of schools committed to introducing no-idling zones, and this campaign continues to grow in strength. I hope more schools commit to those programmes in light of this year's clean air week. While schools throughout the country are already doing their best to protect children's health and reduce emissions, the Government needs to take a lead on this by showing its support for the Bill, thereby providing schools with a legislative framework so they can continue to encourage parents to switch off the engines.

Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have said in recent years that they would be keen on bringing in legislation of this nature. I hope we get cross-party support on this. It is one of simple things we can do. A lot of the time, climate and environment issues can seem very big and global. This simple, effective measure would send a strong message to drivers and parents that children's health and the protection of the environment are key priorities. I look forward to working with the Taoiseach on this.

An Ceann Comhairle: Is the Bill being opposed?

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

Question put and agreed to.

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

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

Question put and agreed to.

Education (Health, Relationships and Sex Education) Bill 2021: First Stage

Deputy Gary Gannon: I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to amend the Education Act 1998 and to provide for related matters.

This Bill seeks to guarantee that young people and children can access relationship and sexual education that is unbiased, fact-based and scientifically accurate in all schools that receive State funding.

I thank the Office of Parliamentary Legal Advisers and my parliamentary assistant, Diane McSweeney, for the work they have undertaken on this Bill over recent months.

Although there is great work being done in some schools, particularly through the active consent schools programme being led by the National University of Ireland, Galway, modern Ireland needs to stop using religion as a method to deliver relationship and sex education. We have a shameful history in respect of sex education or the lack thereof. It has been a tool of control and power for the Catholic Church. With almost 90% of our primary schools under Catholic patronage, the State is still permitting the Catholic Church to influence how sex education is delivered.

I will make specific reference to the controversial Flourish resource programme designed by the Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference and announced in May 2020. Available online, the programme includes the statements that "the Church's teaching in relation to marriage between a man and a woman cannot be omitted" and that "Puberty is a gift from God." Each section of this programme ends with a prayer of reflection for students to undertake. Many schools are not delivering this programme and are instead delivering fact-based sex education but this matter is too important to be left up to chance or to be delivered in such an *ad hoc* manner. All of our young people should have access to fact-based sex education, decoupled from religious influence.

We also see ramifications within the teaching community. Earlier this year, at its annual congress, the Irish National Teachers Organisation revealed that only 18% of LGBTQI+ teachers in the Republic of Ireland declared their orientation in the school community. Approximately 4,000 teachers do not feel comfortable being open about who they are with within their school communities and jobs.

Earlier this year, Plan International Ireland published a report, *KnoWhere to Go...*, which detailed the horrendous failings of our sex education system in Ireland. More than 500 young people aged between 15 and 24 years old were surveyed for the report. Some 85% of those surveyed stated that they had been exposed to misinformation on sexual and reproductive health, with the main sources of this misinformation identified as the Internet and school. One in three had encountered misinformation on LGBTQI+ identities in schools. This was illustrated again last week when the Department of Education had to remove homophobic content from its own teaching resources. According to the report, less than 1% of young people would look to their schools for further information on sexual health.

Our young people have a right to access education that is unbiased and in accordance with best practice in health and science. International human rights standards state that the right to freedom of religion or belief does not entitle parents to withdraw their children from sex

education where information is objective and impartial. In Ireland, the opposite is happening. Parents are withdrawing their children from receiving sex education in the first instance precisely because that education is not objective and impartial. This Bill would stop that. It would create a singular, non-biased curriculum prescribed by the Minister that is subject to inspection and reviewed at least every five years. It is what our schools, our young people and our society need and deserve. I remind the House that in May of this year, following the controversy that emanated from the announcement of the Flourish programme, the Minister, Deputy Foley, said she would be bringing her own Bill before the Dáil. I would welcome such a Bill but it has not yet appeared. In its absence, we are happy to do this for the Minister. We submit our Bill for the attention of the Dáil.

An Ceann Comhairle: Is the Bill opposed?

The Taoiseach: No.

Question put and agreed to.

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

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

Question put and agreed to.

Sectoral Employment Order (Construction Sector) 2021: Motion

Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Damien English): I move:

That Dáil Éireann approves the following Order in draft:

Sectoral Employment Order (Construction Sector) 2021,
a copy of which has been laid in draft form before Dáil Éireann on 20th October, 2021.

Question put and agreed to.

Ministerial Rota for Parliamentary Questions: Motion

Minister of State at the Department of Rural and Community Development (Deputy Joe O'Brien): I move:

That, notwithstanding anything in the Order of the Dáil of 30th July, 2020, setting out the rota in which Questions to members of the Government are to be asked, Questions for oral answer, following those next set down to the Minister for Health, shall be set down to Ministers in the following temporary sequence:

Minister for Rural and Community Development

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine

16 November 2021

whereupon the sequence established by the Order of 30th July, 2020, shall continue with Questions to the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment.

Question put and agreed to.

Houses of the Oireachtas Commission Authorisation to Instruct Legal Representatives: Motion

Deputy Francis Noel Duffy: I move:

That Dáil Éireann, pursuant to section 4(2)(f) (iv) of the Houses of the Oireachtas Commission Acts 2003-2018, hereby authorises the Houses of the Oireachtas Commission to defend proceedings initiated against Dáil Éireann and to instruct legal counsel in that regard in the matter of *Gerard Hutch v. the Director of Public Prosecutions, the Minister for Justice, Dáil Éireann, Seanad Éireann, Ireland and the Attorney General (High Court: 2021/898/JR)*.

Question put and agreed to.

Ceisteanna - Questions

Taoiseach's Meetings and Engagements

1. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his most recent engagement with the First and deputy First Ministers of Northern Ireland. [53399/21]

2. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his most recent engagement with the First and deputy First Ministers of Northern Ireland. [55855/21]

3. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his most recent engagement with political leaders in Northern Ireland. [55888/21]

4. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Taoiseach the recent discussions he has had with the leaders of the Northern Ireland Executive. [55889/21]

The Taoiseach: I propose to take Questions Nos. 1 to 4, inclusive, together.

Last week, I had a series of phone calls with the leaders of the Democratic Unionist Party, DUP, Sinn Féin, including the deputy First Minister, the Ulster Unionist Party, UUP, the Social Democratic and Labour Party, SDLP, and the Alliance Party to discuss the ongoing talks on the Northern Ireland protocol. I emphasised that the ongoing talks between the EU and UK should be given every chance to succeed and the European Union's commitment to addressing genuine implementation issues around the protocol. We also discussed concerns around any potential triggering of Article 16, noting the risks this poses for political stability and prosperity in Northern Ireland. In all cases, there was good, detailed engagement on the practical implications of these negotiations and their potential outcome for people on the ground in Northern Ireland. Other topics discussed included the UK Government's legacy proposals and likely

political developments over the coming months. We agreed to remain in contact on all matters of mutual concern.

I briefly spoke with the First Minister, Paul Givan, at the Ireland-New Zealand rugby test match on Saturday. I also spoke with the First Minister and the deputy First Minister, Michelle O'Neill, at the beginning of the month at the COP26 leaders' summit in Glasgow. I had last spoken with them in Belfast on 8 October, when we all attended and addressed a conference on climate action. During that visit to Belfast, I also, separately, had meetings with the leaders of the main political parties, including the deputy First Minister, on current political developments, including the protocol and legacy issues. I took the opportunity to brief them on the record €3.5 billion budget for collaborative cross-Border investment announced with the publication of the national development plan, including the doubling of the shared island fund to €1 billion to 2030.

An Ceann Comhairle: I call on Deputy Kelly. I am sorry; Deputy Richmond is first. I did not see him.

Deputy Alan Kelly: Jesus, how did the Ceann Comhairle miss him?

An Ceann Comhairle: I apologise.

Deputy Neale Richmond: I am sorry; I was lurking at the back here. As ever, I thank the Taoiseach for a fulsome response to the question. I will ask supplementary questions on two areas he may be able to illuminate. With regard to the discussions on the protocol and the need to avoid triggering Article 16, did the Northern Irish representatives give much detail on the impact of the protocol on life on the ground in Northern Ireland, how businesses are adapting and, more importantly, how businesses and communities are responding to the very generous package of improvements announced by the European Commission? Did the leader of the DUP or the deputy First Minister give any insight as to if or when the DUP might re-engage with the North-South Ministerial Council?

I have a question on a totally unrelated area, although I believe it is timely. Has there been, or will there be, any further engagement on greater co-ordination between North and South with regard to pandemic restrictions? Obviously, announcements are being made in Northern Ireland as well. In some areas, these restrictions are coming up to speed with what we have been doing here for some time.

Deputy Alan Kelly: I will flag two matters. The High Court in Belfast has ruled that the situation with regard to North-South ministerial meetings is unlawful. Does the Taoiseach have any update on that?

The second issue I will raise sometimes goes under the radar. Yesterday, it was made official that a public inquiry is to be held in Northern Ireland to investigate mother and baby homes, Magdalen laundries and workhouses in the region. The deputy First Minister and the First Minister have already assured survivors that legislation will ensure full access to records from social services and the institutions involved and that work will begin on setting up a consultative forum immediately, in collaboration with the Irish Government. Details of a redress scheme for survivors of mother and baby homes and county homes were set to come before the Cabinet today before the scheme is opened for applications next year. I understand an announcement has been made while we have been in here. It is not good enough to be told it will be next year. On what date can we expect the scheme to be opened to survivors? We must also learn from

the failings of the Magdalen laundries *ex gratia* scheme. My colleague Deputy Sherlock called for medical cards for survivors for the long term. That suggestion has been refused despite an amendment being passed in here. We must also address access to records. It is disheartening that, in contrast to the approach in Northern Ireland, this Government continues to double down on the heartache of survivors by refusing to provide them with their own information, which they are entitled to by law. Accelerated legislation and schemes have been developed to better the wrongs of the Government against the women and children of Ireland. Will the Taoiseach give us details with regard to this scheme? What is being proposed? Will he give us details on his discussions with our Northern Ireland counterparts as regards their proposals?

4 o'clock

Deputy Brendan Smith: I welcome the Taoiseach's ongoing engagement with members of the Northern Ireland Executive and the leaders of the political parties. It has been almost ten months since Britain left the EU, and the protocol on Ireland-Northern Ireland is still a subject of concern. Triggering Article 16 would be disastrous for the entirety of this island and for Britain. It is clear from all surveys the business community in Northern Ireland realises the value of the protocol and wants it to work well. Recent surveys show also that the majority in Northern Ireland view the protocol as beneficial.

I previously raised with the Taoiseach the specific issue of medicines and I understand the recent EU proposals deal with any doubts there were regarding the supply of medicines to Northern Ireland, which I hope he can confirm. As we all know, since the signing of the Good Friday Agreement, trade on an all-Ireland and cross-Border basis has grown to the benefit of all the people on this island.

With regard to legacy issues, the Stormont House Agreement needs to be implemented. The needs of victims and survivors have to be foremost in all our political work. The planned statute of limitations, in effect an amnesty proposed by the British Government, is a totally unacceptable and reprehensible proposal. The survivors and families I know who have lost loved ones want the truth. They are not looking for vengeance on anyone. To close inquiries now would be absolutely scandalous, denying forever the possibility of those families who have lost loved ones getting the truth.

At a meeting of the Joint Committee on the Implementation of the Good Friday Agreement on Thursday, the Independent Commission for the Location of Victims Remains will appear before us. Three people remain under the term "the disappeared", that is, three persons who have not been returned to their families to be buried. These people were abducted, killed and buried in secrecy. The very least any family deserve is to have their loved ones brought back to them and for those loved ones to have a Christian burial as well. I would like a much greater impetus to be given to dealing with legacy issues.

Deputy Seán Haughey: I welcome the fact that the Taoiseach engaged with the Northern Irish political leaders last week. I understand from what he said that the main issue for discussion was the Northern Ireland protocol and the associated Article 16. The Vice-President of the European Commission Maroš Šefčovič gave an optimistic assessment of the current position in the negotiations between the EU and the UK at yesterday's meeting of the Seanad Special Select Committee on the Withdrawal of the UK from the EU. The change in tone of the discussions is welcome. He stated all problems under discussion can be solved and that trust can be rebuilt. He also said, however, that the EU is preparing for all scenarios and will be ready for

any outcome. There is still the ongoing threat of violence on the streets of Northern Ireland over this issue, with buses being hijacked and set on fire. The Democratic Unionist Party, DUP, leader, Jeffrey Donaldson, has issued threats about the future of the Stormont institutions and the DUP has withdrawn its co-operation with the North-South structures provided for under the Good Friday Agreement, as other Deputies noted.

In the Taoiseach's talks with the First Minister and Jeffrey Donaldson, did he get the sense that if problems with the Northern Ireland protocol can be resolved, North-South co-operation can resume on the many day-to-day practical issues that confront us all on this island, and that there will be a willingness to advance the peace process generally? I echo what other Deputies said about legacy issues. Will the Taoiseach give a current assessment of the talks initiated in July between the parties in Northern Ireland and the relevant stakeholders on dealing with the legacy of the past and implementing the provisions of the Stormont House Agreement?

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: It goes without saying there are many issues relating to the British Government at this time. There are the ongoing issues of the protocol, the amnesty legislation, the delivery of Acht na Gaeilge and the DUP's boycott of North-South meetings, the last of which presents legal questions. It is difficult to see how the cul-de-sac in which unionism finds itself will be exited without the British Government making a final decision. I welcome some of the positivity we are hearing from Maroš Šefčovič and that which we have heard from business interests and others in regard to trying to make the protocol work, but we need to progress the politics on this. It is not all right for a British Government to use the North as a pawn in its game with the EU. What concrete action does the Government intend to address and advance all these questions?

I welcome the publication of the bipartisan letter from leading US Congress members calling on the US Secretary of State to speak out against the British Government's proposal to end all judicial investigations and offer an unconditional amnesty. This is about the British Government covering over the part it played in its dirty war in the North. Families and virtually everyone else are of the opinion this is not okay, so we need to be very strong on this issue. It goes completely against the obligations of the British Government under the Stormont House Agreement and undermines the human rights commitments in the Good Friday Agreement.

The failures of the British Government are mounting, although that is hardly shocking. We need clarity from the Taoiseach on what the Government will do in the coming weeks and months in this regard.

The Taoiseach: I thank all the Deputies who raised questions in respect of the meetings I had with Northern party leaders. Deputy Richmond raised a number of points relating to the prospectus of the unionist parties in regard to the protocol and so on. I think it is fair to say that all parties, although I do not want to go through each individual conversation, favour continued access to the European Single Market as beneficial to jobs, employment and businesses in Northern Ireland. That is an important point in the context of this saga. As Deputy Haughey noted, all parties, in their approach, want the issue to be resolved by negotiation. I do not think they want a triggering of Article 16. They want a negotiated resolution of all the issues that have been raised so far.

In respect of medicines in particular, which Deputy Smith raised, Vice-President Šefčovič has stated to the British negotiating team led by Lord Frost that we should concentrate on medicines initially and get that resolved. The issue has been largely dealt with in the context of the

presentation made by the Vice-President, but finer details have to be ironed out and that can be done. There has been a change of tone in these negotiations and the UK Government, through both Lord Frost and the Prime Minister, has indicated it wants a resolution.

On the North-South Ministerial Council, we have pressed for continued engagement. It is fair to say that, politically, we need these issues to be resolved to get the North-South agenda on a more dynamic plane and platform. We are continuing with our work under the shared island initiative on various projects and engagements. Recently, there was the welcome formation of an all-island network on biodiversity and climate change, involving academics and interested people, North and South. That all-island network has been established and we hope to support and sustain it into the future with supports from the shared island initiative.

On pandemic restrictions, we have kept each other abreast and the two chief medical officers keep in touch on the pandemic. We have more or less been in consort, although not totally, in respect of restrictions. The North has liberalised much faster than we have for reasons related to broader policy emanating from the UK Government side. We have been much more cautious and slower in our reopening of society.

Deputy Kelly raised the issue of the inquiry into mother and baby homes. It remains to be seen how fast that will get off the ground in the North, although I welcome its announcement. We have not yet had any formal engagement with the Executive. There were references in a number of meetings we have had that this was forthcoming and we have offered any assistance or advice we can give from the experience here in the Republic in respect of mother and baby homes.

Medical cards have not been refused-----

Deputy Alan Kelly: Enhanced medical cards are being refused. The Taoiseach might clarify that.

The Taoiseach: The Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth made a comprehensive announcement earlier in respect of both an action plan and a payments scheme for all residents of mother and baby homes and county homes-----

Deputy Alan Kelly: That does not make it an enhanced medical card, so it might be necessary-----

The Taoiseach: It does include an enhanced medical card.

Deputy Alan Kelly: The Taoiseach is contradicting what has been said outside.

The Taoiseach: We will have to get this reconciled-----

Deputy Alan Kelly: Yes. I am glad the Taoiseach is clarifying it.

The Taoiseach: -----in respect of the medical card being available-----

Deputy Alan Kelly: Enhanced.

The Taoiseach: -----on the same basis as the Magdalen laundries. That is my understanding, but I will get this issue checked for the Deputy.

Deputy Alan Kelly: Okay.

The Taoiseach: Let us be clear, however, that this is an €800 million package, which is being allocated in this regard. I do not want to monetise it, but the action plan is important. Turning to information, the legislation on information and tracing is still before the House. I think it was published on 9 May and it is still at the pre-legislative scrutiny stage. We must move it on and onto Second Stage and then Committee Stage. A significant number of people are waiting for that legislation in respect of accessing information and tracing. Legislation pertaining to Tuam is also undergoing pre-legislative scrutiny. The general data protection regulation, GDPR, right of access to commission records exists, so we are doing everything we can on access to personal information. We have had significant breakthroughs as a result of Government decisions in respect of access to information for residents and survivors of mother and baby homes and county homes. We are looking at the establishment of a national memorial and records centre, public access to original State files, the expansion of the database, the appointment of an archivist, educational research, memorialisation, a national memorial, local memorials and a survivor-led annual commemoration. We are also establishing a children's fund in honour of those who went through the institutions with a view, in the modern contemporary era, to allocating funding towards the children of today who need particular initiatives.

Regarding the legacy issue, we have consistently said to the British Government that we oppose its proposals. We do not want anybody getting off. Those who committed terrible crimes should be pursued and, above all, the families of victims need closure, be that in the context of actions taken by the British Army, by the Provisional Irish Republican Army, PIRA, or republican groups. I was in Enniskillen last Sunday and passed the building where the bomb went off and 12 innocent people were murdered. We need answers for those families. Loyalist paramilitaries have also committed terrible atrocities, for example, the Glenanne gang. For me, it is unthinkable that any Government would not allow for closure for the families of the victims.

Policing Reform

5. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the policing reform implementation programme office based in his Department. [47864/21]

6. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the policing reform implementation programme office based in his Department. [55856/21]

7. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Taoiseach the details of the policing reform implementation programme office based in his Department. [55890/21]

8. **Deputy James Lawless** asked the Taoiseach if he will provide a report on the policing reform implementation programme office of his Department. [55893/21]

9. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the policing reform implementation programme office based in his Department. [55898/21]

The Taoiseach: I propose to take Questions Nos. 5 to 9, inclusive, together.

A Policing Service for our Future is the Government's plan to implement the report of the Commission on the Future of Policing in Ireland. As recommended in the commission's report, implementation of the plan is being overseen by a dedicated programme office in the Department of the Taoiseach. The policing reform implementation programme office, PRIPO, moni-

tors progress on A Policing Service for our Future, and supports the work of the implementation group on policing reform, IGPR. The office also keeps the high-level steering board on policing reform and the Cabinet committee on social affairs and equality apprised of the progress being made. The programme office has been resourced with appropriate expertise in project management; policing; justice; and public service reform.

A Policing Service for our Future is a living document, which is reviewed and updated by the programme office as required to maintain ambitious but realistic commitments, timeframes and milestones. A Policing Service for our Future is broken down into four stages of implementation, namely, the building blocks phase; the launching phase; the scaling phase; and the consolidation phase. The first two phases have been completed and much has been achieved, for example, the roll-out of a new operating model for An Garda Síochána, designed to streamline Garda administration and to provide a more visible, responsive and localised policing service to communities nationwide, is under way; An Garda Síochána has established and strengthened resourcing of a human rights unit and re-established the strategic human rights advisory committee; pilots of local community safety partnerships, LCSPs, are being undertaken in three locations around the country, namely, in Dublin's north inner city, Waterford city and county and County Longford; the development by An Garda Síochána of an equality, diversity and inclusion strategy statement and action plan 2020-21; and the launch of a three-year Garda health and well-being strategy, which will see the introduction of additional health and well-being supports.

Progress on legislative reform has also been made. The Government has approved the drafting of the landmark policing, security and community safety Bill, which provides for the most wide-ranging and coherent reform of policing in a generation; the Garda Síochána (digital recordings) Bill, which concerns the use of recording devices, including body-worn cameras; and the Garda Síochána (powers) Bill, which brings together and modernises police powers of search, arrest and detention. These measures and achievements represent only some of the wide range of actions being progressed under the plan, and further detailed information on the implementation of the reform programme is available on www.gov.ie. While progress since early 2020 has been impacted as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, I have been encouraged to see the responsiveness and flexibility shown by An Garda Síochána in dealing with the demands of this unprecedented situation.

The third phase of the implementation of A Policing Service for our Future, the scaling phase, commenced in October 2020. This is the critical phase of the programme of reform, during which the programme will gain momentum. The delivery of the majority of the actions will be started or executed during the scaling phase. The IGPR and PRIPO have been, and continue to be, actively engaged with key stakeholders to ensure continued momentum on reform, insofar as possible, in the current circumstances.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: This year marks the 30th anniversary of the global 16 Days campaign. One of central themes of this year's campaign is the demand for an end to gender-based violence in all workplaces. Ireland has yet to ratify the International Labour Organization, ILO, Convention 190, which commits the State to ending violence and harassment in the world of work. Does the Taoiseach know when his Government will ratify this convention? There is also an outstanding commitment to deliver domestic violence paid leave for victims. Victims and advocates have called for paid leave for years. Sinn Féin has introduced robust legislation in this regard that was developed in consultation with stakeholders and the Office of Parliamentary Legal Advisers, OPLA. I urge the Taoiseach and his Government partners to

engage constructively with this legislation in order that the Oireachtas can collectively deliver on cross-party support for the provision of domestic violence paid leave.

I also want to raise with the Taoiseach outstanding commitments to victims of domestic homicide and their families. Progress on domestic homicide reviews has been too slow and commitments on legislative amendments to the Succession Acts made to families and supported by the Taoiseach during the period of confidence and supply have been withdrawn by the current Government. It is important to note that the long-awaited study on familicide and domestic homicide reviews is not relevant to the specific matters raised concerning the Succession Acts, nor was the consideration of succession rights included in the study's terms of reference. I encourage the Taoiseach to do what we can to expedite all of these long called for reforms. In addition, any changes in respect of the structure of An Garda Síochána and community safety forums must consider An Garda Síochána as being part of a holistic solution to the issues we have with drug and organised crime.

Deputy Alan Kelly: The new Garda divisions coming into place are downright mental. They make no sense in some areas. The one in Cork is particularly bad. The one in my area of Clare and Limerick, from Ballyvaughan to Carrick-on-Suir is insane. The Association of Garda Sergeants and Inspectors, AGSI, has raised this issue and said that it will not be able to administer the area. We also have a situation where the headquarters has been taken out of Thurles and moved to Ennis. Therefore, Galway, Ennis and Limerick are headquarters, but the county with the two biggest motorways running straight through it, and one of the largest counties in Ireland, does not. It is crazy from a policing point of view, and it is the AGSI which is saying this and fairly deliberately. This decision must be re-examined.

The Garda Commissioner has questioned the constitutionality of the powers to be given to the new Garda Síochána Ombudsman Commission. That is fairly unprecedented. Is he going to be listened to? As the party which brought forward and introduced the Policing Authority some years ago, we highlight the fact that the chair of that body, Mr. Bob Collins, has described the reforms as "a significant step back". Are these stakeholders going to be listened to? We will not be in a position to support a reform regarding changes to the Policing Authority as regards how senior appointments are made, if this aspect is not looked at. These appointments must be made independently given that is what got us into trouble in the first place. Has the Taoiseach examined that aspect?

Deputy Dara Calleary: I too have some concerns about the policing, security and community safety Bill. It contains a diminishment of the joint policing committees, to be replaced by a new structure. The joint policing committees have been effective, though less so since the abolition of the town councils by the Government that was in office between 2011 and 2016. This new structure will result in a further diminishment of community involvement in policing.

I have also noted Garda Commissioner Drew Harris's concerns about the Bill. He normally takes on reform but he has said that this Bill would result in the seeping away of his authority as the most senior Garda officer. He has expressed concern about its impact on the force. What plans has the Government to take on board those concerns, as well as the concerns expressed by the Association of Garda Superintendents and the Association of Garda Sergeants and Inspectors?

The Taoiseach: Speaking generally, this is a long-term programme of policing reform, which the House, to varying degrees, bought into in terms of the establishment of an indepen-

dent Commission on the Future of Policing in Ireland. I was in opposition at the time and we were properly consulted by the commission itself, along with many others. I have noted there seems to be a lot of dissatisfaction now across the board.

Deputy Alan Kelly: We support the minority report.

The Taoiseach: I know that. I am not just talking about the issue as it pertains to a policing authority, I am talking more generally. The Deputy is now calling the Garda divisions “insane”.

Deputy Alan Kelly: The Garda divisions are insane.

The Taoiseach: I am not saying the Deputy is wrong, I am referring to the language used.. The point I want to get across is that there is now a huge gap between what I heard previously and what I am hearing now. That invariably happens when geography comes into the question around the reform of organisations.

Deputy Alan Kelly: This has nothing to do with the policing commission.

The Taoiseach: I take the Deputy’s point. I am not answerable on specific operational decisions as to where a headquarters is located. I take the Deputy’s point about Tipperary, as opposed to the west of the mid-west, as the Deputy has described it, and the organisation of divisions, headquarters and so forth on the ground. I will follow up on that. A unit in my Department oversees policing reform and I will undertake to have a briefing and bring to the attention of those who are overseeing the reform the concerns quite a number of people have about these matters.

Deputy Ó Murchú raised issues relating to domestic violence and the UN convention. I will come back to him with a timeline for Ireland’s ratification of that. Issues of murder within families and so on are complex. A lot of work is being done from the justice and health perspectives in terms of the comments and experiences of others who have been through terrible trauma as a result of the loss of life of family members through the actions of another family member. There have been a number of such cases in recent times. We are open to an informed engagement and dialogue on the issue. It involves input from many professionals.

In terms of domestic paid leave and so on, we are supportive of measures of that kind. The Minister for Social Protection recently brought in some measures that were tried during the Covid period in respect of social protection which we will continue now as part of policy into the future. We will follow through on those issues. A joint departmental approach is being taken by the Departments of Justice; Housing, Local Government and Heritage; and Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth in respect of domestic and gender-based violence more generally with a view not just to additional resources but the provision of proper coverage across the country in terms of refuges and supports. It is a bit uneven at the moment. Eight counties have no provision right now and there is a need to support victims of domestic and gender-based violence in areas where the supports are not adequate or sufficient.

I will turn to the Garda Commissioner’s comments. I have great belief in the joint policing committees. I think they have been very instructive and I know the Garda Commissioner has articulated some concerns with the legislation. We will take input but the Government must legislate, ultimately. Our objective is to create a modern, reformed police force. That means change from the way things were done in the past. We want to do that in a way that is operationally sensible to ensure it works. We will take on board submissions that are being made by the

Commissioner and others in respect of the legislation. Authority is important in terms of the management of any force but, as I outlined earlier in my reply, the Commissioner has overseen significant reforms in respect of the Garda Síochána Ombudsman Commission, GSOC. The Government will always be advised by the Attorney General on matters relating to the constitutionality of any matter we introduce through legislation. It has always been that way and it will continue that way. There is always a balance between oversight and operations.

Overall, we must never lose sight of the fact that we want to maintain resources on the front line. Sometimes we can create enormous bureaucratic overhang above any force. Resources must, first and foremost, be targeted to front line resources and to gardaí on the ground to allow them to police effectively and to make communities safe. I would be concerned that a lot of the anecdotal evidence is that many people do not feel safe in some of our cities and towns right now. That is something we need to address because people need a sense of security and safety as they walk our streets.

Departmental Bodies

10. Deputy Mary Lou McDonald asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the work of the housing and infrastructure unit of his Department. [47865/21]

19. Deputy Dara Calleary asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the work of the economic division of his Department. [55904/21]

The Taoiseach: I propose to take Questions Nos. 10 and 19 together.

The economic division in my Department supports me and the Government in developing and implementing policy across relevant areas to support sustainable economic development and these include policies in the areas of job creation, infrastructure, housing, climate action, digital, social dialogue, quality of life and well-being. This work aims to ensure a co-ordinated approach to the delivery of the programme for Government and any issues that cut across multiple Departments. The division supports the work of the Cabinet committees on economic recovery and investment, housing, the environment and climate change, as well as associated senior officials' groups. The economic division also maintains an overview of progress in key policy and sectoral areas, in line with Government priorities, liaises with the Central Statistics Office and provides me with briefing and speech material on economic and related policy issues.

The housing and infrastructure unit is part of the broader economic division and the unit supports the work of the Cabinet committee on housing, which oversees the delivery of Housing for All. The unit supports the delivery of wider public investment through Project Ireland 2040, which falls under the Cabinet committee on economic recovery and investment. The unit is also responsible for publishing the national risk assessment, which has provided a high-level overview of strategic risks facing the country since it was first published in 2014. The national risk assessment 2021-2022 is at an advanced stage and publication is expected in the coming weeks.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Last week, the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage recommended 1,720 structures of architectural heritage to Dublin City Council for inclusion on the record of protected structures. It appears the Moore Street terrace did not make

the cut despite recent planning observation by the Minister's officials. It is their view that many of the existing buildings, in addition to the national monument, are capable of refurbishment and adaptation and they have recommended to Dublin City Council that it should consider an alternative design for the redevelopment of this site that would allow for the retention and sensitive adaptation for reuse of these significant existing structures. It looks now as if the Government is on the side of Hammerson. We need a change of heart. I urge that, at the very least, the Minister would view the relatives' alternative master plan for the Moore Street area. The completed plan, which they launched last month, addresses all of the Department's planning concerns and unlike Hammerson's development, will meet all of the economic, social, cultural and heritage needs to sustain Moore Street and the surrounding area. Dubliners are very worried about the erosion of the city's uniqueness. There are also other issues. I could go on.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: What is being done to reduce the number of homeless people sleeping rough on our streets? The latest figures show there are 95 people sleeping rough in Dublin. I have met people on our streets who say they feel safer sleeping on the streets than in emergency accommodation. There is no Garda vetting of staff in privately run emergency accommodation. The basic national quality standards are not applied. The local connection rule is used to prevent people from progressing from emergency accommodation to housing. When will Garda vetting of staff in privately run emergency accommodation start? When will the national quality standards be applied to this type of emergency accommodation? When will the Government take action to ensure local connection rules are not used to block people from moving out of emergency accommodation and into housing?

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I hope the Taoiseach and the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage will address urgently what I hope is an unintended consequence of a new statutory instrument that was introduced in March of this year. The instrument changed the income assessment arrangements for social housing. I have been trying to get to the bottom of this because I am dealing with a family of eight who have been homeless for three years. They are currently in emergency accommodation in a hotel and are solely dependent on social welfare, but they are being told they will be evicted from emergency accommodation because, for a period during the 12 months prior to their being assessed, the father was working and the family's income went over the threshold. The father has lost his job and the family is now well below the threshold, but a change requiring an assessment of income earned in the preceding 12 months will now apply. This was not the case previously. I cannot believe the Government intends that those below the threshold should be made homeless. I want the Taoiseach to examine this as a matter of urgency.

Deputy Alan Kelly: The Finance Bill going through the House provides for a new zoned land tax to replace the vacant site levy, which should be collected properly in the meantime. However, the zoned land tax will apply only to serviced land and not to land with planning permissions in place. We will have to wait another year for a vacant homes tax. Our party is calling for the zoned land tax to apply much more broadly. Limiting it to serviced land restricts its usefulness, especially if planning permission is in place for housing. There are huge delays in getting electricity and water connections for housing developments that have already been built. My colleague in Wexford, Councillor George Lawlor, has encountered homeowners who have received quotes of €90,000 for a water connection. In Bryanstown Wood, just outside Drogheda, County Meath, there is a delay in the building of a number of houses until 2022 because of an issue with an electricity connection. It is incredible that we have completed houses lying empty while they await grid connections. Could this be put on the agenda of the Cabinet

subcommittee on housing? Will the Taoiseach return to the House with a report on the matter because these stories are ridiculous?

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: The lack of supply is the biggest issue around the country. I am aware it is a massive issue in Carlow. However, there is a new company, Carlow-Build, that can deliver prefabricated homes. I do not know whether there are similar companies around the country but we need to consider this possibility. It could be part of the solution to the housing supply issue and the delivery of homes. The homes would be efficient and affordable and would help to alleviate the housing crisis. CarlowBuild builds modular housing, and it can build a house in 11 days. This is incredible. Its system has secured the approval of the National Standards Authority of Ireland and meets the requirements of the latest building regulations. The houses are top-line houses. How can we fast-track this? How can we have a process by which we can deliver homes? I ask the Taoiseach to examine the process of CarlowBuild and ascertain whether there are other such companies. We are still dealing with the mica issue. We need to build homes. The lack of supply is the issue. I ask that the Taoiseach consider this.

Deputy Mick Barry: Rents went up 14.6% in Cork county from the end of September 2020 to the end of September 2021, according to Daft.ie. Huge parts of Cork county are not designated as rent pressure zones, nor are they covered by any of the Government's rent controls. How can the Taoiseach justify this? When is he going to extend rent controls to the county as a whole and, more than that, to the country as a whole? Kerry and Clare had some of the highest rent increases.

Furthermore, how can the Taoiseach explain so many vacant local authority houses throughout the country in the middle of the worst housing crisis in the history of the State? How can he explain the fact there were 5,000 vacant local authority houses in the State at the start of the pandemic and 400-plus vacant local authority houses in Cork city at the end of the summer? Crucially, what does the Taoiseach intend to do about it?

Deputy Dara Calleary: The importance of delivery under Housing for All is known to everybody. What work is the Department doing to monitor delivery and the appointment of staff to various authorities at engineer and quantity surveyor levels? Without such staff, none of the promises under Housing for All or the defective blocks scheme will be delivered upon. Is there regular monitoring of the appointment of staff to local authorities to ensure they can deliver on what is expected of them?

The Taoiseach: I thank all the Deputies for their commentary. Deputy Ó Murchú raised the issue of Moore Street. Again, I regret the endless partisan politicisation of this issue by the Sinn Féin Party given that there has been considerable and very significant cross-party engagement involving Dublin City Council and many in the Oireachtas for many years on the preservation of the site of the Rising. A Fianna Fáil Government made Moore Street a monument, if I recollect correctly. The entire area has been derelict and lacking development for decades. My sense is the Deputy wants to take us back to that for political ends. There was a lot of agreement and discussion on this. Do we want to go on for another decade or two and allow the dereliction to continue or do we want to transform the area? It has great potential in terms of employment and history. It is a matter of integrated development that ensures a good, modern, rejuvenated and revitalised streetscape with more employment and security. It is also a matter of transforming the site to reflect its historic importance and attract people. In its current state, despite its centrality at the foundation of the modern State, it does not attract people in the desired numbers.

We are on the side of getting things done now. There has been enough discussion. There has been substantial engagement and ongoing consultation, and a resolution has been arrived at. Decisions have been taken on the matter. I genuinely believe the development should be proceeded with, under the planning processes and so on it will go through.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: What about the relatives' plans?

The Taoiseach: We have discussed this with relatives as well, and the Deputy knows that. I do not want to have an engagement that is too partisan but I believe what is going on is regrettable. I believe there is an electoral and definitely a political agenda associated with what is going on. There has been cross-party engagement on this matter for a long time. I can go back five, six or seven years in the more recent period.

Could Deputy Boyd Barrett give me or the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Deputy O'Brien, the information on the family he mentioned? I will raise the issue with the Minister. There should be flexibility in assessing people, particularly a family of eight, for emergency housing accommodation. There should always be flexibility in whatever legislative framework exists.

On Deputy Kelly's point, the zoned land tax is part of the Finance Bill. It is a substantial part of it. In one year a very substantive proposal has emerged in the context of Housing for All that will make a difference, in the view of the Government, in getting housing and land developed. It is probably the most substantive decision that has been taken and move that has been made in decades in respect of unused land. I will relay the views of the Deputy regarding what he perceives to be deficiencies on water connections to the Minister for Finance.

More generally, there are a number of work streams flow. The Secretary General of my Department chairs a group of Secretaries General in terms of implementation of Housing for All and, every quarter, the targets and progress on them will be published. The first quarter has been published, with ten of the 11 recommendations having been fulfilled. The second quarter will be published in January in terms of much more expansive and ambitious targets. The three key Secretaries General oversee issues in terms of what overall finance will be required to deliver the entirety of the plan, both public and private, and the working through of that. They also oversee the public service and what it takes to get the entire public service on board in respect of delivering Housing for All, which involves the ESB, EirGrid and Irish Water. There have been meetings already in this regard. The three Secretaries General chair the different work streams. The other issue relates to capacity and skills in terms of training up, apprenticeships and so on. There is a fairly significant implementation.

Deputy Calleary asked about this as well in terms of the various work streams that are headed up by a Secretary General who chairs each work stream and engages with the different State agencies and public authorities. For example, I refer to the effort to compile a database of land that the Land Development Agency can pursue to get houses built on land that is in the possession of, but not needed by, a Department or State agency so that we can get land utilised, particularly in urban centres, for housing. That is already under way at Heuston Station. There are plans afoot in respect of that whole area.

Deputy Murnane O'Connor raised a very important point. There is work under way in terms of innovation and how we can accelerate house construction. Prefabricated and modular housing is one aspect of that. It is used in the UK and to a degree here, as I saw when I visited

the Intel site recently, in terms of industrial building. Prefabricated and precast structures and so on are a feature of construction in industry but, likewise, there have been some instances of their usage in housing. If a product is NSAI approved, then there is a role for it in certain circumstances.

Deputy Barry raised the issue of voids. He referred to a figure from before the pandemic. He ignored the significant impact of the July stimulus programme in the context of voids. Since the Government was formed, 6,000 voids have been brought back through additional resources being allocated. We are saying to local authorities that there is no excuse for leaving a house void. As soon as a property is empty, it should be reallocated. The Deputy mentioned rent pressure zones, RPZs. The Minister is bringing in legislation to reduce rental increases in RPZs to 2% or the rate of inflation, whichever is the lower.

Deputy Cian O’Callaghan: Has the Taoiseach nothing to say in reply to my question on homeless people rough sleeping?

The Taoiseach: My apologies; I am coming to that. There are several Deputies to answer. In terms of the homeless, preparations are in place for the homeless coming into winter. The Government has worked with local authorities so that the cold weather arrangements are in place in time. They allow for additional temporary beds to be brought into use across a range of existing services and facilities for those who need them during periods of cold weather. Increased outreach is also a key feature of the cold weather arrangements. The Dublin Region Homeless Executive implemented its cold weather strategy on 4 November. It details increases in capacity for the homeless on a phased basis throughout the winter months. As the beds come on stream, they are triggered as needed, depending on the demand for homeless services on any given night. The Deputy raised issues in terms of the local connection. The Minister has been very consistent that it is not a barrier to a person getting access to homeless accommodation.

On Garda vetting, that is-----

Deputy Cian O’Callaghan: This issue is progressing out of it, though.

The Taoiseach: On the Garda vetting, that is a more recent ask, if you like, in terms of recent developments. I will come back to the Deputy in respect of any timelines in that regard.

The Dublin Region Homeless Executive, in partnership with the Dublin Simon Community, continues to implement the outreach programme. There is a stepping up of activity and engagement in respect of the homeless during this period.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We are significantly over time. I ask the Taoiseach to conclude.

The Taoiseach: I will conclude.

Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: 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 Aengus Ó Snodaigh - to address the imminent closure of the supported employment service Employ Ability West based in Bluebell; (2) Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív - to

ensure there are enough home carers available to provide all the home care hours and packages that have been approved; (3) Deputy Brian Stanley - to discuss the need for insulin pump services at the adult diabetic clinic in Portlaoise hospital; (4) Deputy Cathal Crowe - to consider developing a hub for investigating possibilities in sustainable aviation in County Clare; (5) Deputy Mark Ward - to discuss the report published by the Mental Health Commission entitled Access to Mental Health Services for People in the Criminal Justice System; (6) Deputy Maurice Quinlivan - to discuss assurances received at the Committee on Transport and Communications that the Limerick northern distributor road remains a key piece of road infrastructure; (7) Deputy Kathleen Funchion - to discuss the steps taken in respect of a child abduction from an address in Kilkenny; (8) Deputy Holly Cairns - to discuss the actions being taken to address men's mental health, especially the high rates of suicide; (9) Deputies Brendan Griffin, Alan Dillon, David Stanton and Joe Carey - to discuss proposals for the development of homes from derelict and vacant houses; (10) Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire - to discuss the shortage of resources for children's disability network teams in Cork; (11) Deputy Martin Browne - to discuss the delays in the arrival of paramedics and ambulances to call-outs in County Tipperary; (12) Deputy Jackie Cahill - to discuss the practice of energy providers doubling the cost of fixed price energy bills by including a new additional market charge in bills; (13) Deputy Joan Collins - to discuss the cost rental housing plan for the site on Emmet Road, formerly known as St. Michael's estate; and (14) Deputy Kieran O'Donnell - to discuss plans to reduce to five months the time interval between the second Covid-19 vaccine and the booster vaccine.

The matters raised by Deputies Ó Snodaigh; Crowe; Griffin, Dillon, Stanton and Carey; and Collins have been selected for discussion.

Civil Law (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2021: Motion

Minister of State at the Department of Justice (Deputy James Browne): I move:

That Dáil Éireann resolves that the period of operation of sections 1 to 7 and 9 of the Civil Law (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2021 (No. 14 of 2021) be extended for a period of 6 months, beginning on the 1st day of December, 2021 and ending on the 31st day of May, 2022.

I am here to introduce a resolution to extend the sunset clause in the Civil Law (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2021. Deputies will be aware that section 9(4) of the Act provides that the Act, other than section 8 thereof, shall continue in operation until 30 November 2021 unless a resolution approving its continuation has been passed by both Houses of the Oireachtas before that date. That section outlines that the period of operation may be extended for such further period or periods, each not exceeding six months, as is specified in a resolution passed by each House of the Oireachtas. On 19 October 2021, the Government agreed the extension of the sunset clause for six months in light of the ongoing risk from the disease and uncertain future trajectory of Covid-19. Therefore, I am now bringing forward a proposal that the Act should continue in operation until 31 May 2022.

With restrictions on indoor dining over the past year, many licensed premises availed of outdoor spaces to provide facilities in line with public health advice. At various stages, these areas were the only part of the business able to have on-site trade. When this legislation was introduced, the use of these spaces gave people a welcome opportunity to meet friends and

family safely, but also addressed an uncertainty in the law. The seasons may have changed and weather conditions are not as favourable as during the summer months, but we want to preserve the use of outdoor spaces for the period ahead. We want to allow for continued clarity of the licensing arrangement for these outdoor seating areas.

The Government is committed to supporting businesses in what has been and continues to be an unprecedented period of challenge for the hospitality sector. While businesses can now operate indoors, it is a responsible course of action for us to maintain these legislative provisions to ensure certainty for businesses continuing to operate outdoor seating areas. The public interest is also served in providing for the sale or supply of intoxicating liquor in outdoor seating areas to co-exist with public health advice on Covid-19, which continues to pose a manifest and grave risk to human life and public health. The extension of this Act facilitates the licensees of such premises to operate these outdoor seating areas in a manner that mitigates the spread of that disease. The continued need for clarity on these areas is very important and something I consider of value for licensees and communities alike.

By way of background, the Civil Law (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2021 was signed into law by the President on 2 July 2021 having been brought through these Houses. I thank the Members of this House who facilitated the speedy passage of the emergency legislation at that time. I thank them, too, for their co-operation today in discussing this resolution. The Act introduced changes in the law to allow for the sale and consumption of alcohol in relevant outdoor seating areas. It removed the uncertainty in respect of the lawful sale and consumption of alcohol in outdoor seating areas where those outdoor seating areas have been permitted by the local authorities on public land or where they are on private land abutting the licensed premises.

Confidence in the law and certainty was sought by businesses, local authorities and An Garda Síochána, and this Act ensured, and will continue to ensure, there is no uncertainty for all involved. The Act provides clarity to An Garda Síochána regarding its powers for public order purposes and ensures licensed premises owners understand their obligations to maintain order in public areas where they are selling alcohol.

The importance and benefits of the necessary introduction of this Act were obvious to all Members. The need for the Act was heightened during the summer months and the health measures that were in place at the time. Those measures continue to be in place. It was an appropriate response to remove ambiguity in relation to the uncertainty that arises in the application of licensing matters to outdoor seating areas. However, it is important to extend the application of this Act in light of ongoing public health considerations and uncertainty on the trajectory of Covid-19. It is required so that further emergency measures are not required in the coming months to address the gap in licensing legislation in relation to outdoor seating areas. It is important to continue to give clarity to licensed premises, local authorities and An Garda Síochána.

I am conscious that this is a necessary temporary solution. As Deputies are aware, the programme for Government is committed to modernising alcohol licensing. My colleague, the Minister for Justice, Deputy McEntee, is leading on the delivery of this commitment. The Government gave its approval, on 15 September 2021, for the drafting of the General Scheme of the Sale of Alcohol Bill. Work on the consolidation and reform of the licensing laws is progressing. The complexity of the law in the area and the challenges of this matter demonstrate the real impetus for this reform. Officials within the Department of Justice are working on delivering this extensive codification project. These matters being addressed by the Civil Law (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2021 will be addressed, in that context, as part of the permanent

solution in a more coherent licensing law.

I acknowledge that the public health restrictions that have been put in place since the outset of the pandemic have not been easy. The pandemic has had an impact on all of our lives. The co-operation of businesses with public health restrictions during this difficult time is because they understand that it is the most effective way to help keep us all safe. The past year has undoubtedly been most difficult for publicans and their staff. We are mindful of that in extending this legislation.

The matter before the House is relatively straightforward and pragmatic. I am simply proposing the continued, but time-limited, application of legislation that was scrutinised and passed by this House before the summer recess. The circumstances leading to the enactment of the legislation have not changed. The continued application of the Act facilitates a necessary approach to ensure clarity on the matter for the sector, local authorities and An Garda Síochána. In those circumstances, I commend the Resolution to the House. I thank the Members for their attention and look forward to hearing their observations on the matter.

Deputy Martin Kenny: I thank the Minister of State. I welcome the Minister of Justice back to the Chamber after what was a very successful ministerial event over the summer. I am sure we all congratulate the Minister. While she was well covered in her absence, she is most welcome back.

On the legislation before the House, I, and my Sinn Féin colleagues, will be supporting the extension of the Civil Law (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act. However, we do so with some slight reservations. It would be remiss of me if I did not raise the concerns of my colleagues and constituents with the Minister of State while we debate the Act. We accept that Covid-19 was not expected. We accept that it has been a century since any country faced a pandemic on the scale of this one, or indeed, one that has continued for as long as this has. However, it does not negate the responsibility of Government to plan, even for the most rare of eventualities. My colleague, Deputy Cullinane, has repeatedly raised his concerns about the lack of a stand-alone Bill which encompasses all restrictions and regulations associated with the Covid-19 pandemic.

This Bill specifically deals with outdoor dining and alcohol consumption, but it is part of a wider issue. We all accept that. Initially, when businesses were reopened in May and June 2021, the Government really pushed the outdoor dining narrative. It was warranted to get businesses trading again and to give ordinary people some semblance of a return to normality. That is not the issue that we have with it. Our concerns relate more to the attitude of the Government when it came to the reopening. It seemed to be the case that the Government was asking businesses to open up outside and get on with it. There was very little in the way of guidelines on how to cause minimum disruption for people, for instance, those with disabilities, when constructing the outdoor dining areas. Indeed, I am aware that the disability service providers, such as the National Council for the Blind, were among those who filled the knowledge gap for restaurants and café owners, and not the Government.

These are responsible business owners who want to do the right thing by their customers and also respect how shared public spaces are operated. I am aware that this Act goes some way to setting out the parameters of how outdoor dining should be conducted and detailing which body is responsible for oversight of dining areas and spaces, depending on whether they are on public or private land. However, it is not acceptable to us, stakeholders or ordinary members of the public that Government is using these pieces of emergency legislation, which must be

renewed repeatedly, to govern such technical pieces of so-called pandemic legislation.

Indeed, we often think of the example of Covid vaccination certificates, which is an issue that has come up regularly in recent times. People going into public houses, cafés or restaurants are asked to provide proof of vaccination. There are issues around that. In some cases, the certificates are not being checked often enough and when they are being checked in some cases people are not being asked for their identification. There is a lot of controversy around the issue. There is some resistance from people who feel that their private health is somehow under scrutiny. While we understand all of that, we also understand that there is a pandemic, there must be regulations and people must abide by them. The point that most people make is that just because someone has a vaccine certificate to prove they have been vaccinated does not mean they do not have Covid and are not contagious in respect of that. There is no checking of that particular issue. That is why one of the things the Government seriously needs to look at is the whole issue of how more testing can be done so that when people are entering premises, they are tested to ensure that they do not have Covid, rather than determining whether or not they are vaccinated.

One of the biggest issues that people will remember, and the real origin of this Bill, was the utter confusion in respect of outdoor alcohol consumption caused for members of the Judiciary and members of An Garda Síochána last summer, when nobody knew exactly what the rules were or where we were. That is where this Bill comes from, which reflects a certain sense of poor planning in this area. The Departments of Justice, Health and Housing, Local Government and Heritage failed to foresee the ambiguity that the practice of outdoor dining would cause. While those difficulties have since been clarified with this Act, it highlights a failure to plan and adequately forecast what the public might need as things progressed. I understand that amendments might be needed and I wish to be clear that Sinn Féin will accept the public health advice available, as it has always done. That is what we all need to do, regardless of what our views or individual concerns may be. There are experts who are putting forward their case and we must abide by that.

This is why I repeat the call and that of my colleague, Deputy Cullinane, for the Government to introduce one single stand-alone piece of legislation to cover all the various amendments and extensions related to Covid. If I am honest, this Bill represents a failure to plan and prepare for an issue that cuts right across Government policy. This failure to plan is not just in respect of Covid-related matters. Indeed, I see it when I am using the health services in my constituency, as do the people I represent. We have a fantastic healthcare staff, but there is poor planning and resourcing of the system in which they work. It was not too long ago that I stood in this Chamber and discussed the stark staffing issues facing Sligo University Hospital. That issue was also caused by poor planning and poor resource planning. I see the same issue with An Garda Síochána. There are fine people working on the front line to prevent crime and target criminals, but they struggle with the lack of resourcing and indeed with an ICT system that is outdated.

While we support the extension of this Act, we do so with some reservations. We encourage the Minister of State and Cabinet members to consider drafting stand-alone legislation to cover all of this.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: I have a short five minutes to respond to the Minister of State in relation to this motion. As the Minister of State said, we had a long debate on the legislation when it was enacted. This is simply a roll-over for it, as it were. I think it appropriate to use

the phrase “sunset clause”, since we are talking about outdoor dining as we head into the winter. The sun has well set on outdoor dining.

Obviously, this is a Covid-related issue. I am sure the Minister of State will recall that when the proposal was first suggested that we would introduce outdoor dining and the sale of alcohol on designated streets and areas adjacent to licensed premises, there was a degree of confusion between what was lawful in terms of local by-laws and overarching national policy. Indeed, a number of local authorities voiced confusion about what was lawful and members of An Garda Síochána acted, at that time, to intervene because the law was unclear. The Department did not act immediately, but eventually agreed that the issue needed to be corrected by way of amending legislation which finally came before the Houses.

In fact, the sale of alcohol in outdoor settings has been a great success, mainly because we enjoyed a period of very clement weather through the summer and indeed, the autumn. Right up to yesterday, the weather was kind to us, thankfully. People have got used to eating and imbibing alcohol outside.

5 o'clock

It is immeasurably safer than doing so inside in this time of pandemic. In fact, it has transformed many of our towns and villages. Many local authorities speak of sealing off on a permanent basis laneways and roads for pedestrians only and not for traffic. It has continentalised many of our villages in a way that has been very successful. Of course, the overarching issue has been to make the consumption of alcohol possible but safe.

Unfortunately, we are now heading back into a time of significant increase in Covid numbers. It is extraordinarily worrying. I say as an aside that I hope today the Government will focus on booster vaccines, which are very necessary. As somebody directly related to the cohort, those aged in their 60s have been very badly treated. They got the AstraZeneca vaccine, which is demonstrably less effective. It is very effective but less effective than the others. Yesterday, I saw statistics from the British authorities that show its effectiveness is waning to approximately 40% whereas with an mRNA booster it increases back to 93% effectiveness. I hope the Minister will go back and say this group should get the booster vaccine quickly and not wait for a six-month rule on it.

To deal with the specifics we have in front of us, we will support this extension although we cannot see terrible enthusiasm to have outdoor dining in hail and rain which, I am afraid, is what we will expect between now and the May deadline the Minister has put on this roll-over. Will there also be a roll-over of grants and supports? Will there be a new scheme to winterproof some of the outdoor dining to make it at least feasible and possible when people are outdoors to have basic shelter from horizontal rain and what we would expect in this country?

We will support the motion. I am glad there is clarity on it and not further confusion. I hope the two points extraneous to this motion that I have made will be taken into account. The first of these is a call for the Government to announce further supports for publicans and restaurateurs who want to weatherproof their outdoor facilities for the winter season as opposed to the summer and autumn seasons we have gone through. The second point I made was on the booster vaccines, particularly boosters for those aged between 60 and 69 who are particularly vulnerable. I called for them to receive their vaccines before the six-month deadline indicated as appropriate.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: I welcome the extension of the legislation. It has been a vital support to pubs and restaurants throughout the country over recent months. I accept the point on the weather being better than it is now. The reason the legislation was introduced forward in July was because of the push for us all to have an outdoor summer. The Government realised that licences are granted based on the floor space of a premises and that in certain places throughout the country bylaws were in place to prohibit the consumption of alcohol in public spaces. The provision of outdoor seating areas for businesses, many of which had been closed for a year, has been an incredible lifeline. It was sorely needed at the time. It has given them a bigger footprint when people have had to comply with indoor spacing rules. From a number of standpoints, it allows these businesses to seek a larger number of customers than they would otherwise be able to do. These businesses need every support we can give them to keep their doors open in the coming months. Every extra chair and table will help to keep them afloat. The public like it. They are certainly voting with their feet. It also gives passive security to streets that would otherwise be very quiet. We could see a change in the nature of the streets once we saw quite a lot of people sitting outdoors.

In other cold countries, such as Berlin in Germany in particular, it is routine to have outdoor dining throughout the year. It is also the case in other European cities. Some of this is designed into buildings on a permanent basis. This measure is particularly important at present given that we know the virus is airborne and that it is much safer to be outside as opposed to inside. I have to say I would not find it particularly attractive to be sitting under an umbrella with the rain dripping down my back. There will be a limit to it over the winter.

Some local authorities are looking at making this more permanent. There are issues that need to be considered in this context, including making sure that there are proper footpaths and that people with disabilities are not tripping over obstacles which should not be there. If this is to continue, and I believe it should, a good look needs to be taken at the circumstances that allow this to operate safely and comfortably for all cohorts as opposed to just people who want to eat and drink outside and those who own the establishments. A range of other issues needs to be looked at. I certainly welcome the extension. It gives a degree of certainty that is needed, particularly at present.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I am happy to support the extension of the Act to ensure temporary outdoor seating areas in pubs and restaurants are covered by the liquor licences of the premises. Obviously the use of outdoor seating over the summer in particular was very important in helping to bring down Covid numbers. It also helped to make our towns and city centres more vibrant. It is possible for us to sustain outdoor living outside of the pandemic, particularly in summertime but even outside of the summer. There is much that we have done that needs to be continued.

It is the case that while we are, correctly, extending the Act, the winter weather is delayed but presumably it is coming. When it gets colder, more and more people will leave the outdoor areas and move indoors in bars and restaurants. This, in turn, will pose very serious challenges. I have to say that today's announcement by the Government of the new midnight rule smacks of more theatre about Covid, as opposed to doing what is necessary. It was Orla Hegarty who asked, quite appropriately, whether we are dealing with a virus or a vampire. What are the methods we are taking to try to stop the spread of Covid? There has been so much theatre in the course of the pandemic that involves pretending to be doing something as opposed to dealing with the actual issue.

We are speaking about being outdoors because being outdoors is central when dealing with an airborne virus. To the extent that we have licensing for outdoor premises, there is some thought on the part of the Government that the question of an airborne virus is very important. It simply boggles the mind that almost two years into an airborne pandemic we have had no real action to improve indoor air quality in bars, restaurants, schools or offices. There are no legally enforceable measures to ensure there is proper ventilation. Very few workplaces have CO2 monitors and practically no air filtration systems are in use, including in our schools.

When it was believed the virus was primarily transferred by our hands and on surfaces, action was taken to encourage regular hand washing. Gels were provided in bars. Surfaces were cleaned regularly. Over a year ago, we discovered it is primarily airborne. Yet, when we go into a pub or restaurant we will get hand sanitiser but there is a very large chance there will not be a window or a door open in the place or any concern about it. This is because the main public health messaging continues to be to wash our hands. I am all for washing our hands, and it is a good and important thing to do, but it ignores the elephant in the room, which is the question of ventilation. If restaurants do not enforce proper hand hygiene, they can be shut down but if they have no ventilation or if they have CO2 rates of 1,500 to 2,000 parts per million, nothing can happen to them. Next week, the Dáil will have a chance to correct this by passing People Before Profit's Workplace Ventilation (Covid-19) Bill 2021, the aim of which is to finally establish enforceable standards for clean air and ventilation. That action on ventilation is necessary, as well as encouraging outdoor dining, which this Act does.

The other relevant measures include the introduction of midnight closing, etc. The tendency, unfortunately, will be towards increasing lockdown and sectors going back to being closed. Significant questions will arise when sectors which were just beginning to be opened up will start to be closed again with this midnight closing. I think that is going to go further. At the same time, the Government is proceeding with plans to cut the pandemic unemployment payment, PUP. Just today, people were cut to €250 or just over €200, which is the same level as the dole. People who work in pubs and nightclubs are, at the very least, going to have their hours restricted. Others will be unemployed again as a result of the pandemic.

The new restrictions were made necessary because the Government has allowed Covid-19 to get out of control again, cut back on test-and-trace and refused to enforce proper ventilation in pubs, workplaces and schools, etc. Workers should not be forced to foot the Bill. If it was accepted that one needed a minimum of €350 a year or six months ago, why in this wave of the pandemic is it acceptable to cut it in the run-up to Christmas? It should not be cut; it should be restored to €350 as long as the serious effects of the pandemic are with us, as long as parts of the economy are being shut down and as long as people are unemployed.

Deputy Matt Shanahan: I welcome the Minister back to the House and I congratulate her on the new addition to her family.

The members of the Regional Group of Independent Deputies will be supporting this Bill. We will all probably remember that not very many years ago, the then Minister, Senator McDowell, suggested when he was in Government that Ireland should have a café culture and society. Little did we know how we were going to arrive there, but here we are. The extension provided for in this Bill is correct in that it is going to help licensing laws. It will also help An Garda Síochána and the local authorities.

The Minister is probably aware of some of the problems that arose when these laws were

brought in, particularly in some of our rural towns and villages. Parking spaces were taken up to allow people to extend their licensed areas and were probably accepted as being temporary. It now looks like we are going to be extending that. It will be important for the local authorities to try to engage with other shop owners. Shop owners who are potentially losing parking outside their doors may feel that the walk-in trade is being facilitated primarily for hospitality and not for people to come to their businesses. This is an issue that needs to be looked at.

The Covid restrictions support scheme, CRSS, was very beneficial to a number of people in the hospitality trade because it allowed them to improve their outdoor dining environment. Having said that, they were not planning on continuing it into the winter. Some of these businesses have the potential to put in outdoor heating, etc., to mitigate the effects of our intemperate climate. The question is whether we should be looking at extending possible supports to some of those people again. The current direction of the Covid-19 numbers suggests that it will be far more difficult to bring business indoors in the coming months. How are these businesses to survive? Are they to remain furloughed again? This does not seem entirely possible for many of them. The possibility may need to be there for some form of semi-permanent solutions for some of these businesses. This will have to be done on a case-by-case basis. The local authorities may need to be advised of the attitude they should take to these applications.

Further questions arise regarding our treatment of those with no access to outdoor space. I have been contacted by a number of people in the pub trade who do not have an area where they can operate outdoors. Some of them may have a very small smoking area which cannot be converted into a seated area where people can consume alcohol. Should they have some viability to seek to rent space extraneous to their own premises? Should they be licensed in that way? We will end up looking at that possibility for some bars and restaurants, or else we will have to support them to remain closed the next time this happens.

Issues have been raised in respect of pubs in the context of the PUP and the employment wage subsidy scheme, EWSS, supports, which we are phasing out in April. A person who runs a number of establishments, and has employed a number of long-term staff for five or ten years, has made the point to me that there has been no discrimination, in terms of the PUP, between a person who had been working for a month or two and a person who had been in longer term employment. The same issue arose with the EWSS. These businesses are looking for some extension to supports for people who had been in their employment for more than two or three years. These are skilled people, some of whom are chefs, bar managers and staff, and are not easily replaced. If one has a small business with a number of key people and if one cannot hang on to them when one opens up again, it will have a very drastic impact on one's business for quite a while. I ask the Minister to look at this.

The Minister is well aware that we will need to reconsider the regulations that cover the idea of outdoor dining. If changes are to be made with regard to hand hygiene, masks, spacing, air filtration, rapid testing and all of that, we need to advise hospitality of those changes over the next while, particularly in light of today's announcement.

The only other thing I would say to the Minister is in respect of the Garda presence. As she is well aware, we encountered issues with antisocial behaviour when outdoor areas were being licensed, in that people were able to buy alcohol, take it further down the street and consume it there. I am sure the vintners are very keen to ensure that is not repeated and everybody is supported. We might need better co-ordination between the vintners, An Garda Síochána and the local authorities.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Michael Collins is sharing time with Deputies O'Donoghue and Michael Healy-Rae.

Deputy Michael Collins: I would like to join others in wishing the Minister well on the birth of her child. I wish her and her family the very best.

I should say that I have a conflict of interest here because I have two brothers working in the pub industry, one in Bandon and one in Bantry. That helps me when I am speaking here on behalf of businesses because they and others have gone through quite a great deal over the past year and a half to two years. I support the extension of this Act for six more months to allow outdoor drinking where seating areas will be permitted. This was a good move. I thank the local authorities and I am grateful for any Government funding that was put towards it. I thank An Garda Síochána for its co-operation in this matter. It meant that publicans could open their doors. I have to commend each and every publican in west Cork because all the pubs and restaurants I have gone into are abiding by the rules 100%. They are doing everything to the best of their abilities to keep their doors open, which is a difficult task at this time. They have run top-class businesses in west Cork right through this pandemic. When they were allowed to open, they met this opportunity and give it full support.

I sympathise with the owners of the many businesses that do not have indoor facilities. They have also come up to the mark and are to be commended. They may need financial supports in order to continue.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: I support the extension of this Act because the clarification for the local authorities, An Garda Síochána and the publicans is necessary and very important. I thank the publicans very much because they offer a great service in County Kerry, in particular, which is the county I represent, and because of the excellent way in which they have operated through all types of adversity. I am grateful for the schemes that were put in place to support them. Like everybody else in this country, they have gone through a tough time. The publicans were used to seeing their houses closed on Christmas Day and one other day in the year. It was very upsetting and unsettling for them to have to shut down for such a long period of time. I say this to each and every one of these businesses which have survived the pandemic or have had their doors open.

You would swear I had a problem with drink because I was in 16 public houses in County Kerry yesterday. If I had had a drink in every one of them, it would have been a different story. I was doing my job and meeting people. The pubs that I see are operating to the highest of standards. They have tried their best to keep their customers going in the best way they can. This is much needed.

I would also like to talk about parking outside premises. Cones and identifying measures were placed in our towns and villages. We are not Lanzarote. I cannot see us taking to outdoor dining and the outdoors in a big way. When things get back to normal, please God, the parking necessary for these businesses will be there again.

An Ceann Comhairle: You might be overdoing it, Deputy, with that pub crawl.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: Sixteen pubs. It is a lot in one day.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: I also welcome the Minister and congratulate her on the addition to her family.

I will also support the motion. It is very important to allow for outdoor dining. I must thank everyone who adapted during Covid to outside dining and drinking and everything that was put in place. We need the supports to stay in place and we also need additional supports.

The biggest problem for public houses, hotels and the hospitality sector is that extra staff are needed because things are so spread out. I ask that every person who is available to help out does so. The hospitality sector and a lot of other sectors need people to work and help out in order to provide breaks and do things safely.

I will support the motion. I again thank the hospitality sector. I thank An Garda Síochána for all the work its members have done. I thank everyone who has worked through the pandemic. Everyone is front line staff, including those in hospitality, because they are all there to help people for the betterment of life and so that everyone can enjoy themselves and be safe and healthy.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I supported this legislation on the last occasion and will do so again today in order to sort out the total confusion on the ground. The manner in which the legislation was implemented in Galway left a lot to be desired. I fully support businesses and their extension into the public space. However, it was done with blatant disregard for the Barcelona declaration which committed to universal access for all of our residents in Galway. That did not happen. No analysis has been carried out on accessibility for persons with disability and the impact on residential areas. We have repeatedly drawn this to the attention of gardaí. The Minister has heard us raise Topical Issues in the Dáil regarding what is happening on the streets of Galway. There is also a concentration of people in a confined area and the injustice for some pubs which do not benefit from these measures. I see the pragmatic nature of the legislation, but its implications without any assessment is what seriously worries me. In the same vein, that is exactly what has happened with every single piece of emergency legislation that we have introduced, which has become more permanent by the minute with absolutely no proactive discussion in the Dáil. I have the most serious concerns about what is happening in respect of the division in our society and the demonisation of those who have made a decision not to take a vaccination for whatever reason. I have no time for somebody not taking Covid seriously - let me get that out of the way – but I do have the most serious concerns regarding the leadership in this country that seeks to divide and conquer without a proper proactive discussion on how we all now live with Covid.

I am someone who promoted zero Covid, but it has now gone on for so long that we need to learn to live with it in a safe manner. That is not happening. The Irish Council for Civil Liberties, ICCL, has repeatedly raised its concerns regarding what is happening and the extensions of the Covid certificate without any analysis. It is clearly discriminatory, but sometimes discriminatory practices are allowed if they are proportionate, targeted and for a specific purpose. That is absolutely not what is happening. They are being extended.

Vaccine certificates were ostensibly introduced for travel and are now being used for everything without any human rights assessment or assessment of what is happening in respect of those who are vaccinated and are still infectious and those who are not and are taking great care. I want to place on the record every chance I get that I deplore what is happening. I am extremely concerned for the future and our democracy.

We should all be in this together to help each other and protect the most vulnerable. That never happened and it is still not happening. There is an emphasis on opening night clubs,

which is clearly a high-risk activity, while there are no day centres open and no respite care. There is something horribly contradictory there. There is also a contradiction whereby someone in my family has had Covid and has a six month guarantee that they are okay, while a letter from NPHET tells us the period involved is nine months. The Minister might clarify that.

Deputy Michael McNamara: Like most previous speakers, I congratulate the Minister and welcome her back. I would like to urge her, now that she has experienced the necessity of maternity leave, to impress upon her Cabinet colleagues the fact that if one is reliant on statutory maternity pay lots of people have to return to work on that basis and cannot live on that amount of money, including, but not limited to, many self-employed people.

We know the vaccinated can efficiently transmit Covid-19, including to vaccinated people. That is the science and is generally accepted. What is the scientific rationale for continuing and expanding vaccination certificates? Is there a shred of evidence for this? It appears that there was no evidence in Wales. The matter was discussed in the Welsh Assembly. What evidence does the Government have to do that? If there is no evidence, why are we doing it other than to deflect blame from a Government that has done nothing to address the capacity issues in our healthcare system?

There are 95 people on trolleys in Limerick today. Over the past eight weeks, there were 27 outbreaks linked to hospitality, eight in gyms, six in hairdressers and 283 in healthcare settings. One might say the 95 people on trolleys are a result of the upturn in Covid, but that is not the case. On the hottest day this year, when there were only 95 people in the entire country in hospital with Covid-19, there were 49 people on trolleys in Limerick. The issue of overcrowding in Limerick is clearly exacerbated by, but not limited to, Covid. I discussed this issue with the Minister, Deputy Simon Harris, when he was Minister for Health. He promised the sun, moon and stars with regard to the elimination of overcrowding. Nothing has been done.

Instead of dealing with the problems and lack of capacity in our healthcare system, the Government is focusing on increasing outdoor dining in the middle of winter and expanding a vaccine pass for which I have seen no evidence. If I am shown evidence for it I am willing to consider it, but I see none for it. That exemplifies what is wrong with our Covid response in this State and why we are failing.

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): I thank Deputies for their contributions and the general support for the extension of these particular provisions. As we all know, these are extraordinary times. I do not need to say that to anybody here. With the extension of the Act until 31 May 2022, we are taking into account the fact that we are in an extraordinary time.

I appreciate that many Deputies have alluded to the fact that this is something that a lot of industries and those in this sector would like to see extended and something specifically within the various local councils will be considered. I have no doubt that many are doing their own reviews and are looking at how the measures have been applied. In response to Deputy Connolly's point, they are examining how to make things more accessible for people in the future.

This is, here and now, simply about extending the provisions that currently exist, making sure the time does not lag, there is not a drop and no issues arise for those who have availed of these measures in a very positive way. I can assure the House the Government does not take Covid decisions lightly. While we are asking businesses in the night-time economy to close a little bit earlier from today, I hope they can continue to trade successfully. This motion is an-

other attempt to try to make sure they can do that.

We have often said that we do not want Covid restrictions to remain in place any longer than they have to. This is why we are putting a very clear deadline of 31 May 2022 in place. I hope we will not have to extend it any further and that something more permanent can be put in place.

It is absolutely the case that I want the night-time economy to operate as fully as possible, as soon as possible and in the safest way possible. The extension of the Civil Law (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act clarifies the position of licence holders who wish to sell and serve alcohol adjacent to licensed premises in an area approved by the local relevant authority. I appreciate that there was confusion and issues arose at the beginning of this process, in particular where one could consume alcohol within a certain distance from a licensed premises. Where there were four or five licensed premises next to each other, it became very difficult for members of An Garda Síochána and the premises concerned to enforce the law. That is why the legislation was introduced and it has worked very well to date. The Garda has worked extremely well with many premises. They have had no remedy under the current legislation to amend their licences to include the area. In addition to ensuring maximum equity with business, it was considered prudent to provide that clarity and assurance for licences that were relying on private property immediately adjacent to the licensed premises to provide the outdoor seating areas. With the extension of this Act continued, certainty is provided for this period. It is clear that this measure addresses this matter for licences. It has worked effectively and will continue to do so for the period ahead, with the support of this House and the Seanad.

The Minister of State, Deputy James Browne, highlighted in his contribution that this is a temporary solution. As Members will be aware, the Government is committed to modernising alcohol licensing and I am committed to delivering on that. I appreciate that it is difficult to talk about what it might look like in the future, particularly in light of today's announcement. As we come through this pandemic, which I know we will, I want to ensure that we are planning for the future and that there is a full reform of the licensing laws to support the industry we are discussing. The Government gave its approval on 15 September for the drafting of the general scheme of the sale of alcohol Bill. Work on the consolidation and reform of the licensing laws is well under way. It is very complex law and it is a problem that has arisen here, as Deputies have outlined. It highlights the importance and urgency of this reform.

I want our nightclubs, promoters, disc jockeys, DJs, and all musicians to know that they enrich not just our nights but also our culture. That will be recognised in my reforms as well. We all know many people working in this sector. We hope that all licensed premises will continue to operate safely and effectively. This disease has once again shown just how quickly it can upend our expectations and assumptions. The importance of this Act is evident to all. With this resolution on outdoor seating areas we are supporting businesses, local authorities and An Garda Síochána. We are also ensuring that the public interest is best served by having the provisions of this Act available for the protection of public health.

On some of the points raised about new funding schemes, many of the structures that have been put in place already take account of the fact that irrespective of the fact that we had a mild summer and autumn, that is not always the case as we come into the winter. I accept Deputy Howlin's point about the slanted rain, which many European countries do not have and where it is cold but not wet. That is not the case for everyone if they do not have the relevant structures in place. Our response to Covid-19, particularly in providing funding, has never been found wanting, and that will be the case here. We will engage where there is a requirement or

a request and examine that, hopefully favourably. Parking spaces is an issue that councils will have to examine, particularly as these measures are extended but also as they look to a more permanent type of arrangement for their local settings, towns and environs and take that into account. On those who have no access to outdoor spaces, this is something that needs to be reviewed, but perhaps is not as easy to put into this type of emergency legislation.

The Garda presence has been noted, particularly in the last week with Operation City. That has extended out into the other towns and cities outside the greater Dublin area. That outdoor presence of An Garda Síochána on boardwalks and the streets is even greater than it had been and it has provided reassurance to many people. That will continue well into the winter months and the new year.

I thank Deputies for their support of this extension. There are many other issues that we must continue to engage on, but for now it is extremely important for all publicans, who have shown a great degree of forbearance on this issue, that we provide this extra timeframe for them.

Question put and agreed to.

Sex Offenders (Amendment) Bill 2021: Second Stage

An Ceann Comhairle: In accordance with the Standing Order of the Dáil of 28 April 2021, it is not necessary to agree an Order for Second Stage.

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): I move: “That the Bill be now read a Second Time.”

I am pleased to bring the Bill before the House. This is an extremely important Bill, which will enhance the monitoring of convicted sex offenders upon release from prison, leading to increased public safety. I have no doubt that every Member shares my commitment to keeping our communities, and particularly women and children, safe from the trauma caused by sexual violence. This Bill aims to do so by strengthening the powers that currently exist for monitoring sex offenders and to restrict their activities where that is necessary. We must strike a balance between monitoring and restricting offenders and support them in their rehabilitation. Reintegration is an important factor in reducing offending. This Bill aims to strike that balance by ensuring that monitoring and restrictions are informed by the risk posed in individual cases and that interventions and conditions can be targeted and can be varied by the courts to be as effective as possible.

The amendments to the Sex Offenders Act 2001 outlined in this Bill reflect the Government’s commitment to protecting the most vulnerable in our society from harm. The Bill addresses the risks posed by sex offenders following their release, but it is only one strand of a much broader body of work my Department is undertaking to tackle domestic, sexual and gender-based violence and to keep communities safe. Combating this violence has been a priority for me since taking office. The way our system has historically treated victims of domestic and sexual violence has, quite simply, not been good enough. Victims do not feel supported and the system did not protect them from further trauma. It is not surprising that this has deterred people from coming forward. Working to change this is a priority for me and while we have made much progress in the past 18 months, our intensive efforts to make the system more responsive to the needs of victims will continue.

Supporting a Victim's Journey, when fully implemented, will create a victim-centred approach that protects and supports vulnerable witnesses during the investigation and prosecution of sexual offences. We know, for example, that training in this area is crucial. Every person I meet stresses how important the training piece is. All the staff who engage with vulnerable victims will receive training on victim engagement and on understanding the victim's perspective. We have implemented significant reform in this area. This includes legislation for preliminary trial hearings, increased funding for NGOs providing court accompaniment and related information and support services and a review of grants for organisations supporting victims, which has identified gaps in service provision and is working with partners to try to address them. The first cohort of staff at a new sexual offences unit in the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions, DPP, formally took up their roles in April and I am hearing that this is having a positive impact. The University of Limerick, UL, has been commissioned by the Department to develop the framework for the operation and training of intermediaries to work with those who need their support going through a trial process. The improved victims charter website which provides repository of information for victims has been updated and will continue to be updated and progressed.

Under budget 2022, a total of €13 million is being allocated to combat domestic, sexual and gender-based violence and to support victims, an increase of €5 million on the previous year. Raising awareness and working to change the acceptance of what should be socially acceptable or unacceptable behaviour is another important area of work to combat all forms of sexual harassment and sexual violence. The No Excuses campaign being run by my Department raises awareness of sexual harassment and violence. The campaign aims to bring about a change in long-established societal behaviour and attitudes and to activate bystanders to intervene where it is safe to do so. Work is also under way on a national campaign on the meaning and importance of healthy consent in a sexual context. It is important to outline the wider context in which we consider the Bill, as I am very conscious that it addresses only one area of concern to victims of sexual offences, albeit a very important one.

I will outline what is proposed in it. The Sexual Offenders Act 2001 provides the legislative basis for the monitoring of convicted sex offenders in the State. This Bill aims simply to strengthen the Act. Part 1 is a standard Part, which gives the Title and definitions used in the Bill. Part 2 deals with the amendments to the Sex Offenders Act 2001. The Bill introduces new definitions into the Act of 2001. Of particular note is the substitution of "vulnerable person" for "mentally impaired" person to replace the outdated language of the 2001 Act. A significant feature of the Bill is the changes to the notification requirements, also known as the sex offenders register. The 2001 Act requires those who are subject the Act to notify An Garda Síochána of any changes in address within seven days. It also required offenders to notify the Garda if they are outside the State or away from their home address for more than seven days. The Bill proposes to reduce the notification period to three days. If an offender leaves their home address for three days or more, they will need to inform the Garda in person of this change. This will ensure that the Garda has the most up-to-date information on the whereabouts of the convicted sex offenders.

Sex offenders will now also be required to notify the Garda every 12 months of their home address. For example, an offender, who has not moved house, left their home address for a qualifying period or travelled abroad, will now be required to notify their address to the Garda every 12 months. This requirement does not exist currently. If a member of the Garda is not satisfied that the offender making the notification has a home address, the Garda can require

that person to notify every third day the place they intend to reside that night until the Garda is satisfied that a home address has been acquired.

The Bill also proposes changes to how an offender makes a notification. Currently they can notify the Garda in writing. This will be changed to reporting in person with notifying in writing only available to those who are outside the State for a period longer than intended. Provisions have been made for those who cannot report in person due to disability. A person convicted outside the State who becomes a resident or who stays in Ireland for qualifying time will also have the notification period reduced to three days. These changes will bring the notification requirements in line with those in the Britain and Northern Ireland.

The Bill makes changes to the length of time an offender who is under the age of 18 will be subject to the notification requirements. This will now be determined by the courts and shall not exceed five years. The Bill proposes giving the Garda the power to take fingerprints palm prints and photographs of offenders. The purpose of these provisions is to verify the identity of a person who is making a notification and to assist in locating an offender if he or she absconds. It will be an offence to fail or refuse to give fingerprints, palm prints or photographs.

The Bill will place the existing sex offenders risk assessment and management multi-agency structure, known as SORAM, on a statutory basis, which is not the case currently. It provides for the establishment of assessment teams comprising the Garda, the Probation Service, the HSE, Tusla, the housing authorities and any other relevant agency to assess and to manage the risk posed by high-risk offenders. Providing a statutory basis for SORAM will ensure that the sharing of information to enable the assessment and management of risk of convicted sex offenders is legally sound; that it is compliant with the rights of offenders; and that it is limited to the information necessary while still meeting the justifiable public safety objective.

The Bill provides the Garda with the power to disclose information about a sex offender's previous convictions to a member or members of the public, but only where the person poses a risk of causing harm. I understand that disclosure of information to the public about sex offenders is a sensitive issue. Some would argue such information should be more widely available. However, if information on sex offenders is widely available to the public there is a general feeling that this would increase the risk of sex offenders going underground, which would, of course, hamper the ability of the Garda and the Probation Service to manage the risk posed by them.

I want offenders to engage with the services. Rehabilitation and reintegration are essential to reduce the risk of reoffending and to keep our communities safer. That is why disclosure is limited under the provisions of the Bill so that if the Garda believe a risk is posed to a member of the public by an offender, it will have discretion to disclose information about the offender. A clear example would be if an offender was convicted of offences against a child and perhaps they started a relationship with a person who had a child or children and it was felt that there was a risk.

Provision is also made for the sharing of relevant information about an offender with police services outside of the State. The legislation will also allow the Garda to publish information on an offender if the whereabouts of the offender is unknown to locate him or her again. This can only take place where there is risk to public safety.

The protection of children and the most vulnerable in our society is at the core of this leg-

isolation. With this in mind, it proposes to provide that a court can impose a prohibition on a convicted sex offender from working with children and vulnerable adults. I want to ensure this applies to volunteering as well as working. In considering whether to impose a prohibition, the court will have regard to the need to protect children or vulnerable persons from serious harm by the offender and the need to prevent the commission of subsequent sexual offences. Safeguards are built into the measure to ensure it is fair and proportionate. Non-compliance with prohibition will be an offence punishable on indictment by imprisonment for up to five years.

Under the 2001 Act, the Garda can apply to the court for a sex offender order to compel a person not to do certain things. The new legislation allows the Garda to apply to the court to discharge or vary the order. For example, if the offender has been ordered not to loiter in the vicinity of a school playground but is then found to be loitering in the vicinity of another place where children may congregate, the Garda can apply to the court to have him or her ordered away from this place as well as anywhere similar.

Another important proposal in this legislation is the introduction of electronic monitoring of sex offenders. Under the Bill, a court may order the electronic monitoring of a convicted sex offender who is subject to a post-release supervision order or a sex offender order that includes a condition restricting the offender's movement. It is important to acknowledge that while electronic monitoring is a complex area, there is evidence that electronic monitoring can be effective in respect of sex offenders when it is used for a short duration in tandem with other interventions, such as probation supervision. That is what is being proposed in this Bill.

The aim of the Bill is to provide our courts with a range of appropriate tools and interventions to monitor and reduce the risks posed by sex offenders, to facilitate rehabilitation and, most important, to protect every member of the public. Electronic monitoring is one way of doing that and that is why I want to give the courts that option.

The Bill contains important provisions that will enhance the monitoring and the management of sex offenders in the community. The provisions have been carefully designed to strike the right balance between the rights of the offender and the need to protect our community. I thank those in the House who have supported this Bill to date and I look forward to the debate this evening.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Martin Kenny is sharing time with Deputy Pa Daly.

Deputy Martin Kenny: I welcome the Bill before the House. In many ways, it long overdue. While parts of it are quite technical, given the subject matter that is probably to be expected. I wish to take the opportunity to look in detail at the provisions in the Bill. Members of the public will be shocked that many of the current practices relating to sex offenders have not had the proper legal standing until now.

The Bill proposes to provide a legal basis for the further monitoring of those on the State sex offenders register, including the ability to perform risk assessment on offenders. The approach to further monitoring includes changes to the current notification requirements; a provision for the courts to prohibit an offender from working with vulnerable people and children; and a provision for electronic monitoring or tagging to ensure post-release compliance by offenders who are subject to sex offender orders.

The amendments also finally empower the Garda to collect photographs, fingerprints and palm prints to identify offenders. It will allow a Garda inspector to apply for changes to or

discharge from the sexual offender order. Currently, this can only be carried out by a chief superintendent. Furthermore, the amendments will allow the Garda to disclose information to the public related to the offender on the register in specific circumstances. I will return to that matter shortly, but I want to outline what is proposed in the Bill first.

The Bill will provide a statutory footing for the SORAM multi-agency process. After reading through the Bill, I do not understand why many of these measures were not in place and why it took so long to introduce them. The original legislation, which is being amended here, is the Sex Offenders Act 2001. Here we are 20 years later introducing many of these necessary amendments to it. Many of these amendments are years overdue, as I think the Minister will accept.

One of the main examples is section 20, which inserts a new Part 4A that explicitly prohibits anyone, subject to a sex offender order, working with children or vulnerable people. I would have expected that to have been in place as standard. As it currently stands, the onus is on the Judiciary to include this restriction in a sex offender order and the only responsibility on the offender is to inform their employer of that order. It is disgraceful that was not dealt with before now. This provision should have been contained in the 2001 Act and it is mind-boggling that it has taken 20 years to sort this out.

As part of shaping any policy, my colleagues and I will meet with relevant stakeholders, especially in cases of legislation governing subjects such as sex crimes and domestic violence.

We are always led by the front-line workers and those who deal with the victims of these crimes, as well as victim organisations and support groups. Sinn Féin has specific policy on these crimes and amendments such as this were dealt with by my colleagues in the North a number of years ago. The stance came directly as a result of stakeholder engagement.

Sexual crimes are particularly serious, life-disturbing and grave crimes. It is probably difficult for me to find the words to describe the enormous and long-standing impact that these sexual crimes have on their victims, families, friends and the wider community. Many people I have met have told me this. These amendments need to be victim-focused, and for the most part they probably are, although many are years overdue. I note the statement released by the Dublin Rape Crisis Centre yesterday, which welcomed the amendments but cautioned that these changes must be followed with adequate resourcing.

The most obvious example of this relates to the proposals on electronic monitoring or tagging by anyone subject to a sex offender's order. We support the use of electronic monitoring but I am also quite concerned about the ability of the Garda information and communications technology, ICT, system to support this. I know from conversations I have had with members of An Garda Síochána that its current ICT system is long overdue an overhaul. The last thing people want is that when an electronic monitoring system is introduced, it could collapse under the pressure. Will the Minister outline if the electronic monitoring will be in line with the Council of Europe recommendations on such monitoring?

I urge caution on the amendment allowing gardaí to disclose the identity of an offender in specific circumstances where there is an immediate and serious risk to the community and where the offender is living. The last thing we want to see is an offender being identified, which could, in turn, inadvertently identify the victim as well. It is something about which we must be especially careful and I trust the Department will introduce strict circumstances for the dis-

closure of that type of information.

My colleagues and I support the legislation and I am hopeful the Minister has taken note of the concerns we have around some parts of it. When it goes to Committee Stage, we might consider amendments for particular matters. The message is we need to manage and restrict offenders but we must also offer support and reassurance to victims and survivors. We must put the recovery of victims at the centre of the legislation in this way.

Deputy Pa Daly: I thank the Minister for her statement and I agree with many of her comments. It is a very important matter and a serious topic. As has been outlined by my colleague, Deputy Kenny, it is a complicated matter and it is not black and white. It is important for the victims of sexual violence and only this week we saw members of one family in the North speak out about violence they suffered. This took immense bravery and we must do all we can to support victims.

We should look at the recommendations of Supporting a Victim's Journey and ensure the justice system can become more hospitable to those who have suffered while maintaining a proper balance between their need for justice and the rights we need to afford to defendants for a fair trial. At the same time, we must be mindful that resources and measures such as those proposed in the Bill are not sufficient by themselves and some of these crimes relate to a lack of social care or social work in many cases. We must provide resources for the Garda and others. The Minister mentioned reintegration into society, with which I will deal in a moment.

I note Adult Safeguarding Day is this week and it is important to acknowledge that vulnerable people are at a far higher risk of becoming victims of sexual offences. As the Minister outlined, this Bill attempts to strengthen the legal basis to allow courts to ban convicted offenders from working with children and vulnerable adults, for example, which is important, given the risks outlined.

In a similar vein, I have been examining possible amendments to the Garda vetting system that would improve its function. We saw one of the flaws in the current vetting system with recent attempts by hospitals to hire workers who have not been seen as Garda-vetted, leading to delays of six weeks, despite the people in question being Garda-vetted for sports organisations and clubs and given a clean record. Another flaw in the current vetting system is a lack of any proactive requirement on gardaí to inform employers where an individual may be in contact with vulnerable people when a conviction occurs after the vetting has concluded. I hope to introduce a Bill that would go some way to addressing that matter.

Placing the SORAM programme on a statutory footing is also a good idea, as the Minister mentioned. The SORAM currently operates on a non-statutory basis, as she outlined, but the information shared between the various agencies will only be as good as the resources provided to them. Tusla, in particular, is struggling to recruit qualified staff and this must be addressed.

There is also a matter to be addressed within the wider criminal justice system relating to these crimes and although the register contains largely only the most serious of sexual crimes, its expansion should be considered carefully. It is important to get the legislation right and although we are happy to support it through to the next Stage, some provisions may need to be addressed.

The proposed section 14B(2) indicates a representative of a housing authority may be included in the panel of risk assessment but it does not mention what qualifications that person

must have in such an important role. The proposed section indicates any member of the team can share information with his or her own organisation or body to effectively assess and manage the offender and risk of harm to the community afterwards, which seems quite loose to me. The provision may need to be strengthened. The team, as constituted, should have to make that decision to share information and there should be conditions for doing so. It looks quite informal and subjective, lacking in transparency or having sufficient reasons to do so in individual cases.

With regard to the proposed section 14E, it is always important to maintain proper records for any type of system where there are severe consequences for somebody's liberty. For example, if a person is arrested for questioning in a Garda station and the period is extended by 12 hours, a proper record must be kept. The proposed section 14E refers to an inspector disclosing information but that should be a superintendent. He or she should have to record the decision in writing, just as is done when detention is being extended. There is an overall lack of record keeping in the legislation and the relevant parties should certify if they decide to do something and the grounds used. Any garda giving such a direction should be required to send a notification to the Garda Commissioner and a report on the use of this section should be required every year. The lack of such record keeping in a central repository could be troublesome in years to come if it were used in the wrong way. We are sometimes only a High Court case away from a system collapsing so it is important to get it right.

The proposed section 14F allows a person to make a submission against the proposed disclosure but it only gives five days to do so. I am intrigued as to why the seven-day period was reduced. Is this just to bring it in line with British legislation or were there complaints from An Garda Síochána that led to the period being reduced to three days? It gives five days to make a submission against the proposed disclosure but there is no provision for legal assistance. The period allowed seems quite short.

The proposed section 16C in the principal Act refers to contractual arrangements being put in place to monitor compliance, but what type of contractual arrangements does the Minister envisage? Some other provisions can be dealt with on Committee Stage but it is important we get this right. Reckless law making could mean a victim could eventually suffer if some provisions were struck down as unconstitutional.

As I indicated earlier, there are also some problems with addressing the rehabilitation and reintegration of prisoners. Having spoken with prison governors over the years, I know many, if not most, people who have been convicted of sexual offences do not engage with counselling programmes in prisons. If they did, it would prevent repeat offending and keep communities safe. Difficult decisions may have to be taken to ensure more of them engage to keep communities safe. Sexual offenders are correctly seen as offenders who are different from others but the integrity of the wider criminal rehabilitative system must be maintained. I look forward to examining the Bill further on Committee Stage.

Deputy Mark Ward: I welcome the Minister back to the Chamber as this is my first opportunity to do so. I wish her well. As my colleagues have stated, we support this Bill. Some of the changes in the Bill are welcome and some are not before their time.

6 o'clock

For example, sex offenders will have to notify gardaí within three days rather than the current seven days if they have a change of address. This would enable gardaí to track where the

sex offender is. However, the sex offender should be required to notify gardaí immediately on or even prior to a change of address. What if the sex offender's new home was beside a school or playschool? This needs to be taken into account. The provision of notice after a person moves could lead to a reactive approach rather than proactive approach. It would help if notice was given before the move.

As I have said, to manage the movements of sex offenders properly we also need to increase spending on Garda ICT to support the roll-out of the amendments fully. Garda ICT services have received little funding since they were first introduced in the late 1990s. While some funding was announced in budget 2022, we are unsure how exactly and where it will be spent. While the introduction by the Government of new powers to tackle sex offenders is welcome, the Garda must be properly resourced to enforce them. While bans on working with children or vulnerable people have been made in the courts in the past, the Bill will now provide explicit powers for that. As Deputy Martin Kenny said earlier, putting these explicit powers in place is long overdue. As a society, we should never be in a position where a person convicted of a sexual offence against a child is permitted to work with children or vulnerable people, or volunteer in a place where children are.

The Bill makes provision for the electronic monitoring of sex offenders to assist in ensuring offenders comply with a sex offender order or a post-release supervision order. Electronic monitoring will only work if sufficient resources are available to ensure the monitoring really happens. If there is a breach, for instance, someone goes into a banned space, resources must be available to follow up and investigate that matter. Collating changes in addresses of sex offenders will only work if the Garda have the proper ICT equipment in place.

We also need to put in place measures that ensure survivors of sexual crimes are better supported before, during and after their trial. This should include measures regarding anonymity, court representation and other general support services, which for the most part are offered by the rape crisis centres throughout the country that do tremendous work despite surviving on very thin budgets. Justice delayed is often justice denied. Challenges are caused by court adjournments, when survivors prepare themselves for trial on a certain date and find out that it is postponed to a later date, which may be several months away. This has significant consequences for survivors who prepare themselves emotionally for the trial process as well as make the practical arrangements for time off work, childcare, or travel and accommodation when the trial is due to take place outside their locality.

The media also has a part to play on how it reports instances of rape. There seems to be a culture of survivor blaming. I use the word "victim" as this is often used when the media portray these crimes. Reports state that the victim was drunk, the victim was alone, or the victim left with the perpetrator willingly. I can go on. Let me be clear on one point: there is only one cause of rape and that is the rapist. Rape is not caused by decisions victims make. Rape is caused by an individual who decides to perpetrate a sexual crime on another person. The cause of rape is the perpetrator of that crime. The cause of rape is the rapist.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: I welcome this legislation. In recent years, we have come to a much better understanding of the nature of and enormous damage done by sex offenders. After decades of weak or ineffective legislation, we have incrementally moved to strengthen our laws and to develop supports for victims. It is an ongoing process as our understanding and knowledge deepens and we still have a long way to go, particularly in providing proper supports.

Building a legal framework is critically important, but building a community support is more important than anything else. The network of rape crisis centres now available is an invaluable resource. In my home town of Wexford, there is a brand new rape crisis centre funded by Government that is about to be officially opened. It is an invaluable resource and has great voluntary and professional support groups. As society learns more about things that were unsaid and undone, unnoticed and unacted upon in the past, we have a greater understanding of things now.

The depressing array of reports and investigations of sexual abuse cast an ugly light on Irish society over many decades. It has taken us a long time to come to terms with the way we were and, of course, the way we still are in many instances because it is a process of education. We learned about the institutional abuse in State sponsored, if not State run, institutions, and how generations of Irish people were horrendously abused. We learned of ongoing abuse in the domestic setting, which was a taboo area for decades. What went on within the family setting was to be uncommented upon and was certainly not to be interfered with. Women in particular suffered terrible abuse. One of the most striking events I recall from my experience as a Deputy was relatively early on when I was visited in one of my clinics in County Wexford by a woman in her sixties who had the first conversation she had ever had with anybody. She felt she could come and talk. She told me that her life had been a torment, that she had been abused by her husband for decades and had reared a family whose children abused her in turn because that was the pattern. These were shocking things that often went unreported in our society for a very long time.

There are different types of abuse now. There is online abuse where lives are destroyed by the commentary made online. I thank the Minister for her and her Department's very strong support for Coco's law, which I was pleased to introduce some years ago, that was eventually passed through the Oireachtas with the support of all Deputies in this House and was enacted into law of the land. That was an important bulwark in itself, but was only yet another brick in the wall we need to build to protect people.

We need to have rape crisis centres and make them accessible. We need to make counselling available, which is not always available, in a timely fashion to people. We need to have helplines available for all vulnerable people - men and women - who need to reach out to somebody to be able to have that conversation which has been suppressed, often for years if not decades. I truly believe that the Minister has a deep understanding of these issues and is determined to make a substantial difference. Labour Party Members, from our benches, will strongly support her in that endeavour.

The establishment of a sex offenders register in 2001 was a most important measure, although its initial version needed very substantial improvement. It was a written register - literally a ledger - in its first iteration, with extraordinarily limited effectiveness. It was the idea of having a register which people understood they could check somebody's past record. Deputies have said that sex offenders are different. They are different in a number of ways. Usually, when someone is convicted of a crime, the courts pass an appropriate sentence. Once that sentence is served, that person is free to rejoin society in an completely open way. We have to regard sex offenders differently because we have to protect people from reoffending. Deputy Daly made a very strong point with regard to the number of people who are in prison, having been convicted of what are sometimes very serious sexual offences, and who refuse, as they are entitled to, to engage in any form of treatment or support. They are often still in denial, even after a court case and conviction, and lack an appreciation or understanding of the nature of the

harm they have inflicted. I do not have a solution to that. I do not know how a requirement for some form of mandatory treatment could be introduced. However, it is a fact that, statistically, sex offenders are at a real risk of reoffending after release. It is for that reason we established a sex offenders register 20 years ago and that such offenders are required to be subject to ongoing monitoring and so on.

I would be interested in a proper briefing on the effectiveness of the current register at some stage. I was dismayed to hear how ineffective its original iteration was. However, it continues to be an important measure. We need to improve it. In the legislation before the House, the Minister has set out a number of significant improvements to an array of legislation in light of our deepening understanding of sex offenders and sex offences. The requirement to notify An Garda Síochána of a change of address within three days rather than the existing seven days is important. There is merit to it even on the basis of putting it in sync with what happens in the United Kingdom. That is a good thing in and of itself. Three days is a reasonable period of time. If anybody who is on the sex offenders register is going to be in a different place for longer than that, he or she will be required to notify An Garda Síochána of his or her new locale to allow for monitoring and an understanding of the situation.

In respect of the specific powers to allow courts to prohibit sex offenders from working with children and vulnerable adults, I agree with other Deputies who have spoken. It is a surprising addition at this stage. One would have imagined it would have been open to the courts to make such a determination in the past rather than only requiring that an employer or potential employer be informed of the offence record of an individual who might potentially have access to vulnerable people or children. I strongly welcome the coming into effect of this provision.

Specific powers for An Garda Síochána to take fingerprints, palm prints and photographs to confirm identity is also something one would have imagined was already there. Is such a provision not available under general criminal legislation in any event? If it needs to be made specific and strengthened in this Bill, I will strongly support it.

There will also be specific authorisation to disclose information about a sexual offender in limited circumstances. This is something we have to consider because it is a difficult and fraught area. Anyone who has looked at the international experience will understand why. We certainly do not want vigilantism. We have seen a case in Wales where someone with a similar name to an offender became the focus of public ire and, worse, public violence. There is a balance to be struck. It is to be hoped sex offenders who have been through treatment and the prison system can be rehabilitated. They cannot be excluded from all society forevermore. There would be heightened concern if there was to be general access to the register. In many societies the right to know is enshrined in law, particularly in individual states of the United States. What happens is that either the individuals involved go underground and create an alternative persona for themselves, which is illegal and puts them outside the law again, or they simply cannot live because of the focus upon them. These are very difficult areas because the countervailing point is that, if you were raising your family and an especially grievous sex offender was moving onto your street or next to you, by God you would want to know. You would think you had the right to know and would be dismayed at not knowing. As I have said, I do not have an answer for that.

The formula of words the Minister has used in setting out these provisions limits their use to exceptional circumstances where there is a potential to do harm to prevent that harm, but we need to tease out exactly what that means and in what circumstances they apply because we

have seen individual cases in the United Kingdom in very recent times where members of the police force took photographs and released them, which did terrible harm to the family of a victim of crime. It is something the Minister has obviously given a great deal of consideration to but I would like to hear about the specific international analysis that has been done, what is best practice internationally and how we can arrive at a balance that ensures people can have a right to know while making it possible for released prisoners who have served their sentences to have some life and existence.

Specific teams have been established for some time. I refer to the sex offender risk assessment and management, SORAM, teams consisting of gardaí, Probation Service personnel, Tusla officers and, as the Minister has indicated, perhaps even Housing Authority personnel. Again, we might consider this matter and have some conversation about it. Obviously, these teams have to manage and consider risk, but we need to know who is making those evaluations and how that is being done. We need to ensure some level of consistency across the jurisdiction in respect of these matters because each group established will consist of different individuals who may have different perspectives. We need to have standard guidelines, understandings and monitoring to ensure they operate well. I am conscious they are already operating but we are now giving them legislative underpinning. In that legislative underpinning, we might also want to ensure consistency, objectivity and oversight of the decision-making process and the specific decisions arrived at. I make that point now.

The discharge or variation of a sex offender order is provided for in the legislation before the House. This is again something that has merit. The Minister spoke about youth offenders having an automatic right of discharge after a period of time. Very grievous harms have been done by individuals who are under 18 and therefore children under our legislation. We have seen that in other jurisdictions as well. The overarching principle that must underpin this legislation, and all legislation in this area, is the prevention of further harm. As I have said, we cannot impose permanent preventative custody. I am not suggesting that for a second, but when sex offender orders are discharged or varied, this must be done following criteria we understand and in a consistent way. There is now co-ordination among the courts, with the new courts bodies that were set up to ensure there is consistency in that regard. There should be the power to vary an order over time where a person has demonstrably changed. Particularly where an offence happens when someone is very young, there has to be a possibility of his or her rehabilitation and of getting on with life. I imagine once someone is registered as a sex offender, his or her life chances and opportunities to move and live in society generally are rather restricted. I support that, therefore, but if it is in a way that is better explained as to how it will operate and be managed.

Finally, the issue of the electronic monitoring of sex offenders is something we have talked about for a long time, since the 2001 Act was enacted. I recall a technical briefing many years ago on the deficiencies in electronic monitoring, but I wonder how much the technology has advanced. One of the previous speakers commented we have not spent any money on ICT in An Garda Síochána in recent times, but I sincerely hope we have because I allocated €220 million to it. Unless somebody was spending that money on something else, I hope the ICT system within An Garda Síochána has been greatly improved over the past five or six years, although there is much more to be done. I refer in particular to the specifics of electronic tagging. I recall a view presented by experts who appeared before an Oireachtas committee on justice many years ago regarding the limitations of electronic tagging in terms of geography, where they indicated it was not foolproof. Have those technical limitations been overcome and is there now

an effective tagging system? If so, that is something that should be deployed an awful lot more.

These are just some of the points I wanted to make on this Stage regarding the intentions of the Minister and what has been set out in what I regard as a series of significant improvements to the panoply of our laws to protect citizens, especially people we have not been good at protecting over decades in our State. Obviously, all this has to be against the backdrop of the protection of the innocent. I can think of no more serious crime than rape or sexual abuse.

Equally, I can think of no more serious charge if the accused were innocent. We have to strike that balance always because we have come across such cases. Once someone has been accused of a crime in this area, it is probably impossible to get on with life. The accused is fatally wounded as a person and that is why we have to be so careful in crafting legislation in this area, with the overarching aim to protect the most vulnerable, whom we have significantly failed in the past. We need a deepening of our understanding of the types of hurt and harm done by sexual offenders in all sorts of settings, such as in domestic circumstances, in relationships and online. As best we can as legislators, we must shape an appropriate, and always evolving, legislative landscape to protect them.

Deputy Neale Richmond: I appreciate the opportunity to contribute to the debate and I welcome the legislation introduced by the Minister, whom I thank for her introductory remarks. All of us in the House agree the legislation is welcome but, sadly, it is very late in coming. That should not take away from its importance and the ongoing commitment of the Minister to righting so many wrongs of the past in this State where, as other Deputies mentioned, we have consistently failed the victims of sexual offences over so many years.

It is welcome the legislation will bring Ireland into line with that of the UK in regard to notification periods for changes of address. That change would have been welcome many years ago, but that should not take from the fact it is coming now. We should bear in mind reducing the period from seven to three days will provide the authorities in the area with that much-needed information and with peace of mind for many, regardless of the information they have. Notwithstanding the law's coming into line with that of the UK, what are the rules throughout the European Union and beyond and how that will impact on the legislation?

The issue of the database is tied in to that. The information on sex offenders being retained locally is one thing, and the national database is welcome, but how can we ensure it will be a EU-wide database and that it will be thorough? More important, how will we maintain databases with the United Kingdom? What other legislative tools need to be realised to ensure that peace of mind and security, not just for victims but for communities beyond our borders, will be maintained? What strengths will be given in this legislation and what else will need to be introduced in that regard? While those improvements in this jurisdiction are welcome, we cannot limit ourselves to that.

One area referred to by previous speakers and others relates to the tools that will be available to An Garda Síochána to monitor registrations and the much-talked about electronic tagging. I welcome them but, in the context of all these initiatives and the introduction of the legislative cover, are we ensuring that will be met by resources and tools for An Garda Síochána and State agencies to ensure this legislation will be implemented correctly, efficiently, fairly and in the interests of all people in society?

I welcome the additional funding given consistently over recent budgets to An Garda Síochána.

chána to allow it to improve its ICT in particular, moving beyond just the operational use of ICT to the ability to research and monitor. Nevertheless, we have to ensure gardaí will be trained properly in this area and that resources will not be simply allocated to something. We must invest time in members of An Garda Síochána becoming expert at this, whereby the body of knowledge they are in a position to build up will be retained and consistently improved on, whether through a continuing professional development system or whatever else. It cannot just be a case of us having drafted the legislation and providing some resources. There must be a consistent application of resources, with ring-fencing if necessary, and weatherproofing, in order that this legislation will not just be on the Statute Book. Rather, it must be something the Garda can reach into, and the Garda must always be trained and in a position to ensure it can enforce it in the best manner possible.

I do not want to dwell on the Bill because many Deputies will make the same points during this debate and the Minister made lengthy introductory remarks. I commend her on her consistent proactivity on this issue throughout her time as Minister. I ask that she ensure this law will be applied throughout the system. It must underline the work not just of the Department of Justice but also of the Departments of Education, Health and Social Protection in order that we will have a fully joined-up system that meets the needs of the victims of these gross acts and ensures there will be many fewer victims in future.

Deputy Patricia Ryan: I welcome the Minister back to the House. I congratulate her and wish her and her family the very best for the future.

The Bill is a welcome development and is long overdue. It will introduce a number of reforms that will help to make our children and communities feel safer. The most recent statistics show more than 1,700 people are subject to the reporting requirement under the 2001 Act, 319 of whom are supervised by the Probation Service while 192 are under post-release supervision in the community. A total of 433 people who have been convicted of a sex offence are currently in prison. On the enactment of this Bill, sex offenders will be required to notify changes in their address within three days instead of seven days, which I welcome. I was amazed to learn the current law does not explicitly allow courts to prohibit a sex offender from working with children and vulnerable adults, and this change is welcome also. The Bill also provides powers to An Garda Síochána to take fingerprints, palm prints and photographs to confirm a person's identity. It creates a legal basis for the assessment and management of risk posed by sex offenders by teams involving probation officers, gardaí and personnel from Tusla, which I was again surprised to learn was not already the case.

Another welcome development in this Bill allows An Garda Síochána to disclose information relating to persons on the sex offenders register in some circumstances, for example, where there is a serious threat to public safety. It allows for the electronic monitoring of sex offenders to assist in ensuring an offender's compliance with a sex offender order or post-release supervision order. The Bill also places the current sex offenders risk assessment and management monitoring process for high-risk offenders on a statutory footing. All these changes are to be welcomed. We can pass all the laws we like, however, but they will not mean a thing if they are not backed up by money. I ask the Government to ensure that the required investment is made to ensure these measures get the best possible start.

Media outlets covering crimes of a sexual nature must also think twice before reporting on these crimes. Other Deputies spoke about this aspect as well. A headline I saw last week referred to a woman having been assaulted by two men after drinking with them all day. It should

have read, “Woman raped by two men”. It is irrelevant what she was doing. She was raped, and no means no. There must be no excuses offered for offenders. In addition, reports of child pornography should refer to images of child sexual abuse. Call it what it is. Pornography implies some level of consent. A child cannot consent to sexual contact and we must ensure that the language we use reflects the brutalities of the crime.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: By and large, this Bill is welcome and has been a long time coming. The Sex Offenders Act 2001 has not been updated since its introduction. This legislation has been promised since 2018 and it largely comes from committee recommendations, some dating back to 2006. A 15-year wait for recommendations to become legislation is, fortunately, not common but it is also unacceptable. Wider protections have long been needed for victims. While we are all aware that much more needs to be done regarding the prevention of sexual assault, many of the measures contained in this Bill will go a long way towards protecting victims.

A reduction in the notification period from seven days to three days, as others have mentioned, allowing for risk assessments of sex offenders by probation officers, gardaí and expert groups and providing a power for a court to prohibit a sex offender from working with children are all welcome measures. While this Bill deals with how we treat convicted sex offenders, we must first acknowledge the low rate of reporting and conviction of sex crimes. The 2020 annual report of the Sexual Violence Centre Cork, SVCC, found that only one-third of survivors had reported attacks to the Garda, while two-thirds of those contacting the centre for support had not. This indicates a lack of belief among victims of sexual violence in the Garda and, ultimately, in the legal system. So many are reaching out for other forms of support, but see the legal route as pointless or potentially harmful to them.

The latest information from the Central Statistics Office, CSO, indicates that only 10% of sex crimes reported to the Garda in 2020 have been detected, meaning that a suspected offender has been issued with a summons and faces prosecution. We must keep in mind that as little as one third of crimes, and most likely much less, were even reported in the first instance. Since 2019, the United States’ National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, NCMEC, has alerted the Garda to 13,612 suspected cases of online child abuse. That was a 4.5% increase in tip-offs to the Garda in 2020 compared to 2019, but the force lacked the resources to process them in a timely way. In most cases, once the Garda gets tips, suspects must be arrested and their devices seized for forensic examination. In its report on An Garda Síochána for 2020, the Policing Authority noted that there was roughly a two-year backlog for examination of devices by the Garda. The result has been a delay of five years or more in the prosecution of some online child abusers. We must be doing everything we can to prosecute these cases and to give survivors an avenue to justice. I recognise the commitment and passion of the Minister in this area and I think she would also agree that we need to do more. This Bill is welcome, but we must be continually examining this situation. Legislation is only one part of this context and a variety of other things must be done. That is why regulatory impact assessments, RIAs, and similar mechanisms can be useful in the context of legislation.

At the annual conference of the Association of Garda Sergeants and Inspectors, AGSI, earlier this month, Sergeant Michael Bracken “called for training immediately for all members of the new Divisional Protective Services Units, (DPSUs), which have been established to investigate sexual and domestic crimes”. He stated that: “Their training hasn’t really rolled out yet despite what the Minister says”. I ask the Minister to respond and to give some sort of timeframe in this regard. It is important to have these units in place, but they need proper train-

ing. The purpose of having these units was to have trained gardaí available to deal with victims appropriately and with care, and to repeat no longer the mistakes of the past where gardaí were not equipped to handle cases of sexual assault and victims often faced a retraumatisation when they reported crimes.

Moving on to some specific points of the Bill, I draw the Minister's attention to the proposed new section 14B(7) to be inserted in a new Part of the principal Act, which concerns the risk assessment and management teams. It states that:

The risk assessment and management team may, for the purposes of the performance of its functions, consult with such persons as appear to it to be expert or knowledgeable in the assessment and management of the risk of harm posed by relevant offenders or by the relevant offender concerned.

Will this proposed new section apply to consultation with victims or victims' groups? The list of expert bodies which can be consulted by the new risk assessment and management teams is welcome, but it seems like there should be an avenue for victims to come forward with concerns or information about offenders. It is no secret that the justice system is, by and large, a cold house for victims of sex crimes. Many lose faith in the system throughout the legal process and often for good reasons. Therefore, we cannot just assume that the local gardaí or a probation officer will know every detail about the dangers that a victim can face from an offender. For instance, threats could have been made but not reported and that would be vital information in the context of a case and keeping a person safe.

The proposed new section 14E to be inserted in a new Part of the principal Act relates to the disclosure of identifying information about an offender and stipulates that there are conditions in which information will not be disclosed, namely, where there is deemed to be a significant risk in respect of the offender in question, including public disorder, physical harm to a person, damage to property, intimidation of, or threats to, a person. However, in an instance where a member of the public is at a greater risk than in the context of any of those matters listed, disclosure of the information is permitted.

I fully recognise that there are instances where the disclosure of identifying details is necessary in circumstances where threats have been made and when the individual is deemed to be at very high risk in a certain situation or where the individual is evading law enforcement, for example. It is hard to imagine, however, many cases where releasing the name, address and crimes of the sexual offender will not result in threats being made against him or her. A great deal of discretion is being given to the Garda in respect of quantifying the degree of risk faced by a possible victim and to weigh that against the risks that come with identifying a sex offender publicly.

An Ceann Comhairle: I apologise to the Deputy but I will be interrupting her shortly.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: Is there an intention of providing guidance for the Garda? That is important.

Debate adjourned.

Deputy David Cullinane: I move:

That Dáil Éireann:

notes that:

— the National Ambulance Service (NAS) and emergency services are at crisis point, with health care professionals expecting a very challenging winter with insufficient ambulance capacity;

— response time standards state that life-threatening callouts should be responded to within 19 minutes in 81.5 per cent of cases;

— State-wide response times for life-threatening callouts (Clinical Status 1 – ECHO: Patients who are in cardiac or respiratory arrest) within this timeframe have decreased from 80 per cent in December 2017 to 76 per cent in December 2019, in particular outside of Dublin; and

— State-wide response times for potentially life-threatening callouts (Clinical Status 1 – DELTA: Patients with life-threatening conditions other than cardiac or respiratory arrest) within this timeframe have fallen from 54 per cent in December 2017 to 49 per cent in December 2019, and that rates in the summers of 2020 and 2021 were down on previous years;

further notes that:

— the annual spend on private ambulance services has risen from €2.1 million in 2011 to €10.1 million in 2019;

— in 2019, the three top spenders on private ambulance services were Letterkenny University Hospital (€1.6 million), Mayo University Hospital (€1 million), and Cavan General Hospital (€682,973);

— ambulances are too often travelling in excess of 150 kilometres to reach a destination, with instances in excess of 200 kilometres, and there are extreme geographical disparities in ambulance coverage;

— ambulances are often left idling outside of hospitals due to a lack of bed capacity and an inability to transfer patients, particularly Covid-19 patients, as accident and emergency services are not operating in an efficient and effective manner, resulting in cancellations of scheduled care and contributing further to the waiting list crisis;

— an unacceptably high proportion of shifts, possibly as many as half or more, already run overtime, with 12-hour shifts often lasting 15 hours or more, leading NAS staff to have low morale with widespread burn out and occupation-related mental health difficulties; and

— the attractiveness of a career in the NAS is damaged by the terms and conditions of work under the current system, which is a reputational issue also affecting medical scientists and other underappreciated professions in the health service; and

calls on the Government to:

- urgently complete and fund the recommendations of the capacity review on the adequacy of the NAS, to identify additional budgetary needs to phase out the use of private services, reduce reliance on overtime, fill vacancies, and expand staffing and the ambulance fleet to meet need;
- urgently review the adequacy of the spatial distribution and coverage of the ambulance fleet, ambulance stations and rapid deployment points, to ensure an equitable distribution of services across regions and to reach response time standard targets;
- avoid call centres directing long-distance callouts to teams which are nearing the end of their shift and ensure adequate coverage to support this;
- advance legislation relating to specialist paramedic grades and rapidly advance funded expansions to primary and community services, in particular those relating to community paramedicine and chronic disease management, to provide alternatives to hospitalisation and reduce the strain on emergency services;
- establish a clinical framework to provide for ‘hear and treat’ and ‘see and treat’ alternative care pathways, to further reduce hospitalisations;
- provide more appropriate hospital beds to avoid patients being left in ambulances and admit them to hospital in a timely manner;
- expand mental health supports for the NAS workforce, including access to counselling and psychiatric services where appropriate; and
- ensure redeployment opportunities within the health service, particularly to non-emergency community roles, for frontline paramedics who are fit to work but cannot return to frontline emergency roles for health reasons.

I will be sharing time with some of my colleagues. I have tabled this motion because, as is the case in many areas of healthcare at the moment, we have a lot of burnout and fatigue in the National Ambulance Service. I have met many ambulance paramedics and members of the National Ambulance Service in recent weeks and months. I am sure the Minister is aware of many of the pressures the National Ambulance Service is under. We often hear the words “burnout”, “low morale” and “fatigue” in relation to our front-line healthcare services. It is no different in the National Ambulance Service.

I met yesterday with the SIPTU representatives and many ambulance paramedics on a Zoom call. I again heard at first hand the consequences of what is happening as a result of the lack of capacity in our National Ambulance Service. There are no breaks for many of those who are on long shifts. Ambulance paramedics often work for 12 hours. They cannot get a break, even a lunch break, and many of them talk about a desktop lunch because they simply cannot get time to eat properly. That has a consequence for them. Even after the long hours they work, if there are 15 or 20 minutes left at the end of their shift, they can be given a call-out to somewhere 100, 200 or 300 miles away from their destination, adding lengthy hours to an already long shift. There are many more consequences for the ambulance paramedics. There is real fatigue and burn-out in that community.

There are also consequences for patients. We hear more and more anecdotal evidence from patients and families that people are waiting too long for an ambulance to arrive. I put that di-

rectly to ambulance paramedics I met, including those from SIPTU last night, and they say that is precisely what is happening. They say they cannot stand over a service where the response times are not what they should be. One ambulance paramedic remarked to me that he came onto his shift last week, starting at 7.30 p.m. His first call was to respond to a call that came in from a patient at 11.38 a.m. He had to respond to that call, arriving six or seven hours later, and had to deal with that challenge, through no fault of his own. An awful lot of moral injury applies here with regard to the impact that has on front-line staff. Ambulance paramedics have to do their best. They want to make sure they take whatever call comes in. A child could be sick. An older person may have fallen. Yet, at the same time, those ambulance staff know they need a break or are coming towards the end of their shift. They have to deal with all of that, day in and day out. I am hearing more about that kind of moral injury, not just from members of the National Ambulance Service but right across our healthcare system. It all comes back to a lack of capacity.

I can pre-empt some of what is in the Minister's response. A number of working groups have been established by the National Ambulance Service to look at some of these issues around breaks, late call-outs at the end of shifts and many of those sorts of areas. However, they have not been actioned. We need to see even those small steps implemented as quickly as possible. I also know a capacity review is being conducted. When I talk to ambulance paramedics, they relay to me that the nearest comparable country is Scotland, where there is a staff complement of 5,000 while we, in this State, have a staff complement of just over 2,000. We are far behind. Our fleet needs to be greater than it is, as does the number of paramedics. We need more emergency medical technicians and more staff generally in our ambulance services. The consequence of that not happening is that ambulances will not arrive on time. More burnout and fatigue will be the result.

I have also been told by managers in some hospitals throughout the State that ambulances can be parked up for hours on end because the hospitals do not have the beds to transfer or decamp patients from the ambulances into the hospital. It can happen for hours on end. Those hospital managers told me they have had ambulances, sometimes a fleet of ambulances, parked up for hours outside their hospitals because they do not have the beds for those patients. In those scenarios, the ambulances are acting almost as hospital trolleys. How mad is that? How frustrating is it for ambulance paramedics and people who use the service?

This motion is a sincere attempt to say to the Minister that we need action. I hope the Minister will support this motion and I think he should be able to. We are calling for the completion of the national capacity review and for its publication when it is complete. We are also calling for the proper resourcing of the service. Let us put in place a strategy for the National Ambulance Service that properly resources it, increases the fleet and personnel and ensures we can provide a fair service. We must ensure ambulance paramedics are fairly treated. Let us address the issues of burnout, low morale and fatigue and put in place a plan in which ambulance staff can have confidence. I know there are new personnel at the head of the National Ambulance Service and I wish them well and want them to succeed. I ask the Minister to support the motion and, more than that, I ask that he actions the requests in the motion.

Deputy Pa Daly: Last week, Deputy Cullinane and I met with representatives of the National Ambulance Service to discuss the crisis at University Hospital Kerry. While we were there, problems with the ambulance service came up time and again because they are intrinsically linked. Nearly every day, my office is contacted by people who cannot get healthcare due to the ongoing crisis. Worryingly, a common concern is the inability to get an ambulance

service. People are referred to the emergency department by their GPs or they have an emergency but must wait hours for an ambulance. It is commonplace to hear of ambulances being sent from Limerick and Cork to take Kerry people to University Hospital Kerry, and *vice versa*.

Before coming to the Chamber, I spoke to Ms Rita Sheehy, who worked in medical practice for almost 20 years. She said that things went from bad to worse six years ago when the call centres were centralised. She told me one ambulance from her area went to Rosscarbery last weekend while another went to Union Hall. The Kenmare ambulance ended up in Waterford. I am not sure, given the crisis in healthcare in Kerry, that there is an understanding we have three peninsulas in our spread-out county, with the resources for only 150,000 people. We do not even have that. We have a population during the summer months of close to 500,000 people and the services are clearly not there.

Young children and elderly people end up being driven to hospital by family members, which creates risk and places parents and family members in a bind. Should they wait for paramedics to come or risk driving their loved one to hospital before it is too late? People must face these choices due to the lack of ambulances in Kerry. I previously asked the Minister to base ambulances in Killorglin and Abbeyfeale. Both areas are adjacent to communities grossly underserved in normal times and feel completely abandoned during this crisis. I again invite the Minister to come to Kerry, go to the hospital, meet people and meet with the ambulance service.

I am hearing more stories of ambulances waiting for hours to transfer patients into hospital. It is common to hear of five-hour waits and sometimes eight-hour waits. Staff shortages and a lack of beds mean highly vulnerable patients and paramedics are waiting too long to be seen. It is not good enough. The Minister needs to take action. I urge him to do something before it is too late and someone loses his or her life.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: For some time now, our ambulance services have been under considerable strain. It is not unusual to receive complaints from people who have had to wait for long periods for an ambulance, even after calling the emergency numbers. People have to wait up to an hour or more for an ambulance to arrive. In some cases, on arriving at the hospital, an ambulance has to wait outside with the patient due to overcrowding in the emergency department. There are three hospitals in use for Dublin North-West, the constituency I represent. Those are Beaumont Hospital, the Mater hospital and Connolly Hospital. Each is under considerable pressure because of the wider issues our health system faces due to a lack of resources. Those hospitals are only a ten- or 20-minute drive away from most people in the Dublin North-West constituency. However, if you are ringing 999 for an ambulance, it is because you have a medical emergency and need help urgently. For whatever reason, you cannot make that journey without the help of an ambulance.

The National Ambulance Service has pointed out that due to the lack of a single call and dispatch model, the dispatch process in Dublin is not as seamless as in other areas and it is not possible to integrate all calls in one database to ensure improved planning and performance monitoring. That needs to be considered. We are being told that ambulance units are being sent for hundreds of kilometres to respond to calls in Dublin to fill in all the gaps. This takes resources from the areas where they are supposed to be based. It makes no sense. Our motion calls for many measures that need to be considered, but ultimately the point is that we need an urgent review and an improvement of ambulance and accident and emergency resources for patients on arrival. We need ambulance services to be properly funded and to have more staff, equipment and vehicles. Patients must not be let wait for a long time in an emergency. Lives

are at risk. The ambulance workers are at the front line. They are under so much stress and strain, especially since Covid. They are exhausted and burnt out and they need help.

Deputy Imelda Munster: We are all aware of the enormous pressures on our health service. Covid laid bare the enormous deficits. We are reaching crisis point again in respect of hospital capacity, including ICU capacity. The National Ambulance Service, like many parts of the health service, is in crisis. Staff are reporting that morale is at an all-time low. Staff are completely burnt out. Paramedics often have to travel over 200 km to a call-out due to disparities in ambulance coverage in different parts of the country. Staff have reported having to work for over 15 hours per day, often as a result of having to travel hundreds of kilometres towards the ends of their shifts. It is little wonder that healthcare workers are not being enticed to stay here or come here to work.

The healthcare system is dysfunctional and affecting the health and lives of those who work in it. This is bad news for patients. I have heard from many in my constituency who are upset over the times for which their loved ones have been left waiting for an ambulance. Last year a gravely ill 95-year-old woman was left waiting for three and a half hours. During the summer an ambulance was called for a GAA player who appeared to be seriously injured on a playing field. He was a five-minute drive from Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital but it was decided that he should not be moved given his injuries. He waited an hour and 40 minutes for an ambulance. It turned out that the ambulance came from Tallaght as there was none available locally.

The National Ambulance Service is missing its response targets for call-outs in life-threatening circumstances. We are aware that there are elderly and vulnerable people waiting hours for ambulances. We need to support those working in the National Ambulance Service. The best way we can do so is by increasing capacity in the service so staff will not be so overworked and overstretched and so we will not be overly reliant on private ambulances. We need to identify where additional funding is required, phase out private services, fill vacancies, increase the number of staff and expand the ambulance fleet to meet demand. We need to do all these for the sake of patients across the State and for paramedics and healthcare workers, who have given so much to us in the past year and a half, but also long before that.

Deputy Paul Donnelly: I thank my colleague Deputy David Cullinane for tabling this motion. We need action and need it now. The red tape in recruitment, which was spoken about, needs to be removed. We need more beds in our hospital system and to increase hospital capacity to prevent patients from having to wait in ambulances and on trolleys. We need to expand our ambulance fleet to ensure all communities, both rural and urban, are properly served. It is just not acceptable that the complement of the National Ambulance Service, 2,500, is but half that of Scotland, 5,000.

There are many in this room who have had to call an ambulance at some stage or who, unfortunately, had to travel in one as a patient. For the vast majority, calling an ambulance is the last resort when someone is really ill. An ambulance is called in extreme circumstances and with great reluctance. When an ambulance is called, people expect an appropriate response time. However, this is increasingly not the case in both urban and rural communities. I have heard of people having to wait for an ambulance for an hour or more.

My family had to come face to face with the reality of the pressure the ambulance staff are under just this day last week. My mother, who is in her eighties, was very sick last week with an infection and an ambulance was called at 1 p.m. Despite numerous calls throughout the day,

an ambulance did not turn up until 5.30 p.m. We live in East Wall, and my mother was brought to the Mater hospital, which is just up the road. Does the Minister believe that is acceptable in a modern health service? I certainly do not believe so.

Last night I was shocked to see on the RTÉ programme that the first recorded case of a patient having to wait overnight on a trolley was in 1998. There are 409 people on trolleys as we stand here today. That the first recorded case was in 1998 is shocking. It is not acceptable and there are solutions. It is time we got on with listening to the workers, management and Deputies in this Chamber and implemented the solutions that exist. Not doing so with a sense of extreme urgency is to continue to put people's lives at risk.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: It is obvious that we need an urgent review of ambulance resources and the configuration to ensure the emergency service is adequately resourced and run efficiently and effectively. I acknowledge the trojan work of the dedicated paramedics and other emergency staff. I have seen at first hand their absolute dedication. They deserve much better than what they are being presented with. We are talking about protecting and saving lives and retaining, supporting and protecting ambulance workers – workers who are burnt out from long, exhausting shifts. How can the Minister stand over an emergency service that is constructed and resourced in a way that means seriously ill patients must wait up to two and a half hours for an ambulance? The bottom line is that we need to stop the criss-crossing of ambulances, whereby they are travelling hundreds of kilometres, by expanding our ambulance fleet and ensuring rural communities are served properly.

Yesterday I joined the nurses outside Mayo University Hospital when they were protesting over conditions and safety. Their main concern was the safety of patients and staff. That should concern the Minister, and it should certainly concern us all. I hear accounts of routine delays in offloading patients at emergency departments due to a lack of capacity. The nurses have raised the issue of the severe lack of nursing staff to take over the care of patients from the ambulance personnel. This is the problem arising. Right now in Mayo, the nurse-patient ratio can be as high as 1: 15, instead of 1:7, due to the shortage of staff there. The problem is that ambulances are lined up outside the hospital. Two weeks ago I spoke to the family of an 85-year-old woman, a cancer patient, who had to wait outside Mayo University Hospital for over six hours without morphine on her referral by Westdoc.

It should be much easier for UK-trained paramedics to transfer their registrations so they can work in Ireland. They tell me it is easier for them to go to Australia than to come back to their own country. We need to address the crisis in the National Ambulance Service and, indeed, the wider health service.

On the roll-out of the booster vaccine, particularly to those for whom it is now being rolled out, will the National Ambulance Service be doing what it did on the last occasion? What is the timeline for that? When will housebound people in their eighties and nineties get the booster vaccine? Will it be through the National Ambulance Service?

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I thank Deputy Cullinane for tabling the motion. It is a good motion and we will not be opposing it.

I acknowledge the extraordinary work that is being done by the women and men in the National Ambulance Service. Before Covid arrived, they were doing an extraordinary job. They did not have the resources they needed. The investment was not going in; that is the truth. A

very good and credible strategy was launched in 2016 that did not get the resources that it needed. That was the situation before Covid arrived. Since it arrived, those working in the National Ambulance Service have been under extraordinary pressure. They have been among the most impressive people I have met as I have met health workers and others all over the country who have been involved in the fight against Covid.

7 o'clock

All present remember the pop-up testing and tracing tents that were deployed. That was the National Ambulance Service. As Deputy Conway-Walsh stated, we remember the housebound and the urgency to get to them; a lot of that was the National Ambulance Service. We remember the urgency of getting vaccines out to various parts of the country; that was the National Ambulance Service. It has done an extraordinary job. While it was supporting the Covid efforts in testing and tracing, getting to the housebound and in vaccines more broadly, its staff were continuing to do their day job in respect of emergency response. They have done and continue to do an absolutely extraordinary job and I think every Deputy in this House will acknowledge and thank them for their amazing work through Covid.

I welcome the opportunity to address the motion with colleagues. The National Ambulance Service is a statutory pre-hospital emergency care provider. It operates as part of an integrated health system in which care begins immediately at the time of an emergency call and continues through appropriate treatment, transportation and handover of the patient to the clinical team at the appropriate emergency department or alternative facility.

It is fair to say the National Ambulance Service has undergone a significant amount of change and reform in recent years. It has changed from a service that traditionally transported patients to hospital for treatment to a service that is clinically led. That is an incredibly important and fundamental change. For example, it is now treating patients over the telephone, at the scene, at the patient's own home much of the time and on the way to a medical facility.

Right now, we are investing more than €200 million in the National Ambulance Service. The budget for next year will be in excess of €200 million. This means that NAS annual funding will have increased by approximately €30 million since 2019, which really is important because I agree with the Deputies who are calling for investment. Importantly, in the budgets for this year and next year we have matched that with action. Deputies have rightly stated that we need to see action and the money. I am delighted to be able to share with them that since 2019, the last year of the previous Government, funding has increased by 18%, which is very important. Since the 2016 plan entitled Vision 2020 was published, the NAS has increased staff numbers by 16% and there is far more change on the way. Building clinical capacity in the state-of-the-art national emergency operations centre, NEOC, in Tallaght has facilitated the introduction of alternative care pathways such as "see and treat" and "hear and treat", which are really important and allow the NAS to assess and treat many patients at the lowest appropriate level of acuity, resulting in better outcomes for the patient and more effective use of healthcare resources.

I and the Government are committed to supporting the NAS as we continue with its development and transformation. Significant achievements have been made. Those working in the service deserve great credit for that. In addition to the funding for the budgets for this year and next year, I am very happy to share with colleagues - some of them will already be aware of this - that the National Ambulance Service has been allocated €5.7 million in targeted funding under

the winter plan. This is important targeted funding in response to rising demand for access and it focuses on the “see and treat” measures, which will reduce the number of patients who have to be brought to an emergency department.

As set out in the national service plan for this year, there are specific targets in place that the NAS must meet in responding to life-threatening calls. The service works to achieve these targets by prioritising the allocation of resources to higher acuity calls and patients. I am aware that, as Deputies have noted, the wait times for lower acuity, non-life-threatening calls have presented a particular challenge recently as the NAS has been experiencing unusually high demand. While this is in line with the current experience of many parts of the hospital system, I know it is a concern for all present and certainly for all those working in the NAS. I have been advised that several particular factors are currently impacting on its ability to meet response times. These include a significant increase in demand for ambulance services. In fact, since February of this year, the NAS has seen an increase of 20% in emergency calls. That is a very steep increase. In addition, as all present will be aware, emergency departments have been extremely busy, which has negatively impact on turnaround times, that is, the time required to release an ambulance from an emergency department following patient transport. We are also dealing with a depletion of resources due to increased levels of sick leave, such as due to staff being a Covid-19 close contact, for example, which is impacting on the availability of front-line staff. There is also the ongoing need for enhanced infection prevention and control measures. I am fully committed to supporting the National Ambulance Service in responding to all these challenges, as it is doing. The unprecedented level of funding allocated in the past two budgets is evidence of that. The funding will help the service to address capacity shortfalls and build on the staffing levels increases and continue with that, which is important.

Successive reports on emergency ambulance capacity have highlighted that there is a shortage of qualified paramedics in Ireland, regardless of funding allocated. What are we doing about this? We are training more paramedics. There are more than 200 student paramedics at different stages of the paramedic degree programme right now. Of course, colleagues will be aware and, I am sure, fully supportive of the amazing advanced paramedic role. We are seeking to have more of those as well. They are doing an incredible job. It has been a really positive innovation in the ambulance service.

The stated target of the HSE is that 80% of ambulances will be released and available for tasking within 30 minutes of arrival at an emergency department. I am aware this target is not being met and that the pressures in emergency departments are a significant contributing factor to the release of the ambulances. The HSE has commissioned a review into this issue with a view to identifying what can be done in the short term to assist with it. I am advised that the initial findings of this review are currently being assessed by the HSE. I look forward to sharing and discussing those findings with colleagues.

I note for the information of the House the progression of delivery of acute bed capacity projects that is happening across the country in line with the requirements set out in the 2018 capacity report. This is relevant to the debate on the National Ambulance Service because to achieve the desired turnaround time, one of the many things we need in the acute hospitals is a significant increase in beds. The progress in this regard includes an increase in permanent acute bed capacity of 795 beds compared with the number available on 1 Jan 2020, with a target of 938 to year end. We also have €52 million in funding provided for critical care this year to allow for an additional 66 beds and to be followed by an additional €10.5 million for next year, with the stated aim of bringing the number of critical care beds from 255 at the start of Covid

to 340 by early 2023. That will be an increase of one third, or 33%, in ICU capacity, which is significant. As we have discussed previously in the House, we are not stopping there; we are driving on with a very significant increase. In fact, the target we have set and on which we have Government agreement is in excess of the number identified in the previous capacity report.

The past few months have been challenging for the National Ambulance Service, as all present will be aware. Our clear focus now must be on continuing to support the capacity building and reform to ensure the service offers the right care at the right time and in the right place. We are acutely aware that the past two years have been incredibly challenging for the healthcare services. The experience of the National Ambulance Service and the women and men who work in it has been no different in that regard. While continuing to provide front-line services, it has done an enormous job in the Covid response, including carrying out more than 2 million Covid-19 tests. I thank the Deputies for tabling the motion. The Government will not oppose it. It contains very good ideas and I look forward to continued discussion.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: There was an error in respect of the speaking time in the previous Sinn Féin slot. There were two and a half minutes remaining, which should have been allocated to Deputy Martin Kenny. I ask that 12 and a half minutes be allocated to this slot to make up that difference, if the Leas-Cheann Comhairle is agreeable. It is the same amount of time overall. Is that fair enough?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Yes.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: Every Deputy will want to share with the Minister their experiences in their own constituency. My home county of Donegal has had major problems with ambulance services in recent years. There are a number of families who have lost loved ones due to the length of time it took the ambulance to arrive. There is no doubt about that. They have very courageously told their stories and campaigned for a better ambulance service. I am sorry to report, having spoken to people who work in the service over the past few days, that there is not enough personnel in place around the county. There are not enough ambulance bases, ambulances and personnel to cover the county. On top of that, the number of people waiting on trolleys over the past number of weeks in the major acute hospital, Letterkenny University Hospital, has been at the top. In that regard, currently, Letterkenny University Hospital is second only to University Hospital Limerick, which has a terrible problem with overcrowding and people waiting on trolleys in the emergency department. There is a backlog at the emergency department in Letterkenny and ambulances are backed up. From speaking to families, I know that there have been many instances of great distress being caused to the patients and the paramedics operating those ambulances. Their business is saving lives. They have done that and have got the patient to the hospital, only to face a backlog. The working conditions are utterly unacceptable. Their business is saving lives; that is what they signed up to do.

To be clear, my point is that there is not an adequate ambulance service in County Donegal. I do not think there is a recognition of the unique geography of the county. The paramedics who work in the service are under unbelievable pressure. That must be dealt with and Letterkenny University Hospital must be helped to tackle the crisis in beds, nurses and doctors. The two crises in the ambulance service and the acute hospital in Letterkenny lead to impossible working conditions for the front-line emergency workers who are working there. They are being failed and it is not acceptable. I appeal to the Minister to examine the issue with his colleagues and to make it clear to the National Ambulance Service and the Saolta Hospital Group.

Deputy Seán Crowe: People in Ireland are tired of the dire state of the public services that they rely on. Since the days of austerity, funding has been whittled away, and in many areas we are left with hollowed-out services. Nowhere can this be seen more than in our health service. We are told of all the extra money that the Government is throwing at it, when really, we are standing still when it comes to services.

Waiting lists continue to climb, overcrowding continues to worsen and the National Ambulance Service and emergency services are at crisis point. We spend millions of euro each year on private ambulances rather than on improving the working conditions and strength of our ambulance service. Our motion calls for that life-threatening call-outs to be responded to within 19 minutes. The importance of the golden hour response time seems to have been dangerously stretched when we hear stories of ambulances having to travel further and further to attend to patients. We are increasingly hearing stories of desperate families waiting long periods for emergency responders. Ambulances left idling outside hospitals due to overcrowding is wrong on many levels and leads to unacceptably long shifts. NAS staff are suffering from low morale, as we have heard, and burnout is widespread in the service.

We cannot blame Covid for these problems, as these and other challenges meant that we were at breaking point before the pandemic. The Government must urgently review the adequacy of NAS resources. It is vital that we identify exactly what is needed to phase out the use of private services, reduce reliance on overtime, fill vacancies and expand staffing and the ambulance fleet. As part of this, what is needed is to provide adequate healthcare in this State. We also must provide more appropriate hospital beds to avoid patients being left in the back of ambulances and ensure that they are admitted to hospital and treated. We cannot neglect public services in this country any longer. We need a Government that works for the people and for workers and their families.

Deputy Kathleen Funchion: I wish to commend my colleague, Deputy Cullinane, on introducing the motion. Nowhere is it more evident how vital the National Ambulance Service is than in a rural community and constituency like my own. Nowhere are funding cuts, staff shortages, burnout and inadequate facilities more evident more keenly felt than in rural communities. I know from the calls that I have received on this issue that the service is not fit for purpose in counties Carlow and Kilkenny. It is totally and utterly unfair to those who work in the sector. A recent incident reported in Carlow emerged where a Thurles ambulance crew from County Tipperary were sent to Tullow, County Carlow, only to be diverted to New Ross, County Wexford, then on to Kilkenny before being sent back to Carlow town. This is a regular occurrence. It is absolute craziness.

Carlow's ambulance crew has been screaming out for a new depot, as the current facilities on the ground at St. Dymphna's Hospital are completely unacceptable. The Minister should visit the site, if he has not already, to see how inadequate they are. A new ambulance base is needed. I ask that that be prioritised.

The shortage of paramedics in counties Carlow and Kilkenny was evident recently in the case of a constituent who had to wait on the side of the street for an ambulance for two hours. This was not the fault of the people working in the sector, who are overstretched and burnt out. On top of the burnout and the crazy situation facing staff, they are also working 18-hour shifts and face long drives home. Many have to opt to stay in a local hotel, if possible, due to the tiredness. Paramedics seem to be diverted all over the place. Life and death decisions are being made by overstretched and under-resourced paramedics, which is unacceptable. I reiterate how

unfair this is to those working in the sector.

If resources in an area are already responding to calls, the job is then given to the next available ambulance, which could be hours away from where the caller is. In counties Carlow and Kilkenny, that could mean an ambulance being dispatched from anywhere in the country.

In January 2020, SIPTU called for immediate and effective action to be taken by the Minister for Health and HSE to relieve the pressure being experienced by ambulance professionals throughout the country. It was ignored, and the unacceptable situation of paramedics treating patients in the loading bays of hospitals instead of hospital beds has continued. I cannot impress on the Minister enough that our services and personnel must be resourced so that they can perform their duties to the best of their ability. I commend all those who work in that sector. I do not know how they do it. Their morale must be so low at times.

Deputy Martin Kenny: A number of years ago, I met ambulance staff in County Sligo and they told me the arrangement in place was what they called “dynamic deployment”. One would think it was NATO on manoeuvres in the south Indian Ocean. However, it was code for fewer ambulances covering a wider area. It meant that ambulances from Sligo were spending a lot of their time going up to Letterkenny, perhaps over to Castlebar, away into the midlands or up to County Monaghan. Therefore, when people were looking for an ambulance locally, it was not there. There was an incident two months ago in which a lady was hit by a car by Carrick-on-Shannon, where there is an ambulance depot. She lay on the side of the road for almost an hour and a half before an ambulance was able to come. That is the experience of many people. When there is an emergency and a crisis, we are told to dial 999 and act fast. We are told that in cases of stroke, for example, time is critical and we must react quickly to get the person to hospital and treated. Yet, our ambulance service which is there to do that, is simply failing. It has failed for a long time. This is not news to any of us in the Chamber. We have known about it for some time.

The Minister mentioned that more resources were being put in and more money was being provided. However, the experience of people is that they are not seeing those resources. That is the reality of it. When I speak to the staff, it is the same situation. There are fewer staff trying to do more work. There must be a re-examination of this dynamic deployment model, how it has worked and how it has failed. If the Government is to continue with that model, where ambulances will be dispatched over vast areas of the country, there needs to be an examination of how much more resources need to be put in to provide for that. It simply has not worked and there needs to be recognition of that. Any new design of a system which can work in future will clearly require more staff and more vehicles. Everyone that we speak to tells us that.

I wish to commend Deputy Cullinane on bringing forward the motion because every Deputy, Senator and councillor in the country, regardless of political affiliation, has been inundated with messages from ordinary citizens out there. When there is a crisis in their lives they expect to be able to get an ambulance and get to hospital. It is bad enough that when they go to hospital, they face waiting times and other issues. In their moment of crisis, the State is letting them down. It is paramount that we deliver for the ordinary people and ensure there is a proper ambulance service in place.

Deputy Claire Kerrane: I will begin by acknowledging the work that paramedics do throughout the State day in, day out. They are the first on the scene to horrific incidents and they tend to people at the most frightening times of their lives. They do all of this under immense

and growing pressure. I also acknowledge the National Ambulance Service and the management team there. Last year, I spoke to them about an ambulance blackspot in west Roscommon in my constituency. It had been identified by HIQA in 2014 as a blackspot. At that time, there was just a day service Monday to Friday that closed at 6 p.m. and a night service on Saturdays and Sundays with no day service. There was only one permanent crew in place during that time and the four people were run ragged. I do not know how they did it. For me they very much sum up the incredible commitment of our paramedics throughout the State.

I brought this issue to the attention of the National Ambulance Service. It conducted a report and found that between January 2019 and October 2020 a staggering total of 4,259 calls were received for the Loughglinn region of which more than 93% were emergency calls. On the back of this report, the NAS agreed to make the Loughglinn service 24-7. I am grateful that the NAS not only listened but acted and did so very speedily. Now is the time the Government has to act. While that was a positive and a good news story at long last for west Roscommon, we have an issue in that there is a total lack of resources nationally. This is stretching ambulances and paramedics on duty to the absolute limit.

Every day, several texts go to paramedics offering overtime in various areas to cover shifts. In many cases they physically cannot be done. I know of several texts that went out this week for counties Roscommon, Mayo and Galway. As has been said, paramedics are also working dangerously long hours. I know of a shift last week from 10 a.m. to 10 p.m. and the crew did not get back to base until 3 a.m. the next morning. There are issues, which need to be dealt with. They have been highlighted. As has been said, this is not Sinn Féin saying this; this is paramedics on the ground. We need to act.

Deputy Sean Sherlock: I welcome the Sinn Féin motion. We are supporting it. I want to speak on two specific scenarios as they relate to my county of Cork. They certainly reflect the experiences of the Sinn Féin Deputies as they related stories from their constituencies. An email I received from a person stated that on the previous Saturday an elderly man aged 85 crashed into two parked cars on the side of the Ballyhooly road coming out of Glanworth. I am being deliberately parochial because it needs to be highlighted. The email stated:

The man called the ambulance immediately. The man was informed the ambulance would be 20 mins. I offered 1st aid at the scene. The man appeared ok but had pain in chest and down his left arm. The fire brigade attended the scene quickly ... The man was kept in the car waiting for the ambulance. The fire brigade crew kept him as comfortable as possible with blankets and a tarpaulin. The emergency services told the man that his ambulance had been diverted to a heart attack and his ambulance was cancelled. An advanced paramedic did arrive about 1.5 hrs after the accident had happened. Around the same time a local doctor ... saw the lights and came to help. The gardai were on the scene throughout. Eventually 2.5 hrs after the accident, as the night was cold and wet, the man had to be taken from the car and brought to a neighbour's house for his health and safety. At this point there was 5 fire engines, 3 garda vehicles and an advanced paramedic on the scene. They were able to clear the rd and open it again. It was 3 hrs 20 mins before an ambulance eventually came and it was 4 hrs after the accident before the man left in the ambulance for hospital.

This is quite a typical case. I mentioned the location because I want to put on record that it is a rural area in Cork but no more than a 20-minute drive from Cork city and the nearest tertiary hospital and no more than half an hour from the nearest secondary care facility. This is happening and it needs to be acknowledged. I grant that the Minister has acknowledged the

problem. I absolutely accept that he has said more financial resources are being deployed to deal with the issue and that he is in the process of recruiting 200 additional paramedics who are going through the system.

There is a legitimate expectation on the part of every citizen to expect that emergency services operate on the basis of the pre-hospital emergency care guidelines and that there is a time limit by which each call will be triaged. It is very clear to me that if there has been a change in the protocols when people ring the emergency phone line calling for an ambulance, that change has not been communicated to our citizens. If there has been a shift in what people's legitimate expectations are in respect of an ambulance coming to a scene and if there have been some changes in these protocols then they certainly have not been communicated to the public. This needs to be addressed.

Notwithstanding all of this, the simple thing that occurred in the incident I detailed was that there should not have been any ambiguity in any protocol for pre-hospital guidelines involving an 85-year-old man in a road traffic accident. There should not be any ambiguity about the need to ensure that an ambulance arrives on time and within the pre-hospital guidelines. This is why I am articulating the case.

I also received the following email from a paramedic:

I'm a paramedic in the National Ambulance Service and I've recently learned of a Bantry/Fermoy ambulance crew who crashed returning to base ... apparently a result of exhaustion.

The crew in question had clocked up 600 km+ in one shift. Thankfully neither the crew or another road user was seriously injured ...

The crew escaped with little or no injuries however the next time the crew, the potential patient they carry and other road users may not be so lucky.

This is a result of NEOC (national emergency operational control) and national ambulance service managements refusing to treat paramedic/EMTs with the dignity they're entitled to and deserve

This runs to the heart of the issue. It really does need to be sorted.

We welcome the motion. I am delighted to see it this evening. In this country at present, not only are people not guaranteed access to a GP or access to an out-of-hours GP service, they cannot even be sure whether they will get an ambulance if they need it. Something is going seriously wrong. The place is going to hell in a hand cart fairly lively. I know we are in the middle of a pandemic. We all understand this. The testimonies the Minister has heard this evening are crucial. We need to see the ship being turned around quickly to ensure people have confidence that the system will deliver for them and that at a very minimum an 85-year-old man could have the legitimate expectation for all of his years that if he was involved in a road traffic accident, the case would be prioritised.

The issue raised by Deputy Cullinane on the length of time that ambulances spend in emergency departments needs to be tackled. It is not good enough for the Minister to say HSE has commissioned a review into the issue with a view to identifying which remedial measures might assist in the efficient release of ambulance resources from emergency departments. We have known for ages that this has been going on. I could not put a timeline on it. The dogs on

the street know that ambulances have been backed up at emergency departments since Adam was a boy. The day for coming into the House-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I am unsure as to what the Deputy's internal arrangement for sharing time is but the Deputy is probably over-----

Deputy Sean Sherlock: ----with that kind of language is gone. We need a response. I apologise to my colleague, Deputy Nash, for going on.

Deputy Ged Nash: I thank the Leas-Cheann Comhairle very much. The points and all of the issues made by Deputy Sherlock, as we know, predate the pandemic. I join with colleagues in commending the work of the ambulance service before the pandemic and the sterling work that they have done throughout the pandemic, particularly in the visits that they have made to the house-bound, together with the sensitive way in which they go about their business. This gratitude must be put on the record of the House. I thank them for their activity in that regard in my area of Louth and Meath.

The Minister will probably agree that front-line health workers of every description should be entitled to the very best working conditions. As far as emergency medical technicians, EMTs, in Drogheda are concerned, that is not the case. Drogheda is Ireland's largest town and serves one of the most densely populated areas in the country. EMTs in my home town work in intolerable conditions. Their base is at the old Cottage Hospital in Drogheda and it is not fit for purpose and never was. They occupy a space in a building that was meant to be temporary that has now taken on a state of permanence.

I will give the Minister one example of the inadequacy of the facilities. A few weeks ago the washing machine and dryers were out of action and there was no running water available to wash the interior of ambulances, that is, during a pandemic. There was no running water available or no facilities to wash uniforms. I do not want to get started also on the showering facilities. I raised this with the HSE before. Replies to me say that Drogheda is a priority for capital investment for a new base. In February and March I sent the HSE a list of prospective sites. I have tried to follow that up to weeks ago with the HSE but there has been radio silence since and over the past few months.

I believe the Minister will agree that hard-working EMTs are entitled to better than this. We need a new base in Drogheda. This needs to be expedited. We need a timeline and I would appreciate an update, if not from the Minister this evening then from the HSE and very shortly, please.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Glaoim ar an Teachta Cairns ó na Social Democrats.

Deputy Holly Cairns: We are all aware of the instances in recent months of unacceptable waiting times for ambulances and paramedics being directed, sometimes hundreds of kilometres, to respond to an emergency. This is obviously deeply distressing for families and communities who should be assured of access to emergency services. These fears are even more acute in rural areas where waiting times can be much more significant. The delays in the ambulance service are a cause of worry in themselves, but coupled with the erosion of health services in areas like Cork South-West, communities are deeply troubled by the implications.

Bantry General Hospital is still awaiting the necessary investments to guarantee its future, while the closure of some services due to staffing in the summer demonstrated its precarity.

Furthermore, the rationalisation of SouthDoc has resulted in reduced hours in Castletownbere and the closure of the Kinsale service. Combined, all of these issues greatly impact the rights of people in the area to access appropriate medical care.

The focus on ambulance services is incredibly important. This is always part of a multifaceted and interlocking system. We need greater support for all of these features together.

In discussing this motion, it is important to note that we have very dedicated and professional paramedics and ambulance service staff who are doing everything they can to respond to calls. Anyone who has interacted with them understands the commitment and skill they display in dealing with emergency and difficult situations. Emergency services are an essential public service. There should be no doubt or worry that ambulances, in this case, or the fire brigade or An Garda, will respond immediately to emergency situations. This has to be a bare minimum. This has to be a service the State guarantees. Unfortunately, this is not the case.

Instances highlighted in this House and in the media in recent times reveal considerable waiting times, with several cases in Cork. The response times for both life-threatening and potentially life-threatening call-outs have decreased in recent years. Reports from within the NAS, however, show over-stretched staff and inadequate resources where paramedics and other staff have their 12-hour shifts overrun, putting themselves and others at risk. This is simply unacceptable.

After a recent ambulance crash, the *Southern Star* reported that members of the ambulance crew have begun to speak out. They say that “enforced overtime”, which sees their 12-hour shift extended to 14, 16 and sometimes 18 hours, presents a real danger to them, patient outcomes and the long-term effectiveness of the service.

There are four ambulances in west Cork but they often travel massive distances to attend life-threatening calls in Cork city and Kerry on a daily basis, sometimes resulting in one or no ambulances being in west Cork. People have been in touch with me and it was amazing to hear other Deputies saying that it is a very common occurrence for people to be waiting more than three hours for an ambulance. Can you imagine if that happened to you? I cannot believe how common it is and I thought it was an outlier down where I am from.

Paramedics are reported having to apologise to patients for the length of time it takes them to get there, something that was described by one paramedic as embarrassing. Worse than that, it is dangerous. They have said that this has to be highlighted because people are going to die due to delays. We must have sufficient numbers of ambulances based around the country and have staff who work reasonable hours to be able to respond safely and effectively to emergencies. We must also have a service that reaches all communities in a timely manner.

The NAS has identified issues leading to delays in responding to calls in different areas of the country, including increased arrival-to-hand-over delays at emergency departments and infection prevention measures. Congested emergency departments can leave ambulances waiting at the hospital and tie up paramedics who should be out answering calls. It illustrates the complexity of the circumstances and the interconnection with other shortcomings in the health service.

As we face into the winter season of increased numbers presenting in hospitals, especially through emergency departments, will this situation only get worse? Any efforts to address the delays in ambulance responses have to consider all of the factors involved.

The NAS capacity review from 2015 highlighted the need for increased investment in vehicles and technology, the redeployment of ambulance stations around the country to service communities better and the hiring of additional staff. In cases where seconds can make all the difference, it is essential that the necessary investment is made in the service. For example, the improved locating of ambulance stations would decrease drive times and lead to an improvement in response times.

Ambulance crews also believe the switch to operating the service from a regional to national basis is not as effective as it might appear on paper and this needs to be considered.

The motion rightly calls for the urgent implementation of the review's recommendations. In addition, the capacity review calls for different clinical options as alternatives to converging all patients into already overcrowded emergency departments.

In England, the development of alternative care pathways has allowed ambulance services to treat up to 50% of patients by means other than transportation to accident and emergency departments. However, this requires the creation of link-in services and availability of out-of-hours GP facilities, social services and emergency dental services. More specialist paramedic grades and the development of community first responder schemes can also play a role here in not only reducing the strain on ambulances and acute hospitals but in providing emergency interventions and care at the point of need.

The role of air ambulances in providing rapid emergency care, especially for island and coastal areas, needs to be acknowledged this evening also. The air ambulance is underutilised and underfunded.

Finally, ambulances are not just about emergencies, they are often key assets in transferring patients or people with additional needs for care in acute settings or even appointments. We need the capacity in the system to ensure these services are available to people.

I have recently been dealing with a case where an older person in west Cork has regular appointments in Cork city but is not guaranteed to make them due to the unavailability of vehicles. This is now a constant source of worry for the family who are struggling to make alternative arrangements and is simply unacceptable.

We need a properly resourced ambulance service that guarantees the numbers of vehicles and supported staff to ensure the best possible response times. It is the least the families, communities and the workers themselves deserve.

It is also necessary to provide other services that assist and improve the function of ambulances from fully resourced emergency departments and rural hospitals to out-of-hours GP cover and empowered paramedics. All of these features are connected and necessitate proper investment and co-ordination and this cannot happen fast enough.

I thank Sinn Féin for bringing forward this motion and I encourage all Deputies to support it. I know that the Minister said that he would not be blocking this motion but the question is when he will bring the measures requested in.

Deputy Bríd Smith: I move amendment No. 1:

To insert the following after "but cannot return to frontline emergency roles for health reasons":

“and

— direct the Health Service Executive to recognise the National Ambulance Service Representative Association, who are members of the Psychiatric Nurses Association, as

a trade union with full collective bargaining rights for its members employed in the NAS.”

I thank the Sinn Féin Party and congratulate it on a very good motion. It is good to hear that the Government will not be objecting to or opposing it like it normally does, just for sake of it, and I hope the motion will make a difference.

There is one further matter I wish to mention. The Minister was not in the Chamber this morning when I mentioned it. On top of all of the details about the crisis in our service and how that could be improved by having a more efficient flow-through to beds and ambulance services, etc., there is the question of home care packages. Many beds could be freed up from our hospital services and ambulances would not be waiting outside if those beds could be freed up if there was not the total chaos in the provision of home care packages. I understand, from talking to local health teams in Ballyfermot and beyond, that many workers are leaving the companies that provide these packages because their pay and conditions are so poor. They are not paid for travel time or expenses for using their own cars or if they have to take taxis and buses. They are constantly under pressure by the companies that employ them. A lot of these inefficiencies etc. can come down to workers’ rights and how they are treated, in particular if we cannot recruit and retain staff. This situation could be addressed by dealing with this group of workers in the home care industry in a proper and decent way.

That brings me directly to what I want to say about our amendment. We want to add to the motion “to direct the ... [HSE] to recognise the National Ambulance Service Representative Association... [known as NASRA, affiliated to] the Psychiatric Nurses Association, as a trade union with full collective bargaining rights for its members employed in the ... [National Ambulance Service]”. The Minister may recall when he was in opposition that on at least seven days this group of more than 500 workers in NASRA systematically organised. They were often outside the gates of the Dáil, sometimes hundreds of them at a time. They banged on our doors to ask this Minister and previous Ministers to tell the HSE to recognise this group of workers with almost half of the National Ambulance Service in its membership. The previous Ministers refused to do so and I am now appealing to the Minister not to do likewise.

My brother is gone now, but he was an ambulance driver. For many years workers in the ambulance service were extremely frustrated at the low levels of representation and services they got from their unions. They have a right to move on and establish themselves in other unions. A union they are connected with, namely, the Psychiatric Nurses Association, PNA, has 50 years of experience in organising within the health service. That is important.

When it comes to trying to advance legislation on how to bring on community paramedicine and chronic disease management to provide alternatives, we will have to talk to workers. We cannot leave them out of the loop. I understand there are trials in place, but there is a cohort of workers nobody is talking to. That is why this matters in a very concrete way. It matters in terms of fulfilling the objective of having a workforce that buys into, agrees with and is enthusiastic about major changes to be made in their lives. That is why the amendment to the Sinn Féin motion is so important.

I mentioned that my brother worked in the service. One of the first things he had to do when called out when he was very junior, and at a time when the training was not nearly as good as it is now, was to attend a car crash where a man had been decapitated. He suffered very badly psychologically for a very long time with the memory of that. He got no counselling, support or backup. I do not think he even got sick leave at the time. The section of the motion that refers to expanding mental health supports for the workforce, including access to counselling and psychiatric services where they are appropriate, is absolutely essential. After all, these workers are dealing every day with complex cases and life and death. Without them, we would all suffer greatly. Due to the fact they are suffering, the service is suffering.

There is a domino effect from the time an ambulance tries to get to someone, to the time it gets to the hospital, meets the trolley crisis and bed blocking happens, a term which I hate but which explains the situation best, and then to not having home care services. There are a whole load of complex problems. The Government must talk to workers and this is a crucial cohort of workers that has to be recognised.

Deputy Mick Barry: There have been several ambulance crashes in Cork in recent months. Deputy Sherlock gave one example of an ambulance that had been on a 600 km journey. The standard of driving in the service is high, so we must ask what factors are at play. Could it be the case that fatigue might have been a factor in the other cases? It is not at all unusual for there to be overruns in the schedule for an ambulance team. Overruns of up to five hours are not unknown. Often, an overrun can be linked to intercounty run and sometimes to an interprovincial run. Not only are these overruns contributing to fatigue, the situation is compounded by the fact that ambulance teams are often being forced to work through lunch and dinner breaks.

I will pause while the brothers have consultations over here. Sorry, folks; I am trying to speak. The ignorance of it. It is astounding.

The point I am making is that the situation is compounded by the fact that ambulance teams are often being forced to work through lunch and dinner breaks. While the working time Act provides for rest breaks to be ignored in the event of an emergency, there can be no real argument that this clause is being seriously abused by the National Ambulance Service management. What is being asked of ambulance personnel may not stand outside of the law, but it certainly stands at complete odds with anything that might reasonably be expected of a worker.

Will the Minister commit to publishing the results of the investigations into these crashes when the reports are complete? If fatigue is a factor, and I strongly suspect it is, there must be no cover-ups. This is a major issue in the ambulance service. The most consistent voice within the National Ambulance Service raising the issue of fatigue over the past ten years has been NASRA, whose members are part of the PNA. These are issues that would have had to have been addressed by now had NASRA and the PNA been at the table. Yet, the Minister, this Government and the previous Government, which the Minister supported, have denied them that place at the table in a clear example of modern-day 21st century union busting.

With more than 500 members, NASRA is, without doubt, one of the two largest trade unions in the National Ambulance Service. Why does the Government continue to deny it a place at the table? When will it change this union busting policy?

Deputy Michael Lowry: I support the motion. I raised this matter with the Taoiseach last week. I requested an urgent independent review of the ambulance service. Since I highlighted

the issue, I have been contacted by paramedics, patients and medical professionals from every corner of the country. Story after story has been relayed to me, some through anger and others through tears, but all of them through frustration and desperation.

This service is in crisis and I am not sure that the Minister, the HSE or those who are responsible for delivering the service are fully aware of the extent of the problem. This service is failing those who strive every hour of every day to provide emergency care. This service is failing men, women and children throughout the country. This service is failing full stop.

I could quote stories of the anguish and suffering being experienced by patients, and it would be a long list. We have all heard them. Every public representative here has heard the stories emanating from paramedics, ambulance crews and the public who have been affected by this problem. Most of these stories we hear are heart-rending. Each one is a catalogue of human suffering. The realities of our flawed National Ambulance Service cannot be allowed to become a vote-catching opportunity for any elected representative, including me.

We have a duty to demand that this be put right. This is our duty, in the first instance as human beings and in the second as elected representatives. We cannot fail on this issue. It is too important, and failure is not an option. We must start to improve what is a substandard service, which is being experienced every day by people everywhere. We must tackle this national crisis by engaging with and listening to the front-line staff. We must ensure those who are doing the job have the means, structures, conditions, support and co-operation to do it safely and effectively.

The words “health and safety” have become so much a part of everyday life that one wonders if they are now simply taken for granted. It is ironic that health and safety regulations in the case of paramedics, who are recognised globally as being among the most highly skilled medical professionals, are constantly ignored or sidelined. If an individual has a licence to drive a heavy goods vehicle, he or she is obliged to obey the Road Safety Authority rules. These rules require a maximum of four and a half hours driving which must be followed by a 45-minute break. The driver’s working day must be no longer than nine or ten hours, with weekly and fortnightly limits to be observed. Weekend breaks are also enforced.

A paramedic is expected to work 15-hour or 16-hour shifts, without rest periods and with no enforced weekly breaks. Meal breaks can be requested but cannot be guaranteed. Eating food in an ambulance in the current Covid environment is not exactly a healthy practice, yet this is the only option for paramedics as they travel the motorways. As they travel the motorways they pass numerous big glowing road signs that state, “Tiredness kills”. A good work-life balance is long recognised as essential for healthy living. Some 57% of all paramedics’ shifts do not finish on time. Nobody can predict which ones will be part of the 43% that might get home on time. This puts massive stress on families and on the well-being of the paramedics who are trying to do their best to be all things to all people.

When I raised the current ambulance service debacle with the Taoiseach last week, he referred in his response to pre-hospital emergency care. This is the primary function of paramedics, who are licensed to practise by the Pre-Hospital Emergency Care Council, PHECC. Countless lives have been saved because of their interventions. We owe them a huge debt of gratitude. Their job should be complete when they arrive with a patient at the emergency department. The hospital staff should take over responsibility at that stage. However, the reality is very different. In recent years, the ambulance has become an extension of the emergency

department. Crews are caring for patients in ambulances for up to five and six hours because the receiving hospital staff have no place for the patients. This is not pre-hospital care.

Three things must happen immediately, and they are just three of many actions that are battling for priority. Front-line paramedics must be taken off Covid testing. The ambulance service is already grossly understaffed. Highly skilled paramedics should not be diverted to Covid testing. The deployment of the new interns due out of training schools must be monitored carefully. My request is that interns be placed as close as is practical to their homes or localities. Interns are on very poor wages. They get no travel or accommodation allowance. I know several interns based in Tipperary who are travelling daily because it is cheaper for them to travel to west Cork. They could leave Tipperary at 10 p.m. or 11 p.m. and report back for duty again the morning after at 8 a.m. It is simply unfair and unjust to treat young people like that, and it is happening regularly.

I also agree that paramedics must have NASRA recognised as their union of choice. This group was formed by paramedics to be their independent voice. It was initially recognised, but the HSE withdrew the recognition. Will the Minister enlighten us as to why this recognition was granted and then withdrawn? Paramedics and ambulance crew feel very strongly that their views are not represented adequately, and they believe there is a conflict in the fact the union that is currently representing them is also representing the management of the HSE. This should be recognised and reflected in the decision of the Minister.

The lid has been blown off the pathetic state of the ambulance service. That lid can never be allowed to close again until the voices of those who work in and depend on the National Ambulance Service are both heard and heeded. The problems in the ambulance service are compounded and exacerbated by a general malaise in the healthcare system. The Minister mentioned the lack of acute beds. There is an urgent need for a significant increase in bed capacity. For example, last week the Taoiseach received a very warm welcome on his visit to open a new 40-bed unit in South Tipperary General Hospital. His visit was well received by the management and staff and, indeed, patients across Tipperary. I do not see the Deputy tonight and I wish him well, but the only note of hostility was from Deputy Mattie McGrath, who did not want to see the Taoiseach in the hospital or in the constituency. The Taoiseach in his tour of that hospital saw a 39-bed unit on which €2 million has already been spent. An additional €5 million would make 39 additional beds available. I ask that this gets priority.

Deputy Michael Collins: To reply to Deputy Lowry, he must realise that Deputy Mattie McGrath is ill at present. He has reason to be critical of the Taoiseach and certain hospital closures in Tipperary previously. The Deputy must have forgotten that.

I start by thanking every worker in the ambulance service, in west Cork and throughout the country, who has had to work under immense pressure in a failed ambulance service. The service is untouchable as the HSE and this Government are covering up what I call a shambolic situation that, unfortunately, is costing lives day after day, and nothing is being done. I and my colleagues have tirelessly raised the crisis we see nationally. I can see at first hand the disaster this Government has allowed to happen, which has led to many incidents in west Cork. I even raised these incidents with the Taoiseach. To be honest, Shep the dog would have done something about what I raised. The Taoiseach promised to look into it but, of course, it was west Cork so nothing happened. There are a small number of ambulances in west Cork. I hear that the Castletownbere ambulance is in Kerry all the time. The Clonakilty ambulance is now dubbed the Cork city ambulance as it is always in the city. The other two are based in Bantry

but are in Cork city most of the time, outside Cork University Hospital with patients. That leaves no cover for west Cork if there is an emergency call.

I will outline a small diary of incidents which would prompt a massive inquiry if they occurred in any other sector. I asked the HSE and the Taoiseach and I now ask the Minister to hold this inquiry. To date, nothing has happened. On 1 August, a man was struck in Castletownbere. There was no ambulance in Cork county so he lay on the ground for two hours and 45 minutes. Second, in late August, there was a car accident in Schull with three people injured. Fire and Garda personnel laid the three injured on the roadside and rang for an ambulance.

8 o'clock

There was no ambulance in west Cork. They waited two hours and 30 minutes before an ambulance came from another county. There were three persons seriously injured in Skibberreen with no ambulance available in Cork county. That person died waiting.

A person on Long Island just off Schull had a suspected stroke. The family rang for an ambulance but there was no ambulance in west Cork and the family waited for one hour and 30 minutes. A few weeks ago - this made the front page of the *Southern Star* - I got a call from a grandparent telling me that his grandchild fell seriously ill at a school north of Bantry. The parents rushed to the school to be told they could not get an ambulance. The ambulance service advised them to drive the child to Cork University Hospital. After some frantic driving by the child's father with the mother minding the child in the back of the car, they stopped in Coppeen as they thought their child had passed away. This is scandalous and needs to be looked into.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: I thank Sinn Féin for bringing this very important motion before the House. We have all had experiences of hearing from constituents of the crisis in the ambulance service. Before going into that, I thank most sincerely the people who operate the service in County Kerry with whom I have considerable dealings. The personnel in the ambulances are excellent, kind, diligent, hard-working and put in very long hours. I meet them regularly when they are finishing shifts, starting shifts and in between shifts. They are very frustrated, to say the least, at how the system is being managed.

Considering the size of County Kerry, it is totally crazy how often the Iveragh Peninsula in south Kerry, for instance, might be left with no ambulance whatsoever. There are times when Killarney, the tourism capital of the western world, is left with no ambulance service because the ambulance goes to Cork. When the button is released and an ambulance has discharged its patients, it could be sent up to Tipperary. These types of situations are happening over and over again. It is beyond belief that it is being allowed to continue.

I was one of the most vocal critics in this country of the centralising of the ambulance service when it was taken away from the system that we had in the past. I did so at the time because I knew taking away the local knowledge and the local system would be detrimental and unfortunately, I was proven right. It was brought here to a disused fire station where they put in two different types of computers that could not talk to each other for a long time and the left hand did not know what the right hand was doing. Ambulances were going east and west, and the people in ambulance control did not know what was happening. It was a completely shambolic system.

I agree with the motion. I again thank Sinn Féin for tabling it. Each of us is demanding that the ambulance service be put right in the interest of the safety of the patients it deals with.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: How many front-line response ambulances do we have in the country? How many supervisory officers do we have in ambulance cars who have not been rostered in the community? How many calls per week or per month do the supervisory officers make or attend? I am calling for a full review of the service, like a Garda division. There needs to be a front-line medical section and a clerical section. As training of an advanced paramedic is quite specialised, why does the National Ambulance Service expect paramedics to perform clerical duties and run budgets? I understand that paramedics are being used in test centres. How can this happen when we have a shortage in the ambulance service? Ambulance staff and paramedics save lives. Surely we should have fewer ambulance cars and more ambulances.

I think a service agreement for a call to be turned around in 90 seconds is important. However, why is this not applicable to a journey response - a time to get to the patient? This also needs to be monitored. It is unbelievable to hear that an ambulance from Cork is servicing Kerry and an ambulance from Limerick is servicing Tipperary, Cork and Kerry. Talking about a 90-second response time for an ambulance is brilliant but it takes an hour and 45 minutes to get to the patient. That is crazy.

I have seen ambulance paramedics told to go to an accident an hour and a half away. An hour into the journey, they are turned around to go back to their station again because another ambulance can get there sooner. There should be an ambulance service for each individual county and cover for areas that need it. The 90 seconds to get an ambulance out is absolute nuts. We need to ensure we have the correct number of ambulances. We need to get rid of the ambulance cars and put in more ambulances.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I too thank Sinn Féin for bringing forward this very important motion. It is one of the most hurtful things that is happening in our county at present. We do not have an adequate service. I compliment the drivers, paramedics and all the staff who do an excellent job. It is the management of the ambulance service that is wrong without a shadow of a doubt. Ambulance workers are burnt out from long exhausting shifts. Ambulance staff work very hard to perform an invaluable service in caring for our communities.

Far too often, patients are left waiting for far too long when they need urgent medical help. This not only causes considerable distress to patients but can worsen the medical outcomes. We must stand up for our ambulance service workers and ensure they get the support they need to do their jobs properly. We need to expand our ambulance fleet to ensure rural communities are properly served and not left behind as they are at the present time. We need to increase hospital capacity to avoid patients being left waiting in ambulances.

Up until 2012, we had a very good ambulance service before the reconfiguration of the National Ambulance Service. What it actually meant was a reduction of the ambulance service. Ambulances are being deployed from south Kerry deep into the heart of west Cork. Recently an ambulance crew started off at 8 o'clock in the morning and took a patient to Cork University Hospital. When they pressed the button coming out of there, they were sent to Dungarvan to take a patient to University Hospital Waterford. When they came out of Waterford, they were told to go back to Dungarvan for a second patient and took that patient back to Waterford again. Then they thought they were coming back to Kerry but they were told to go to Clonmel. That is the God's honest gospel truth. That happened. Our county of Kerry was left a whole 12-hour shift without that ambulance, which is not good enough.

We are on the back burner because more ambulances go to Cork and not so many Cork

ambulances go to Kerry. Therefore, we are left without a service. A farmer had four fingers cut off. After a long wait, his wife had to wrap up his hand, bundle him into a car and take him herself. The last drive that Ambrose O'Sullivan got to the hospital, instead of being in an ambulance was in his wheelchair in the back of a Transit van. That is not good enough. We had a better service years ago than we have now. The Government needs to wake up and do something about it.

Deputy Joan Collins: This motion could be addressed to many if not all areas of the health service: insufficient capacity; lack of funding; staff shortages; enormous pressures and mental strain on staff; and a constant ongoing crisis affecting both those who need the service and those who work in it. Despite increased funding and a commitment to employ more staff, there is difficulty in recruiting new staff and holding on to trained staff. One of the answers to that relates to poor conditions of employment, including low pay, poor management and low morale among staff.

The figures relating to the National Ambulance Service in the 2018 national staff survey by the HSE are quite shocking. Only 5% of staff felt that senior management acted on staff concerns; only 5% felt that communication was effective; only 6% had confidence in decisions made by senior management; and shockingly seven out of ten had experienced bullying and harassment. These figures indicate a completely dysfunctional workplace environment - at best, a management that does not listen or engage with staff and at worst, a culture of bullying and harassment. That is within a publicly funded State service employer.

The HSE could make a start in changing this by recognising the right of ambulance workers to be fully represented by a union of their choice, in this case NASRA. I fully support the amendment to the motion in this regard. There are 500 workers represented by NASRA and they feel totally sidelined in giving their experience within the service. I wish the Minister, Deputy Stephen Donnelly, was here, as he sent a tweet on 16 July 2019 stating:

So @PNA_IRL feel they've been left with no option but to order the strike back on this Friday. How do we solve this? We need meaningful engagement from both sides, we need to use the industrial relations apparatus of the State and above all we must show RESPECT to workers.

That was the Minister, then part of the Opposition, calling for support and respect for the workers. I wonder if he has started the process of using the industrial relations apparatus of the State to try to resolve this matter. I would have asked him if he had been here tonight.

Alongside poor management is the ongoing problem of a lack of adequate funding and capacity in the service. Workers in the service have been raising these matters for years. In 2014, following an "RTÉ Investigates" programme and a Private Members' motion by Fianna Fáil on the matter, the disparity in the sources of funding in comparison with the North of Ireland and Scotland was highlighted by representatives of the PNA and NASRA at an Oireachtas committee meeting. Northern Ireland, with a population of 1.7 million people, had 1,200 staff and an annual budget of €78 million. With a population of 5.3 million, Scotland had 5,400 staff and a budget of €258 million. Here, with the population then at 4.6 million, we had staff of 1,600 and a budget of €137 million. We had approximately a third of the resources of Northern Ireland and Scotland.

I fully support the motion and commend Sinn Féin on bringing it forward. I thank the Min-

ister of State for indicating the Government will not oppose it but I want its provisions implemented. The annual spend of private ambulance services has risen from €2.1 million in 2011 to €10.1 million in 2019. What are we doing and why are we paying private ambulances when we could expand our services? This should be dealt with in Sláintecare.

Deputy Thomas Pringle: Covid-19 has highlighted not only the importance of our ambulance services but the severe stress we put them under due to the complete failure of this Government to provide the necessary funding and investment that these services need. I was in this House in 2014 when we called on the Government to address the lack of staff and resources being reported by ambulance services. I stand here again more than seven years later and very little has changed. The incompetence of this Government, as well as previous Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil Governments, is absolutely staggering. How can we expect to trust these parties can deliver on anything when our ambulance service, which was on the brink in 2014, remains on the brink now?

It is said the service cannot be fixed overnight but I fail to see how it cannot be fixed over seven years. To fix the ambulance service in Donegal would take the provision of three extra ambulances in the county. We need one for the Killybegs base, one in Inishowen and one more for the county generally. Surely it is not beyond the service to provide that.

My office has had reports of staff suffering burnout and exhaustion due to extremely long shifts. Only last month we had reports of a Donegal ambulance being tasked to Tipperary and another tasked to Belmullet. A Donegal patient, meanwhile, was brought to Letterkenny hospital in a Garda car because no ambulance was available. This prompts serious questions about the dispatching of our ambulances. Ambulance crews backed up at hospitals waiting to discharge patients are a typical example of the dysfunction of our health services.

At a recent meeting we heard from the manager of Letterkenny University Hospital and he made a big display, indicating to members that 80% of ambulances at the hospital were freed within two hours every time. This is the precise point as he did not mention that 20% of ambulances are there for longer than two hours. That is what leads to the problem around the county.

More recently there have been fears about the future of our Lifford ambulance base and I cannot stress enough that Donegal cannot afford to lose any more ambulance bases. There has been some good news as well with the roll-out of community paramedics, although that provision now seems to be stalled. These paramedics can divert patients from hospital and have them treated at home, which will save pressure from being exerted on hospitals. Of course, in typical HSE style, the roll-out has stopped, probably to be penny wise and pound foolish.

It is completely unacceptable that the people who are doing the most in this country are being given the least but, unfortunately, that will be the legacy of the Government. I hope its members hang their heads as a result.

Deputy Michael McNamara: I do not mean to be ageist but everybody in this Chamber probably remembers when we had ambulance drivers and they were able to take two people in an ambulance at a time. Everything has changed and we no longer have ambulance drivers but paramedics and advanced paramedics. They are highly trained health professionals and many people in the State owe them their lives.

Equally, we determined, in line with best practice, that ambulances could only take one person at a time rather than two. When that decision was made, nobody ever thought to double

the number of ambulances. The number of ambulances stayed the same but the number of people who could be transported in those ambulances was halved. We have infinitely better trained and arguably better resourced paramedics but we are still restricted by the fact we have the same number of ambulances to cater for a larger population than before, when people could take two in an ambulance. I am not suggesting we go back to the days of taking two people in an ambulance but we must bear in mind that people are often waiting longer for an ambulance.

I will speak to the training of ambulance personnel, including paramedics and advanced paramedics. As I said, once these were drivers but now we have highly trained health professionals, which is very good. How are these people entering the ambulance service? Along with running an ambulance service, the NAS has its own sort of training scheme. My understanding is that this is quite unusual in comparison with European standards, as most European states now take paramedics through universities. Of course, we now have university training for paramedics at the University of Limerick. How many graduates of the University of Limerick paramedic course entered the NAS directly or even managed to get work experience there?

My understanding is that few have managed to do this, and the number may be one in recent years. The vast majority of graduates from that course in Limerick end up in the United Kingdom working for its ambulance services. Of course, they are of huge benefit to the people of the United Kingdom but we are training them in our university system. For the most part they are of our nationality, although, as with all our medical personnel, they are not all of our nationality. Will the Minister of State consider this? We need to get more people working in the ambulance service and consider how our resources are spent. If a university is producing graduates, we must ensure those graduates can access work in Ireland and we are not producing graduates to export in an area where we so badly need them working here.

I am not asking the Minister of State to respond tonight. Like many others, I have raised the matter before. I thank Sinn Féin for the opportunity it has afforded for us to raise the matter again.

An Ceann Comhairle: It appears from what Members are saying that there are people involved in the dispatching of ambulances around the country who do not have an even basic understanding of the geography of the country.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): That seems to be the case, given what has been said about an ambulance going from Donegal to Tipperary. I thank Sinn Féin for bringing forward this motion this evening. I am glad to say we are not opposing it. No differently from anybody else in the Chamber, I have listened to the debate on the motion in its entirety. I have a record of answering debates on ambulance services in Connemara, and I am glad to say that ambulance service has been put in place. I am also glad to hear Deputy Kerrane's experience in Roscommon.

I have worked on this over the summer and I have met representatives of the NAS, etc. There are certain fundamental pieces to be put in place. Although we have many ambulances, we must consider a dedicated retrieval ambulance team. It would be like a mobile intensive care unit. Deputy Danny Healy-Rae spoke about the poor man who lost his fingers. It is needed for the likes of that. Such teams need to be put in place sporadically around the country.

We also need to look at the implementation of a trauma strategy to reduce the need for people to access services through the acute services and the accident and emergency units.

Deputy McNamara raised the ambulance apprenticeship programme. I checked it before coming into the Chamber this evening. It was launched on 11 November and the closing date is 28 November. That is the apprenticeship model. The Deputy spoke about what is going on in our universities. The Deputy said that it is in Limerick, but my understanding was that it is in Cork. I thought a masters programme was taking place in University College Cork. Of the 16 who have been trained, six are on a panel. I cannot answer the question about how many were recruited into the service, but I know there are six on a panel. One would wonder why we have them on a panel and are not using their expertise.

Deputy Thomas Pringle: The budget, perhaps.

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: I will come to that next. A number of elements need to be there. There is a different hierarchy within the EMTs, the paramedics, the advanced medical practitioners, and a broader advance of other groups like the community first responders, CFRs. We have 275 CFRs. They were stood down during the Covid period, but 125 of them are working again. I hope that will come to bear when there is an Echo or a Delta response, because they are closest to the person and give the support at the start while he or she is waiting on an ambulance. There is no excuse for a person having to wait four or five hours. I have heard the stories.

Deputy Lowry made a valuable contribution when he said that 57% of all ambulance workers do not finish on time. He asked about the deployment of front-line paramedics for Covid testing. It is something I will bring back to and discuss with the Minister, Deputy Stephen Donnelly. Deputy Lowry suggested that interns and apprenticeships should be left closer to home because they are not paid an inordinate sum of money. There are numerous reasons, for example with regard to housing, we should leave them closer to home. We do not want to burn them out or turn them off. We would like to give them a reasonable experience in order that they might stay on board. We need them in the profession. We do not want to lose them at their point of entry after working.

I cannot comment on the matter raised by Deputy Joan Collins with regard to the unions because I do not have enough knowledge on it. I will bring it up with the Minister, Deputy Stephen Donnelly. Two or three Members raised that point before Deputy Collins did so.

Deputy Cairns talked about the triple lock. I do not have enough information to answer that question, but I know I have addressed it.

I asked for a clear breakdown on budget 2020. In budget 2022, €8.3 million was allocated to the NAS for the continued implementation of the strategic initiatives aligned with the NAS plan. The training and recruitment of additional paramedics to support baseline capacity needs 49 whole-time equivalents. The strength and clinical capacity in the National Emergency Operations Centre needs eight whole-time equivalents. Addressing tactical and operational management deficits needs 42 whole-time equivalents. Enhanced governance arrangements within the NAS need 29 whole-time equivalents. From what I can see, there is an action plan in relation to recruitment across a number of levels to address it. It does not speak to the point that Deputy Pringle raised about ambulances. That is what we need, and Deputy McNamara also said it. We need ambulances. That was the difference in Connemara. We got the ambulance and the people came around it. It takes the guts of 11 people to man an ambulance so that it can run 24-7. One can work out from that how many ambulances would need to be recruited into those areas. This is absolutely essential. I have heard the horrific stories from front-line workers who have found being out on the ground extremely difficult and very challenging. I

have heard about how exhausted they are and the burnout they have felt. What is wrong in the NAS did not just happen over Covid. It was wrong before Covid ever arrived and it has to be acknowledged. I acknowledge that the Minister has sought funding. It is provided for within the budget. There is a plan for the spending within the budget. My experience and engagement with the NAS within my ministerial role has been very positive. They engaged, they found the funding and the staff and they had the will to implement it.

Queries have to be made about the suggestion that temporary amendments could be made to the current deployment model. What are the proposed amendments being considered? When will a final decision be made on whether they will be introduced? Deputy Pringle spoke about the deployment of an ambulance from Donegal to Tipperary. The current deployment model is aligned to best international practice and was put in place following HIQA recommendations regarding safety concerns with former health board level control centres. In the context of current service pressure and capacity issues, the NAS and trade unions have a working group in place that is jointly looking at what work practice changes are possible. This will improve staff experiences without affecting or compromising patient safety. While a timeline for the conclusion of these discussions is not yet available, the NAS has emphasised that there is no intention to move away from the HIQA-recommended model and return to a geographical limited model, which would reintroduce inherent patient safety risks that were eliminated when the local control centres were closed. They should, and I hope they will, look at the piece of equipment - the ambulance or car itself - and at the rapid response between the various areas, and whether that could help in formulating any support that could work. When they did this piece of work in the past, they looked at the UK model and found that the rural capacity response rate there was 12%, whereas our rate was 40%. The geographical spread and the diversification within our need for more local or regional ambulance depots is essential, as is the quality of those depots.

It is sad to hear that when ambulances are left outside hospitals, paramedics are failing to have access to toilet facilities or to eat. It is wrong that they are left having their lunch in the ambulance, which is their place of work all day. I ask the hospital groups to take that on board following tonight's debate. It is wrong that the families and friends of patients are going to the local service station to buy ambulance personnel a cup of coffee or a bun. That is not how we should treat any front-line worker. Most importantly, it is not how we should treat people who are under an inordinate amount of pressure, and are in fact under severe pressure. That is my one ask of the hospital groups. It does not require money. It does not require legislation. It requires a willingness to acknowledge the role played by our paramedics and front-line NAS personnel in delivering patient care.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Cronin is sharing time with Deputies Paul Donnelly and Cullinane.

Deputy Réada Cronin: I hear and appreciate what the Minister of State has said. Sinn Féin appreciates that she is not contesting the motion. We have to remember that our ambulance service is a critical service that everybody wants but hopes they will not need. I will never forget meeting a fireman who was on duty the night of the Stardust fire. He recalled that it was a very quiet night before all hell broke loose. He said to me that the emergency services are like an insurance policy; we hope for the best when we are at our worst. These services should never be run to their limits.

We all feel fear in our hearts when we are in traffic and hear an ambulance siren. We see cars doing all kinds of manoeuvres to get out of the way. Instinctively, we know it is a mat-

ter of life or death. We hope that if we need one, it will come on time, but it will not if it is a Thursday in Maynooth, Celbridge, Leixlip, Kilcock or anywhere in the northern hinterlands of my constituency from Donadea to Johnstownbridge. There is no ambulance service operating from the Maynooth base from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. due to the austerity cuts from 2012. A person can have a heart attack or a stroke, or sever an artery, on any day except a Thursday between 7 a.m. and 7 p.m. With no ambulance available from the Maynooth base, he or she will be relying on an overstretched service from Naas or Tallaght. Time is of the essence and that time can be lost.

Jenny Moore contacted me last night to recall how she waited for an ambulance for almost an hour and a half outside Celbridge after a head-on collision, fearing the worst for her son in the car beside her. I have also been contacted by a paramedic regarding two cardiac arrests in Leixlip, both on a Thursday morning last month. In both cases, the response was delayed. Imagine the pressure this puts on our wonderful paramedics, who give 100% to their work, the job and the people they come to help. The Taoiseach and the Minister of State mentioned community first responders last week. I have been involved with Maynooth Community First Responders since I held a public meeting at which I and several others established the group. It is a volunteer group, however. It offers a superb service but should complement the State service. No citizen should have to rely on volunteers for their health. No volunteer should have to carry that burden of responsibility either.

I will finish on this point. Our society has changed. People are less likely to intervene if they see some misdemeanour in the streets. However, if we saw a vandal interfering with the wheels of an ambulance, we certainly would intervene. In its neglect of our ambulance services, the State is that vandal on the street, abusing our paramedic crews and taking the wheels off our ambulances. The treatment of the ambulance services and the citizens who depend on them is really a disgrace. I will leave it at that.

Deputy Sorca Clarke: I have listened to the Minister's response and that of the Minister of State. I welcome that the Government is not opposing this motion. It is obvious to anyone who chooses to look that this service, like so many of our health services, really comes down to a postcode lottery. This is another service that is virtually on its knees. The Minister of State spoke about the valued and valuable community first responders who respond to incidents coded Delta but that is not their role. The State should never rely on volunteers to be the first responders in every situation. Even those of us who have no medical training, including me, understand that time is of the essence when it comes to an emergency situation. This is absolutely not the fault of the paramedics and the professional and dedicated staff of the National Ambulance Service. Responsibility and blame for this lies squarely with the successive governments that have allowed this situation to develop. I say that because this has been going on for a number of years. We all know of cases where people have been left waiting for an ambulance while in pain and distress and that is not good enough but we also know of people who have lost their lives while waiting for an ambulance and that is absolutely not good enough.

The staff of the ambulance service in Longford-Westmeath are absolutely burnt out. They truly are. They are doing exhausting shifts and morale is on the floor. One paramedic told me this week that they spent three hours in a queue with a suspected Covid patient. They also told me they had driven like the clappers for 90 miles to get to an incident only to discover that a child had been unconscious for more than 40 minutes after being knocked down. That is absolutely not good enough.

I have some questions for the Minister of State. How many people have applied for, been

offered and accepted positions? What is the capacity of the National Ambulance Service training centres? Managers and staff are doing everything in their power but are operating in impossible conditions because there simply are not enough of them. We need to increase the numbers and to ensure that the system becomes robust so that, when we speak about community first responders again, they will be supplementing a service that is fit for purpose.

Deputy David Cullinane: It is a sad reflection on our health service that many people cannot access a GP. As the Minister knows, in some parts of Dublin and in some rural areas, people cannot register with a GP because of a shortage. We are now seeing waiting lists and waiting times for GPs. In the past, people could contact their GP and get an appointment that day or within two or three days. That is now being pushed out to a week or longer. Out-of-hours GP services are inaccessible or not available to far too many patients. That is putting great pressure on our emergency departments because people are going to them when they do not have access to out-of-hours GP services. Dentists are leaving the dental treatment service scheme for medical card patients at a rate of knots. I know many medical card patients who cannot get access to dental treatment. Far too many patients cannot get access to a hospital bed. They are on trolleys. As was said earlier, the first case of a patient on a trolley was in 1998. There are now hundreds of patients on trolleys every day, as if it is normal that they cannot get access to a bed. We have ambulances parked up outside hospitals. Their patients cannot be transferred into the hospital because beds are not available.

We also have ambulance paramedics and front-line staff who are stressed out and burnt out. One of them described it to me as hell. We do not appreciate the kind of calls they have to attend. They have to deal with children who are sick and children who are dying. They have to cut people out of cars. They tend to people who are reaching the end of their lives after an emergency or an accident that happened on the side of the road. They are the people who go out to respond to those calls. They get up every single day to their job and keep us safe. When they tell us the system is not fit for purpose and that it is unsafe - and they have been saying that to me right across the board from middle management to ambulance paramedics and emergency medical technicians, EMTs - we have a responsibility to listen. They often do not get downtime after attending to a greatly distressing call or accident. Moral injury kicks in. They just need time to recover. A child or older person may have just died. The ambulance personnel may have just been at the scene of a horrific car accident and then, within five or ten minutes, they have to respond to a call somewhere else because of the pressures on the system. That is unacceptable.

Ambulance paramedics have to eat their lunch on the dashboard of the ambulance because they cannot take the time to eat. They are doing 12-hour shifts. They may get a call to respond to an accident 100 miles or 200 miles away ten or 15 minutes before the end of their shift and they cannot say "No" because of who they are and how they have been trained. As has been said, they are advanced paramedics. They are highly trained and highly specialised and they love what they do. They want to treat patients and will never refuse a call but we cannot put so great a moral responsibility on them all of the time that they cannot take breaks or eat properly and that they must sometimes work long shifts for 14 or 15 days without leave because of a lack of capacity in the system.

With respect for the Minister of State and the Minister for Health, who was here for most of the debate, I welcome the fact that additional funding has been put into the National Ambulance Service. Every single cent of additional funding is valued. I certainly value that additional spend. However, I ask the Ministers not to agree not to oppose the motion only to then not

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implement its recommendations. I do not want to be here again in six months, a year or two years still talking about the same problems. I understand that we cannot solve all of the problems overnight. We need a strategy that is properly funded and that sets out how and when we are going to increase the fleet and the number of personnel. The Minister spoke about training.

I will make one very quick point, if I may. The Minister said in his speech that the national service plan for 2021 set specific targets for response times for life-threatening calls and also for calls with lower acuity. However, he did not say anywhere in his speech whether those targets are being met. The truth is that they are not. That means that patients and those who work in the National Ambulance Service are being failed.

Amendment agreed to.

Motion, as amended, agreed to.

Ceisteanna - Questions

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Public Procurement Contracts

62. **Deputy Mairéad Farrell** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the progress to date of the interim procurement reform board under the remit of his Department; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56103/21]

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: What is the progress to date of the interim procurement reform board under the remit of the Minister of State's Department?

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Osian Smyth): The interim procurement reform board was appointed by the then Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform in May 2017 to provide oversight of the delivery of the procurement reform programme, advise the Government on national public procurement strategy and advise on the objectives and business plans of the Office of Government Procurement. The board meets quarterly and presents an annual report to me, as Minister of State with special responsibility for public procurement. The most recent report, for 2020, was published in August and is available on the OGP's web page on *gov.ie*.

The board comprises 11 members, two of whom are independent members recruited from outside the public sector, eight are senior public servants drawn from a wide range of Departments and the chairperson is the former Secretary General of the Department of Defence, now retired. The terms of reference of the board include that it will provide oversight to the implementation of the public procurement reform programme, which has had considerable success to date. Governance arrangements have been established to foster collaboration and co-operation across the OGP and the main sectors of health, local government, education and defence. Representatives of health, local government and education are included in the board's membership.

Through the development of a suite of centralised arrangements, the Government's purchas-

ing power has been leveraged by speaking to the market with one voice. Procurement reform has delivered a programme of policy supports for SMEs and built an awareness in industry regarding the opportunities arising from public procurement. The board promotes active engagement with these arrangements across the public service.

The OGP, in consultation with the board, has been developing proposals on the refinement of public procurement following engagement with our colleagues across Government and industry. These will enhance public procurement, building on the progress to date, with a more strategic focus and increased emphasis on sustainability, social responsibility, SME access, innovation, digitisation and professionalisation.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: The national children's hospital was initially estimated to cost €650 million but the latest estimate stands at €2.4 billion, an increase of approximately 270%. The national broadband plan, initially estimated to cost €350 million, is now estimated to cost €5.7 billion, an increase of 1,530%. Behind schedule and over cost are hallmarks of procurement failure and the OGP does not collect data on the specific reasons for cost overruns. It seems that from a public policy perspective, this kind of information would be crucial. The procurement reform board needs to get a handle on the reasons for these cost overruns.

SI 284/2016 requires contracting authorities to prepare a written report for every procurement contract and also empowers the Minister of State to request other information in the form of a statistical report. Will he commit to gathering those data, either through the procurement reform board or by asking the OGP to do it?

Deputy Ossian Smyth: The Government has a huge capital investment programme and the OGP oversees roughly €16 billion in expenditure on goods and services. The idea of that is to centralise that spend to achieve three main objectives, namely, value for money, quality and transparency. Added to that, in looking at strategic procurements, we seek social conditions and green procurement.

The Deputy asked where we find where matters have gone wrong, how we can build on that and so on. We require that contracting authorities report back on their non-competitive or non-compliant procurement that takes place during the year-----

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Minister of State.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: It will please the Minister of State to learn I have a Bill forthcoming that relates to public procurement. One of its aims is to improve the approach to procurement data collection. Another Bill I have introduced, the Regulation of Tenderers Bill, which has passed First Stage, attempts to address the issue of bid rigging, something that everyone now understands is a problem. We often hear that Ministers want us to come up with solutions, and there are solutions in my Bills. I hope the Minister of State will support my Bill, which seeks to improve the approach to procurement data collection. It is really important in order that we can collect data that will help inform policymakers of the causes of cost overruns.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy. Time is up.

Deputy Ossian Smyth: Data collection is essential and I am glad the Deputy will, I believe, support the forthcoming planning and procurement Bill, which I hope will achieve cross-party support along with social conditions and green public procurement. As for her own Bill, I am happy to engage with her and see what she is trying to achieve. I am absolutely committed to

open data and transparency, which will help us to achieve our goals in public procurement. She outlined occasions where public procurement has not succeeded in various contracting authorities, but it has to be recognised the vast majority have delivered value for money and furthered the aims of the Government and the people.

Public Spending Code

63. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if he will provide information on planned changes to the public spending code against which proposals from Departments and State agencies will be appraised in respect of the need to comply with the aims of the climate action plan and sectoral carbon budgets; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [54955/21]

Deputy Ged Nash: We cannot legally meet the binding targets of net zero unless we radically change how we do things. The Department of Public Expenditure and Reform is the parent Department for the national development plan, which he has stated will see us spending an additional €116 billion over the next ten years, during its lifetime, on major infrastructural projects. The legal, moral and existential demand to slow and arrest climate change should be at the heart of every project his Department promotes. How does the Minister plan to change the public spending code to align it with our climate goals?

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): The public spending code is the tool the Government uses to evaluate the consequences of capital investment decisions. Every public investment project with a value above €20 million must conduct an analysis of the potential costs and benefits associated with that project, using rules set out by my Department. It is critical, therefore, that the public spending code provide a realistic assessment of the likely climate and environmental consequences of these decisions.

My Department has a full programme of works for the evolution of the public spending code to ensure it is compatible with the Government's enhanced climate ambition. In the first instance, the priority will be to increase significantly the cost associated with any release of additional greenhouse gases into the atmosphere. Each cost-benefit analysis must provide an assessment of the net impact of the proposal on greenhouse gas emissions. These emissions are then priced according to a schedule of values based on the estimated marginal cost society will incur to reach specific climate targets. Any project that results in greenhouse gas emissions must price these emissions at what it is likely to cost society to reach our climate targets by adopting an offsetting measure that will reduce emissions.

In 2019, my Department tripled the price of carbon applied in the code. This reappraisal of the cost of carbon was based on the estimated costs associated with achieving a 30% reduction in emissions by 2030. Since then, the Government's climate ambitions have been considerably strengthened. Ireland now intends to cut greenhouse gas emissions by 51% by 2030 and to become a carbon-neutral economy by 2050, with any remaining emissions balanced by the removal of emissions from the atmosphere. This means the price applied in the public spending code must be updated to reflect this enhanced ambition. In addition, work has commenced with the OECD on evolving further aspects of the public spending code.

Additional information not given on the floor of the House

A new model for assessing the emissions impact of infrastructure investment will be progressed to ensure the full range of potential consequences for this type of investment are captured and valued appropriately. This work will consider how such assessments are performed at the moment and what reforms might be implemented to improve these assessments. The project will also examine how investments that may be vulnerable to the impacts of climate change should be appraised.

Finally, work will be progressed on understanding the role of an instrument like the code, in a scenario where net-zero greenhouse emissions must be achieved by 2050 and the role the public spending code can play in the achievement of broader environmental objectives. Ultimately, the objective of this programme of work is to allow the Government to take decisions that are fully informed by the best possible evidence on the consequences of these decisions.

Deputy Ged Nash: When will that work conclude? This is critical. I am not sure the Minister and everybody in his Department, or indeed the Minister for Finance and his Department, understand the absolute centrality of their Departments in meeting our climate change ambitions. The Minister mentioned that the reference cost of carbon will have to change again if we are to align the national development plan and the Government's ambitions more generally with our climate goals. When precisely will that happen?

Fiscal policy, tax spending and climate are all intertwined, and the Minister's Department will have to get used to saying "No" to projects it would routinely have passed and promoted until relatively recently. On that note, it would be useful to understand how involved his Department was in the making of the recently announced carbon budgets.

Deputy Michael McGrath: It is important to say that the recently published national development plan, NDP, contains a comprehensive set of climate methodologies, against which all major capital investment projects will be assessed. My Department and that of the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, worked very closely and collaboratively in the preparation of the NDP in that regard.

As I set out in the original reply to this question, we have now considerably strengthened the greenhouse gas, GHG, emission reduction targets to 51% by 2030. As the Deputy has acknowledged, that means that the public spending code must be updated to reflect this enhanced ambition and my Department has a full programme of works to ensure that the code remains fit for purpose. Since the projects initiated will give rise to emissions over their lifetimes, the assessment of public investment projects should include an appropriate valuation of the cost that society will bear in dealing with the emissions that a project will give rise to.

Deputy Ged Nash: With respect, that reply is the kind of "blah, blah, blah" that Greta Thunberg has accused others of. We must be more precise and how we describe this. I am interested in establishing exactly what kind of metrics the Minister's Department is going to apply in respect of approving those projects that will be significant in allowing us to meet our carbon reduction and emission goals more generally.

One of the projects, for example, that would allow us to do that which seems to be still on the blocks is the DART+ initiative, which will ultimately take the DART to my home town of Drogheda in the constituency of Louth and east Meath. The project seems to me to be a no-brainer and it strikes me that a strong climate-informed public spending code would see that project being initiated in earnest as soon as is humanly possible. I again ask the Minister when

the reference cost of carbon will be changed and updated. We cannot wait until next year or the year after; we need to know now.

Deputy Michael McGrath: I reassure the Deputy that this matter is a priority for my Department. Work on this is ongoing and I anticipate that it will be completed shortly. As the Deputy is aware, a shadow price of carbon is the value that we place on these projected future emissions from projects. I reassure the Deputy as well that when he looks at the national development plan, he will see that we have given an envelope of funding of €35 billion, for example, to the Department of Transport. The Deputy is aware of the overall emphasis in respect of the ratio that we have agreed for spending in this regard, namely, that of a 2:1 ratio in respect of investment in public transport versus investment in road infrastructure. We have also carved out an annual commitment of €360 million for investment in a range of active travel measures during the lifetime of the programme. Therefore, my Department and that of the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, are working closely together. This format does not really allow us to get into the detail, but I would welcome engagement with the Joint Committee on Finance, Public Expenditure and Reform, and Taoiseach on the detail of how we are connecting this analysis and how we are assessing the impact of the shadow price of carbon concerning individual projects. It is difficult, however, to get into the detail in this format.

An Ceann Comhairle: Yes, it is, but we can change the rules if we do not like them.

Departmental Policies

64. **Deputy Mairéad Farrell** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the issues the Open Government Partnership will be addressing with him; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [56104/21]

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: Regarding the Open Government Partnership, OGP, I ask the Minister to advise us concerning the issues it will be addressing with him and if he can give us some more detail in that regard.

Deputy Michael McGrath: Open government is a culture of governance that promotes the principles of transparency, integrity, accountability and stakeholder participation in support of democracy and inclusive growth. Ireland is fully committed to upholding the Open Government Partnership principles of open and transparent government. Significant progress has been made in progressing the programme for Government commitment to “Continue and reinvigorate participation by the public sector in Open Government Partnership”. Milestones achieved to date, with civil society, include: the provision of open government in Ireland webpages on *gov.ie*; the co-creation of terms of reference for the open government round table multi-stakeholder forum; a public call for expressions of interest to join the open government round table multi-stakeholder forum; a public call for submissions for the next and future open government national action plans; and the nomination of public sector round table members from relevant Departments. Ireland is also in the running for an international Open Government Partnership impact award for the Irish Citizens’ Assembly and our deliberative democracy journey.

The first meeting of the open government round table, to be opened by my colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy Ossian Smyth, will take place online on 29 November 2021. There are no predetermined issues or commitments to be addressed at this stage of the process. It is a cornerstone of the process that the round-table members will collaborate on the issues to devel-

op the next open government national action plan commitments through this multi-stakeholder process, with the active engagement of citizens and civil society.

The round-table members will have the opportunity to consider the breadth of submissions received from the public call; updates on relevant programme for Government commitments and other activity, for example, the transposition of the EU whistleblowing directive; ethics legislation; the review of the Freedom of Information Act; and open data, etc. The national action plan, which emerges for the round table's deliberations, will focus on the Open Government Partnership values of transparency; civic participation; public accountability; and technology and innovation enablers.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: I welcome the Minister's response. Many people would agree that there have been major concerns regarding transparency and accountability. I do not need to rehash those concerns because I think we have debated regularly in this Chamber. It is welcome that there will be an open government round table multi-stakeholder forum and that the Minister of State, Deputy Ossian Smyth, will be attending. Equally, however, it is important that the collaborative effort consists of more than discussion and that firm action will be taken by the Government in this regard. It is important as well that the Government listens to what comes out of that process and that a real strategy emerges to improve accountability and transparency in the Government. I say that because we have a deficiency in that regard. We can see that with the Government's review of the freedom of information legislation, and we need legislation to be introduced to strengthen all those aspects.

Deputy Michael McGrath: I point to the work streams we have under way in this space, because it can seem quite abstract when we talk about it in respect of what it means in practice. For me, it means transposing the EU whistleblowing directive and strengthening the protected disclosure legislation. The Deputy is aware that I will shortly be bringing forward legislation in that regard. We have commenced a review of the ethics legislation and that is a significant body of work. We still have outstanding recommendations from tribunals of inquiry that reported several years ago and I am determined to make progress in that area.

As the Deputy is also aware and has acknowledged, we have commenced a review of the Freedom of Information Act. That will be a comprehensive and genuinely collaborative review. The Deputy will be aware too that we have legislation on the way on the regulation of lobbying. I acknowledge that the Deputy has also brought forward legislation in this regard. Therefore, I think that I have demonstrated my good faith in respect of open government through the various reforms under way in the Department.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: I will also be introducing legislation on protected disclosures. It will be intended to strengthen the legislation in this area, because it does need to be strengthened. Turning to freedom of information provisions, I have been clear that the current regime needs to be strengthened and that is why I have brought forward legislation and submitted amendments in that regard. The same goes for the issue of lobbying. When we have a situation where Bills intended to strengthen transparency and accountability are ready to go, then the Government should support them. This should be a collaborative effort. When Bills already exist, then they should be supported. Regarding regulation of lobbying legislation, that could have been implemented when I introduced my Bill on this subject, rather than kicking the can down the road for nine months. When legislation exists already, then, I will give the Minister credit if he supports the passing of these Bills.

Deputy Michael McGrath: I acknowledge the work that the Joint Committee on Finance, Public Expenditure and Reform, and Taoiseach has been doing on the pre-legislative scrutiny of the proposed protected disclosures (amendment) Bill because, as the Deputy is aware, we are obliged to transpose that EU directive by the end of this year. I look forward to receiving the committee's report. It was a comprehensive scrutiny process and I anticipate that we will be getting that report shortly. We are now at an advanced stage of the drafting of the Bill, in conjunction with the Attorney General, but I want the committee to be afforded the opportunity to table its ideas, proposals and the outcome of its scrutiny before I bring forward this proposed Bill. I am now in the final stages in respect of the drafting of the heads of the regulation of lobbying Bill and I anticipate that will come up over the course of tonight's discussion.

9 o'clock

In the coming months, we can make a lot of progress, whether through the Deputy's Bill or the Government Bill, to introduce important reforms in this area.

Office of Public Works

65. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if an update will be provided on the overpayment of rent at the Miesian Plaza; the contacts which his officials have had with the landlord over the past six months; and when he expects to recoup this overpayment. [56170/21]

Deputy Róisín Shortall: I again raise the matter of the significant overpayment of rent on the Miesian Plaza offices on Baggot Street which house the Departments of Health and Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth. I raised the matter with the Minister in April and June. What progress has been made in recouping the substantial amount of money that is owed to the Irish taxpayer?

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan): The rent being paid by the Commissioners of Public Works in respect of the offices at Block 1, Miesian Plaza, is in accordance with the terms of the lease. However, the Office of Public Works, OPW, has previously acknowledged in reply to parliamentary questions that an issue arose on which they should have engaged with the landlord and sought to recalibrate the rental rate as a result of the new measurement standard, international property management standard 3, IPMS 3, introduced in early 2016. This should not have happened and the Commissioners of Public Works regret that this error arose.

Since the issue was identified, the OPW has continued to engage with the landlord with respect to the measurement standard applied. In recent months, further discussions have taken place between the OPW and the landlord, including meetings on 3 June, 24 August and 23 September. At these meetings, there was constructive discussion around possible solutions towards resolution of the measurement issue. The Deputy will appreciate that the matters under consideration involve complex commercial property transactions and discussions are at a sensitive stage. While progress has been made, discussions are ongoing and the OPW anticipates a further meeting with the landlord will be held within the next two weeks.

Both the OPW and the landlord are committed to continuing this process with a view to establishing if a solution that is acceptable to both parties can be reached.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: It is estimated that the loss to the taxpayer is approximately €344,000 per year which, over the lifetime of the lease, would come to approximately €10 million. It is not a small matter, it is a significant matter. The Minister of State has said to me on two previous occasions, in April and June, that the OPW very much regrets that errors were made so there is no question but that errors were made. That regret is not enough. Concrete steps must be taken to recoup the outstanding moneys owed and to put the rent on a proper footing.

The landlord is Mr. Larry Goodman, trading as Remley Developments. Does the landlord accept that an error was made and that the measurements that were taken by the OPW need to be corrected?

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: The Deputy will appreciate that I am not getting involved in a commercial negotiation on the floor of the Dáil. The Deputy has served as a Minister in the Government so she will know it would not be appropriate for me to do that. I have said in my reply today and in previous replies that the Deputy is correct that the OPW regrets that the issue arose in the first place. The OPW never attempted at any stage to conceal it and admitted from the very start that an error was made. The Deputy is correct that the impact to date is in the region of €1.4 million. We are hoping that over the next fortnight, there will be a further meeting. I told the Deputy when the matter was most recently raised with me in the Dáil that face-to-face meetings between the landlord and the OPW were due. Since then, three meetings have taken place and another will take place. We hope to be in a situation whereby we can move forward in a collaborative way but the Deputy will appreciate, as I said in an earlier part of my reply, that it is complex and commercially sensitive. I hope we will be able to resolve this matter and when we do, I will be able to provide further updates to the Dáil.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: I am sure the Minister of State appreciates the fact that this issue was examined by the Committee of Public Accounts. It was also highlighted by Cianan Brennan of the *Irish Examiner*. I raised the matter with the Minister of State in April and again in June. It would seem that no substantive progress is being made, apart from the general aspirations that the Minister of State reiterated in his reply. I only received his reply at 5 p.m., even though this was a priority question to be taken tonight.

Since I spoke to the Minister of State about this issue in June, there have been two meetings and he has said there is another coming up in two weeks' time. Will the Minister of State undertake to provide me with details of the outcome of that meeting in two weeks' time? Will he ensure that clear instructions are given to officials in his Department to bring this matter to a conclusion so we can get to a point where there is an acceptance by the landlord and that the taxpayers will get back the money they are owed?

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: I cannot do that and the Deputy knows that. I cannot negotiate on the floor of the Dáil on a commercially sensitive matter.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: I did not ask the Minister of State to do that.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: Excuse me, I am replying to the Deputy. I cannot do what she has asked. Three meetings were held on 3 June, 24 August and 23 September. Another will take place and if subsequent meetings have to take place, the OPW will do that in a constructive fashion. We will do that on the basis that we want to get resolution to this matter. While this has been investigated by the Committee of Public Accounts, I wish to put on the record that the

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OPW has engaged not only with the Committee of Public Accounts but also with others on this matter. We have at all stages co-operated to try to make sure that measures have been put in place to ensure that events such as this do not happen in the future.

I appreciate the Deputy's level of concern. As Minister of State with responsibility for the OPW, I am also concerned. Nobody has a monopoly of concern over this matter. I am a former member of the Committee of Public Accounts. I hope to have resolution but I cannot guarantee anything to the House and I want to be clear about that. I will revert to the House as soon as I have an update.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

EU Funding

66. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if he will provide a report on the national recovery and resilience plan; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [55892/21]

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: I am hoping the Minister can give us an update on the implementation of the national recovery and resilience plan. We know the importance of the plan, given the hefty investment available for battling climate change and the digitisation of local economies. Will the Minister give the House a progress report?

Deputy Michael McGrath: I thank the Deputy. The European Union's €800 billion NextGenerationEU recovery instrument, along with its €1.2 trillion seven-year budget, is central to the Union's response to the global pandemic. The aim of NextGenerationEU is to help repair the immediate economic and social damage brought about by the pandemic and to prepare for a post-Covid Europe that is greener, more digital, more resilient and fit to face the future.

The recovery and resilience facility is the largest component of NextGenerationEU, making more than €700 billion available to member states in the form of grants and loans, with Ireland in line to receive almost €1 billion in grants over the lifetime of the facility.

In order to access this funding, Ireland has developed a national recovery and resilience plan, with a total value of €990 million, which sets out the reforms and investments to be supported by the facility. The overall aim of Ireland's plan is to contribute to a sustainable, equitable, green and digital recovery in a manner that complements and supports the Government's broader recovery effort. The plan is based on 16 investment projects and nine reform measures covering three priorities: advancing the green transition; accelerating and expanding digital reforms and transformation; and social and economic recovery and job creation.

Ireland submitted its draft plan to the European Commission on 28 May 2021. On 16 July 2021, Commission President Ursula von der Leyen travelled to Dublin to present the Commission's positive assessment and draft Council implementing decision to the Taoiseach. On 6 September 2021, I joined the Minister for Finance at the ECOFIN meeting at which Ireland's draft plan was considered and the required Council implementing decision was then adopted by written procedure on 8 September 2021. Now that the decision has been adopted by the Council, the plan will be the subject of a financing agreement between the Commission and Ireland.

The next phase is the implementation of projects over the period 2021 to 2026, with milestones and targets to be achieved so that EU funding can be drawn down. An implementing body is being established in my Department to drive progress and delivery of the projects.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: I thank the Minister for his response. As he said in response to an earlier question, we have a moment to talk about 16 investment projects and nine reform measures. What triggered my asking this question is that I noticed in recent days that the Spanish Government has made an application for disbursement. It has applied for an initial €10 billion of the €69 billion it has applied for. I am seeking a timeline for how we will go about the disbursement of our own moneys. Do we have any timeline in mind? I have a particular interest in the electrification and upgrade of the Cork commuter railway line. Has the Minister any information pertinent to the €85 million digitalisation fund for the roll-out of broadband? We are aware that there are concerns over delays in broadband roll-out. Will these have a negative impact on the digitalisation programme?

There is €114 million for the SOLAS recovery skills response programme, which is about greening the economy and preparing the trades for that. If the Minister has any information on that, I would appreciate it.

Deputy Michael McGrath: I thank the Deputy and acknowledge his strong support for the Cork area commuter rail programme, which he has been advocating to the Government for some time. It is a very exciting programme. Its total cost is €185 million over the five-year period from 2021 to 2026. It involves significant enhancement and development of the rail network over approximately 62 km from Mallow through Cork to Cobh and on to Midleton. The main construction contract will be signed next year, as well as the contract on the electric train fleet. It is estimated that the key work in Kent Station in Cork will be completed by the end of 2024 and the full project will be finalised in 2026. As the Deputy knows, all this is with the ultimate aim of having ten-minute frequency all day on electrified rail services associated with the Cork commuter rail project. Therefore, it is a really exciting project. I welcome the Deputy's support for it and the fact that he has raised it. I have a detailed information note on it that I am happy to share with him.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: I thank the Minister. As he mentioned, the project is one of the most exciting that will be carried out in my area of Cork over the coming years. I am delighted to see progress on it.

I have two more questions I would like the Minister to address. Do we have any indicative timeline for the disbursement of funds in Ireland? Will it extend into next year? I would appreciate information in this regard.

Has the Minister any information on future grants? The rounds of funding in question are the first of a couple. The next round might be in 2023. Could the Minister advise us on any preparations that are being made in that regard?

Deputy Michael McGrath: We are expected to receive €915 million in grants in 2021 and 2022, with a further set to be allocated in 2023 under the recovery and resilience facility. Since this is EU funding, there is a significant amount of compliance required and we have to ensure we act in a manner that is consistent with the regulations. The instrument is performance based. Ireland will make its first payment claim to the Commission in the second half of 2022 and in each subsequent year until 2026. Over the course of the programme period, 2021 to 2026,

projects funded under the national recovery and resilience plan will be put in funds via the Estimates process. That is how we are going to deal with this. The funding will start to flow quite soon. The important thing for us is to ensure we have projects we can deliver and implement on the ground. Those that the Deputy has highlighted are exciting ones to which the Government is fully committed. We look forward to implementing them.

Brexit Issues

67. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the way in which the national development plan, NDP, will help to deal with the ongoing challenge of Brexit; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [55551/21]

Deputy Neale Richmond: My question is simply to ask the Minister about how the NDP will help to deal with the ongoing challenge of Brexit.

Deputy Michael McGrath: I thank the Deputy for his question and his ongoing interest in the Brexit issue. The full implications of the UK's departure from the EU remain to be seen but they will be significant. We need to remember that the EU–UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement does not replicate the *status quo*. Seamless trade no longer exists. This is why the Government has been working to prepare for Brexit for several years. Our total Brexit-related expenditure since the UK referendum on EU membership is now over €1 billion.

The Brexit adjustment reserve represents an important response by the EU to the challenges posed by the UK's departure from the EU and an important expression of solidarity with Ireland. The purpose of the reserve is to help counter the adverse economic and social consequences of Brexit in the sectors and member states that are worst affected.

Ireland will receive just over €1 billion in Brexit funding, the biggest single allocation for any member state, representing just over 20% of the total fund. It is appropriate that Ireland, as the member state most impacted by Brexit, would be the largest beneficiary.

On the NDP, I consider it prudent and more appropriate over the longer term to focus on core capital spending requirements, excluding the once-off spending that may be required to meet the emergency needs arising from Covid-19 and Brexit. These once-off costs can be considered as part of the annual budgetary process, and provision can be agreed upon for the upcoming year if required.

The substantial investment detailed in the NDP will more broadly support investment that is growth enhancing and will meet the challenges caused by Brexit. For example, there is a considerable investment to support the enterprise and agriculture sectors in innovating, with a particular focus on green and digital transition, to make both more sustainable in the longer term.

Under national strategic objective 6 of the NDP, which is to achieve the delivery of high-quality international connectivity, there is a commitment to continuing investment in our port and airport connections to the rest of the EU, the UK and the rest of the world. This is integral to underpinning international competitiveness and it is also central to responding to the challenges, as well as the opportunities, arising from Brexit.

Deputy Neale Richmond: I appreciate the insight the Minister has given. Could he elaborate on one or two of the points he made, particularly on the investment planned for our ports

infrastructure to facilitate an increase in direct shipping to our largest market, continental Europe? We have seen over recent months a huge increase in the number of new shipping lanes from Dublin, Rosslare and Cork to countries such as France, Spain and the Netherlands, but we can agree that there is much more potential in this regard. The Minister pointed to the challenges of Brexit but also to the opportunities. When Ireland joined the EEC in 1973, 55% of our exports went to Great Britain. This proportion is now down to 9%. There is still great potential, not only within the Single Market but also through it and European trade deals, but we cannot realise that potential if we cannot get goods to market. I stress that our biggest market is continental Europe.

Deputy Michael McGrath: I acknowledge and welcome the Deputy's comments on this. When it comes to the selection of individual projects, it is a matter for the line Minister and line Department but, as part of the NDP, we have agreed to multi-annual capital ceilings. For example, the Department of Transport now knows what it will have by way of a capital budget for each year until 2025. Indeed, it has its total envelope to 2030 confirmed as part of the NDP. It will amount to €35 billion over the period. I will be working with the Minister for Transport, Deputy Eamon Ryan, and all of our Government colleagues to ensure our ambitious plans are implemented. That will involve significant investment in our ports and airports. As the Deputy knows, there has been significant investment in our ports to date to be prepared for Brexit, but we acknowledge that there will be further development of more direct connections to mainland Europe from our ports. That will require continued investment by the Government.

Deputy Neale Richmond: When we bear that in mind, we must recall it is also a matter of access to our ports on our roads, whether they are going to Rosslare or Cork. We must also remember the myriad of approaches to Dublin Port.

Considering the investment needed to promote the level of trade and enterprise I desire, I very much welcome the funding allocated last week by the Tánaiste and the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine, through the Department of the Minister for Finance, to support our agrifood industry in diversifying after Brexit. Throughout the discussions and negotiations on Brexit, people said 86% of our cheddar cheese goes to one market, so we have to start producing different types of cheeses. How are we supporting enterprises to ensure transport connectivity to the Continent? How are we ensuring that individuals and the Enterprise Irelands and IDA Irelands of the world have the resources they need, not only in Ireland but also elsewhere, including the commercial offices in Lyon or Frankfurt, to promote the sale of our goods in the markets in question?

Deputy Michael McGrath: I thank the Deputy. He has made some important points. The deployment of the Brexit adjustment reserve will be so important for our country. We are getting the lion's share among member states because we are undoubtedly the country that is most impacted by Brexit. What we have to do is match those resources with the sectors that require additional support to counter the adverse consequences associated with Brexit. We have defined those areas already. Some of them are very much consistent with what the Deputy has stated. The Brexit adjustment reserve fund will be used in the area of enterprise supports, measures to support fisheries and coastal communities, targeted supports for the agrifood sector, reskilling, retraining and checks and controls at ports and airports, for example.

Ireland's allocation of €1.165 billion is significant. As the Deputy is aware, the spending of that money must take place between now and the end of 2023. One can bring into the reference period expenditure since 1 January 2020. My Department is working through the detail of that.

The funding is most welcome and will be used in the areas the Deputy has identified as being of priority.

Flood Risk Management

68. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the status of the flood relief measures for County Louth; the progress to date; the additional staffing resources provided by the OPW to Louth County Council; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [55833/21]

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I ask the Minister to provide an update on the status of flood relief measures for County Louth, particularly the plans under the catchment flood risk assessment and management, CFRAM, programme to deal with Dundalk, Blackrock, Ardee, Termonfeckin, Annagassan, Carlingford, Greenore, Drogheda and Baltray. I am seeking a complete update on as much of this as possible. I accept that consultants have been appointed and that an element of work has been done.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: I thank the Deputy. Through the CFRAM, programme, detailed engineering analysis, assessment and extensive public consultation was undertaken for 300 communities throughout the country, including 90 coastal areas, that were identified as the most likely to be impacted by future coastal and fluvial flooding. One key output of the CFRAM programme is the flood risk management plans, FRMPs, that contain proposed flood relief measures informed by preliminary costs, benefits and environmental factors to address the flood risk in each community and nationwide.

The evidence provided by the CFRAM programme launched in May 2018 supports the Government's €1 billion programme out to 2040. As part of this, Louth County Council, working with the Office of Public Works, OPW, has agreed to be the lead authority in the delivery of flood relief schemes at Dundalk, Blackrock south, Drogheda, Carlingford, Greenore, Baltray and Ardee. The OPW has agreed to provide funding for a senior executive engineer, two executive engineers, an administrative officer and a technician at grade 1 level. These appointments have taken place and all expenditure associated with the appointments listed have been recouped in full by Louth County Council, in accordance with procedures in line with the public spending code.

The proposed flood relief scheme at Dundalk and Blackrock south includes the Ardee flood relief scheme and will protect some 1,880 properties when completed, while the scheme at Drogheda and Baltray will protect some 450 and the scheme at Carlingford and Greenore will protect 409 properties.

Although the CFRAM process investigated possible structural flood relief measures for both Annagassan and Termonfeckin, economically viable schemes for these communities were not identified. As such, a review of the risk in these communities and the likely costs and benefits is to be undertaken. The OPW has put in place a process for undertaking such reviews and it is envisaged that the reviews, including those for Annagassan and Termonfeckin, will be completed within the next 12 months.

The contract for engineering consultancy services was awarded in 2020 to Binnies and Nicholas O'Dwyer as a joint venture for the Dundalk, Blackrock south and Ardee projects and

they are being progressed simultaneously.,

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I appreciate the comprehensive answer. In fairness, my first question was going to be in respect of the timeline for the reassessment of Termonfeckin and Annagassan but the Minister of State has indicated it should be completed within 12 months. All present accept the necessity of these mitigations. Louth is very much an exposed county. Where I live in Dundalk is reclaimed land. Given the circumstances in which we now find ourselves, on a personal basis, I, along with many of my neighbours, would benefit from having these works done. They are an absolute necessity. I am seeking as much information as possible on a general timeline for the works, specifically for Dundalk to Baltray in light of the indication by the Minister of State that the review of Termonfeckin and Annagassan will happen within the year.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: I can provide a more comprehensive answer to the Deputy in writing. I was in County Louth last year, shortly after I was appointed, and met the Louth county manager. I fully appreciate the concerns that exist. The Deputy is correct. The counties of Louth, Meath, Dublin, Wexford, Wicklow and down into Waterford and east Cork are particularly exposed. The speed at which we are responding will have to increase significantly. As I have stated in this Chamber previously, as well as in that awful place down on the quays to which I hope we will not be going back any time soon, the response time to these communities is too slow. I have no difficulty saying that. This generation has seen the growth of massive urban conurbations in places such as Dundalk. These are significant population bases to which we have to respond. If the sea level continues to raise at the current rate, these urban communities will be facing massive difficulty. The Deputy is correct. I can respond to him in writing with a more comprehensive reply.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I appreciate that. If the Minister of State could provide me with a reply in writing, that would be brilliant. I am finding it difficult not to agree with him on the fact that the work that needs to be done is necessary and is all happening too slowly. I will try to avoid repeating myself.

Obviously, some of these projects will be substantial. I am aware the whole planning process is being reviewed at this point. We know there are significant issues in that regard. Consultation with the community is always a very important part of any work but there are definite difficulties in this regard. The Minister of State himself has spoken about those difficulties. Is any of that impacting on this issue? Is there a need for added resources or further work, particularly as regards the OPW or Louth County Council?

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: The short answer is "No". For instance, what we will require in Dundalk are hard defences, flood embankments, walls, rock armour, coastal protection, demountable barriers, road raising, sluice gates, tanking, channel conveyancing improvements and road changes. There is a massive amount of work to be done in Dundalk alone, not to mention Drogheda, Baltray and Greenore. These are massive civil engineering projects. It is not possible to just magic away the volume of water that is coming. That is before even getting into the issue of the people who will jump up and object to the schemes for these communities. This is happening all over the country. Can the Deputy help me? Absolutely, he can. If he could wish away all the objections, court injunctions and delays experienced by the OPW and Louth County Council, as well as every other local authority across the country, he would be doing me a significant favour. Those delays are the scourge of communities.

Flood Risk Management

70. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the details of his Department's overall strategy or master plan for countering the impact of rising sea levels and coastal flooding in County Galway; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [55883/21]

Deputy Catherine Connolly: My question is on a similar issue in the context of Galway. I am seeking clarification on the overall strategy or master plan for countering the rising sea levels. I say that in the context of several reports. I refer to the current status report for Ireland 2020, in which the Environmental Protection Agency, EPA, and the Marine Institute point out that sea level has risen by approximately 2 mm to 3 mm per year since the early 1990s. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, IPCC, working group notes that due to relative sea level rise, extreme level events that occurred once per century are now going to occur at least annually. I do not think I need to tell the Minister of State this. I am asking for clarification against the background.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: I thank the Deputy for her question. I hope to visit Galway in the next couple of weeks. I know there is a significant amount of anxiety in respect of the situation there.

The OPW has developed a climate change sectoral adaptation plan for flood risk management that was approved by the Government in October 2019. The plan identifies on a national scale how climate change could impact on flooding, flood risk and flood risk management, and prioritises these impacts in terms of urgency of action and degree of impact.

The long-term goal adopted by the OPW on climate adaptation for flooding and flood risk management and set out in the plan is the promotion of sustainable communities and support of the environment through effective management of the potential impacts of climate change on flooding and flood risk. The OPW programme of flood relief schemes takes climate change into account. For example, the project brief for the detailed development of the Galway city flood relief scheme includes a requirement for a scheme adaptation plan that will set out how climate change has been taken into account during the design and construction, and what future adaptation measures might be needed - that is to what the Deputy is referring - and, more important, when. The six-yearly reviews required under the EU floods directive will ensure that the current and future levels of flood risk to communities on our coast are kept under review, and plans put in place to manage that risk as it becomes significant.

The Government has established an interdepartmental group on managing coastal change to scope out an approach for the development of a national co-ordinated and integrated strategy to manage the projected impact of coastal change to our coastal communities. We cannot do this on our own. The interdepartmental group is jointly chaired by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage and the OPW, and will bring forward options and recommendations for the Government to consider shortly.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I have seen first-hand the work that the OPW and the local authority have done. I was there when the CFRAM timeline from 2011 to 2016 was announced. All of the work has been done and set out and all of the risks have been identified. There might well be some objections to the work, but my concern is over the delay. The steering committee that was set up was promised in March 2020. It met for the first time in September 2020. It

was to produce a report within six months. It is now said that the report will be produced “in due course”. That is of great concern to me.

My question concerns Galway city and county. Works are planned for the Spanish Arch and the completion date for the work is nine years from now. That is of great concern. Works are also needed in County Galway.

We know that almost 2 million people live within 5 km of the coast, and 40,000 live within 100 m of the coast. County Galway has a huge coastline. Therefore, we need specific answers in relation to timelines and works. We will certainly work with the OPW on the issue.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: I do not disagree with the Deputy for one minute. While this issue has not fallen on the OPW, the OPW is gladly taking on this responsibility because it is our bread and butter. We require the input of other Departments to ensure that everybody plays a responsible role in this, because the issue of how our coast will change is a societal problem. As the Deputy quite rightly said, our coast will change. It will require all Departments to come to the table. We must ensure we put forward a cohesive plan that takes into consideration how every Department will bring its views to the table. The plan that we are going to bring forward ultimately will have to be a holistic one, and one that reflects the views of all Departments.

It is not for the lack of energy on behalf of the OPW, and we are trying to ensure that it is expedited as much as possible. I have spoken to the Deputy about the issue both within and outside the House. It is a priority for me. I hope to visit Galway in the next few weeks in response to the issue. I have visited other coastal communities. It is an issue that the OPW takes really seriously.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I do not doubt the bone fides of the Minister of State on this issue. I am on record as praising the OPW. My difficulty is the delay in delivery. The timeline for the CFRAM finished in 2016, which was the date of implementation and review. In Galway the completion date for the work to be done on the Spanish Arch and the surrounding areas, with over 940 properties to be protected, is in nine years' time. That is my difficulty. I also have a difficulty with the lack of knowledge in relation to the county. I can quote many of the figures, but what is the point? If there is an interdepartmental group, surely there must be a specific brief for when it is to report? To say, in response to questions, that a report will be available in due course is unacceptable, given the threat that we are living with and given the floods we have seen in Galway and elsewhere in the country. It is one of the most urgent issues that we must deal with so that we can trust and work with the OPW.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: I do not think it is one of the most urgent issues; it is the most urgent issue, in my book, because of the number of people who live on our coast. Our largest urban centres, Dublin, Cork, Limerick, Galway and Waterford are all coastal. We also have a relationship with Northern Ireland, and Belfast and Derry are coastal. We are an island and the sea is rising around us. If we are threatened by anything, we are threatened by the sea in this country. The sea is our greatest risk at the moment.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: What about the interdepartmental group and the interim report?

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: The only commitment that I can give the Deputy is that from my perspective, for the last year this is the issue that has preoccupied me most in the OPW, in terms of exercising my Government colleagues to ensure that it is raised. While a lot of air, hot

and cold, was spewed at COP23, COP24, COP25 and COP26, the issue of how Ireland is going to deal with its coastal defences and the communities of the Spanish Arch, King's Island and every other island community around the coast is going to be absolutely critical for this generation and for subsequent generations. From my perspective, and that of the OPW, I assure the Deputy that it is our number one priority currently.

Aviation Industry

69. Deputy Cathal Crowe asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if he will provide an overview of NSO 6 of the National Development Plan 2021-2030; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [55877/21]

Deputy Cathal Crowe: I wish to ask the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if he will provide an overview of NSO 6 of the new National Development Plan, NDP, 2021-2030; and if he will make a statement on the matter.

Deputy Michael McGrath: I thank the Deputy for raising the issue. At the outset, it should be noted that my Department, in carrying out its role in co-ordinating the NDP review, does not consider the merit of individual projects or sectoral policy strategies, as this is primarily a matter for individual Departments and agencies.

With that point noted, I would be glad to give the Deputy an overview of the NSO 6, which is the delivery of high quality international connectivity. As an island, continued investment in our port and airport connections to the UK, the EU and the rest of the world is integral to underpinning international competitiveness. It is also central to responding to the challenges as well as the opportunities arising from Brexit. The relevant sectoral strategies here are the national aviation policy, the national ports policy and the telecommunications chapter of the National Marine Planning Framework which relates to international telecommunications connectivity. These strategies play a critical role in identifying the goals and priorities for the sector and are therefore critical in informing the investment projects set out in the NDP.

In terms of our airports a range of investment are planned and under way. A new €50 million control tower has been completed at Dublin Airport and the new north runway will be completed next year. Cork and Shannon Airports will continue to be supported in their roles as key tourism and business gateways for their regions. Continued Exchequer support for smaller regional airports, including Donegal, Kerry and Knock, is planned under the regional airports programme.

Three major capital infrastructure programmes are currently ongoing in tier 1 ports, namely, Dublin, Cork and Shannon Foynes. For example, the Port of Cork is investing to redevelop the port's existing facilities at Ringaskiddy and is due to be fully operation in the coming months. The masterplan for Rosslare Europort was granted planning permission in quarter 4 of 2020 and has identified a number of key infrastructure investments to make better use of available capacity, improve efficiencies and target specific sectors, while promoting the benefits of congestion-free access to European and UK markets.

These are just some of the many investments which will be delivered under this NSO in the coming years to support Project Ireland 2040. Further details on projects by NSO, can be found on the investment tracker on gov.ie/2040.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: I thank the Minister for his response. All Members of the House are aware that aviation and tourism have been the two sectors most decimated by the Covid pandemic. Experts in the sector estimate that the pathway to recovery will take four to five years. That, in itself, is devastating for all those who depend on it. In the mid-west, we very much see Shannon Airport as being a catalyst for virtually all economic activity. We live and die on that. Its recovery will be crucial to our regional recovery.

I read with interest chapter 11 of the NDP, which deals with a whole realm of international connectivity. We are going to be at a very low starting base coming out of Covid, but within that there are opportunities. There are a number of issues I wish to raise in the Chamber today. Chapter 11 references the existing 2015 national aviation policy for Ireland. I believe that is now defunct. It only exists in name because aviation does not resemble anything referred to in that policy. The NDP alludes to a new national policy for aviation. I would be very keen to hear the Minister's thoughts on that.

Deputy Michael McGrath: I thank the Deputy. I fully agree with his sentiment on the importance of Shannon Airport to the mid-west region. I acknowledge his continued support for, and his regular advocacy in respect of, the continued development of Shannon Airport. As the Deputy is aware, on budget day we announced a €126 million aviation funding package, of which €90 million will be made available in a very short period of time to the State airports, namely, Dublin, Shannon and Cork airports. The same methodology was used in respect of the €20 million already provided to State airports this year. In addition, funding of €36 million will be provided next year to support regional airports and public service obligation air services through the regional airports programme. It is significant that due to reduced passenger numbers and as a direct result of Covid, Shannon Airport and Cork Airport are eligible for supports under this programme. I agree with the Deputy that the recovery will be gradual and the Government will be there to support Shannon Airport and the other airports on that journey in the period ahead.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: I thank the Minister. I am delighted to hear that Shannon Airport and Cork Airport can continue to avail of supports under the regional airports programme. For too long they were excluded or found it difficult to come under it given the annual passenger thresholds. There will need to be multi-annual investment. The Minister mentioned public service obligation routes. We have to think in a different realm so far as they are involved. It cannot be all about small aircraft going out to the Aran Islands or aircraft going to Kerry to provide rural regional connectivity. As we come out of Covid, there will be merit to also having European hub connectivity on a public service obligation basis until we get to a point of recovery. We will get transatlantic routes back to Shannon in the spring. We are slowly improving the Heathrow service but we need connectivity to places such as Amsterdam, Charles de Gaulle or Frankfurt. They are where onward connectivity to the eastern markets is. Public service obligation also needs to be looked at through this lens as we come out of Covid.

Deputy Michael McGrath: I thank the Deputy. It is ultimately about services and routes for us, as an island nation, as we continue to grapple with Covid and as we seek to rebuild our international connectivity. It will be very important that we continue to provide extensive support to our airports. This is why we have made an intervention of the magnitude we have in the context of the budget for 2022. As the Deputy knows, some of this funding can be made available immediately. We recognise this is a significant challenge.

The Deputy touched on the impact of Covid on the tourism sector. We all know the role

that aviation must play in bringing tourists to our country and for continued industrial development and the attractiveness of the mid-west region. It is vital that Shannon Airport secures once again its status as an important hub and a gateway to the mid-west region. I look forward to working with the Deputy, other colleagues and the Minister Transport, Deputy Eamon Ryan, as we continue to support Shannon.

National Development Plan

71. **Deputy Michael Moynihan** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the way the revised national development plan will strengthen rural economies and communities; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [55850/21]

110. **Deputy Michael Moynihan** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if he will provide an overview of national strategic outcome No. 3 of the National Development Plan 2021-2030; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [55849/21]

Deputy Cathal Crowe: How will the revised national development plan strengthen rural communities and rural economies? Will the Minister make a statement on the matter to the House?

Deputy Michael McGrath: I propose to take Questions Nos. 71 and 110 together.

My role as Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform has involved setting the allocations for capital expenditure across a number of Department's relevant to this national strategic outcome. National strategic outcome No. 3 seeks to strengthen rural economies and communities. This applies in terms of the traditional pillars of the rural economy as well as those emerging from such developments as improved transport connectivity, national broadband delivery, climate action and rural economic development.

The sectoral strategies here include Our Rural Future, the town centre first policy, Food Vision 2030 in agriculture, the investing in our culture, language and heritage strategy, the Linking People and Places tourism strategy and the national sports policy. An extensive number of projects are already being rolled out through the €1 billion rural regeneration and development fund. Applications for funding have already been approved for 139 projects across rural Ireland with a total cost of €239 million. Examples include the Cahersiveen town centre regeneration project in Kerry and the Cahir town regeneration project in Tipperary.

In addition to maintaining the regional and local road network in good repair, it is a priority to carry out targeted improvements to sections of the network. The Carrigaline western relief road and the Coonagh to Knockalisheen project are under construction, while other projects where the main construction work is due to commence shortly include the Tralee northern relief road, the Shannon crossing-Killaloe bypass R494 upgrade and the Athy southern distributor road.

Under the national broadband plan, which commenced roll-out in 2020, 1.1 million people living and working in more than 544,000 premises, including almost 100,000 businesses and farms along with almost 700 schools, will receive access to high-speed broadband. The on-farm capital investment scheme under Ireland's 2023-27 CAP strategic plan will provide significant support to farmers looking to invest in capital projects on their farms to increase environmental

efficiency and develop their farm enterprises. Major capital investment projects of up to €180 million are under way and planned in fishery harbour centres around the country.

Investment in our international tourism marketing infrastructure also helps to stimulate business from overseas markets. This is critical when every 1,000 additional overseas tourists support 20 jobs in the domestic tourism industry, many of which are in rural Ireland. These are just some of the many investments across rural Ireland that are being scaled up under this new national development plan.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: I thank the Minister. One of the small silver linings of Covid - and, let us be frank, there have very have been very few of them - has been people returning to rural Ireland and the vibrancy we are once again seeing in our villages. To take as an example Kilkee in County Clare, my party colleague, Councillor Cillian Murphy, has often bemoaned the fact that only one in three people in Kilkee are permanent residents. People go during heatwaves in the nine or ten days we typically get in an Irish summer and they are gone again. People are back living in Kilkee. They are job hunting and house hunting. This is leading to other problems but for tonight we can say the national development plan is injecting huge amounts of money and hope into rural Ireland. I want to briefly reference a number of issues. The progressing of the Killaloe bypass in Clare is good. The light rail system proposed from Limerick city to Shannon and Bunratty is very welcome. Are there timeframes for these projects? I worry somewhat that while they are backed and contained in the national development plan, some of the planning logistics could make them a little bit further down the line than we would like. We need some streamlining of the process.

Deputy Michael McGrath: I thank Deputy Crowe. I join with him in acknowledging the good work of Councillor Murphy and others in Kilkee. I agree with his point that one of the fall-outs from Covid has been that it has opened up opportunities for rural towns and villages throughout Ireland because remote working is here to stay to some extent. We will see a blended form of working in future. This means more people spending more time in their local communities. This will enrich these communities and allow people to spend more of their money locally, volunteer their time and become more active in community life. If we look at the national development plan and the overall Project Ireland 2040, the target is that 75% of the growth in population of Ireland to 2040 will be outside Dublin. This underlines the level of opportunity and ambition there is for rural communities. Time does not allow me to go into individual projects. Perhaps we can engage on a bilateral basis. I will seek to get whatever information I can on timelines for individual projects. I thank the Deputy for raising them.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: I thank the Minister for his positive remarks. I want to reference a project about which I have spoken privately to the Minister many times. It is the Limerick northern distributor road. He referenced it in his contribution. Phase 1 is well under construction and, hopefully, in a matter of months vehicles will be travelling on it alleviating traffic congestion in the north suburbs of Limerick city and making it possible for Clare people to get to and from work. Phase 2 stands somewhat in a state of flux. There is a roundabout at Knockalisheen in Meelick where phase 1 ends. We do not know what will happen with phase 2. It is not referenced in the national development plan but there are a lot of statutory phases ahead of it. We would like to know whether it will progress in some form over the coming years. The key aspects to note are that it will alleviate traffic, provide connectivity across south Clare and provide a knowledge corridor from Limerick Institute of Technology, which is now part of a technological university, and the University of Limerick. There are teething problems along the route line; I will not say there are not. Many of them relate to some of the routing through

Parteen and Cloonlara. This needs to progress through consultation with the community. We would really like to know whether this is dead in the water or is something that can still progress over the coming years.

Deputy Michael McGrath: I thank the Deputy. It is important to underline the point that the national development plan is not a comprehensive list of every project that will happen over the coming ten years. It is fundamentally a high-level document that sets out the overall strategic priorities for the Government and the financial framework available to support capital investment over the period. The fact an individual project is not explicitly referenced does not preclude it from being progressed or from being fully delivered over the course of the national development plan.

I am familiar with the Limerick northern distributor road and I know Clare County Council is the lead authority on the project under a section 85 agreement with Limerick City and County Council. This project was raised with the National Transport Authority and Transport Infrastructure Ireland when they appeared before the Joint Committee on Transport and Communications in early November to discuss the NDP. They confirmed their intention to go to a second round of public consultation in January and that the northern distributor road, with public transport provision on it, was included in their first document. They also propose to include it in their second document. I will work with the Deputy, other colleagues in the region and the Minister for Transport on this important local road project.

Public Procurement Contracts

72. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the status of the work of the interim procurement reform board; his plans to strengthen the procurement process in the State; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [55832/21]

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: What is the status of the work of the interim procurement reform board and what are his plans to strengthen the procurement process in the State? I also ask for some detail on a timeline for that. We all accept that there have been significant and costly mistakes in procurement over the years. We could talk about the national children's hospital until the end of time but mistakes were obviously made. Questions about the contract for the national broadband plan have been raised in newspapers in the past while. We need to ensure we can cut out as many of these problems as possible.

Deputy Ossian Smyth: The interim procurement reform board was appointed by the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform in May 2017 to provide oversight to the delivery of the procurement reform programme, advise the Government on national public procurement strategy and advise on the objectives and business plans of the Office of Government Procurement, OGP. The board meets quarterly and presents an annual report to me, as the Minister of State with special responsibility for public procurement. The most recent report, for 2020, was published in August and is available on the OGP's website.

The board comprises 11 members. Two are independent members recruited from outside the public sector, eight are senior public servants drawn from across a wide variety of Departments and the chair is a former Secretary General of Department of Defence, now retired.

The terms of reference include that the board shall oversee the implementation of the public

procurement reform programme which has had considerable success to date. Governance arrangements have been established to foster collaboration and co-operation across the OGP and the main sectors of health, local government, education and defence. Through the development of a suite of centralised commercial arrangements, the Government's purchasing power has been leveraged by speaking to the market with one voice. Procurement reform has delivered a programme of policy supports for SMEs and has built an awareness in industry regarding the opportunities arising from public procurement.

The OGP has been developing proposals on the refinement of public procurement following consultation with our colleagues across government and industry. These will further enhance public procurement, building on the progress to date, with a greater focus and emphasis on sustainability, social responsibility, SME access, innovation, digitalisation and professionalisation.

The Government has set out a number of commitments in the programme for Government in relation to public procurement, including evaluating and managing the environmental, economic and social impacts of procurement strategies within the State, developing and implementing a sustainable procurement policy and tasking the Office of Government Procurement to update all procurement frameworks in line with green procurement practice. These commitments enhance work already under way by the OGP to promote wider policy considerations in their work.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I thank the Minister of State for his response. I do not think anybody would have a major difficulty with having enhanced processes on social and environmental responsibility taken into account. One such important process is to have a greater element of due diligence, particularly for large infrastructural projects, in respect of the ability of those tendering to deliver the project and that they have a skill set to do so. I ask the Minister of State to be a bit more definitive on what actions he is referring to or to give a timeframe for doing so.

The Minister of State had an interaction with Deputy Mairéad Farrell earlier. She indicated that Sinn Féin would like the Office of Government Procurement to have more data feeds and information, and referred to legislation in that regard which would allow for a greater element of due diligence in respect of firms being actually able to deliver upon the promises of the tender.

Deputy Ossian Smyth: One of the best ways in which procurement can be strengthened is through training. The Office of Government Procurement has a skills academy where it trains and teaches staff responsible for purchasing across government how to procure successfully. It is important that we have a good e-tenders platform. The platform is being replaced and a new tender has been placed to get a new software system for bidding for contracts.

The Office of the Comptroller and Auditor General has an important role in making procurement stronger. The office investigates when exceptional circumstances with procurement arise or procurement has fallen short and it rings reports on such matters before the Committee of Public Accounts. The relevant Accounting Officer can be cross-examined at the committee and we can discover where changes need to be made. I assure the Deputy that this process is always taken very seriously and lessons are learned from it.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I accept the Minister of State's point on a skills academy, which is needed. I ask him to provide more detail on the new system for e-tendering, the reason for

it and the weaknesses of the previous system. It makes complete sense that any learnings from investigations by the Comptroller and Auditor General be built into whatever our *modus operandi* will be in the future.

I ask for some leeway in respect of the Minister of State's other area of expertise and responsibility. We are dealing with a story about the national broadband plan and a crossover between areas where Eir will deliver its own service and areas where the NBP will be delivered. Were there weaknesses in the contract or are there allowances there? Will this result in dual building and will we have to pay National Broadband Ireland?

Deputy Ossian Smyth: The e-tenders system has been in place for a long time and requires to be updated. We asked bidders and suppliers what they would like the tendering system to do differently and we have determined that we need a new tendering system. It will be the best we can get. We are being careful and this is not being tendered for on the existing e-tenders system so there is no advantage to the incumbent.

On the NBP, the Deputy asked about encroachment. There is an intervention area where the national broadband plan applies. It is not, however, an exclusion zone in which no commercial company can operate. If any of the major three commercial companies in the market which put in fibre to the home wants to deliver broadband or any other technology of broadband, they can do so. That has happened. I note a recent report that 45,000 homes in rural Ireland had been given extremely high-speed broadband by a commercial provider. That is great as it means these households now have a choice between different suppliers, whether it is the subvented supplier or a commercial supplier. That is an advantage which was foreseen in the contract and accords with what was in the tender and contract.

Public Private Partnerships

73. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the reason for using public private partnerships, PPPs, to deliver capital projects, particularly in relation to the technological higher education sector; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [55903/21]

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: The technological universities have the ability to deliver high-quality third level education for many people, including in Mayo and the west, and to be a real driver for regional development. They are one of the most important developments in third level education for decades. Why, with almost no public debate, is the Government using controversial public private partnership contracts for the development of our public education system? Will the Minister outline the reason for this drastic change of approach that will see public private partnership contracts used for all building projects in technological universities?

Deputy Michael McGrath: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. My Department's role in public private partnerships is to maintain and develop the general policy framework, including, where necessary, the legal framework, within which PPPs operate. It also provides central guidance to other Departments and State authorities in that context. My Department has no direct involvement in the procurement or delivery of individual PPP projects. Therefore, the delivery of the technological higher education sector projects, through the use of PPPs is, in the first instance, a matter for my colleague, the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science.

10 o'clock

PPPs are partnerships between the public and private sectors for the purpose of delivering a project or service and it is an internationally recognised model to design, build, finance, operate and maintain public infrastructure. Some of the advantages associated with PPPs are that they allow the public sector to avail of private sector expertise and innovation, and the private partner assumes responsibility for a considerable portion of the risk. The contracts tend to be long-term arrangements, typically spanning 25 years or more, with the private provider required to maintain the asset at a suitable standard over that period. At the end of the contract the PPP company must return the asset in year 1 condition.

PPPs continue to provide benefits to the State as a procurement method and, as such, enable the public sector to harness the innovation, commercial and management expertise and efficiencies of the private sector to design, build, finance, operate and maintain State facilities. PPPs will continue to be a procurement method available to the State for appropriately structured projects where they demonstrate value for money over a traditional procurement option. In ensuring Departments obtain the best value for money from public capital investment, PPPs are subject to the same robust and rigorous project appraisal process as traditionally procured projects. It is essential that projects are judged on their merits and in cases where PPPs can be demonstrated to give better value for money than traditional procurement, it is appropriate that they should be selected on that basis.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: This Government is spearheading a substantial shift in how the State delivers building projects in third level education. Essentially, PPP is a misleading name for an agreement where a developer delivers a project and the Government agrees to pay every year for 25 years for the right to use the building. It is essentially build to rent for the Government. It is good for the developer, but bad for the public.

We have not seen their use in third level education since the last time Fianna Fáil was in government. Now all new buildings of technological universities and institutes of technology are planned to be delivered exclusively through PPP contracts. Significant questions remain for citizens about value for money, accountability and the long-term impact on public finances. It also relates to the privatisation of public services. These contracts give rights to provide the related services which include building maintenance, cleaning, security, ground maintenance and IT support.

Deputy Michael McGrath: I thank the Deputy. It is important to say that the PPP method should only be used where value for money can be demonstrated. It is one option in terms of the possible financing of a range of projects. There are currently 11 higher education projects in the pipeline for delivery by way of PPP. They are split into two bundles. The Deputy probably has all the details, but I am happy to provide them separately to her if necessary.

It is important to make the point that if one is comparing the cost of a PPP with the Exchequer funded option of delivering a capital project, one has to take account of the fact that the payments made by the Exchequer over the life of the PPP contract include not just the construction costs but also the cost of finance, operations and maintenance and, indeed, the overall lifecycle. It is one option, but it should only be used where value for money can clearly be demonstrated and the interests of taxpayers are protected. There are many examples of pieces of infrastructure that would probably not exist today if we did not choose the PPP option.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: The Minister will remember that we discussed in the Joint Committee on Finance, Public Expenditure and Reform the Carillion example and what it cost people. This has major implications for finances for the State for the next 25 years. One contract signed in 2020 was valued at almost €600 million. These contracts typically mean that the public pays a lot for very little control.

We cannot even have a real debate due to the complete lack of transparency and accountability. I cannot access the estimate of the cost of any of the 11 projects due to the commercial sensitivity involved. The value of the contract is only made public after it is concluded. Even then, the Government refuses to provide an estimate of how much it would cost to build under a normal contract. That information is withheld for five years, long enough for any Government to avoid real accountability. Accountability, transparency and value for money are at the core of all of this. We have seen what has happened in the case of Carillion and in other cases. We are not getting value for money with many of these projects and we do not have the transparency that is required.

Deputy Michael McGrath: I want to assure the Deputy that the appraisal process is rigorous. It is worth putting the figures in context. The annual cost of the unitary payment charges in respect of operational PPPs was approximately €320 million in 2020, at a time when the State's public capital investment programme was in the order of €10 billion. The contracted capital value of all PPPs in operation or under construction is over €5 billion. We have now committed to a public capital investment programme out to 2030 of €165 billion.

I agree with the Deputy on the need for accountability and transparency about the metrics, methodology and criteria used to assess what the best channel open to public bodies is to deliver important pieces of infrastructure. As she knows, technological universities have now been given the power to borrow for the first time for capital investment purposes. That is important progress.

Flood Risk Management

74. **Deputy Alan Dillon** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the status of final approval for a project (details supplied) in County Mayo; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [55884/21]

Deputy Alan Dillon: A date that will live long in the memory of the people living and working in Crossmolina is 5 December 2015. For the second time in three weeks, the town centre of Crossmolina was devastated by a floodwater sweeping through by the River Deel. It is coming up to the sixth anniversary of this event. I want to know when the scheme will be granted final approval to give certainty to the people of Crossmolina.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: The OPW submitted Crossmolina flood relief scheme documentation to the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform for statutory confirmation under the Arterial Drainage Acts 1945 and 1995 on 28 September 2020. As part of this process, stakeholders were afforded a formal opportunity to provide comments on the environmental element of the proposed works. Following this consultation, independent consultants appointed by Department of Public Expenditure and Reform carried out a review of the scheme documentation. Following this review, supplementary information was requested by the Department in May 2021 and provided by the OPW in July 2021. The scheme is currently awaiting confirmation

from the Minister of Public Expenditure and Reform.

The Department has advised that it has received final technical reports from its environmental consultants on the proposed flood relief scheme, following clarifications they sought from the OPW on further information recently provided on the proposed works. The Department is now finalising its review.

Deputy Alan Dillon: I thank the Minister of State for his response. What I say is not a criticism, but local residents are seriously frustrated with the situation that they find themselves in six years on. I take on board what the Minister of State said around the confirmation process, but this community will have to endure another winter of high water levels. Unfortunately, residents are extremely concerned and stressed out every winter because the necessary works have not yet been completed. What can we expect to unfold in the weeks ahead? Will the Minister of State clarify, subject to the confirmation process and judicial review, that a local OPW construction crew will be able to commence advance construction works on the scheme. In parallel with the confirmation process and the judicial review, can some tendering works for small projects under the OPW commence?

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: As was the case when another Deputy asked a question, I will respond in the same light. The OPW is at the mercy of a planning process and we have to adhere to it. We are the same as anybody who is applying for permission. In this case, we are applying for permission under the Arterial Drainage Acts and we have to go through a consent process. If we do not go through that process and have due regard to it, there can be objections, judicial reviews can be taken against us and we may end up in court. In this case, Mayo County Council could wind up in court. I have to be very conscious of what I say in the context of what I hope will happen. Obviously, I am very conscious of the fact that Crossmolina, Enniscorthy and towns all over the country are waiting inordinate amounts of time for these schemes. I hope the work will be done as soon as possible.

Deputy Alan Dillon: I appreciate the Minister of State's visit to Crossmolina last May to meet the members of the Crossmolina flood relief scheme, staff of the local OPW and members of Mayo County Council. The people of Crossmolina need progress on this scheme. We have to get the ball rolling on the construction. This is a €13.5 million project to protect 116 properties. The Crossmolina community has waited patiently following the initial delays due to design and environmental challenges and I ask that the Minister of State and the Department work efficiently to get this confirmation process approved.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: As is the case with confirmation processes we have recently been through, for example, in Blackpool in Cork, a small urban village in an old part of Cork city, which my colleague, the Minister, will be familiar with, just when we thought everything was ready to go, we were taken into a judicial review process at the last minute. None of us knows the length of time it will take to get through it. That is very frustrating, particularly for old people living in old communities. Many of these towns, villages and urban centres are particularly old, vulnerable places, and Crossmolina is no different, that have been scourged for years by the plague of flooding. I have put it on the record of the House previously, in the presence of both the Leas-Cheann Comhairle and the Ceann Comhairle, that the current system for the delivery of these schemes is just not fit for purpose. There has been a great deal of toing and froing in COP26, but if these Houses are going to respond to the scourge of climate change, they might do me and the Office of Public Works a favour and tackle the system in respect of planning for the delivery of climate mitigation measures. They would be doing all the com-

munities they serve a huge favour.

Written Answers are published on the Oireachtas website.

Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

Employment Support Services

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: The reason I raise this issue is that the workers in placement and the staff in this very successful service located in my neighbourhood of Bluebell, but covering all of Dublin west, have been told that the service is to close at the end of the year. Those who have a physical or mental disability and who were returning to the workplace or beginning work for the first time have been able to engage with EmployAbility in west Dublin and be supported in advance of a job being found for them. The supporting specialists involved, seven in total, I believe, worked with up to 130 people annually and supported them and the employers to ensure they could overcome any challenges that may arise in their first 18 months of employment.

I am aware from local people who have come through the services of the great scheme that exists and the work that is involved. It would be a tragedy if the service were to disappear. Some of those who are currently in this supported employment environment would overnight, on 31 December, lose their job coaches. They might not rely on them each day, but they know they are there in the event of a problem arising. I am told that EmployAbility has 70 workers on its books at present and, of them, 30 will still be in supported employment when the closure happens. The only reason for the low numbers at present, as 130 people are normally in the service, is that EmployAbility has not been taking Department of Social Protection referrals since the summer in preparation for the closure. The Department should be well aware of the imminent closure at this stage and should have taken steps to address the issues I will outline.

There are another 23 EmployAbility services across the country. I believe they are independent of each other and I am not sure if other services are contemplating closure due to either inadequate Department of Social Protection funding, the predicted privatisation of services that is happening with the tender which is undermining the local employment service, LES, and jobs clubs or otherwise. However, there is an imperative here. The Department must step in and ensure a seamless transfer of the services to another service provider and the continued employment of the seven or eight support specialists, who have years of experience between them. Failing this, all those in supported employment must be engaged with in advance of the closure date and reassured by the Department that the Department will take care of their needs. The Department of Social Protection must also take it upon itself to reassign others who were due to be placed with EmployAbility in west Dublin to other appropriate services, given the already identified needs they have, and to ensure that they can continue to engage with the workplace.

There is also a need for the Department of Social Protection or the St. John of God organisation, which is also involved in this project, to resolve who is going to pay for the redundancy of the workers, who between them have from 20 to five years service. Both organisations will continue to exist after the closure date, but EmployAbility in west Dublin appears to be closing on 31 December so the workers will have to fight to get their redundancy packages. It is only

the statutory amount of two weeks per year of loyal work, whereas they deserve a great deal more. They also deserve to have their redundancy package resolved in advance of them being made redundant at the end of December.

Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Damien English): I am replying on behalf of the Minister for Social Protection, Deputy Humphreys, who could not be present. I thank Deputy Ó Snodaigh for raising this issue. He is correct that the work that is carried on through the 24 providers of the EmployAbility service is essential and successful. The job coaching has been a great support for many over the years.

The Department of Social Protection contracts with 24 providers to deliver employability services. These services supplement the Department's internal Intreo service through the provision of targeted supports for jobseekers with a disability. I can confirm that the Department recently offered a contract to the board of EmployAbility in west Dublin to provide services for a further year in 2022. The board has formally declined this offer and, regrettably, the Department must respect the decision of the board. I wish to be clear that it is the decision of the board, not forced on it by the Department. It would be inappropriate for me to comment in detail on matters particular to a third-party contractor. However, it is my understanding from the intensive engagement the Department has had with this contractor over the recent period that the decision not to recontract is entirely an internal matter, unrelated to the terms and conditions of the contract for service with the Department. It is not the case, as the Deputy said, that it is to do with inadequate funding or with predicted or assumed changes coming down the track. They are not the reasons.

As the Deputy is aware, the Department of Social Protection is reviewing the structure and procurement of all its externally contracted employment support services. The provision of the EmployAbility service, its procurement and its structure will form part of this review. Over the course of next year, the Department will be examining options regarding the design of the EmployAbility model, and the provision of services in the former area of operations of EmployAbility in west Dublin will form part of these design considerations. That work has not happened yet, so what is going to happen there cannot be assumed or predicted. As part of this process the Department will engage with all relevant stakeholders.

As always, the first option for any person seeking assistance in returning to or improving their prospects in the workforce, whether in receipt of a jobseeker's payment or not, is to contact the Department's Intreo service. Intreo case officers will be able provide the necessary professional support and assistance and, if appropriate, identify any further service that the person may benefit from accessing. I therefore encourage anyone in the area who is seeking employment advice and support to contact his or her local Intreo office, which will provide the person with the necessary supports and advice. That is what the offices do daily. In many areas they engage extra help and assistance through external providers. If that is not available, the Intreo office will do the work itself. I should be clear about that. In all cases, a case worker would be employed to guide somebody through the system. The Deputy has engaged as a member and chair of the committee quite a lot over the years so he knows the value of the work that is carried out through the Intreo offices, along with many of their external service providers as well.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: I am glad to receive some clarification. I was not sure what the reason was for it, which is why I referred to another reason. If there is a State contract there and it was offered, has it been offered to any other service provider? The nearby EmployAbility in south Dublin or in north Dublin might be able, if resourced properly, to take up the services

and perhaps employ some of the people who are working directly with these people, or take on the employers who place people who have availed of the EmployAbility service. Yes, I recognise the great work that Intreo case officers do, but this is a specialist line of work that requires specialist care. That is why these contracts have been offered over the years to the EmployAbility West service. It is vital especially given that there are people who are in supported employment at the moment and need the services. What steps are being taken to prevent the service collapsing altogether with the loss of the expertise and the loss of support for those workers and the employers who have helped in ensuring that those who have a disability or those who suffer with mental health issues can be supported in returning to the workplace or starting in the workplace in the first instance?

Do the various sections in the Department of Social Protection talk to each other? This is a Department of Social Protection contract. It needs to ensure that the workers who are expecting to be made redundant on 31 December do not need to go to the Labour Court to get the redundancy to which they are entitled given their service and given that it will come from the Department. One section needs to talk to the other.

Deputy Damien English: I had meant to address the redundancy part in the opening statement. I will deal with some of the Deputy's questions. Those who are assisted by this service will receive letters between now and December explaining the pathway for them and how they can engage with Intreo offices in future. The service will be reviewed. The Deputy asked if the contract could be secured by another party. I am sure that option is open. I will also raise that with the Department. Generally, these contracts are agreed for a year at a time and they would normally be up for renewal during the months of August and September. There might be an opportunity to do that. I can guarantee that a service will be provided to these people. They certainly will not be left without a service.

Regarding the number of people employed, I think the Deputy mentioned seven or nine. There were 7.4 whole-time equivalent job coaches and 9.5 whole-time equivalent staff. It might be possible for those staff to re-engage with another service provider in the area. As he knows, there are three covering Dublin.

Regarding redundancy, I want to be clear that there is no reason for them to go to the Labour Court. Statutory redundancy is available to anyone in this country without needing to go anywhere near the Labour Court. In this case it is the employer's responsibility by law to pay statutory redundancy to eligible employees. An eligible employee is entitled to two weeks' remuneration for every year of service plus a bonus week. Normal weekly remuneration is subject to a ceiling of €600 per week. If an employer cannot pay statutory redundancy to eligible employees due to financial difficulties or insolvency, the State will always ensure that employees receive their statutory entitlements by making the statutory redundancy payments on behalf of the employer from the Social Insurance Fund.

There is no need to involve the Labour Court whatsoever. That is set out in law and is always paid out. In such situations a debt is raised against the employer. The Department of Social Protection applies a flexible and discretionary approach to the recovery of the debt because some employers cannot pay this due to insufficient funds. Generally, the Social Insurance Fund pays it out and the employer, in most cases a business, can be pursued. The situation would probably be a bit different here but the Department can pursue the money at a later stage. The former employees will not be left waiting for their money in those situations.

Dáil Éireann
Aviation Industry

Deputy Cathal Crowe: I thank the Minister of State for agreeing to take this Topical Issue matter tonight. Two weeks ago, I spoke at an aviation conference held in County Clare. On the Wednesday evening we had what is called a fireside chat. An expert panel on the future of aviation, aviation recovery, etc., was assembled. A very interesting discussion evolved with Patrick Blaney, John McMahon and Joe Gill on that panel. Anybody who follows aviation will know that they have been three of the kingpins of Irish aviation over many years in terms of policy, leading the industry and thinking of its future.

We went off on a tangent talking about the vision of sustainable aviation in the future. The current young generation are a mixture of some anomalies and contradictions. They will gladly order four pairs of jeans to be delivered by Next or Amazon via a courier. They will keep one and send back three. Yet many of the same generation believe in flight shaming and that people should not be travelling all around the world because of their carbon footprint. Therein is a contradiction. There is a major move rightly and, in some places, misguided to quickly get to a sustainable form of aviation which we need to embrace, as many European governments are. There is a European-wide multibillion euro stimulus package to get the airlines and all those who work in the aviation sector to a net carbon neutral position, as we and many other countries aspire to, by 2050.

Since we discussed sustainable aviation at that meeting, I have been looking at hydrogen. Hydrogen is now seen as a more sustainable fuel for powering aircraft. At the start of the summer, we saw the first commercial hydrogen-powered flight take off in Britain. It very successfully carried passengers and this is seen as the way forward. Airbus is already developing a number of concept aircraft which it hopes to have in the skies by 2035. While this may seem a little way off, I do not believe we in Ireland have fully grasped the real opportunities that this presents over the next decade or so in terms of testing out, seedbed activity and seeing how all this develops.

Political leadership has been shown in the mid west, Clare and Shannon over many years. Even before Shannon Airport existed, setting up Foynes as an international destination for flying boats coming in was one opportunity. We have had the Shannon stopover. There have been many opportunities successfully seized by those in the mid west.

I have mentioned Airbus and how the European Union is getting involved. The British Government is also throwing significant money behind this, but we in Ireland seem to be lagging behind. That brings me to County Clare. Hydrogen can be produced from water through the process of electrolysis using renewable power. Offshore in county Clare we have major plans to develop 1.4 GW offshore wind farm - the Green Atlantic project. While it creates jobs and will bring €2 billion worth of investment into the county, what happens on shore is most exciting. It will convert much of this electricity generated at these enormous turbines offshore into hydrogen. We have Shannon Airport just up the road and we have this knowledge corridor involving LIT, now a technological university, UL, NUI Galway. We have a motorway and the airport. With so much going on there, it is the ideal part of the country to have a test bed for sustainable aviation and to look at hydrogen fuel, as I have mentioned, and to seize the opportunity that could present. I would like to hear the Minister of State's thoughts.

Deputy Damien English: I thank the Deputy for raising this important and pertinent issue. I am sorry that the Minister of State, Deputy Naughton, cannot be here to take part in this

discussion which I am taking on her behalf. It is a topic that I am very interested in. I am sorry I missed that fireside chat which I am sure was very useful with the three people the Deputy mentioned involved in the conversation. It is important that we have these conversations and that we tease out all these options.

I chair the regional enterprise strategy for Clare, Limerick and Tipperary. We have discussed the potential of the Green Atlantic project. I would be very supportive of that and of assisting with working through the action plan. There is a major opportunity from a green energy production point of view off the west coast and into those counties as well which will have a major benefit for Shannon Airport and all in the area. That is something that will cross many Departments.

As a small open economy on the edge of Europe, the aviation sector is critical for the movement of our goods and people. It has provided a key underpinning to our economic development generally, the expansion of our tourism sector and in particular our success in attracting foreign direct investment.

Nevertheless, as the Deputy recognised, the contribution of aviation to climate change is undeniable and the need to move quickly towards a more sustainable model is now fully accepted across the mainstream of the aviation industry. I believe that everyone is willing to play their part. This is clear in the public statements made by the major industry representative bodies - the International Air Transport Association, representing the airlines worldwide, and the airports body, Airports Council International.

Regarding the development of a hub as referenced by the Deputy, the Minister of State, Deputy Naughton, is aware of recent announcements by an aerospace consultancy company of a study funded by Aviation Skillnet Ireland to develop a roadmap to a green aviation ecosystem.

She has been informed that one of the key pillars of the roadmap includes exploiting the available infrastructure at Shannon Airport to develop a regional airport pilot, Smart Green Aviation Ecosystem.

We look forward to the report being published. We are, of course, in principle, positively disposed towards initiatives that will enable progress towards decarbonisation in aviation.

Shannon Airport has already shown its commitment to playing its part in addressing climate change and decarbonisation and I welcome its endeavours in this regard. This is seen in its recent biodiversity projects, installation of electric vehicle charging points and LED lighting upgrades. Further, an application for the Airport Carbon Accreditation, ACI, programme was recently submitted. The ACI programme is a global carbon management certification programme for airports.

I also understand that Shannon Group intends to carry out a feasibility study of the airport terminal building. The results of this study will inform Shannon Group's plans to achieve its carbon-reduction goals. The Government has put in place a range of funding measures to assist our airports with climate resilience. Specifically with Shannon Airport, over €6.3 million was allocated under the Covid-19 regional State airports programme 2021. Many of the projects supported through this funding incorporate measures to support sustainability.

More generally, the Climate Action Fund was established on a statutory basis in 2020. At least €500 million will be available from this fund over the period to 2027 to support projects,

initiatives and research across the economy that contribute to the achievement of Ireland's climate and energy targets and goals. To date, just over €140 million has been committed from the Climate Action Fund for a range of projects. Opportunities to secure support from the Climate Action Fund will also be available during 2022 and beyond, particularly relating to projects and initiatives that are aligned with the recently published Climate Action Plan.

On the question of other possible funding opportunities, the European Union's Connecting Europe Facility, CEF, supports the development of Europe's transport, energy and digital services networks. Funding is awarded on a competitive basis and information on open calls under this programme and others is available on the EU's funding and tenders portal. For the aviation sector the major driving force towards carbon reduction will be the measures that are adopted through the European Union's Fit for 55 package of proposals. This package consists of a set of interconnected proposals that all drive towards the same goal of ensuring a green transition by 2030 and beyond.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: I am delighted to hear of the development of a smart green aviation ecosystem. We must be with the trends and ahead of other countries in trying to capture some of the money that will follow this trail. There have been many new points coming from COP26 but one of the take-home points is that money will follow the greening of industry, aviation and pretty much all sectors in society.

We can consider the carbon dioxide outputs of aviation. Overall, commercial aviation accounts for 2.5% of global carbon outputs. We might think it is a small figure but it is a lot higher than the amount emitted from Germany, Europe's most industrialised country. Covid-19 has probably given aviation a bit of a "get out of jail" card because, unfortunately, the aeroplanes have been largely grounded for the past 18 months, although we all wanted them back in the sky. This sector will very much come into focus again.

County Clare is uniquely positioned to offer sustainable aviation a future and in the curtilage of Shannon Airport we have the amazing Future Mobility hub, which is a testing bed for automated vehicles. Land Rover and Jaguar are there and one can see little vehicles powering around with no driver at the wheel. If we are able to do that and be a leader in Europe in that regard, we could certainly be a leader when it comes to aviation. We have all been on Ryanair and Aer Lingus flights to sun holidays but aviation is changing by the month. In the past month we have seen personalised drones being tested in China and they will go commercial in the next two years in bringing individuals around.

Aviation is changing, including its fuel types, types of aircraft and the efficiency of aircraft engines. We have been able to attract the giants of aviation, such as Lufthansa, into Shannon over the years but we are now entering a new greening era of sustainable aviation. Rather than being outside the tent we must be leading, taking every opportunity, including money available from Europe and the home shores of Ireland. Leadership was demonstrated in developing Foynes, Shannon Airport and Ireland's aviation industry over many decades so we should once again take leadership in developing a sustainable future in aviation.

Deputy Damien English: I thank Deputy Crowe and we are very much committed to leading that sustainable future. It is in the climate plan announced last week and we can see the direction of travel for Ireland. I have been involved with the research agenda for a number of years in this country and I know the potential in our research community to drive successful projects and research while tunnelling into options that can help us create jobs and reduce our

carbon emissions.

The Deputy mentioned a fund and I mentioned the regional enterprise plans earlier. The Deputy mentioned the Future Mobility hub, which is a very exciting project. I visited it quite recently, meeting the team involved, and I am glad one of them is a Meath man. He is Mr. Russell Vickers, who was in school with me. I assure the Deputy that even when he was four or five, he was destined to provide solutions on an engineering and science front. It is very exciting work that puts Ireland at the cutting edge of technology. We want to be part of that. I was in the Land Rover and understand what it can do. I saw the technology in the boot and much work went into that. The centre will attract investment, stakeholders and significant players from all over the world to come to Shannon and carry out work and research on that testbed. We are leading that work and I am glad the regional enterprise fund has assisted through the work of Enterprise Ireland. It has assisted many others as well, and it is something we must do.

I mentioned the Fit for 55 package earlier, which consists of a set of interconnected proposals that all drive to the same goal of ensuring a green transition by 2030. The elements of this package that impact aviation are as follows: a tax on aviation kerosene to be implemented incrementally over a ten-year period from 2023 to 2033 to match the equivalent minimum rate for motor fuel; blending mandates for sustainable aviation fuel starting at 2% by volume from 2025, increasing to 20% by 2035 and 63% by 2050, with a sub-mandate for synthetic fuels from 2030; a change to the emission trading scheme to phase out the free allowances afforded to aviation by 2027 and to reduce the overall scheme cap on a linear basis by 4.2% per annum; and targets for supply of fixed electrical ground power at aircraft stands for stationary aircraft.

It is important to emphasise that these are proposed measures and it remains to be seen what political agreement will ultimately emerge. The potential for agreement is there and by working together, all of us can drive forward this change.

Vacant Properties

Deputy Brendan Griffin: My Fine Gael colleagues and I from around the country want to raise this very important matter of vacant and derelict houses that could and should be converted to homes for people. In 2015, I proposed to the relevant Department what later became the repair and leasing scheme. The financial supports I proposed at the time were never implemented and the scheme has not been a widespread success, with the exception of Waterford. The success of Waterford should be learned from.

I reiterate the calls I have been making over a number of years for a plan for derelict properties. This can be addressed by getting properties on the market by providing a tax break window for owners to sell them to first-time buyers. The help-to-buy scheme should be extended to such houses without the requirement for total demolition. Generous renovation grants should be provided to first-time buyers and planning-exempt extension dimensions should be increased for the properties. We should also waive or rebate water and electricity reconnection fees for the houses, subject to an occupancy clause. The cities, towns, villages and countryside of the nation are dotted with such properties and we need to get them back into use.

Deputy Alan Dillon: I have been banging the drum about dereliction since I was elected and it could make a real difference in bringing people back to our streets outside normal business hours. In Mayo we have seen much-needed funding coming on stream, such as the urban

and rural regeneration funding in Castlebar and Westport. It would also be very useful to see such funding have a greater emphasis on putting vacant units back into residential use.

Dereliction is a scourge on the areas it infests. Considering our efforts to boost housing supply, we really need to put in place solutions to this matter. I have heard all the excuses surrounding cost concerns, fire escape concerns and noise but I have seen very little in developing solutions for these problems. We really need to equip our local authorities to tackle this matter and lead the way in bringing vacant units back into use.

Deputy David Stanton: Since 2018, €7.75 million has been made available to local authorities to pay for vacant housing officers. Most of these officers have other jobs as well and recently I believe only five were full time. Those officers had other roles too. How can they do the work if they are not doing it full time? When will these officers be full time and why are they not full time already? Cork County Council, for example, should have three full-time officers for each of the divisions in the county to do this work. They should be identifying homes, which can be seen on *vacanthomes.ie* anyway. They should be talking to owners, tapping them on the shoulder and seeing what is available. They should be putting in the requisition to purchase these houses and derelict sites so as to bring them back into use. Many small towns and villages are full of empty houses that could be made available if the will is there. These officers must be made full time straight away. We need more of them and they must deliver.

Deputy Joe Carey: It is very clear we need a more comprehensive strategy to assist the re-development of derelict and vacant properties. If properly implemented, such a strategy could play an important role in helping to address the housing crisis while also helping to rejuvenate our towns and villages.

A number of welcome measures have been introduced over the past number of years, such as a repair and leasing scheme and the buy and renew scheme, aimed at turning these dwellings into social homes. Some local authorities are better at implementing these schemes than others. We desperately need our local authorities to step up in their efforts and use the powers available to them, such as a compulsory purchase order and the derelict sites levy. Many local authorities shy away from using these tools. We need quicker results in turning these derelict eyesores into social houses. We also need schemes to provide opportunities for affordable and private homes. The approach taken to date is piecemeal and requires a far more robust response.

Deputy Damien English: I thank Deputies Griffin, Dillon, Carey and Stanton for raising this issue today. It brings me back to my previous role and part of the job I liked but did not make as much progress on as I would have liked to, because tackling vacancy and dereliction are essential parts of our work. Tonight, I will take this debate on behalf of the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage and specifically the Minister of State, Deputy Peter Burke.

We all know the importance of this issue. It is important that we use the new housing for all strategy as a way to focus our minds on this to get delivery, and to build on the work started in Rebuilding Ireland, which was far from being completed. I will tease through the issues raised by each Deputy. I wish to flag on behalf of the Minister of State, Deputy Peter Burke, that he will, very soon, publish the town-centre first framework, which will respond to the programme for Government aim to develop our town centres and build outwards. The Minister of State, Deputy Peter Burke, has chaired this across three Departments, including the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, the Department of Rural and Community Development,

and the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage. That should help us with a comprehensive strategy. Deputy Carey referred to the need to join all the dots and bring all Departments around the table, and our agencies, in order that we can drive on to address the issue of vacancies in our towns, villages and even parts of our cities as well. Vacant properties are misused assets. All the resources are generally there when it comes to water, sewage and so on. We need to find ways to make that happen.

Local authorities need to drive on with this and make it happen, as was touched on by Deputy Carey. Deputy Stanton is right in that we need to put them in a position to be able to do that. We have had this conversation before over many years. We need to put more money into the vacant housing teams and for officers in each county, and certainly in the larger counties, where there is more opportunity. I was in Cork recently, where one can drive around and see all the vacant properties. They are in every county as well. There are probably not as many as the census stated but there is a large number. If we can get this right, there are possibly 50,000 or 60,000 potential homes in the country. It is, therefore, important that we put the pressure on.

I will raise this directly with the Ministers and Ministers of State involved the need, under the Housing for All strategy, to allocate more money to the vacancy officers. There is a unit in the Department responsible for co-ordinating this work. It has put a lot of effort into that and has designed manuals. The importance of an easy manual in order that a house can be repaired was also referred to. Deputy Dillon raised the point about making it easy to take on an empty property or derelict house. One can use the manual published by the Department. It gives a step-by-step approach on how to cut through some of the perceived red tape to bring a house into use.

Deputy Griffin raised a number of issues. He probably speaks faster than do I, so I will try to deal with all four or five of them during this debate. On the planning exemptions, the intention is to extend them to make it easier to tackle these vacant properties or previous commercial properties to bring them into use as a house. All of us recognise the benefits of having families and people back living in our towns. It provides them with homes and breathes life back into our towns and villages from a job creation point of view as well. The Deputy is right about the repair and leasing scheme. It was something he brought forward in recognition at the time that people who own these properties do not necessarily have the cash to do them up, and are in need of a grant or an incentive of some sort. To be fair, that could have worked but it did not. It probably focused too much on social housing and a positive change to that would be to include housing for anybody. We get a return on that money and it is money well spent. It is something the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, is clearly considering, but I will certainly raise it with him too. Having tax breaks to encourage this is the same thing, in that it provides some sort of assistance because it is costly in some cases. While it is value for money in the long run, someone needs to provide the money upfront to make it happen and that is where assistance is needed.

The help to buy scheme was originally introduced to bring in new supply, but at this stage we should accept that an empty house, vacant for many years, is as good as new supply if it can be brought back into use. I will raise that and some way to extend that scheme with the Minister as well. Planning fees and exemptions can be worked on. Local authorities could take the lead on that. I understand that they have the scope, when it comes to planning contributions, to make changes in recognition that the infrastructure is there, and likewise, with reconnection fees. Generally, those agencies will work with people as well. There is a lot of potential here and I thank Deputies Griffin, Dillon, Carey and Stanton for raising this issue and I will certainly

bring their concerns back to the Minister and Minister of State.

Deputy Brendan Griffin: In relation to Waterford, the local authority carried out 118 repair and lease schemes out of 267 nationwide. Based on those figures - that is not enough by the way - there could have been about 3,000 additional units around the country, had the other local authorities pulled their weight. There needs to be more money put into the repair and lease scheme and its remit needs to be expanded to open the scheme to everybody. The amount of dereliction in the country is an absolute sin at this time. We need urgent action from the Department. Not in six months' time or next year; we need it now.

Deputy Alan Dillon: While I welcome some features within the housing for all plan, including the planning exemption for above-shop conversions and streamlining the protective structures system, as well as the new Croí Cónaithe fund to promote development within our regional towns and villages, we need to be more proactive on this issue and make use of vacant properties and convert them back into residential usage. One need only walk along Main Street, Castlebar, Pearse Street, Ballina, or Bridge Street, Westport to recognise the vast amount of space above the shops and on ground level that is going to waste. Certainly, we need to prioritise this within government. Processes such as the repair and renew scheme and compulsory purchase orders are tools we should utilise.

Deputy David Stanton: I do not blame the vacant housing officers who are already in position. They are doing their best but they have about ten other jobs and this is probably the lowest one on the list. They should be freed up to do this exclusively because it is a hugely important job and it is a win-win. There are people all over the country now screaming for houses. There are vacant properties that could be turned around very quickly into usage. They do not need planning permissions very often; they just need to be made available. The owners need to be tapped on the shoulder by somebody, and those people need to have the time to do it. We also need a senior official at assistant secretary level in the Department to whom they will respond. Will the Minister of State come back to us to inform us of who that is?

Deputy Joe Carey: The number of vacant and derelict buildings dotted throughout our towns and villages needs a much more comprehensive response. The schemes currently available are insufficient and must be opened up to allow the further development of affordable and, indeed, private homes. I welcome the initiative by the Minister of State, Deputy Peter Burke, in bringing all the Departments together. I also believe the Minister of State needs the backing of the Departments of Finance and Public Expenditure and Reform. I thank the Minister of State, Deputy English, for taking this debate tonight.

Deputy Damien English: I agree with all four Deputies. We need to add more schemes to the pot. There are also schemes that are available that could be utilised more. I accept Deputy Stanton's point that the vacancy officer cannot perform miracles out of fishes and loaves. We need to strengthen their teams. I have addressed this in many councils of all parties and I have listened to many in the Opposition over the years criticise vacancy. There is a role here for every elected representative on a councillor level to help join the dots when it comes to vacancy, to knock on the doors and tap on the shoulders to let people know about the schemes and options that are available, to make it easy and to work with the vacancy officers. Local councillors who take on that responsibility would be of major assistance.

In addition, a lot of our housing bodies and associations could also take a proactive role to pursue these vacant properties. The Peter McVerry Trust is an example of an organisation that

has done that and has successfully brought back many houses into use throughout our counties by targeting vacant properties. The onus is on everyone's shoulders to play their part here and not just the Government schemes, while we certainly can and should adjust them as well.

The purchase and renew scheme, a successful scheme, worked well in Waterford along with the repair and lease scheme. There is no reason why it cannot work everywhere else. It is about the focus and commitment of all involved at local council level. Deputy Stanton is correct in that we should have somebody at a national level. There is a team in place, but perhaps it needs someone at assistant secretary level to really drive it home. There is a massive opportunity for win-win on that as well.

Deputy Dillon mentioned the proactive approach and the Croí Cónaithe fund. That is there to enable and help local authorities complete these projects and deal with these vacant sites and properties through a range of ways including to buy them, sell them on, make them available or work with the owners. In many cases, there is a massive story behind every vacant property. This needs the work of everybody involved and the local authorities to make it happen. We have made changes to the fair deal scheme which makes it easier for these properties to be rented out. It has to be worth people's while to do up the property, to make it available, either by selling it or renting it, for it to become a family home. There must be a recognition on all sides that this takes effort and schemes. Sometimes that involves giving people a grant to make it work. Everybody wins if we do that right.

Housing Provision

Deputy Joan Collins: I note that the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, is in the Seanad at present. That is probably why he is not here in the Chamber. I am aware the Minister of State played a role in the Rebuilding Ireland scheme and he was the Minister of State in the then Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government in the last Dáil, so he would be fairly clued in to this issue. The cost-rental housing plan for the site at Emmet Road, formerly St. Michael's Estate, is due to go for planning in the first quarter of next year, so it is fairly imminent. This is a pivotal project in setting the terms and conditions for other such projects in the future given its scale and scope. Clarification and reiteration of previous commitments from Ministers and Dublin City Council that rents for housing in this project will be related to income rather than to the market rate are urgently needed. In early 2019 the campaign for housing on St. Michael's Estate organised a meeting with Vincent Browne, to which Deputies were invited, and put forward the cost-rental model. It explained what it is based on. It is for people whose income exceeds the limit to be eligible for council housing but who do not have enough income to build a nest egg to get a mortgage. This is really pivotal for the community. As has been mentioned before, it will be a game-changer if it works.

The residents and activists in the area have been going to the design meetings in respect of the size of the apartments and the storage and balconies they will have. The architects do not seem to know how much money they will have to build the units and so cannot design around those funds. The activists had a meeting with all four Dublin South-Central Deputies last Thursday and asked us to put down a question to find out exactly what is going on. The other Deputies did not get their questions in on time this morning but do support the residents in looking for this information.

It is really important that the Government is clear with the community as to what we are

talking about. Rents of €1,300, or €1,500 for two-bedroom units, are not affordable for people on incomes of €35,000, €45,000 or €50,000. It is just not possible to pay such rents on those incomes. Under its Housing for All plan, the cost-rental model was recognised as a form of housing. What regulations are now being brought in to deliver cost-rental housing? The European Investment Bank committed to €100 million back in 2018. What is the figure now?

We know from the report issued today that housing costs are increasing. In Dublin, the average cost to buy a house is now over €430,000. We saw the Daft report last week which showed that rents have gone up all over the country again. They increased by 2.7% year-on-year in Dublin, by 6.9% in Cork, by 8.9% in Limerick and by 10% in Waterford. There is also a lack of rental property. It is really important that the cost-rental model begin to play a key and game-changing role in cities and the country with regard to affordable rents based on income rather than market rent.

Deputy Damien English: I thank Deputy Joan Collins for bringing up this issue in respect of Emmet Road, previously St. Michael's Estate. It is a project I am very familiar with and which I had hoped would be further along at this stage. Covid and other issues have caused delays but this project should have started by now and I am glad we are nearly at the stage of getting planning permission because I had hoped we would be providing homes before now. At least the project is still intact and we are making progress. It is being developed on a cost-rental model, as the Deputy has said. It will be cost-rental housing. We are very much committed to that. The rents reflect the costs of developing it. The Deputy spoke about engagement with the design team. It is important that nobody gets carried away and spends unnecessary money on this. It has to be top-class, A-rated housing and that is what I expect it to be but it must be borne in mind that costs should be kept reasonable. I know the Deputy is not advocating otherwise but I remind the House that this is not-for-profit housing and we must keep costs at a level that will allow us to deliver rents at the right price.

All of us in the Government understand the importance of affordable housing. It was always going to be the second phase as we came out of Rebuilding Ireland and moved onto Housing for All. It is right that we focus on affordable housing. I believe the process for social housing has been fixed. We need to keep that process going and keep putting more money behind it. We now have to concentrate on affordable housing models. The Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, is bringing focus to this issue with the legislation he brought through and with the publication of Housing for All. This project will happen and it will work. The Deputy asked me whether it will work. It will. I have no doubt that it will deliver housing at the right price.

On behalf of the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, who is stuck in the Seanad, I formally thank the Deputy and clarify that the site at Emmet Road - not Emmet Terrace like we have in Navan - plans for which are currently being brought forward for development by Dublin City Council, is significant for the development of cost rental in Ireland given its scale and city centre location. We recently had a meeting with the European Investment Bank which reaffirmed its desire to assist with projects like this, for which it has funding available. This is something it wants to do. It is part of projects all over Europe. There are great models all over Europe, involving a myriad of funding streams. We need to tap into all such streams to make things happen.

While the design of the Emmet Road development has not been finalised by the council, current plans propose 484 homes in total, of which approximately 375 will be designated cost-rental homes. The remainder will be provided as social housing. I believe the Deputy will

agree with that proposal. I am advised that the council is currently preparing a Part 10 planning application, to include an environmental impact assessment report, for the Emmet Road development with the intent to lodge an application with An Bord Pleanála in the second quarter of next year. I am thankful that we are near the end of the process and ready to put in the planning application.

Any rent levels for the cost-rental homes to be delivered at Emmet Road will not be directly related to either tenant income or the market rent for the area. It will be related to the cost. It is cost rental. That is generally reflective of the needs of the tenants the Deputy is aiming for because, in many cases, rents may be delivered at half the market rate, which is what the Deputy is trying to achieve. As is the central principle of cost rental, the rent for the homes will be a function of the costs incurred in financing, building, managing and maintaining them. That is why it is so important to keep costs low and not unnecessarily high. This is consistent with the provisions of the Affordable Housing Act 2021 approved by the Oireachtas with its full support earlier this year.

Our cost-rental model follows European examples to ensure that a financially self-sustaining sector is developed that delivers more affordable homes for people to rent on a long-term basis, with the homes being retained to become even more affordable over time. This explicit link between the rent and the cost of delivery of the homes means that the homes at Emmet Road will, by necessity, be affordable, efficiently designed and easy to maintain. Dublin City Council is committed to the idea that the design should reflect this with regard to the site layout, unit design, building materials and landscape finishes. Project capital and operating and maintenance costs will be carefully monitored and all decisions will be reviewed throughout each stage of the project to ensure affordability is maintained, which is only right.

Cost rental is not social housing as we know it. It is targeted at those individuals and families on moderate incomes who are above the eligibility threshold for social housing. I believe the Deputy agrees with that idea. An upper limit of €53,000 in respect of annual household income, after income taxes, has been applied to the first cost-rental projects, thereby giving an indicator of the cohort at whom this sector is aimed.

Deputy Joan Collins: I thank the Minister of State. I note that no copy of his speech was given out. Perhaps one could be sent over to me. The suggested rent of €1,300 for a one-bedroom apartment and €1,500 for a two-bedroom apartment, which is the concept in some areas in Dublin, is affordable only to the top 30% of households. That is not what we are looking for or what we need in respect of cost rental. For 40% of households, their income means that rent must be €800 a month or less to be affordable. The Minister of State has said that rents have to be based on the cost but is the Government looking at introducing differential rent with, for example, tenants paying 15% and the difference being paid through a housing assistance payment, HAP, type scheme? We pay HAP to landlords. Are we looking at that type of thing in respect of people on incomes which are low but above the eligibility threshold? We have to think outside the box if we are to ensure that people on such incomes can get this housing. I would like to hear the Minister of State's position on that. Is he saying that rents will be in and around €1,300 for a one-bedroom unit and €1,500 for a two-bedroom unit? If that is the case, this housing is not affordable nor is it based on people's incomes.

Deputy Damien English: I want to be clear. I am not saying those numbers; the Deputy is. I want to be clear on that.

Deputy Joan Collins: Those figures are out there.

Deputy Damien English: I do not know anything about them because we never put out any figures in respect of this scheme. I am not saying anything. I want to be very clear on that. The rents will be reflective of the cost. I did not think I would ever hear the Deputy advocating the use of the HAP scheme. I say that in jest.

Deputy Joan Collins: I do not agree with the HAP scheme in general.

Deputy Damien English: I know the Deputy does not and she is not advocating its use as it is. The HAP scheme was only ever meant to be a short-term housing solution for people as they moved to more permanent housing.

11 o'clock

Without the HAP scheme, 60,000 families would not have houses. I acknowledge that the Deputy and I will never agree on that, but it is the reality. There should only ever be a short-term need for HAP as the recipient moves on to a permanent home, which can be delivered on the Emmet Road site through a cost-rental project and through social housing. It is always the intention that HAP is not a long-term solution and that is as it should be.

These cost-rental model houses are not aimed at the top 30% of households. They are aimed at those who are just above the threshold for social housing and who cannot qualify for it. They might be in a job that pays them the average wage or thereabouts, resulting in a take-home income of €53,000. We are aiming at that cohort of people, and if the project is developed correctly, we can do that.

It is about keeping down costs. One of the methods to ensure cost-rental homes are affordable to this moderate income cohort relates to the use of direct State support. We can subsidise and reduce these costs in the home's construction. This can include the provision of public land at no or low-cost, upfront capital grants from the Executive and State assistance with loan financing, as well as the European Investment Bank reducing the cost of borrowing. All three of these methods have been made available by the Department to support this project, with the provision of land by Dublin City Council, the approval of a serviced sites fund grant from the Department of €18.7 million, the full funding of the social housing homes within the development and the potential assistance of the European Investment Bank and the Housing Finance Agency in helping to facilitate a long-term low-interest loan to fund the remainder of the development costs. Already, therefore, many of the costs have been reduced. It is important that from here on we keep those costs to a minimum in order that we can deliver this project for the cohort in question and ensure it will be affordable to them. I reiterate that they are not aimed at the top 30%, as I am sure the Deputy will appreciate.

Message from the Standing Business Committee of Dáil Éireann

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Standing Business Committee has completed its consideration under Standing Order 30 of the request by the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform to waive the requirement for pre-legislative scrutiny under Standing Order 173 on the general scheme and the draft heads of the Houses of the Oireachtas Commission (amendment) Bill 2021 and has agreed thereto.

16 November 2021

The Dáil adjourned at 11.02 p.m. until 9.12 a.m. on Wednesday, 17 November 2021.