

# DÁIL ÉIREANN

---

## AN COMHCHOISTE UM TURASÓIREACHT, CULTÚR, EALAÍONA, SPÓRT AGUS NA MEÁIN

## JOINT COMMITTEE ON TOURISM, CULTURE, ARTS, SPORT AND MEDIA

---

*Dé Céadaoin, 23 Meitheamh 2021*

*Wednesday, 23 June 2021*

---

Tháinig an Comhchoiste le chéile ag 3.30 p.m.

The Joint Committee met at 3.30 p.m.

---

Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair/Members present:

Teachtaí Dála/Deputies	Seanadóirí/Senators
Ciarán Cannon,	Malcolm Byrne,
Alan Dillon,	Micheál Carrigy,
Brendan Griffin,	Annie Hoey,
Mattie McGrath,	Fintan Warfield.
Imelda Munster,	
Johnny Mythen,	
Christopher O'Sullivan.	

I láthair/In attendance: Deputy Maurice Quinlivan.

Teachta/Deputy Niamh Smyth sa Chathaoir/in the Chair.

### **Making Europe Fit for the Digital Age: EU Commissioner for Competition**

**Chairman:** Before I introduce our witness for this session, I ask the members of the com-

mittee to ratify the draft minutes of our previous public and private meetings, which were held on 16 June. Are the minutes formally agreed and there are no matters arising? Agreed.

This meeting has been convened to hear from the European Commission Executive Vice-President and Commissioner for Competition, Margrethe Vestager - I hope I pronounced that well - who has responsibility for the Making Europe Fit for the Digital Age strategy. It is my sincere honour and privilege to extend a very warm welcome to the Commissioner, who will be joining the meeting via Microsoft Teams. The format of the meeting is that I will invite the Commissioner to make her opening statement, and questions will then be posed by members of our committee. As the witness is already aware, the committee may publish her opening statement on its website following today's meeting.

Before I invite the Commissioner to deliver her opening statement, which will be limited to five minutes, I advise the witness of the following with regard to parliamentary privilege and I hope the Commissioner and the members will bear with me while I go through these housekeeping rules. Witnesses are reminded of the long-standing parliamentary practice that they should not criticise or make charges against any person or entity by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable, or otherwise engage in speech that might be regarded as damaging to the good name of the person or entity. Therefore, if their statements are potentially defamatory in respect of an identifiable person or entity, they may be directed to discontinue their remarks. It is imperative they comply with any such direction. Witnesses participating in this session from a jurisdiction outside the State are advised they should also be mindful of the domestic law and how that may apply to the evidence they may give.

Members are reminded of the long-standing parliamentary practice to the effect that they should not comment on, criticise or make charges against a person outside the Houses or an official either by name or in such a way as to make him or her identifiable. I remind members of the constitutional requirement that they must be physically present in the confines of Leinster House or the convention centre to participate in the public meeting. I will not permit members to attend unless they are adhering to that constitutional requirement and, therefore, any member not so present will be asked to leave the meeting. I also ask members to identify themselves when contributing for the benefit today of the Commissioner and of the Debates Office staff who are preparing the Official Report. I also ask that microphones be muted when not contributing to reduce background noise and feedback. I ask our guest and members to use the raise hand function on their screen if they want to contribute. We have speaking slots and it would be wonderful if we could adhere to them. I remind everyone as well to turn off their mobile phones, if at all possible.

Without further ado, we are privileged and delighted to have the Commissioner with us today. I feel a little bit of *déjà vu* because I had the pleasure of attending the Conference on the Future of Europe in Strasbourg at the weekend. It is wonderful to see the European flag flying in the background again today and it feels very apt after the weekend I spent in Strasbourg and in the context of the important work to be undertaken in the months ahead. I invite the Commissioner to make her official statement to the committee.

**Ms Margrethe Vestager:** I thank the Chair for this very warm welcome and for the opportunity to exchange views with the committee today regarding how to make the best use of digital technologies to improve our societies and our Union. I am glad this meeting is possible since travel is still restricted. Our discussions, however, should not be restricted because there is an urgent need for our democracies to catch up and get ahead of the curve of technological development to serve our people in the best possible manner.

One lesson of the pandemic is that digital technologies can enable many things which otherwise would not be possible. Equally, digital technologies can also facilitate travel and enable us to come together. This is best exemplified by the European Union digital Covid-19 certificates, which will come into effect and be available on 1 July. On the other hand, though, digital technologies can also increase differences. Those who can fully benefit from an enriched and secure digital space with a full range of services are in a very different position from those who cannot benefit in the same way. That disparity in access might derive from a lack of connectivity, skills, hardware and-or access to different services.

It is important we consider this digital divide as something we should work on, and this is why the deployment of fibre and 5G is very important. I welcome the ongoing roll-out of the national broadband plan that aims to deliver high-speed broadband services to all premises in Ireland. The expansion of the digital sector, however, should not come at the expense of a second transition, which is to being a climate-neutral continent. It is important that data centres, for example, minimise their CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, as they now account for many of these CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. While we roll out digital, we must really be much more effective in minimising CO<sub>2</sub> emissions.

There will be no green transition without the digital transition. They come together but only if we are successful in co-ordinating policies between the two. Being successful in that respect also takes in the enabling of our European values to come to life with the help of digital technologies. It is why we in the Commission have adopted our digital compass, the European way for the “digital decade” that sets out what we want to achieve by 2030.

Like a compass, this strategy has four cardinal points. The first, of course, is about humans and how we can get the basic and expert skills to shape digitisation. The second is about secure infrastructure to help us to get connected. The third is the digital transformation of businesses and reinterpretation of business models and ideas with the use of digital technologies. Last but not least is the digitisation of public services and e-governance, enabling public services to be delivered in a digital way.

It is not enough just to set targets and we need resources to enable us to reach those targets. We have both the multi-annual financial framework and the NextGenerationEU recovery and resilience facility to help us to do this. Members know a minimum of 20% of the recovery and resilience funds have the objective of achieving digital transition in a sustainable way. The in-depth assessment of the Irish plan is ongoing, following which I hope to confirm that Ireland meets the digital targets.

Cybersecurity, and particularly in the Irish context, is very topical because of the hideous ransomware attack on the health system of Ireland just last month, forcing Ireland to shut down most of the healthcare IT systems. I really want to express my solidarity with the people affected by this and firmly condemn such a malicious act. This is aggressive interference in a very sensitive and strategic area, as health services all over the world have suffered an increase in attacks during the pandemic. This is pathetic behaviour from the people who are responsible.

Everyone is deeply concerned about these attacks. The more we use digital technology, the more vulnerable we can be if we do not protect ourselves in the best possible way. This is why we have launched a revision of the network and information systems directive in order to have broader scope and bring more sectors on board. It is also about increasing coverage of the healthcare sector, meaning many more hospitals and health-related facilities will need to take legally required cybersecurity measures and report cyber incidents.

Just today, we launched a proposal for a new joint cyber unit to improve cross-border cooperation in preventing cyberattacks and assistance so that member states can help each other if there is an attack.

I have some comments on the Digital Services and Digital Markets Acts that have been proposed, both focusing on the market or services to be delivered with more security with products sold online and in the handling of illegal content. This also involves securing freedom of speech and, with the proposed Digital Markets Act, ensuring the market is open and competitive for the many amazing and innovative European companies with interesting products to present to us. There is an artificial intelligence proposal focusing on the use cases and where there is a risk of fundamental values not being upheld while embracing artificial intelligence in all its many other forms.

There is a review of the broadband cost reduction directive in order to ensure we have a sustainable, quick and more efficient roll-out of high-capacity networks, including fibre and 5G. We have much legislation in the pipeline, focusing on two fundamental elements. We must be able to trust technology in order to see its full benefits and we must ensure our democracy is not only catching up with technology but getting ahead of the curve in order to be able to shape our future societies.

**Chairman:** I thank Ms Vestager for that insightful introduction to our discussion today. I am sure the sentiments she expressed this afternoon will be very much reflected in our members' thoughts and questions. The members are aware of the speaking slots and I will turn first to Deputy Imelda Munster.

**Deputy Imelda Munster:** I welcome Ms Vestager. Does she have a timeline for implementation of the Digital Services Act?

**Ms Margrethe Vestager:** The Portuguese Presidency has really decided to own this and has put it as a high priority. It is really advanced. There is much interest in the European Parliament and many committees are contributing to it. We hope we can pass it next summer during the French Presidency. It is a regulation that could come into effect quite fast and perhaps by the end of next year if everything goes well. I need to knock on wood in order to ensure I do not jinx it.

**Deputy Imelda Munster:** Okay. It is possibly by the end of next year. It may have some crossover or even conflicts with Ireland's online safety and media regulation Bill. We hope to have that Bill enacted by the end of this year. Is the witness in any way familiar with that legislation?

**Ms Margrethe Vestager:** Unfortunately, no, I do not have knowledge of that proposed legislation at any level of detail.

**Deputy Imelda Munster:** That is fair enough. The Bill, in particular, would treat harmful and illegal content in much the same way. I understand the European Commission has stated they should not be treated in the same way because they are not the same, more or less. I am interested to hear Ms Vestager's comments on that.

**Ms Margrethe Vestager:** The idea of the Digital Services Act is to make sure we have processes that ensure illegal content is taken down and that legal content - even though sometimes it may hurt to see it - can stay up. It is not a proposal on substance. What is legal and what is illegal is for the member states to decide. The Digital Services Act will provide an obligation

to do a horizontal risk assessment on the digital services to determine whether there is a risk they can be misused, for instance, to undermine elections. We have seen examples of that. If so, those risks must be mitigated by the service provider.

Also, in the case of individuals, if something is taken down, they should be told and have the option to complain about it. That, in parallel with the work on the strengthened code of conduct, will get us to a situation where there is room for a national debate on what is legal and what is illegal while we establish processes that enable the conclusions of the offline world to be valleys in the online world.

**Deputy Imelda Munster:** I thank the Commissioner for that. Will she talk us through the plans she has for closing the digital divide between urban and rural areas? There is a major problem here in Ireland which is mainly due to poor broadband in rural areas, but it is also a problem in socioeconomic terms. During the pandemic, every child had to be schooled from home online. That was okay for some families, but others were not in a position to do that. Will Ms Vestager talk us through the plans she has for closing the divide between urban and rural areas?

**Ms Margrethe Vestager:** I thank Deputy Munster for raising this because we have made exactly the same observation in that there is a social toll here. For some kids, who have good connectivity, the correct gadgets, and whose parents can help out, the pandemic has been one thing. However, for kids with very poor connectivity and whose parents have not been able to help out, this may have been a year that was more or less wasted. In a child's life, a year of schooling counts for something.

There are two things from this. Obviously, we have varying subcompetence when it comes to education, yet we have made a digital education action plan to see what we have learned in this. The second thing is to focus on connectivity. A minimum of 20% of the recovery and resilience facility is for digital technologies, and much of that goes to connections, in particular, where there is no business case. If a private business does not roll out services because it does not believe there is a business case, a state can come in and make sure there is sufficient support for the roll-out to happen. At the same time, it should work on other forms of technology so that the very remote areas can also be connected with broadband or fibre and, if not, via satellite.

Deputy Munster raised the point that of families living door to door in an urban environment, some have the resources to connect and others do not. That is an important point for the local authorities. In my letter box, when I came home the other day, there was an invitation to an open house youth centre, where young people were invited to come and write their CVs and learn how to deal with online job searches. It is an important thing for local authorities to provide that because they are well placed, they know the families involved, and they are probably trusted to do something rather than someone sitting thousands of kilometres away.

**Senator Malcolm Byrne:** I am conscious the Commissioner, Ms Vestager, is with us, because Danes normally celebrate midsummer this evening. I thank her for giving us her time. I want to talk about the Digital Services Act and the Digital Markets Act because they are, as Deputy Munster just said, related to legislation we are considering here. I will specifically talk about some of the issues we need to address domestically and at European level.

My first question is about online advertising targeting children. Does Ms Vestager believe there should be a Europe-wide ban on such advertising? Second, does she believe there should be a ban on surveillance-based advertising? My third question is about algorithmic decision-

making. Algorithms can do lots of wonderful things, but if we do not guard against algorithmic bias, it will create many problems. We are looking to develop a number of codes here, but is it an approach that should be adopted at European level?

My final question comes down to the issue of European values and the importance of data. Does Ms Vestager view the right to data privacy as a European value? I speak in the context of China, which is increasingly using data for surveillance purposes, and the challenges we know of in the US around security and commercial purposes. How should Europe approach this? One must be conscious of the Schrems decisions and the implication of that in Ireland.

**Ms Margrethe Vestager:** The Deputy is correct. Tonight, many Danes will be singing around bonfires to celebrate midsummer. Luckily, we have stopped burning women on the stake, which was a bad idea. Now it is a much more peaceful thing.

I think it is a European value for a person to have the right to privacy. It is important we make this a right that people know they can enforce. By now, after the introduction of the general data protection regulation, GDPR, many people know they have rights but they find it difficult to know they are able to enforce those rights. We still have some way to go. We are trying to reflect that in new pieces of legislation, such as on artificial intelligence. We use a metaphor of a pyramid. At the bottom of the pyramid, where there is a lot of space, there are kinds of artificial intelligence we do not touch at all. However, at the tip of the pyramid we find cases that we would completely prohibit. There is no place in the European Union that a government would put in place a social scoring mechanism that puts citizens under surveillance and that, based on whether they pay their rent, jaywalk or are due a dental appointment - whatever it may be - they are allowed certain privileges or not. We want that to be prohibited.

The second thing we want prohibited, as a matter of principle, is general biometric surveillance in public spaces. Basically, someone would know where you were at all times. The one exception would be that you could go to a judge and ask to be allowed to use it for a limited period of time, for example, in the search for a missing child or in the case of terrorist or other serious crimes.

Last but not least, we would also want to prohibit the use of subliminal techniques that would make people do something that could be harmful to them or to others. We also try to take this value of privacy into other pieces of legislation so people can see that this is for real.

On the question of algorithms, we have quite a number of initiatives on algorithmic transparency. One of the things would be an obligation for the providers to explain how their algorithm works. We would not necessarily ask for the code itself but we would ask the developer to be able to say how this was actually working because, without that level of explainability, how can we trust that it works without a bias? That is exactly how we would do it because there is a risk of bias if there is no transparency or no explainability with the algorithms being used.

On the question of online advertising, both targeting vulnerable people and also targeting the rest of us, this is where there have been some very heated discussions. One of the areas where we have been a little careful is in the case of smaller businesses with a limited advertising budget because, for them, it can be a good thing to be able to reach potential customers. Businesses with large advertising budgets do not mind so much, and although every business minds about its costs, they can afford to have much broader advertising practices. I am more than willing to discuss how we can, for instance, protect children against targeted advertising, going further than the transparency we are suggesting right now. People should know why they see

an ad but I think it is important to be mindful of businesses which have very small advertising budgets because, for them, targeted advertising really makes the difference.

**Deputy Johnny Mythen:** I thank the Commissioner for appearing before the committee. I have four questions. How important is rural proofing to all of these ideas to make sure we do not leave anybody behind? Young people use the most data and they are prominent users of social media. How are the voices and perspectives of young people included in the regulatory work of the European Commission? The Commissioner mentioned there are significant resources but what does she see as the key areas for funding? The Commissioner spoke about data centres, which account for the biggest share of carbon emissions. How can we reduce these emissions in this country?

**Ms Margrethe Vestager:** I thank the Deputy. The idea of rural proofing is to see how proposals work outside of an urban area because there is a difference between people living closer together and people living much more spread out. These are different communities and there is a different dynamic, but that does not change the fact that we should be sensitive to these differences between urban and rural. We are working to be better at doing that kind of analysis in order to see how legislation will work for everyone.

Second, on the question on how young people are being heard, that is a really good question because we do not necessarily have specific youth panels. What we see is that there are a lot of young people worrying about having the right competences and whether we learn what we need to learn at school in order to be qualified for the jobs to come. This is one of the reasons we treat digital skills as a very hard strategic priority, not with education as a side thing or by treating it as if we can always put education here or there, but that it is a central thing and, without education, it will not work. I will take the inspiration and think about how more young people can be included.

It is also a point that goes for older people. For those aged 70 years today, in the next 20 years digitisation will only increase and more and more public services will come in digital formats. Therefore, it is never too late to get the digital skills in order for people to fully feel they are part of their society and they can benefit from the different services being delivered. People who are 70 today may well be here for the next 20 or 30 years. It is very important that we take the different generations on board in that respect.

On the key areas for investment, as I said earlier, I really think connectivity must be a key area and the second must be skills. We cannot leave anyone to say that digital society is not for them and that it is not important whether they feel empowered or not. The citizen's empowerment to deal with this is of the essence because, otherwise, there is a risk that we get societies where people do not feel they belong, and I think that is the worst thing that can happen. They may be fired from a job but if they feel they are being fired from their country or their society, where do they go then? Skills are of the essence.

When it comes to the data centres, with regard to the technology to get the next generation of semiconductors to use less electricity and less power, we have what we call an important project of common European interest that is working exactly on semiconductors to bring that down. The second thing is to organise the data centres so they can run on renewables, like everything else, but also that excess heating can be used. I know it is a quirky example but in Paris they have organised a pool next to a data centre, so the excess heat actually heats the pool for the people living around the data centre. I think that is quite a sweet example.

**Senator Micheál Carrigy:** I welcome the Commissioner. It is an honour to have her at our meeting. She mentioned the draft Digital Markets Act which is being worked on by the EU, along with the Digital Services Act. It sets out some rigid and non-negotiable rules for a lot of tech businesses, regardless of circumstances. Is there any concern in the EU that it is a bit over-specific and inflexible and might lead to unintended consequences? When I say “unintended consequences”, I am talking about the whole issue of sideloading. There are concerns that this could allow incidents such as software holding user data to ransom and letting children bypass parental controls and, indeed, that it could lead to potential piracy. Given the proposed draft, does the Commissioner have any concerns with what is there as this is seen to be non-negotiable at present?

**Ms Margrethe Vestager:** When we were developing the Digital Markets Act, we took our experience from competition law enforcement and focused on what we were seeing. One of our main challenges was to make procedures more efficient. Even when we move quite quickly, it takes time to bring a competition case, for obvious reasons. First, we have to prove dominance and then we have to prove that there has been wrongdoing through an illegal behaviour. The mechanism of using a Digital Markets Act is a bit different. Beforehand, parties are designated as gatekeepers according qualitative and quantitative objective criteria. The gatekeepers, and there will not be too many of them - maybe ten to 15, or something like that, have a number of obligations and a number of things they cannot do. What they must do and cannot do is based on our experience from competition law enforcement and the experience of seeing unfair trading practices. We are being quite specific, because otherwise, we would revert back to competition law enforcement. The regulation is supposed to complement competition law enforcement. There will still be competition cases, but not in the same way as before.

The question of data protection and security is a valid one. However, it is far-reaching to suggest, for instance, that an app store other than the one you already have on your phone would be an irresponsible app store that would allow any kind of crap to be pushed onto you. For all other providers, the same GDPR and privacy rules apply as for everyone else. One of the things I find thought-provoking is that if I am not happy with the prices or the choice of my supermarket, I go to another one. When it comes to app stores, once I buy my phone, there is a monopoly. I cannot use another app store to download the apps I want on my phone.

**Senator Micheál Carrigy:** When concerns are being raised, should it be looked at again, or is the draft a final version and not negotiable? Is that the case?

**Ms Margrethe Vestager:** There is nothing I respect more than the co-legislator. We, the Commission, draft the regulation using our best efforts. Of course we would like the co-legislator to accept the draft regulation and vote it straight through, but that is not the case. The co-legislator will discuss it and deal with it. It has been said that Council is quite advanced in its considerations. The Parliament is also getting there, with many committees interested in it. Once it is passed, since it is a regulation, the same rules apply to everyone.

**Chairman:** Senator Carrigy may get the chance to make a second contribution. To be fair, he had a shorter time. Is Deputy Dillon on the call? No. Does Deputy Griffin have any questions?

**Deputy Brendan Griffin:** My apologies for being unable to connect earlier. I watched the Commissioner’s presentation. First, I congratulate the Danish football team on how well they have performed in the Euros and how well they have represented their country at a particularly difficult time, given the events of last Saturday week. The team were a credit to everyone in

Denmark and to the football community. I wish the team all the best in the round of the last 16.

The Commissioner touched on the issue of cybersecurity earlier. As she will be aware and as she mentioned, we suffered a serious cyberattack here recently. Does she feel that a pan-European approach needs to be taken to cybersecurity? There have been calls for heavy investment in our own cybersecurity. Is it something that needs to be done at European level, covering the whole Union? Perhaps the Commissioner can speak more to that issue. As we know, and as she has mentioned, the more dependent we become on digital, the more vulnerable we become. We are small country of 4.5 million people, like the Commissioner's own country. For a small country, it is a heavy burden to try to protect our digital space. Perhaps it is something that requires a common European approach. I ask the Commissioner for her wider views on that issue.

**Ms Margrethe Vestager:** I thank the Deputy for his warm words in respect of the football team. It was devastating and shocking to see Christian Eriksen collapsing on the field. I find very touching the reaction of the entire football community to the events. The football community and the fans have shown fair play and warmth. I find it impressive. Of course, Christian Eriksen is fine and out of hospital. He had surgery. In Denmark, many people have signed up for first aid classes to learn how to do life-saving CPR. Therefore, something good will come of it. Obviously, I will be proud if the members join me in hoping for the Danish team to make it through the game on Saturday.

On the question of cybersecurity, it is a bit tricky. Of course, we have the European Union Agency for Cybersecurity, ENISA, which deals with cybersecurity. The directive on the security of network and information systems is trying to increase the scope so that more sectors will also be legally obliged to have what it takes to protect themselves against cyberattacks.

At the same time, we see that there is room to do more. As we increase the use of digital technology, we become more vulnerable. It is not only about vulnerability in the sense that each and every one of us can make the mistake of clicking on a link that looks attractive but is basically a phishing exercise or something much worse than that, but more systemically, it is about protecting us against the real professional, malicious attacks that we see happening. We hope to be able to apply six to eight "socks", which is technology that carries out surveillance by patrolling the networks and the cables to determine if an attack is imminent.

The second measure is to start up a joint cyber unit. We are very much aware that cybersecurity is a national competence. However, we are also aware that some of the attackers have a lot of resources at their disposal and it may be a good idea for member states to help each other both in their surveillance as to what is ongoing to help out if an attack is under way, but also to learn what happens during an attack so that it can be recognised by others and better prevented. There are many things that we can do together without affecting the sovereignty of the member states. Perhaps by co-operating more closely, we can increase the sovereignty of the member states. I do not think states feel sovereign when they are experiencing a massive cyberattack.

**Deputy Brendan Griffin:** I thank the Commissioner for the reply. I agree there needs to be greater co-operation given the risk involved, how far we have come and how vulnerable we now are. I thank the Commissioner for her comments and I wish the Danish team the very best at the weekend as well.

**Senator Malcolm Byrne:** Deputy Griffin will probably be recruiting many Irish supporters for the Danish team. The Commissioner will be quite happy to hear the cheers. I wish to

talk about the need for Europe to be more competitive in the digital age. With regard to one of the challenges, we see Silicon Valley and all the new companies that have been emerging from there. We have not seen the number of digital companies growing to the same extent in Europe over the recent years. In the Commissioner's vision for Europe in the digital age, what can we do to be able to support that creativity? Part of it may relate to the relationship with some of the tech giants. I am not sure if the Commissioner wants to comment on the ongoing Apple case, an issue which is much in the news in Ireland, but maybe she might comment on the relationship with the European Union and Apple and the antitrust case against Google that is being taken this week. How does the Commissioner envisage the digital wallet proposal which her directorate general, DG, is now developing? Does she believe we should move towards the introduction of a digital euro?

**Ms Margrethe Vestager:** It is interesting and so regrettable a number of successful, now US, businesses have their origins within the European Union. You find so many clever, entrepreneurial people within our Union. What we have seen so far is that many of them will leave for the US for skilled employees and capital to come on board. We have been trying to create better capital conditions by creating the capital union, because European companies often go to the bank and create more debts if they need capital on board, whereas in the US it is much more the custom that you go to the market and sell 5% or 10% of your business and not only do you get capital on board, you get new competences on board. It is definitely not a given that the innovator or initial entrepreneur who has created a great product also holds the competences to scale that business. We also want to create a different sort of capital market dynamic in Europe.

The second thing, and here there is a sense of urgency, is to make sure the industrial potential of Europe is being used in full because everything digitalises: energy, mobility, health and agriculture. Those ought to be the triggering events for European industry to dominate the next big chapter of digitalisation. That takes an open marketplace in order that they can get to their customers. It takes capital, a capital market that is willing to take risks and, of course, a Single Market approach in order that solutions can be scaled up because a full Single Market is available. I am quite enthusiastic about this but it will take considerable effort for us to use this industrial culture and potential to its full.

On the ongoing cases, actually we have quite a few tax cases. The Apple tax case is under appeal and I cannot comment on that, but what was interesting for me to see is that some of the things we have been looking at before are coming back. We have to look at the same behaviour, only in slightly different markets. If it is a different market, there is a different dynamic, but the fundamental behaviour is very much the same. One of the things that really underpins the Digital Markets Act is that the things we have seen before should be straightforwardly prohibited in order that we do not have to spend the resources to redo investigations we have done before, with the risk of smaller businesses being squeezed out of the market in the meantime.

On the question of the digital wallet, our ambition is that it should work like a passport. You have a national passport but it is also a European passport. It is the same idea. You have a national e-identity and it should work all over Europe as well. If you can use your own identity to log in to different services, you can much better control what data you deliver or what trace you track after yourself.

The second beneficial thing is that you can create trust. Other people will know that if you choose to identify yourself, it is really you. That is one of the things which is really lacking online. I appreciate that you can be there anonymously, but I also appreciate that I know who I am dealing with. That can make the Internet a much more trusted place, if we get this to work.

Having a wallet in which you can also stash your birth certificate, educational certificates and all of this can make your life much easier in the administrative procedures you have to go through in life.

**Senator Malcolm Byrne:** Can I ask the Commissioner a question about the digital currency? This is an issue the ECB is considering currently.

**Ms Margrethe Vestager:** I will wait to see what the ECB comes up with. It is a really interesting issue but I do not have sufficient insight from my daily work to give the Deputy a proper answer to this. I will reserve myself until I know what it thinks.

**Deputy Johnny Mythen:** I concede to Deputy Christopher O’Sullivan. He was not here at first and I would like for him to speak first.

**Deputy Christopher O’Sullivan:** I thank Deputy Mythen for the offer. Senator Byrne has already covered many of my questions. I appreciate him thinking about me, but Deputy Mythen can work away.

**Deputy Johnny Mythen:** The Commissioner mentioned there was a proposal for an artificial intelligence, AI, Act. Why is a separate Act needed for AI? Would it not be covered under the digital Act? Does the Commissioner think there should be more built-in deterrents for these ransomware attacks, such as confiscation of bank accounts, assets and so forth, and that they should be increased?

**Ms Margrethe Vestager:** These are the areas of responsibility of my colleagues, Commissioner Ylva Johansson, on cybercrime, and Commissioner Margaritis Schinas, on cybersecurity more broadly. I think we have seen only the beginning of dealing with this. Unfortunately, it seems that the digitisation of crime is happening even faster than that of business, the legitimate side of society. Criminal groups use digital technologies at a level we would love the legitimate side of society to use. In the coming years, we will develop not only ways to protect ourselves but also a much stronger zero tolerance of this. Of course, we need also to work on this internationally.

One disturbing issue is that not only are cybercriminals professional in what they do but there are also state-sponsored cyberattacks that in various ways polarise us and make it difficult for people to get the correct information because misinformation is flourishing. One of the big debates in the years to come will concern how to fight state-sponsored attacks. It is not tolerable that we should see what we have seen, most recently in Ireland but also elsewhere during the pandemic, when hospitals became one of the main targets of attacks at a time they were under extreme stress to do their best and to help citizens who were suffering from Covid.

**Deputy Johnny Mythen:** Why does Ms Vestager believe the AI legislation needs to be separate from the digital legislation?

**Ms Margrethe Vestager:** It needs separate legislation because it is specific. We have been careful not to refer to one specific type of technology. There can be different technologies, but the way in which the technology works determines whether it is defined as artificial intelligence. It could be technology that helps in a decision-making process, enables people to find patterns or does tasks that humans would otherwise do, such as a simple will or something like that. We are defining it by what the technology can do to future-proof it, given that there will be new forms of AI. It develops by the day.

Moreover, we are not focusing on the application as such or the sectors, but rather on the use cases. We compiled a list of use cases where, after the public consultation, we found there is a risk of fundamental values not being upheld, such as when people are being hired or applying for a mortgage. These are areas that are sensitive for people, where they want to be seen as who they are, not as their gender, postal code or ethnic background but as the person they are, with their talents and so on and with none of the other aspects. This is why we are specific with the use cases, but at the same time, there are many use cases where we find there is no risk. We may ask for transparency in order that people will know they are dealing with a machine, such as in customer service, but otherwise we just say “Go, go, go” because there are so many applications where it will make life more convenient.

**Deputy Ciarán Cannon:** I thank the Commissioner for joining us and appreciate her giving us her time today. We are, I hope, working our way slowly but surely out of a viral pandemic that has crippled Europe and the wider world. Throughout, we have become overwhelmed with misinformation. One might call it a misinformation pandemic. The after-effects of that may linger for significantly longer than will the effects of the pandemic itself. I recall Neelie Kroes in 2014 taking a significant step forward in empowering our young children to become more adept at manipulating technology and beginning that wonderful initiative that was EU Code Week.

In the aftermath of the pandemic, in the knowledge that our young people in particular need quickly to develop the skills necessary to become exceptionally digitally literate to be able to parse, analyse and critique all the information they encounter on the Internet using social media and other platforms, is it now time - perhaps this is something the Commission is already contemplating doing - to have a European-wide programme of digital literacy education for our young people, at both primary and post-primary level, that gives them those kinds of critiquing, parsing and analytical skills that are so crucial at a time they will most definitely be subjected to misinformation on a scale that is simply incomparable with what we encountered as young people growing up in the EU? Is that being contemplated? Does Ms Vestager have any comments to make about it?

**Ms Margrethe Vestager:** This is something we are passionate about. Someone told me the other day that the risk of someone passing on an article that is misinformation is higher with my generation or the slightly older one. It is definitely not always young people who are the source of misinformation or who pass it on; it can very well be people of other ages. It is important, therefore, to have a broad scope when we are discussing how to ensure we will get the exact competences the Deputy mentioned.

EU Code Week is ongoing because it is a great initiative, and it is encouraging to be part of this. We also have events - what we call hackathons - because it is intriguing and interesting to see what can be achieved in perhaps just 24 hours if skilled people work in teams on a certain area. Solutions can be found and that is an inspiration too. We have an ongoing project to determine whether we can create a European digital certificate, similar to the one for languages, where somebody can receive qualifications of C1, B2, B1 and so on for his or her skill level. We could have the same for digital skills in order that employers could easily recognise what kind of digital skill a young person or an experienced person has, and he or she will be able to travel with those digital skills. We are in the process of developing that. At the same time, it will not apply to each and every one of us such that if we just become more clued in, we will not be misinformed.

We have also strengthened the code of conduct. It is soft law, but all the big companies,

such as the US ones, including Twitter, Facebook and Instagram, as well as TikTok and Mozilla, have signed up for a number of actions to ensure that misinformation will be suppressed. During the pandemic, for instance, they sought to ensure that when a person was seeking Covid information, he or she would see the official information from the local health ministry as the first result. We strengthened the code because we found there was room for the platforms to do better. Here, of course, the next step will be the Digital Services Act. This will give them new obligations. For example, they would have to consider whether there is a risk that their platforms can be misused for systematic misinformation to people of all ages.

**Chairman:** I thank the Commissioner very much. She has had a busy hour responding to all of our members. I also thank our members. At the risk of sounding repetitive, which is not what I want to do, the Commissioner has covered everything comprehensively. It falls to me to conclude. The erosion of democracy is something that has left our countries and world highly vulnerable. We saw what happened on Capitol Hill. We saw the power of digital media and social media and the implications it had on Capitol Hill, which would have been unimaginable had anybody suggested it would be possible. This is why I believe the work being done by the Commissioner is hugely important for all of us as a country.

Having attended the Conference on the Future of Europe, I am mindful that one of the important pieces of policy work the conference will do is on digital transformation and on the idea the Commissioner has comprehensively addressed today on leaving nobody behind, whether people live in rural or urban areas, whether they are female or male or their age. None of this should matter and this is a very good objective.

To reflect on what the Commissioner and members have said, during the pandemic we had an attack on our health service. This was probably at the most vulnerable time in the history of the State. It proved very difficult for those on the front line in an already-impossible situation. I feel very strongly about a point that has been touched on, which is that in the work being done by the Commissioner, it will be hugely important to find a way to ensure that information going out is legitimate, trusted and independent. This is crucial in the work being done by the Commissioner. It has been critical throughout the pandemic with regard to Covid deniers. The voice and platform misinformation gets is equally as powerful as the correct and legitimate information. We have to find a way at European level and here in our own country to ensure we suppress the misinformation that can get out. It led people astray in the situation the world found itself in with the pandemic.

I do not have any questions because the Commissioner has covered everything so well. These are just my own rambling thoughts, having listened to everything everybody has had to say. I invite the Commissioner to make any closing remark she has after hearing from committee members.

**Ms Margrethe Vestager:** I really appreciate the questions and comments of committee members. They are right that our democracy cannot fall victim to digitisation. No matter how much I like digital solutions and work for us to use them where they improve lives and convenience and make our societies more inclusive, they are only a supplement to people coming together and speaking in real life, where we can read body language and see the sparkle in someone's eye. It is still much easier to understand people we disagree with when we see them in real life. It is a different thing to say to someone's face what some people write in online commentary. We should never forget this when raising our children. We must keep reminding ourselves as adults that democracy depends on a civilised way of disagreeing, listening to one another and perhaps finding ways of agreeing. I look forward to being able to meet the com-

mittee in person in the not-too-distant future. Committee members may not all be football fans or football players but perhaps we could go to a hurling match together. Such investment is what is needed to stabilise our democracy. Digital is one thing but humans coming together is the basics.

**Chairman:** The one thing we have learned is that while Zoom is fine and brings us to a certain level, we cannot beat face-to-face conversations in the same room and, as the Commissioner said, seeing the twinkle in people's eyes and reading the body language. We do miss that and we look forward to getting back to that day very soon.

I thank the Commissioner most sincerely for being with us today and for being so generous with her time and information. I know all of the committee members will concur with this thought and sentiment. The Commissioner's contribution today has been very useful in the work the committee is doing on the online safety and media regulation Bill. I thank the Commissioner and wish her well.

**Ms Margrethe Vestager:** I thank the Chair and committee members.

**Chairman:** We will now suspend to allow the secretariat to make arrangements for the next session with representatives from the Music and Entertainment Association of Ireland to discuss the impact of Covid-19 on the music and entertainment sectors.

*Sitting suspended at 4.36 p.m. and resumed at 5.05 p.m.*

### **Impact of Covid-19 on the Entertainment Sector: Music Entertainment Association of Ireland**

**Chairman:** This meeting with representatives from the Music and Entertainment Association of Ireland, MEAI, has been convened to discuss the impact of Covid-19 on the entertainment sector. I welcome Mr. Jackie Conboy, a co-founder of the MEAI, and his colleague, Mr. Matt McGranaghan. They will be joining us remotely via Microsoft Teams. The format of the meeting is that I will invite our witnesses to make their opening statements which will be followed by questions from members of the committee. As our guests are probably aware, the committee may publish their opening statements on its website following the meeting. I am afraid members will have to listen to some housekeeping rules again if that is all right. Our guests opening statements will be limited to three minutes.

I must advise our guests of the following with respect to parliamentary privilege. Witnesses are reminded of the long-standing parliamentary practice that they should not criticise or make charges against any person or entity by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable, or otherwise engage in speech that might be regarded as damaging to the good name of the person or entity. Therefore, if their statements are potentially defamatory in respect of an identifiable person or entity, they will be directed to discontinue their remarks and I ask they comply. As our witnesses are attending remotely from outside of the Leinster House campus, they should note that there are limitations to parliamentary privilege and, as such, they may not benefit from the same level of immunity from legal proceedings as a witness who is physically present does.

I invite Mr. Conboy to make his opening statement on behalf of the MEAI.

**Mr. Jackie Conboy:** The MEAI would like to thank the Chairman, the joint committee and the clerk to the committee for their work and for the invitation to the MEAI to attend today to discuss the impact of Covid-19 on the music and entertainment sector. The MEAI would also like to thank most sincerely the members of this committee and Members of the Oireachtas in general who have raised issues relating to this sector and offered their voice and assistance to the association on numerous occasions.

On 12 March 2020, the music and entertainment industry ground to a sudden halt as a result of Covid-19. As the days passed beyond the initial lockdown, it became apparent that as long as social distancing was a requirement to slow the spread of Covid-19, the industry would be at its mercy. As of today, 23 June 2021, we are now on day 469 of lockdown or of severe restrictions which prevent those in our sector from working. On 27 April 2021, the MEAI made a written submission to this joint committee on the Impact of Covid-19 on the music and entertainment sector. In that submission, we highlighted a number of areas of concern for consideration including social protection, banking issues, business supports from the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, sector-specific supports from the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media and guidelines, consideration and provisions for reopening. Since then, the landscape has changed considerably and issues relating to certain topics in that submission require urgent and swift action. These issues are: the proposed cuts to the pandemic unemployment payment, PUP, from September and the transitioning of recipients on the lowest rate to jobseeker's allowance, thus classifying them as unemployed; the need for social protection measures and sector supports when the sector is in a state of phased reopening and for those supports to continue until the sector can function fully without restrictions or social distancing; the fact that the music and entertainment business assistance scheme, MEBAS, contains criteria to which other Government supports are not subject, namely, minimum business costs and publication of recipients; and the fact that Fáilte Ireland guidelines, which state that no live or loud music or performances are permitted, are preventing the sector from a phased reopening process - we would like to see test gigs conducted in licensed premises and social settings so that guidelines can be created for the safe and responsible return of live entertainment in those settings. We recommend that the VAT rate for our sector be aligned with that relating to the tourism and hospitality sector because this would provide a meaningful stimulus and support for the sector when reopening can take place.

There is a great lack of understanding of and various misconceptions about the nature of the music and entertainment sector and how it works. The Members of the Houses of the Oireachtas we have been fortunate enough to engage with over the past 16 months all have an understanding of the severity of the problems and have empathy and sympathy for the situation, but this compassion and comprehension is not necessarily reflected in the slow roll-out of the supports we have been promised up to now. I thank the committee.

**Chairman:** I appreciate Mr. Conboy's very positive comments. Many members of the committee are directly or indirectly involved in the industry as well, or were in former lives. I believe Mr. McGranaghan is not going to give a presentation but he is there for answers as well, as we have a very short session. I advise members that rather than the speaking slot method we used last time, we are going to use indication. If members are interested in putting questions or comments to our guests, they can indicate via Teams. Deputy Munster has done so, so she may begin.

**Deputy Imelda Munster:** I thank the Chair. I raise the recently announced changes to the PUP and the effects it will have on the sector. It will reclassify people as unemployed, so what

effect will this have on the ability of those the association represents to work or receive supports? Does it also mean people could lose funding under the live performance support scheme, LPSS, should they accept work?

**Mr. Matt McGranaghan:** Our concern is over the proposed cuts to the PUP for September. It would mean those people who are moved to the lowest rate would then be transitioning to jobseeker's allowance. We have raised the issue before of the protection the PUP offers people from the point of view of-----

*(Interruptions).*

**Mr. Matt McGranaghan:** -----and the point of view of insurance as well. To classify a self-employed person as unemployed, our understanding is that person would need to wrap up their business as well.

On the PUP support and where it stands at the moment with the LPSS, we are concerned that because people cannot sign back on to the PUP, there may be this false economy which is being supported by the LPSS and the funding that is given through that. People may only be able to take a certain amount of unemployment out of that because of the limitation of €960 over an eight-week period for their earnings. We understand also, from speaking to the Department of Social Protection, that any expenses during that are only applied to the eight-week period as well. If earnings and expenses were taken over the course of the year, as in a normal business, that would be a more understandable way of looking at it. We are concerned at the moment people may be in a position where, if they get some employment in July or August, they will be forced to sign off the PUP and then they will have no support further on into winter. We would be going into a period of natural closing down of the industry anyway as it is seasonal.

**Chairman:** I apologise to Deputy Munster but I must keep these slots short to get to everybody. I must move on.

**Deputy Imelda Munster:** Okay.

**Chairman:** I call Senator Carrigy. I ask him to be as brief as he can to give everybody a chance to get in. I remind members we only have 20 minutes for this session, so I ask them to keep it to one question, comment or statement so I can give everybody a shot.

**Senator Micheál Carrigy:** I thank the Chair. I welcome our guests. I have one short point related to something brought up by the Minister, Deputy Martin, about the arts industry, that is, the whole thing of a living wage. I think in some other European countries a minimum wage is set for people in this industry. Do our guests feel this is something that should be done across their sector as well? Over the next 12-month period, probably, people are not going to be able to get full time work. This would mean that if there are changes to the PUP, there would be a minimum wage set and the support mechanism would be put in place and we would not have a situation where people would go on jobseeker's allowance.

**Mr. Jackie Conboy:** I thank the Senator. Again, we think it is step in the right direction. If it is across both sides, that is, the commercial and non-commercial sector, we would like to be engaging with that. The only problem is that it is further down the line. There are more immediate problems we have to deal with sooner because we cannot see that coming in before the middle of next year.

**Deputy Ciarán Cannon:** I thank Mr. Conboy and Mr. McGranaghan for their contribu-

tions and for being very effective representatives for the thousands of musicians and technicians who are a critically important part of our cultural output in Ireland. I have one quick observation to make and then a question to follow it. As we recover from the pandemic and begin slowly to reopen our economy, there are sections of the economy where it is exceptionally straightforward to determine they are open, functioning and providing full employment. For example, if hairdressers are open, they are open. Their employees come back and they provide that service. Due to the nature of the music industry, that coming back process is going to be very slow and transitional in nature. As Mr. McGranaghan said earlier, it is also affected by the normal seasonal ebbs and flows of the industry in any event. What do our guests suggest is the best model for continuing to support artists and technicians in the music and entertainment industry, which would allow for the transitional phase to happen in a successful manner so nobody goes over the edge and ceases to be part of the industry and that they are supported and nurtured back to full health, if I can put it that way? I suspect that will not happen until sometime early next summer. That is my assessment of how long this is going to take. For our guests, as representatives of that industry, what is the best model to allow for that support to continue in a very effective way?

**Mr. Matt McGranaghan:** I thank the Deputy. One of the most effective supports we have is the PUP. When we see that being reduced come September, we are very concerned that is going to be a repeat of last year whereby, as other sectors slowly reopened, there were reductions and then, as the larger lockdown happened in October, the rate went back up again. The PUP is a critical life support but it should be enhanced with additional supports. The LPSS is a very good support. We could be critical of certain aspects of it, certainly, and it does not get out all the time to everyone who needs it, so we must look at other ways of ensuring subsidies can be given right across all the different sectors.

One of the greatest supports could be to make guidelines that will allow for work to happen in a safe and responsible manner and not just put this blanket ban on. That could then encourage a lot of workers back to licensed premises, hotels and weddings. That is probably one of the best real-life supports, along with maintaining the PUP.

**Deputy Johnny Mythen:** I have two quick questions. The MEAI representatives said they asked the Minister in August 2020 for a review of the professional artists on jobseeker's allowance scheme. What was the response to this request? They also mentioned the failure to recognise musicians, sound engineers, road crews and so forth as sole traders. Do they see this as a major obstacle to their industry?

**Mr. Matt McGranaghan:** I thank the Deputy Mythen. The professional artists on jobseeker's allowance scheme was through the Department of Social Protection. We have asked if that could be reviewed. We have not received an update on that. As that stands currently, a person must be a member of a recognised body and the only recognised body in Ireland for a musician or an artist is-----

*(Interruptions).*

**Mr. Matt McGranaghan:** You have to be a member of the union before you can sign up for the professional artist jobseeker's payment. We would like the criteria for that payment widened. I am sorry; I have forgotten the Deputy's other point.

**Deputy Johnny Mythen:** I asked about designation as a sole trader.

**Mr. Matt McGranaghan:** We find that the language being used can sometimes be misunderstood by many people in our sector. Without trying to be too negative, the language can sometimes be a little bureaucratic. We find that to be the case with MEBAS. Many musicians do not really classify themselves as sole traders, even though that is what they are. With regard to MEBAS, they do not seem themselves as businesses, even though that is what they are. The language used has deterred people from applying. We heard from the Minister last night that there have been just over 300 applications. We consider that an incredibly low number. In addition to the relatively high threshold of €20,000 in turnover and the issue of minimum business costs, the language used is a factor which deters people in the industry from applying for support.

**Senator Malcolm Byrne:** I thank Mr. McGranaghan and Mr. Conboy not only for their engagement today but also for bringing together a very disparate sector. I have a question in that regard. As they know, part of the difficulty has been that the voice of the music and entertainment sector has not been at the table because it has not really had a representative body. What structure should be in place to ensure engagement with the sector in future? I am also conscious of the question of universal basic income, a matter Senator Carrigy raised. I know this is not happening until next year but the planning will begin next month. That is why it is important the sector is involved, which requires a representative structure to be in place.

My second question has regard to the venues. We are going to hear about venues being reopened from 5 July. What message would the witnesses like to hear with regard to venues being able to safely reopen? Should we look at antigen testing? What about those who are not vaccinated or who refuse to receive a vaccine? Should venues be allowed to prevent such people entering the premises?

**Mr. Jackie Conboy:** I thank the Senator. I will take the second question if Mr. McGranaghan would like to take the first one. With regard to antigen testing, there seems to be opposition among many organisations, venues and festivals because it would add to the cost of tickets. There is also the matter of setting up areas for people to get tested and holding areas for them to wait for their results. If that is the only way forward and if venues can only open up with antigen testing, that is okay. It is quite interesting. Over the long weekend two weeks ago, many people were out drinking, eating and socialising in the streets. It will be interesting to see the results of that. It is almost like an unofficial test because there were so many people out on the streets enjoying the good weather and having food and a bit to drink. It will be interesting to see whether that will result in a spike in cases.

**Mr. Matt McGranaghan:** I will take the first part of the question but I will also add to what Mr. Conboy has said about antigen testing. Venues such as theatres and large concert halls have made their views known. It is really important that guidelines be developed for licensed premises, weddings and pubs that do not require antigen testing and which allow for music and entertainment in a safe and responsible way.

With regard to the representative body, the Senator is quite correct. Those in our industry have paddled their own canoes for a long time. We have been very fragmented. We have never had a unified voice. The Music and Entertainment Association of Ireland is in the process of being officially incorporated. We hope that this will be a positive step forward. There are many different voices in this industry and each one plays a very important role and needs to be heard.

**Chairman:** I thank Mr. McGranaghan and call Deputy Mattie McGrath. If members wish to ask questions, I invite them to indicate. We are coming very close to the end of the session.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** Like the witnesses, I have many friends in the world of music and entertainment and I am constantly being contacted by people wishing to voice their concerns about problems including the lack of support for the sector. I am deeply worried about all of the musicians, sound and lighting people, drivers and so on who work very hard. I have two quick questions. I compliment our guests because, as someone said, they have brought a disparate group together. I see that they faced some opposition. Some did not like having them on their turf. They have done a great job representing people in the industry. I also compliment Senator Murphy for chairing our group. We meet occasionally to try to tease out issues.

I will move on to my dhá questions. Starting with ceist a haon, can the witnesses explain what it is like for the ordinary man or woman facing the loss of his or her pub and the effects this has on him or her? With regard to uimhir a dó, why is it taking so long to get supports out to these people? Our committee takes some responsibility. We were refusing to meet these good people. They are powerful groups that are good at lobbying. I thank our guests. They have started a lobbying organisation to work for their people. They are the ordinary plain people of Ireland who love to entertain and give solace to people.

**Mr. Jackie Conboy:** I thank the Deputy. With regard to what it is like on the ground, there are a lot of very worried people out there. Over the last while, they have had to sell equipment to pay bills because the moratoriums are gone. They have to deal with the banks in respect of mortgages and loans and so are now selling equipment. The fact that there is so much stuff on sale means that even the equipment they are selling is not worth as much as it should be. That is creating its own problems. From July, the rate paid to people who earned less than €200 a week before the pandemic will drop to the level of the jobseeker's payments. There is no protection for them whereas there are certain protections for those on the pandemic unemployment payment. The mental stress out there is unbelievable. The number of phone calls we are dealing with every day is hard to believe. Before Christmas, we were dealing with Lions Clubs and organisations like it to get vouchers out to people so that they could have a Christmas dinner or buy kids presents. That is the reality. Perhaps Mr. McGranaghan would like to take the second question.

**Mr. Matt McGranaghan:** The Deputy asked why it has taken so long for supports to roll out. That is a great question. I hope this committee can help us find the answer to it because a €50 million package was promised in October of last year as part of the budget. It is now 23 June and, so far, €1 million of that €50 million has been spent. We are anxiously waiting. Even though MEBAS and the LPSS are there, that money has not yet reached people.

**Chairman:** I have given everyone an opportunity to speak. There will not be time for a second round but people had at least one opportunity to speak. I thank the witnesses for being here. I also thank Senator Eugene Murphy, who has been a champion for their organisation. He has done Trojan work in the background with the MEAI in the context of its convening its committee and making the presentation to us today.

I am alarmed by the final comment from Mr. McGranaghan concerning the Government's announcement of €50 million in supports and the fact that only €1 million of that funding has reached the artists, musicians and crews involved. Will Mr. McGranaghan expand on that?

**Mr. Matt McGranaghan:** The €1 million was given to the St. Patrick's Festival in March. I do not know the breakdown of that funding, where it has got to or if it has reached the artists and the crews, the people most in need of it, as the Chair said. Regarding MEBAS, we must, in fairness, give credit to the Minister, Deputy Catherine Martin. She has done great work in

advocating for the industry. Could more be done? Yes, it probably could. However, MEBAS is the only non-competitive support afforded to the industry and the Minister fought hard to make that happen. Every other support given to this industry so far is competitive. Looking at business supports such as the CRSS and the small business assistance scheme for Covid, SBASC, those are not competitive schemes. Support is provided once the eligibility criteria are met. Unfortunately, there are criteria involved even in MEBAS which are not present in other Government support schemes such as the SBASC. We have a minimum business cost to produce. Strand 2 of MEBAS, for example, offers grant support of €4,000 on turnover of more than €50,000 and up to €100,000. It is necessary to supply minimum business costs of €5,000 or €6,000 when applying for that strand of MEBAS, but it is not necessary to do that for applications submitted for support from the SBASC.

**Chairman:** It is fair to say that this committee could do some work on that aspect and extrapolate on the basis of the information. As Mr. McGranaghan said, it must be acknowledged that the Minister has done Trojan work to champion the industry. I am sure, however, that she would welcome the opportunity to provide the relevant information to the committee and, ultimately, to the MEAI concerning the plans for the €50 million in non-competitive funding which must be made available to the artists and crews. Mr. McGranaghan was right when he mentioned the timeframe and it having been seven or eight months since that announcement. A great deal of money is still to be disbursed to artists. An announcement was made last week concerning live performance venues that had been successful in their applications to the LPSS, and that was welcome. In my constituency, however, only one venue was successful in that regard. Such a successful application can be a lifeline for the bands, musicians and crews involved, and it is important. That may be another strand of work for this committee to undertake.

With the blessing of the members, I suggest that we write to the Minister regarding Mr. McGranaghan's final point concerning the €50 million in funding which was announced and how it is intended or expected that the remainder of that funding will be disbursed to those most in need of such support. It is really a survival mechanism. As Mr. Conboy stated, bands and musicians are selling equipment, and for far less than it is worth, because there is no timeline in sight yet for the type of reopening which will allow those in the sector to use such equipment to perform again. It is awful to hear those stories, but they are a reality and it is important that we hear them. Is it agreed that the committee will write to the Minister regarding this issue? Agreed. I thank everyone. Once we get that feedback, we will communicate it to the MEAI for some feedback.

The meeting may have felt short, but it was very informative. I thank the witnesses and the members of the committee. Our next session on 30 June will have representatives before the committee from the Arts Council, Theatre Forum Ireland, the Drama League of Ireland, the Amateur Drama Council of Ireland and the Association of Irish Musical Societies to discuss the challenges facing arts venues and theatres as a result of the impact of Covid-19. That will be a very nice follow-up in the context of what we have heard about today. Following that session, we will have a shorter one with restaurateur, Mr. Paul Treyvaud, to discuss the challenges facing the restaurant sector due to the impact of Covid-19.

The joint committee adjourned at 5.35 p.m. until 12.30 p.m. on Wednesday, 30 June 2021.