



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

SEANAD ÉIREANN

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

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SEANAD ÉIREANN

Déardaoin, 26 Samhain 2020

Thursday, 26 November 2020

Chuaigh an Cathaoirleach i gceannas ar 10.30 a.m.

Machnamh agus Paidir.
Reflection and Prayer.

Gnó an tSeanaid - Business of Seanad

An Cathaoirleach: I have received notice from Senator Martin Conway that, on the motion for the Commencement of the House today, he proposes to raise the following matter:

The need for the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage to provide an update on his Department's plans to improve the water and wastewater infrastructure in the villages of Doolin, Broadford, Cooraclare and Carrigaholt in County Clare.

I have also received notice from Senator Pat Casey of the following matter:

The need for the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage to outline when he proposes to make waiver of rates regulations under section 15 of the Local Government Rates and other Matters Act 2019.

I have also received notice from Senator Micheál Carrigy of the following matter:

The need for the Minister for Education to provide an update on a request for funding for additional classroom space in St. Mel's College, Longford.

I have also received notice from Senator Paul Gavan of the following matter:

The need for the Minister for Education to outline the transitional arrangements in place to deal with applications outstanding on the closure of Caranua at the end of this year.

I have also received notice from Senator Malcolm Byrne of the following matter:

The need for the Minister for Transport to provide an update on waiting lists for driving tests.

I have also received notice from Senator Mark Wall of the following matter:

The need for the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage to update the planning guidelines to ensure that Changing Places toilet facilities are available in all public buildings.

I have also received notice from Senator Garret Ahearn of the following matter:

The need for the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage to allocate urban regeneration and development funding for Clonmel, County Tipperary.

I have also received notice from Senator Mary Fitzpatrick of the following matter:

The need for the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage to provide funding for the creation of a national monument museum on Moore Street, Dublin 1, and the regeneration of trading on that street.

I have also received notice from Senator Fintan Warfield of the following matter:

The need for the Minister for Health to make a statement on the reopening of the gay men's health service post Covid-19 restrictions.

I have also received notice from Senator Robbie Gallagher of the following matter:

The need for the Minister for Health to provide an update on the nursing homes support scheme.

I have also received notice from Senator Jerry Buttimer of the following matter:

The need for the Minister for Health to make a statement on the national awareness campaign on HIV-related stigma to coincide with World AIDS Day on 1 December 2020.

I have also received notice from Senator Emer Currie of the following matter:

The need for the Minister for Transport to provide an update on the development of the N3 to N4 link road.

The matters raised by the Senators are suitable for discussion and I have selected those of Senators Conway, Casey, Carrigy and Gavan and they will be taken now. The other Senators may give notice on another day of the matters that they wish to raise.

Teachtaireacht ón Dáil - Message from Dáil

An Cathaoirleach: Dáil Éireann has passed the Withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the European Union (Consequential Provisions) Bill 2020 on 25 November 2020, to which the agreement of Seanad Éireann is desired.

Nithe i dtosach suíonna - Commencement Matters

Water and Sewerage Schemes

Senator Martin Conway: The Minister of State, Deputy Peter Burke, is welcome to the House to deal with this important matter of sewerage schemes in critical villages in County Clare. There are four in particular, namely, Broadford, Cooraclare, Doolin and Carrigaholt. As the Minister of State knows from his many visits to County Clare, it is a big tourism county, which has hundreds of thousands of people coming to visit during peak times of the tourist season.

Doolin has been waiting for decades for an upgraded sewerage system. Hundreds of thousands of people use Doolin to connect to the Aran Islands every year. Many people in Doolin wish to provide infrastructure for the tourism sector. There are people who wish to build accommodation, guest houses, small hotels, boutique hotels and bed and breakfasts. People in the area have been waiting to have the streetscape in Doolin upgraded, with proper public lighting, proper footpaths, improved roadways and so on. The problem is all of this development is deemed to be premature because the existing sewerage system cannot cope with the level of development in place at the moment, not to talk about increased capacity. Doolin has provided the taxpayer and the tourism industry in this country with a unique product and the State has not stepped up to the plate in providing the vital sewerage schemes. Similarly, Carrigaholt is another part of County Clare that has benefited the area, the county and the country with its tourism offering. It also is an area in which many people wish to invest. There would be significant capital investment in the tourism area, were the sewerage scheme up to standard. However, it is not and investment is needed. Cooraclare is just off the Wild Atlantic Way. The village has waited for decades and been promised by umpteen Governments that it will have its upgraded sewerage system in place. It still has not happened. Regarding Broadford in east Clare, there are a number of investors waiting and willing to invest in the village, to improve it, invest in its infrastructure, provide accommodation and small industry and so on. Again, it is all deemed to be premature because the sewerage system that is there is not fit for purpose.

I understand these are considered small schemes in the overall context. The problem is that there is no home to accommodate them. I will suggest what the Minister of State and the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, should do. The Oireachtas Members in Clare had a constructive meeting with the Minister in the Custom House yesterday evening. We explained that a pot of money has to be made available in the Department for small schemes and the local authorities need to prioritise a scheme each, perhaps, because this is not just prevalent in County Clare. I am sure it is an issue in other counties as well. A pot of €30 million or €40 million should be made available by the Department over a five-year period that the local authorities could apply to in order to deal with the legacy sewerage schemes that have to be upgraded. They are not big enough for Irish Water and they are too big to be done at a very localised budgeting level. Therefore, they are in between.

I suggest County Clare and the four schemes I have proposed should be a pilot to see how such a scheme would work nationally. I encourage the Minister of State and the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, to roll this out at national level then because I have no doubt the pilot would be successful.

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke): I thank Senator Conway for raising this issue and providing me with the opportunity to address the matter. Since 1 January 2014, Irish Water has had statutory responsibility for all aspects of public water services planning, delivery and operation at a national, regional and local level. As part of budget 2021, the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage secured funding of over €1.4 billion to support water services. This includes €1.3 billion in respect of domestic water services provisioned by Irish Water.

The overall investment will deliver significant improvement in our public water and wastewater services, support improved water supplies across Ireland, including rural Ireland, and support a range of programmes delivering improved water quality in our rivers, lakes and marine areas. The programme for Government commits to supporting the take-up of Irish Water's small towns and villages growth programme, which is intended to provide water and wastewater growth capacity in smaller settlements, which would not otherwise be provided for in the capital investment programme.

It should be noted that Irish Water is subject to independent economic regulation by the Commission for Regulation of Utilities, CRU, which determines the revenue required by Irish Water to meet its operating and capital costs and ensure it operates in an efficient manner in delivering its services to customers. Therefore, Irish Water brought forward proposals for a small towns and villages growth programme, as part of the capital investment programme for 2020 to 2024, to the CRU for consideration. The programme is intended to support a number of the national policy objectives and national strategic outcomes under the national planning framework. I understand from Irish Water that an allocation of €97.5 million for this programme was approved by the CRU. I also understand that projects that are now commencing design and investment under the programme will deliver change in the coming years.

Irish Water is working with local authorities across the country in ensuring that investment supports the growth of identified settlements where these are prioritised in line with local authority development plans. Irish Water has informed me that Clare County Council has applied for funding under the small towns and villages growth programme in relation to Doonbeg. This application is under review. In addition to the major investment delivered by Irish Water, my Department also funds rural water investment under the multi-annual rural water programme. This programme supports investment in community-based group schemes, as well as providing supports for improvement of wells and septic tanks. The current investment programme is based on recommendations from the working group established in April 2018 to conduct a review of rural water services. The working group has a two-strand approach of consideration. Strand one considered the composition and distribution of funding under the rural water programme while strand two is considering the long-term future resourcing of rural Ireland and water supply generally.

The issue of wastewater infrastructure in villages not serviced by Irish Water is a matter for the working group, which it will consider as part of its work. The Department expects a further report from this group in 2021. I again wish to acknowledge Senator Conway and his interest in rural Ireland and, in particular, rural infrastructure in County Clare. I was not aware of the meeting yesterday with the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, but I will raise it. Obviously, it is important that our towns and villages are given the opportunity to grow. A key component of that is the infrastructure Senator Conway rightly points out is needed in a rural area. I will follow up on that meeting and we will try our best to prioritise it in the new year.

Senator Martin Conway: I sincerely thank the Minister of State, Deputy Burke, for what I consider a positive update. A slice of that funding for Irish Water needs to be pulled back into the Department. A fund should be created in the Department, with each local authority being given the option of applying for one scheme per year under a new programme which would deal with these legacy wastewater and sewage systems.

To be quite frank, I consider Doolin in County Clare to be a national tourist destination. It is visited by hundreds of thousands of people every year. Those visitors and, more importantly, the people living and working in the village of Doolin deserve an upgraded sewerage system.

Cooraclare is a village just off the Wild Atlantic Way. Thousands of people travel through it and people live there. Again, they have waited long enough for a sewerage system and an upgraded wastewater facility. They deserve it.

Similarly, Carrigaholt is part of our tourism offering in County Clare. It is a super facility and area and part of our Gaeltacht. Again, those people deserve an upgraded wastewater and sewerage system.

Broadford village has people who are prepared to invest in and develop it as a thriving rural area. At the moment, it has stagnated. It is static because, again, people are waiting for an improved sewerage and wastewater system.

I believe the Minister of State and the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, should give serious consideration to the fund we spoke about at the meeting with the Minister last night.

Deputy Peter Burke: I thank Senator Conway again for raising this issue and for working on behalf of the residents in Doolin, Broadford, Cooraclare and Carrigaholt. It is important we respond to the challenges because we are clear in this country that private investment will be weak over the next number of months because of the coronavirus. That gives a key opportunity for the State to step in with public investment to ensure it keeps our economy strong. There is no better way to do that than to improve our infrastructure in our local towns and villages to give them the capacity to grow and realise their full potential. I will follow up on that meeting and we will try our best to prioritise this for 2021.

Local Authority Rates

Senator Pat Casey: I welcome the Minister of State back to the House today. One of the greatest challenges for us is how we attract people into public life. When it comes to councillors there are two real components, one of which is their pay and conditions. We have all made our contributions on that. I believe at this stage it has gone above all our pay grades in this House and sits at another level. Hopefully, we will have an answer to that shortly.

The second component involves trying to give councillors power that has a direct and immediate impact on their communities and the people they serve. When the Putting People First action programme was launched, I believed I saw change from a point of view of progression in restoring democracy at local level, specifically around the local property tax, LPT, process. We can now argue that because of the baselines and the equalisation fund, the LPT actually takes that flexibility away from councillors. Realistically, they are left with a small part of the budgetary process to allocate from a discretionary point of view.

I was a Member of the House and part of the process that brought through the Local Government Rates and other Matters Act 2019. We finished that process and it had unanimous support across all parties in the House. It dealt with the antiquated commercial rates process. It is still antiquated, but the 2019 Act tried to tidy it up. The part that received unanimous support and we all looked forward to was giving councillors the power to introduce a rates waiver scheme. The question today is about why that has not been enacted.

A year and a half has gone by since this Bill was passed. We all know our county development plan process. Most of our counties are reviewing or amending their county development plan process at this stage. The conditions in the Act were that if a council was going to introduce a rates waiver scheme, it had to be part of the county plan, local area plan or national planning framework. The other condition related to the local economic and community plan, which is a rolling document and can be changed at any time. Now is the appropriate time to enact this legislation because every councillor is now going through that process.

Covid-19 has resulted in a further decline of our towns and villages. We are trying to restore life to our main streets. The measure I have mentioned gives councils the opportunity and gives them back the power to which I believe they are entitled. It can make a difference to the people and the communities they represent. I know each scheme must be finally approved by the Minister, but that initial process needs to start now. We need to enact this good legislation, which restores powers to the councils and gives them the opportunity to incentivise business in their towns and villages.

I wrote to the Minister of State on this directly. I believe he also received a letter from a film studio in County Wicklow which put its case forward. It would have been receiving a benefit with regard to the levy scheme. It is, therefore, about restoring powers. When does the Minister of State see section 15 of the Act being enacted by the Minister to give the councillors the power to introduce a commercial rates waiver scheme?

Deputy Peter Burke: The Local Government Rates and other Matters Act 2019 was passed by the Oireachtas and enacted on 11 July 2019. Key elements of the Act include a modernisation of rates legislation and practice including variation of rates payment arrangements, the *pro rata* levying of rates on occupiers based on period in occupation within a year, the application of interest payments on unpaid rates, minimum charges for vacant commercial premises, a potential rates waiver scheme and amendment to the rate limitation order formula in place in the year following re-evaluation.

These new provisions will add to a suite of options already available to local authorities to support local businesses and ratepayers. Importantly, section 15 of the Act also provides for a rates waiver scheme to be delivered by a local authority to meet national and local policy objectives, including, for example, local area plans under the Planning and Development Act 2000 and local economic and community plans under the Local Government Act 2001.

Currently, only the sections of the Act relating to the amendment of the rate limitation order have been commenced. The commencement of the remaining elements of the Act depends on a number of factors, including the drafting of the requisite prescribed regulations, preparing circulars and guidance to local authorities and ensuring the local government sector will be in a position to have the IT and administrative processes in place to support this new provision fully. It is intended that the bulk of the provisions will be fully operational for the 2021 local authority budget cycle in November 2020. However, based on preparations, they have been delayed by

several months due to the impact of Covid-19 and the associated crisis.

The impact of the Covid-19 crisis on local authorities and businesses in 2020 has been significant. The Government has provided a €900 million financial support package to fund the cost of a nine-month waiver of commercial rates, an unprecedented measure that offers support to businesses and certainty to local authorities.

My Department has necessarily prioritised ongoing engagement with local authorities on key financial matters and the development and implementation of a commercial rates waiver.

Plans to commence the legislation and introduce the regulations are intended to have effect in time for the 2022 local authority budgetary process. As elected members of local authorities are currently reviewing development plans, they are giving consideration to their own local authorities' objectives for particular areas for intended development, improving existing amenities. It is intended that section 15 of the Local Government Rates and other Matters Act 2019 will be effective for the next local authority budgetary cycle, which will enable elected members to reflect and support decisions they have made regarding development plans at this time in rate alleviation schemes.

11 o'clock

Senator Pat Casey: I thank the Minister of State for the clarification. It is good news that the waiver will be available for the 2022 budgetary process. Nevertheless, on top of what he outlined, there needs to be education for councillors as to what they can and cannot do in respect of the process. The ones I have spoken to were not fully aware of section 15 and the power it gives them. Even if that process could be rolled out with each local authority to advise members what they are entitled to do in the county development plan process, that would be welcome. As we all know, it will take a while to get through the county development plan, and it is hoped the direct impact of this, as the Minister of State noted, will be available to the budgetary process in 2022. The Department might engage with local authority members and give them clear directions on what their powers are in this process, informing them that they should be able to avail of this waiver in the 2022 budgetary process, which is a year from today.

Deputy Peter Burke: I met the president of the Association of Irish Local Government, AILG, and his team yesterday and committed to holding quarterly meetings with them. Part of this relates to the engagement with councillors to provide core support to them in order that they will be aware of all the issues they can respond to in the chamber, which are very extensive at this time. The Office of the Planning Regulator provides courses for planning matters. One is taking place this week and there is ongoing engagement with councillors on that matter. I look forward to supporting the AILG. We can raise this issue with it and see what support we can provide it to outline to councillors the powers of the Act and their capacity to incentivise change or create waivers that will underwrite the county development plans they are currently producing.

School Accommodation

Senator Micheál Carrigy: I welcome the Minister of State. I raise the issue of an application for additional school accommodation by St. Mel's College, Longford, a school I attended a number of years ago. The college opened in September 1865, with 48 boarders and 28 day boys. For most of the next decade, the college was a major seminary, where students pursued philosophy and theology through to ordination. More than 650 former students of the college

were ordained to the priesthood between 1865 and 2000. In 1965, the centenary of the college's foundation was marked with the building of a new wing to provide accommodation for 100 boarders, as well as a new refectory. Prefabricated buildings were also built to cope with the increase in numbers.

In 1996, there were 740 students and 42 teachers, while in 2002, the last boarding students departed, ending a tradition that began in 1865. In 2010, St. Mel's College welcomed the parishioners of Longford following the fire on Christmas Day 2009 in St. Mel's Cathedral, and for five years the school hosted mass for the parishioners in Longford. St. Mel's also has a great history of sporting achievement, and by the year 1994 had won a total of 28 Leinster GAA titles. The school is on a fantastic site and is lucky to have football fields, which are used by the school and are open to other groups, such as underage county hurling, and recently signed an agreement with Longford Athletics Club to provide an indoors athletics facility for the county.

The school has applied to the Department for additional school accommodation. Grant aid is sought to remove nine prefabricated classrooms and to replace them with nine classrooms in the existing building, the 1865 wing, which has a number of classrooms. If funding is received, these classrooms will include a large technical graphics room, a guidance suite, a computer room and a music room. St. Mel's wants to move these classes into the 1865 building, as this would bring the school back to its original home and save having to build a new building to replace the prefabricated buildings, which are now in a state of decline. A recent architect's report on the prefabricated buildings commented that the college continues to maintain the demountable buildings and keep them decorated but that they are in poor condition. It went on to say there were poor insulation values, that the buildings were not up to current fire safety standards, and that the rooms are appropriate for temporary, not permanent, accommodation use.

The college was built as an educational environment for boys after the Famine and the vision at the time was to provide education for boys in the surrounding areas. This vision has not changed and the school would like to bring the 1865 building back to use by using it to house a total of 15 classrooms, where the boys will once again walk the corridors and receive their second level education. This building provides excellent additional space on the first and second floors to provide these additional classrooms, which the school feels will satisfy the growing numbers in the school over the coming years and into the future. At present, there are a total of 560 pupils, with a projected enrolment in 2021 of 580. A large number of pupils from Longford town have to travel in excess of ten miles outside the town area to receive secondary education due to the low number of places available in the town. Longford County Council is replacing with railings a 7 ft high wall on St. Mel's Road to open up the views of this historic building. I hope the Department can follow suit by providing funding to bring this old building back to life and to have students walk its corridors again.

Minister of State at the Department of Education (Deputy Josepha Madigan): I thank the Senator for bringing this matter to my attention. It provides me with the opportunity to clarify the current position for St. Mel's College, Longford, in respect of the additional classroom space. I am sure the school is delighted to have the Senator as an alumnus representing them in the House.

St. Mel's College is a Catholic all-boys primary school under the patronage of the Bishop of Ardagh and Clonmacnoise. In September 2019, the school had an enrolment of 548 pupils, and enrolments have grown in the college by more than 18% in the past five years. In June 2020, the Department received an application from the school authority of St. Mel's College for

capital funding under the additional school accommodation scheme. The college has applied, as the Senator noted, for the replacement of nine prefabricated mainstream class units on site and for the refurbishment of a building dating from 1865 to provide specialist classroom space for a technical graphics room, a guidance suite, a computer room, a music room and a science laboratory.

Officials from the Department have been liaising with the school authority, seeking clarification on a number of issues that have now been agreed on. The planning and building unit within the Department deals with those clarifications. Before the assessment process can be finalised, members of the Department's technical team will have to consider whether the 1865 building is a viable option for reconfiguration. I can confirm that this assessment will be carried out as quickly as possible and the school authority will be kept informed of all developments. I note what the Senator said about the architect's report and the fact it found there were poor conditions and insulation and fire safety concerns, and that the prefabricated buildings are designed for temporary, as distinct from permanent, accommodation. I am sure that is something the Department will take into account.

Under Project Ireland 2040, the schools sector will receive a total of €8.8 billion over the period 2018 to 2027 and capital planning and budgeting is undertaken multi-annually. For the Senator's information, the key drivers of capital investment in the school sector are demographic change, alignment with housing provision and national planning at school planning area level, construction costs, catch-up to address a legacy of underinvestment, and climate action objectives, including deep energy retrofit. In addition, there are also three additional cost drivers which occurred after the original NDP capital allocation for pre-2018, namely, the school remediation programme, Covid-19 and the programme for Government.

Suffice to say, if the assessment is favourable, the school would be able to proceed to planning. We hope that will happen. The specific allocations in each area under the NDP capital allocation are closely monitored and can be adjusted from year to year to take account of project progress and other the factors.

The Department proactively manages all of its capital allocation across subheads and budget lines to advance its school building and other capital investment priorities. It is within these parameters that a building project for St. Mel's College in Longford will be progressed. The Department always has a large pipeline of projects for delivery under the school building programme. I hope the application for St. Mel's College will be successful and will be able to proceed to the planning stage.

Senator Micheál Carrigy: I am delighted that the project will be moved to an assessment stage, which I believe will be successful. The school engaged a professional architect to assess the possibilities for the project. The report which stated that it was viable to bring the building back into use was submitted to the Department.

We discussed costs for education. This project would provide value for money and would bring a large building within the confines of the town within walking distance of students back into use rather than incurring the substantial costs of providing a new building. The building is available. I am confident that the assessment will be positive and I am delighted that the project is moving forward. I look forward to it being successful.

Deputy Josepha Madigan: I thank the Senator. I wish to reiterate that the concerns the

architect raised in his report will be taken into consideration by the building and planning unit. The distance that pupils have to travel to go to school will also be taken into account. What will primarily be taken into account is the fact that it is a building dating from 1865 and whether it is a viable option for reconfiguration in the first instance. I have been told by the Department that the assessment will proceed as soon as possible. It is to be hoped that we will be in a favourable position to come back to the Senator.

I thank St. Mel's College for co-operating with the Department in terms of outlining any issues that need to be agreed. They have been agreed, which is good. That has been satisfactory in terms of concluding that aspect of the process. Once the assessment has been completed we will then be in a position to see whether the project can proceed to planning, and I hope that it will.

Residential Institutions Redress Scheme

Senator Paul Gavan: I thank the Minister of State for coming to the House. For decades this country placed children behind bars, the vast majority for reasons of poverty and class. Fr. Flanagan of the boy's town schools in the United States visited the Irish industrial schools in 1946 and described them as a national disgrace. That led to a public debate in the Dáil and national media exposure. Their abolition was decades away and exposing the true horror of what went on within the walls was even further away.

As the Minister of State knows, Caranua was established to aid those who survived institutional abuse in Ireland. This month, its CEO stated that in the next few months it would finalise its operations while preparing to close on Thursday, 3 December of this year. The final funding support payments will be processed by 11 December, which is just two weeks away.

I have been contacted by representatives of some of the clients of Caranua. As I said, it is ceasing funding and winding down. However, it will not have completed its caseload by the time the fund is closed. I understand there are 86 outstanding cases, and I will briefly outline two such outstanding cases, the details of which have already been forwarded to the Department of Education.

In the first case, an applicant to Caranua applied for housing assistance in 2014. The application was supported by occupational therapists employed by Caranua. Three separate reports recommended that Caranua should pay for an extension to provide the applicant with a downstairs bathroom and bedroom. He cannot access the upstairs part of his home unassisted and is forced to urinate in his backyard and sleep in a chair. In February 2020, Caranua finally agreed to provide the person with funding for the extension. However, that funding has still not been provided.

A second person applied for help with improvements and repairs to her home. Caranua appointed its preferred supplier, but the work was carried out to a very poor standard. Other applications the person made were not dealt with at all. It was only after the last meeting of the Committee of Public Accounts, when this issue was raised with Caranua, that the case began to be resolved. Immediately after that meeting, Caranua contacted the person and apologised. That process is ongoing but is still a long way from being completed.

I have some questions for the Minister of State. What will happen to the outstanding ap-

plications following the closure of Caranua? While it said it believes all applications will be resolved by 11 December 2020, what contingencies have the Department put in place in the event that there are any outstanding applications? I believe that will very much be the case. On 4 November, it confirmed that there were 86 extending applications. There were also seven outstanding appeals.

Caranua intends to delete all the case files when it closes. What consultation was undertaken with survivors before this decision was taken? Once it closes, what supports will be available to survivors of historical institutional child abuse, many of whom have not received any financial assistance? Will the Government respond to the call for urgent measures to address the needs identified by the survivor consultation group which reported in July 2019?

Deputy Josepha Madigan: I thank the Senator for raising this important issue. He will be aware that the residential institutions statutory fund board, also known as Caranua, was established in 2013. Its specific purpose was to disburse the cash contributions of €110 million pledged by religious congregations following the publication of the report of the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse, more commonly referred to as the Ryan report.

The contributions received from the congregations were held in an investment account managed by the National Treasury Management Agency, NTMA, and, including interest, the total funding available to Caranua was €101.38 million. Since its establishment, it has provided grants and funding supports to more than 6,000 survivors of institutional abuse, and for the most part those payments have related to health and housing. It has also provided support to survivors for education, training and exceptional needs.

The 2012 Act provides that all expenditure by Caranua must be met by the statutory fund, including grants and administrative expenditure, and does not provide for the Exchequer to supplement that fund in any way. Therefore, in anticipation of the exhaustion of the statutory fund, Caranua announced in 2018 that it would not accept new applications after 1 August 2018 unless there were exceptional circumstances. I understand it undertook an extensive publicity campaign to ensure that survivors were aware of this date, targeted in particular at survivors who had not previously benefited from the fund.

Caranua has since that time dealt mainly with applications on hand. To progress applications, it is dependent to a large extent on the receipt of paperwork such as quotes or invoices from survivors. Its application adviser team has worked to establish personalised timelines for applicants to ensure that their applications can be progressed, although the Covid-19 pandemic has, for obvious reasons, had an impact.

At this time, Caranua has only a small number of applications remaining to be finalised and has reduced its staffing component during the wind-down phase. It expects to have made any final payments by 11 December, as the Senator mentioned, and most of the remaining staff will leave the organisation on 31 December. For that reason, it is not expected that any applications will remain open when it is formally dissolved. Therefore, it is not expected that any transitional arrangements will be required. It expects to have utilised all of its available funding at the time of dissolution, so there are unlikely to be any significant cash assets remaining. Non-cash assets are unlikely to have a significant value. Its fixed assets had a book value of about €74,000 as of 31 December 2018.

Survivors have expressed concerns to the Minister, Deputy Foley, about how their needs

into the future are going to be met, and the Senator mentioned some of those. I believe it is the intention of the Minister, Deputy Foley, to bring to Government proposals for a package of ongoing supports for survivors and for those supports to be in place when Caranua is dissolved. My understanding is that, primarily, most of the moneys have been spent on health and social services and educational services. Caranua is prohibited from spending money on rent and mortgages but it can spend money on white goods, and dental and ophthalmic costs have also been prevalent. I understand that, from 2 August 2018 until September 2020, there were some 342 late applications which came into that cohort under the exceptional circumstances bracket.

Senator Paul Gavan: I thank the Minister of State for the response. I am somewhat concerned. I have had prior dealings with Caranua through the education committee in the last Parliament. I am aware its dealings were far from satisfactory on a number of occasions. I would be concerned at the Minister of State's reference to "a small number" of cases because I certainly do not think 86 is a small number of cases, and that was the position just over two weeks ago when the statement from Caranua confirmed it was 86 cases. I would be almost certain there will be cases outstanding. I would like a reassurance from the Minister of State that transitional arrangements will be in place to ensure that, in any outstanding cases, there will be funding and solutions for those people. As I have had to describe, unfortunately, right now, one man is having to urinate in his backyard and to sleep in a chair. That is not untypical of the type of cases we are talking about. Let me remind the Minister of State that these are people who have been victimised several times over by the State already. We cannot fail them again.

Deputy Josepha Madigan: I completely agree with the Senator's sentiment in that regard. Obviously, due to the particular impact of residential abuse on survivors, the Department is extremely mindful of that. Caranua was set up and designed to pay out, not that any money can ever compensate for what people have suffered and endured in this type of abuse or, indeed, any abuse. Having said that, moneys are available and late applications will be possible and have been possible since 1 August 2018. The Department told me that 342 late applications have come in since August 2018 and if there are transitional arrangements to be made, they will be made. My understanding is they will not be required at this moment in time. Obviously, it is always open to existing or new applicants to look for funding.

Sitting suspended 11.23 a.m. and resumed at 11.30 a.m.

An tOrd Gnó - Order of Business

Senator Lisa Chambers: The Order of Business is No. 1, motion regarding the arrangements for the sitting of the House on Monday, 30 November, Tuesday, 1 December, Wednesday, 2 December and Thursday, 3 December 2020, to be taken on conclusion of the Order of Business, without debate; No. 3, Health Insurance (Amendment) Bill 2020 - Committee and Remaining Stages, to be taken at 1 p.m.; No. 2, statements on reopening Ireland, Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, to be taken on conclusion of No. 3 and to conclude after two hours, with the time allocated to all Senators not to exceed six minutes, and the Minister to be given not less than six minutes to reply to the debate; No. 4, statements on the reopening of Ireland, Department of Health, to be taken 15 minutes after the conclusion of No. 2 and to conclude after two hours, with the time allocated to all Senators not to exceed six minutes, and the Minister to be given not less than six minutes to reply to the debate.

Senator Seán Kyne: I acknowledge the difficult decisions the Government will face with regard to reopening Ireland. It involves balancing the protection of jobs, the protection of businesses and the all important protection of our health.

Tomorrow is Black Friday, which is not particularly a term that I like but it is a term that seems to have crept in over recent years from the other side of the Atlantic. It is a reminder of the changing consumer behaviours and habits which will be even more apparent this year. Irish consumers spend more than €5 billion online each year. Of that sum, €2 out of every €3 goes abroad, which is a colossal loss of potential as well as money. The impact of this on the local multiplier effect is devastating. The local multiplier effect is a hugely positive economic fact, whereby every €1 spent locally generates up to €5 in the local economy. Every newspaper purchased, every cup of tea or coffee consumed, every appointment made or haircut received from the hairdressers or barbers, every prescription filled and every grocery item purchased in local shops, from sole traders to supermarkets, makes a difference of enormous proportions.

It is an understatement to say that the retail and hospitality sectors are in crisis. It is an unprecedented crisis and it is one which has direct implications and consequences for our communities and for city, town and village centres. I have seen the impact in Galway and in Dublin. I have seen it in Galway because it is my home county and I have seen it in Dublin because it is where this Oireachtas is located. Local businesses, from retailers to restaurants, that were institutions in their own right and that were central to communities, are gone. Retail unit after retail unit has been emptied and cleared out and it is a saddening sight.

It is important to acknowledge the actions that have been taken. The enhancement and expansion of the trading online voucher scheme is welcome. That scheme has been instrumental in supporting Irish local businesses to trade online. The introduction, too, of the online retail scheme and the restart grants have been welcome. However, I have grave concerns for local communities and for our town and village centres. Some of the local businesses that were previously successful and so central to daily life will not be reopening. These losses are not just financial or commercial but they are losses suffered by communities. There will be knock-on consequences, from job losses and lost revenue to lost opportunities.

We need to step up our efforts. We need a whole-of-government approach because it involves not only the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment but also the Department of Social Protection, the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications and the Department of Rural and Community Development. We have made progress in the recent past in terms of regenerating and revitalising communities. The Department of Rural and Community Development and its schemes and programmes, some of which I was delighted to be able to contribute to, show the progress and the difference we can make.

I also acknowledge the importance of the cash injection of the Christmas bonus to those in receipt of social welfare payments, including those in receipt of the pandemic unemployment payment for 17 weeks up to 3 December. The payment to those qualifying under the pandemic unemployment payment will be made on 8 December. This is a very important cash injection for all in receipt of the Christmas bonus. I encourage everybody to buy Irish, buy local and protect jobs, businesses and our future.

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: I would like to complement Senator Kyne on what he has just said. He is a typical rural politician, he understands what is going on in his local area and as a fellow Galwegian, I congratulate him for bringing that forward. We need to support local

industry.

Speaking of supports, there is an issue I often discuss in this House, which some Members think is purely political but it is not. It comes from my trade union background. That issue is the way we treat our local representatives and our county councillors, in particular. Since the pandemic has struck, many local representatives have found their small businesses closed and unable to trade. When it comes to welfare payments and the like, their representational allowance is taken into account. The time has come for us to face up to the issue of this representational allowance. Although we talk about county councillors' pay, they are not paid in the true sense of the word. There is no master-servant relationship. They cannot be fired; they are elected. The miserable moneys they get are to carry out the duties we ask them to do.

In 2015 when I spoke to a councillors' convention in Inchydoney Island, I was told that all of that is dealt with in the corridors and is not talked about publicly and that in any event, it was all going to be fixed straight away. The document was on the Minister's desk in 2015, it has not been signed yet and will not be signed.

More importantly, and this does not just refer to councillors because we hear of young barristers in the Law Library also being refused payments. It is just wrong in every sense of the word. The money that is given to these county councillors is to assist them to do the job they are elected to do. It is not a salary and if it is we should be ashamed of it. The bottom line is that we need to look at the welfare of these councillors.

I could bring Members to councillors, the Deputy Leader could do so herself, who drive hundreds of miles every month assisting families, filling out forms and working through various parts of the bureaucracy of this country and all they have to fund that is their representational allowance. We have allowances here which are not regarded as part of our salary but are there to support us in the work that we do. I am not one bit ashamed of supporting the need for county councillors to have money to do the job they are elected to do. If we want to pay them a salary, let us pay them a proper salary and stop all of the nonsense. I was deeply distressed last night at the number of county councillors who contacted me about the dire straits in which they are living. If other people are entitled to welfare because their businesses are closed, so too are local representatives.

Senator Rebecca Moynihan: First, I congratulate the Scottish Parliament for what it did the other day. It is the first country to legalise free period products in the world and Labour MSP, Monica Lennon, guided this measure through the Scottish Parliament. It is being rolled out in a number of places, including through local authorities and by looking to provide them in public buildings. In the last term of the Dáil, the women's caucus had a motion on the issue of period poverty or period justice and I seek a discussion on this issue in this House. If possible, Members would try to reach a cross-party consensus on how to deal with this issue and to avoid being subject to a money message if I consider drafting a Private Members' Bill along similar lines to what has happened in Scotland.

It is a very important issue particularly for younger women who have difficulty in affording the type of sanitary products and protections they need, together with the impact that has on their education and, in particular, people who have issues like endometriosis and who may have heavier bleeds. Access to what is a basic hygiene product is a discussion we need to have. It should be considered a basic hygiene product. I compliment the Government on reducing reusable products to a VAT rate of 0% in the budget but we need to have a wider discussion on

this issue. It is to be hoped that we would follow Scotland's lead in being a world leader in this regard. When I was on Dublin City Council, I brought forward a motion that all public buildings within the council's control would provide free sanitary products. The sum of €100,000 was secured in last year's budget and has been incorporated into this year's budget for this, and a pilot project was rolled out. I have been disappointed with the rate of progress and it has certainly taken time but in the buildings within which it has been rolled out, it is not abused or seen as being a big deal. It has, however, provided significant comfort to people who need access to sanitary products, for example, in the leisure centres. Any council employees to whom I have spoken in buildings in which it has been operational have said it has worked very well.

Finally, it is worth having a discussion in this House on the cost of citizenship. I compliment my colleague Senator Ivana Bacik on the Bill on citizenship she is bringing forward in terms of the principle, "born here, belong here". There is a growing issue for EU citizens as to the high cost of citizenship. If one is an EU citizen or non-EU citizen and wants to apply for citizenship, one has to pay an application fee of €175. It then costs €950 if one is granted citizenship. This compares to somewhere like France, which has an application fee of €55 and Spain which has an application fee of €102. The cost of citizenship is a prohibitor for the many people who have been living here for a long time and who would be able to get citizenship but who will not apply for it because of the simply prohibitive costs we have imposed for no good reason.

Senator Paul Gavan: I wish to begin, a Chathaoirleach, by paying tribute to Diego Maradona, who passed away yesterday. For my generation, he was without doubt the greatest footballer we have ever seen. There was so much to the man. He was not just a wonderful footballer who scored the best goal ever seen in football against England in 1986. This was not because it was against England but because of the breathtaking skill that was involved. Who can forget Jimmy Magee's amazing commentary, "Different class." The so-called hand of God was the first goal but the second goal was absolutely incredible. He led Argentina to the World Cup that year but what he did with Napoli was completely incredible. This club won two league championships, which for one of the poorest clubs in Italy was against all the odds. He is also a legend there. I was very struck by what Messi said, which is that while he is gone, he will never be gone because he is eternal in terms of his contribution to world football.

He had his challenges in life, particularly in terms of addiction and it was significant that he went to Cuba. Cuba came to his rescue and he lived there for four years to help him with a serious heart condition. He said at the time that Fidel opened Cuba's doors to him when clinics in Argentina were slamming them shut because they did not want the death of Maradona on their hands. He wore his politics proudly and had a tattoo of Che Guevara on his right hand and a tattoo of Fidel on his left leg. We have lost a huge legend.

Coincidentally, he died yesterday on 25 November and four years ago on the same date, the great man Fidel Castro passed away.

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: And George Best.

Senator Paul Gavan: And George Best, absolutely.

The second issue I raise is altogether different. A very serious report by the Tax Justice Network, which has not received much attention since it was published last week, has shown that Ireland is one of the biggest tax havens in the world, costing other countries, including some of

the poorest countries in the world, almost \$16 billion, that is, €13.5 billion in lost revenues each year. The only countries ranked worse than Ireland in the overall rankings were the Cayman Islands, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, the United States, Hong Kong, China and the British Virgin Islands. In corporate tax evasion alone Ireland was ranked as the 11th worst in the world and the fifth worst in Europe. It scored a haven score of 76 out of 100, with 100 being the worst. This was the first study to thoroughly measure how much every country loses to both corporate tax abuse and private tax evasion.

Interestingly, the report also showed that this country suffers a loss of €14.5 billion each year due to global tax abuse. Just €199 million of that is attributed to corporations, the rest is to private individuals. That would account for a loss of over \$3,000 for every member of the population. We need an honest conversation about tax and tax justice and we need to be internationalists when it comes to tax justice and I ask for a debate on that topic.

Senator Frances Black: I wish to highlight today the Government's White Paper on ending direct provision, which is scheduled to be published before the end of 2020. It is essential that we put pressure on the legislators to use the key recommendations of the groundbreaking report by Catherine Day. We must see an end to direct provision, an end to institutionalised living and an end to congregated settlements. While the Government is committed to ending direct provision, the new recommendations are not legally binding and thus the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, which now leads the direct provision portfolio, is not required to include all of the suggested measures in its White Paper. Having had discussions with Nasc last week, it expressed anxiety at the thought of the White Paper excluding the key recommendations proposed by the Catherine Day report. Ms Fiona Finn, the CEO of Nasc, says the significance of this report cannot be understated. The main area of concern, from Nasc's point of view, is housing, dealt with in chapter 4 of the Day report. We must ensure the Day report is the main point of reference in drafting this White Paper. Ireland will continue to receive asylum seekers so it is essential we fashion a housing policy that is fit for purpose.

The Day report proposes that first-instance decisions on asylum applications be made within six months, as required under the European Commission's recast reception conditions directive, to which we have been subscribed since July 2018. The report also specifies that asylum seekers will spend up to three months in a State-owned reception centre where they will undergo a vulnerability assessment, receive legal advice and begin their application for international protection. Importantly, the report stipulates that people should not be housed in remote areas but in towns and cities where they have access to employment and educational opportunities. It also provides that the number of people housed in each area should be proportionate to the size of the town or city. The report is nothing short of groundbreaking. While some advocacy groups have commented that it is non-exhaustive, it is the most widely praised report by NGOs and advocacy groups in this area and must be the main point of reference for the White Paper.

Finally, I take this opportunity to remember Jeffrey, a resident in the asylum centre in Killarney, County Kerry, who had a history of poor mental health but no access to the help he desperately needed. I want to take a moment to send my respects to his family and friends. Jeffrey was one of a number of asylum seekers who had been protesting poor living conditions. We cannot allow this type of atrocity to occur again. As people in positions of privilege, we cannot simply stand by while human beings suffer in squalor under the State's watchful eye. It is absolutely urgent that we do something about this.

Senator Timmy Dooley: Earlier this week, the Government announced over €100 mil-

lion in funding for bog rehabilitation in the midlands under the just transition programme. The programme is aimed at addressing the very significant economic impact of the decision of the State to move away from the burning of peat as our contribution towards the reduction in carbon emissions. The decision to invest €100 million in the midlands is a good one. It is the right decision for the environment and for economic activity in the region. It is about ensuring the citizens of that area are not negatively impacted by the rest of us wanting to do right by the environment.

However, just transition is not just about the midlands. The west of County Clare, in fact a vast part of it, is badly affected by the reduction in emissions from the burning of coal at Monypoint. Unfortunately, neither this Government nor the previous one has seen fit to include that area in the just transition funding. Employment has tumbled at Monypoint in the last two years. There has been a gradual reduction in the number of contractors and ESB staff there. The plant is due to close in 2025 and successive Governments have said they will deal with it then, but the crisis in that area is happening now. Staff have lost their jobs. Some people have moved to work elsewhere and others have not succeeded in gaining employment. All the while, this is undermining small businesses, small shops, schools, post offices and general business in the area. The area is being hollowed out just as the bogs were cut away. What we need is an equality of approach to addressing climate change and to the spending of the just transition funding. The funding needs to be invested in County Clare, in my humble opinion.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: I join Senator Gavan in paying tribute to the late Diego Maradona. I am of the generation that admired his skills and we extend our deepest sympathies.

I concur wholeheartedly with Senator Craughwell's point that there is a cohort of local authority members who are being, to borrow Senator Dooley's phrase, hollowed out by Covid-19. There is an obligation on us, a Cathaoirligh. Perhaps this is something you could lead us on as Cathaoirleach of the House. Given that we are predominantly elected by the councils, maybe you could make representations to the Government on behalf of those men and women who are being really hollowed out by Covid-19 in their personal workspace.

I ask the Deputy Leader to hold a debate in the House on the role of An Garda Síochána, Revenue and the DPP in the light of the "RTÉ Investigates" programme last night. At a time when RTÉ is getting criticised, we should pay tribute to it if the facts are as presented last night in the "RTÉ Investigates" programme on Patrick Russell. If the programme material is correct, there are serious questions that must be asked around the role of the Garda, Revenue and the DPP. I know they are not here to defend themselves. I am talking about if the information is correct because we have only got one side. It is not good enough that people have been defrauded and have been robbed. This person is in jail, a Cathaoirligh, so he has been proven to be guilty.

An Cathaoirleach: I understand that.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: I am being very careful. I am mindful that I am not going to have a row with you now. I am being very careful.

An Cathaoirleach: You know the procedure.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: I understand. I am being very careful in what I am saying. However, millions of euro were stolen by a person who is in jail today. The point I wish to make about the DPP, the Garda and Revenue is that if the information is correct, and we have only

one side-----

An Cathaoirleach: For the benefit of the House, there is a Standing Order in relation to the issue of things being before the courts. I know what you are talking about in relation to cases that have been prosecuted but I do not want this House to be impacting on any future cases.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: I hope you understand, a Chathaoirligh, by my term and my demeanour that I am not trying to bring the House into disrepute in any shape or form.

An Cathaoirleach: I know that.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: I will conclude by saying there is a real need for the DPP, Revenue and the Garda to explain and not to hide behind saying they do not comment on individual cases. How can a person, for 20 years plus, go unchecked by the organs of the State? I am only an ordinary person, but I can imagine how those people feel and the impact it has had on their lives.

Senator Eugene Murphy: I want to raise an issue that was highlighted on “Prime Time” this week. Indeed, it was highlighted in the Dáil by my colleague, Deputy Cahill, and others. I refer to the lack of service being given by Eir to many people in both urban and rural areas. While it is bad enough not to get one’s Internet connection or whatever, there is a far more serious side to this. Many of our elderly population rely on their landline for the security link they have to their house. Many people in my part of the country, counties Roscommon and Galway, and in other parts of the country are waiting months for a simple fault to be repaired. I have seen this happen with my own mother. She had patience about it, and we made representations time and again, but it did not happen for months. This also happened to a lot of other people. The chief executive of Eir, Ms Carolan Lennon, was before an Oireachtas committee yesterday. I know this matter has been discussed in the Dáil. I am wonder if we can send a strong letter representing every Senator in this Chamber. I am afraid that after all the coverage this week, the matter will go away and many vulnerable urban and rural dwellers in our society will still not get their faults dealt with speedily. This is very urgent because the security link that old people have is vital. Maybe we could get agreement all round on that. I do not think we can invite this lady in here but if we cannot we should send a very strong letter on behalf of all Senators asking Eir to deal with these matters as quickly as possible.

Senator Emer Currie: I would like to raise a matter that Senator Kyne has already touched on. Tomorrow is the day traditionally known as Black Friday, which has grown in popularity in Ireland over the last decade or so. It is the day we look for our bargains and deals, especially in the run-up to Christmas. I am asking all Senators to help to turn Black Friday into green Friday. There is an existing campaign, Champion Green, which has assets on its website that we, as public representatives, can use to send to community groups, put online, and get the message out that we want to turn Black Friday into green Friday.

We all know the pressures that our local businesses are facing because we are dealing with them every day. They have had to move online to survive. I am not just talking about bigger retailers, but also designers, artists, boutiques and gyms. People in our localities are depending on us. It is time that we click, shop and support local, champion our local businesses, economies, jobs and communities. Some 70% of what is being spent online is actually being spent abroad. If we all spent €50 in our local economies, money that we were going to spend anyway,

it would add €180 million to our national economy. That is an important message that we need to get out tomorrow.

I praise the resourcefulness and resilience of our local businesses. I know that supports are there to help businesses move online, modernise and become more productive. My message today is that we should get behind our local businesses tomorrow. We must get that message out because those businesses are depending on us.

Senator Niall Blaney: I concur with Senator Craughwell's comments about our councillors across this country, no matter from which party they come. I am a former councillor and am all too aware of the work they do. A councillor is as important as a Senator, no matter what jurisdiction he or she is in. A lot of the money available as a result of policies adopted in these Houses goes to local authorities, and councillors are responsible for the oversight of that money. They are a critical part of local government but are not getting the recognition or remuneration for the work they do. We are losing high calibre councillors across the country, male and female, because they cannot afford to stay in their roles. That is wrong and needs to be put right.

I also concur with Senator Currie. Green Friday is a great idea.

I got to my feet to ask the Leader to find out if a gambling regulator has been appointed yet. Gambling has been an awful scourge on Irish society, and all societies. A gambling regulator is important when it comes to dealing with sporting organisations. I also ask the Leader to find out whether Sport Ireland has moved on a policy on this issue. That is something I would love the House to debate.

Senator Mary Fitzpatrick: Diego Maradona died yesterday but two men in our capital city also died. One of them was homeless and living on the streets of Dublin and the other had been homeless and was in sheltered accommodation. I have raised the issue of homelessness many times in this House and at the Joint Committee on Housing, Local Government and Heritage. I fully recognise the commitment from the Government in terms of funding for homeless prevention and support for those people who are unfortunate enough to be homeless. More than €230 million will be spent on homeless prevention and services this year alone but we, as a House, have to examine the situation with the provision of homeless services, particularly here in the capital. We must ask why, when we are spending so much money on homeless accommodation, people are opting to sleep on our streets. I would like the Leader to write to the chief executive of the Dublin Region Homeless Executive expressing our appreciation for its work and the work of everybody who responds to and supports homeless individuals, but also to ask for a report on the provision of homeless services and the quality of those services.

Senator Ruane spoke earlier in the week about the fact that homeless people are ending up in prison. There was talk today about direct provision, the ending of which I absolutely support and to which the Government is committed. We must recognise that it is not enough to say that we are going to provide a bed. People who end up homeless often have many other challenges in their lives. We must recognise that and support them. I would like the Leader to raise that issue with the chief executive of the Dublin Region Homeless Executive because I have a real concern that homeless accommodation is increasingly being provided by private operators in Dublin city. They do not have the skill set to respond to the complex needs of homeless people that go way beyond just a bed.

Senator Martin Conway: Like others, I would like to pay tribute to "RTÉ Investigates"

for the programme that was aired last night on Patrick Russell. I particularly commend Mr. Paul Murphy for his determination to expose not just what went on with this particular conman, but the failure of the institutions of our State to deal with him. The Revenue Commissioners have questions to answer about how it was allowed to escalate to the degree it did. An Garda Síochána also has questions to answer as to why this particular gentleman had not been convicted prior to recently, given the fact that many complaints were made and plenty of evidence was available. I do not know how we go about dealing with that but I suggest that the Joint Committee on Justice should do a body of work on it. The justice committee should bring the Garda Commissioner before it and engage as to what role the fraud squad has played in this case. More importantly, at this stage, the committee could find out if there are more examples of this type of corruption that the Garda is aware of but has not done anything about. What was exposed in that programme is totally disgraceful.

I commend the people who participated in the programme. They showed bravery in sharing their experiences and stories in order to ensure this type of thing does not happen in our society. It has been a bad week for RTÉ but that programme was a very good example of public service broadcasting.

Senator Fiona O'Loughlin: I completely endorse the idea of green Friday. The amount of money that is leaving this country day after day is frightening, particularly as we are heading into Black Friday and Cyber Monday, when we will see courier vans going around every town, village and estate. We have to send a strong message to everybody to support our local businesses and shops that support our local communities. They are the businesses to which we turn, time after time, to support community events. Now is the time that they need our support.

A young woman was left stranded at the side of the road at an isolated bus stop a few nights ago. What sin did she commit to fail to get entry onto a Dublin coach? She offered to pay cash because she did not have a card. She was refused entry to the bus and left stranded. There are two noteworthy things about that. It is appalling that any bus driver would go off and leave any young woman on her own at night at an isolated bus stop. Any such woman is vulnerable. I totally support the Covid-19 regulations and the suggestion to try to use contactless payments when possible. However, to move away from a situation where cash is valued and important is completely wrong. The only institutions to which that would serve as an asset are the banks, which will continue to make money. We all learned about how to use money and its value by using coins and notes. We cannot get away from that. Many people find it far easier to budget using cash rather than credit or debit cards. We need to send a strong message to all businesses and institutions that while we support the use of contactless payments at the moment, it is important to continue to use cash when we can.

Senator Micheál Carrigy: I would also like to endorse the campaign for people to shop green this weekend, and I am going to be parochial and ask those in my own county of Longford and those in Westmeath to shop in businesses in their counties to help with employment.

I wish to raise the issue of services for those seeking early intervention. I know that it is an issue that has been raised on numerous occasions, but figures recently released by the HSE reveal long waiting lists for assessments for speech and language therapy, occupational therapy and physiotherapy, where early intervention is key to a child's prognosis. The endless HSE waiting lists are forcing some families to seek private medical care. According to figures from September 2020, there are currently 21,286 children under the age of 17 waiting for their first occupational therapy assessment, which is shocking. While we understand that many services

have been put on hold due to Covid-19, we have been told by the Minister of the great work that has been done in recruitment but we have not seen this on the ground. Occupational therapists and speech and language therapists who are supposed to be treating those children have spent the past seven months doing contact tracing for the HSE. I call on the Minister to tell us when those staff will be back on the front line, treating children and not making phone calls. As far as I can see, until this is done, the situation, which is already serious, is at risk of getting out of control. What families need are expedited appointment dates and not excuses about Covid staff levels, etc.

I recently met with HSE officials and I was told that in the CHO 8 area, 12 people were recruited to relieve staff and to enable them to go back to providing front-line services, however the staff have not gone back to their front-line roles because the 12 people recruited were employed to cover the extra staff needed in testing.

I recently met with families in my home county of Longford who have spoken of their difficulty in accessing basic services for their children. These are real families and real people. We are in danger of becoming desensitised to the numbers on the waiting list, which are now in the thousands. Each number on the waiting list represents a child and a family who are desperately seeking intervention.

There has been a 45% drop in the recruitment of graduate occupational therapists, OTs, since 2016. That figure is part of statistics published by the HSE's health business services division, which shows that just 73 OTs were recruited by the HSE in 2019, down from 135 in 2016. This problem is only going to get worse.

Senator Ivana Bacik: I support my colleague, Senator Moynihan, who spoke on the Irish Nationality and Citizenship (Naturalisation of Minors Born in Ireland) Bill 2018, Committee Stage of which will be taken next Wednesday. I know that the Deputy Leader responded previously when I spoke on it, but we are very anxious that the Government supports its further passage. Amendments will be tabled, including one on the issue of the citizenship fee that Senator Moynihan mentioned. The crucial thing about this Bill is that if passed, it would restore a measure of generosity to our citizenship law in respect of children born in Ireland, and it is part of our Born Here, Belong Here campaign that is being run by the Labour Party along with Labour Youth and whole range of NGOs which have supported us, such as the Migrant Rights Centre. We hope that colleagues on all sides of the House, but particularly Government Senators, would support it. Indeed, Fianna Fáil and the Green Party supported the Second Stage of the Bill in this House in November 2018. We look forward to that debate and I look forward to engaging with the Deputy Leader of the House on the matter. I have also engaged with the Minister for Justice on the Bill and she has made some positive noises about it and on the hope that it will go through.

I thank the Leader of the House for ensuring that we will have statements on reopening Ireland this afternoon, because it is very important. The Government has a very difficult decision to make in terms of balancing public health with the need to restore a modicum of hope, and indeed to give some prospect of survival to many businesses around Ireland. The zero Covid strategy that has been strongly proposed by many medics and scientists, including many of my colleagues in medicine at TCD, relies on us either closing our borders as an island, with an all-island strategy, or having a hard border on the island, which makes it very hard to see prospects for that. However, I know that we will have a further debate on it this afternoon and I am glad we will have the opportunity to do so.

Senator Malcolm Byrne: I agree with Senator Bacik on the issue of citizenship, with Senator Carrigy on occupational therapy assessments, and with Senators Craughwell and Blaney on the importance of recognising the role of our councillors. However, I disagree with Senator Gavan in his songs of praise for Cuba. In terms of foreign policy, I do not know what Sinn Féin's obsession is with adopting a Cuban policy in Ireland, but Cuba continues to repress and limit freedom of expression and association and freedom of the press and engages in arbitrary detention. Senator Gavan is a strong campaigner for trade union rights, but in Cuba the right to strike is banned, so I do not know why Sinn Féin has an obsession with Cuba. We should not be emulating it.

I return to the comments made by Senators Kyne and Currie and others. It is really important that we shop local and support our local businesses as far as possible in the run-up to Christmas. A number of my parliamentary colleagues have availed of the boutiques and menswear shops on Main Street and Esmonde Street in Gorey, and I would encourage others to do so. One of the debates that we need to have, which relates to the local government funding issue, is around the commercial rates model of funding local government. This model dates from the 1820s and it is ridiculous to think that today, local government is partially funded on the basis of the floor size of a shop or business premises, particularly where those premises are competing with online providers which are often outside of the State, and do not contribute to our local economy. We need a full debate on local government funding, because the commercial rates system is way out of date and needs to be abolished. I ask the Deputy Leader to organise that debate.

Senator Lisa Chambers: Senator Kyne discussed Black Friday and the need to shop locally, and he was supported in his remarks by a number of Senators, including Senators Byrne and Currie and others. It is a really important message that we need to get out there, that every one of us should try to spend as many euro as possible locally. Last week I made the remark that we should not let Jeff Bezos win and we should keep away from Amazon as much as possible. We should be shopping on Irish websites and in Irish businesses, and whether it is by using click-and-collect services, we should be doing all we can to get that campaign moving, because it will make all the difference. As it stands, there is a sticking plaster in place for many businesses, and my concern is that come summer 2021, the cracks will appear when the Government supports understandably have to be wound down. Many businesses that are just managing to keep their heads above water will be struggling in the middle of next year. Therefore, everything that we do now will make a real and significant difference to their survival.

Senator Craughwell raised the issue of how councillors are treated and their well-being, and I agree with his remarks. Senators Blaney, Byrne and Carrigy and others backed him up and I agree with them. We should show a degree of respect for the profession of councillor, because it is a real job, they perform real and meaningful duties and they are not paid properly. Their take-home pay is not even really proper pay, and it is less than what someone on social welfare receives. It is not a salary and it in no way reflects their workload. I agree that depending on where councillors are located, many are driving hundreds of kilometres monthly, which is a direct cost to running their operations. Some councillors who have a second job effectively take home very little, and although they do not do the job just for the money, they should be paid properly, and I do not see why there is a fear in saying that. I hope that we see movement on that issue without any further delay.

Senator Moynihan raised the issue of period poverty and rightly credited the women's caucus with having highlighted the issue in the last term, and there was a cross-party motion supported by the entire House to provide free sanitary products. I join with the Senator in commending

the Scottish Parliament on being the first to move on this issue and to provide the products. I remember watching a Ken Loach film a number of years ago - I cannot recall the name - in which that very issue was highlighted. A female character was depicted going to a food bank and having to make the choice between getting food or sanitary products. It might seem like a small issue that does not affect people, but it does, and one should not have to choose between getting food for one's family or getting very basic sanitary products. It is an issue affecting women and it would take a small amount of money in the grand scheme of things to resolve it. I look forward to Private Members' business on that, and the Senator will have my support.

I note also the amendment the Senator is proposing on the cost of citizenship. I was not aware of the level of cost associated with it, which seems extremely high, and that should be addressed. It is quite expensive.

I join with Senator Gavan's tribute to Diego Maradona. I would not agree with the rest of his contribution in that regard but that has been dealt with by my colleague, Senator Byrne.

With regard to Senator Gavan's reference to the Tax Justice Network report on Ireland being a tax haven, I think he used the words "tax evasion" whereas the report refers to "tax avoidance", which is an important distinction. In terms of reform of the tax system, it is well documented and well known that Ireland and the Irish Government are working with the OECD to bring in meaningful reforms on a global scale. At the same time, I do not think we should make any apology for cultivating a very positive business environment to ensure that thousands of our citizens are employed in this country in many of the corporations under the foreign direct investment, FDI, band. We would hope to see continued FDI coming into the country in the years and decades ahead.

Senator Black made reference to the White Paper on direct provision. There have been reports in the media around the difficulty in delivering what is proposed. I am sure we all acknowledge there will be pushback if there is a suggestion that somebody in the direct provision system, coming in as an asylum seeker, would get preference for housing over somebody who is here already. This is because of the shortage of housing and the solution is to address the housing problem. We need more supply. I do not want to see us pitting one person against another when there is a genuine need on all sides for the basic necessity of housing. We have a lot of work to do in terms of increasing supply and that might, in turn, help us to deal with the direct provision issue. I believe we are all committed to moving away from that system and its many injustices. There have been some improvements but there is a long way to go yet, and I agree with the Senator on that.

Senator Dooley raised the issue of the €100 million being put into bog rehabilitation in the midlands, which is very welcome for those communities and I am sure it will alleviate many of the pressures there. I agree with the Senator that Moneypoint is a very important issue for people living and working in that area. The fact they are excluded from the just transition fund needs to be addressed. I agree with the Senator that we should not wait until the end of 2024 to address it because it is coming down the tracks. We have advance notice now of people who are in real difficulty and this is about real jobs, real people and real families. Let us use the time wisely to make preparations to look after those people in a proper and meaningful way.

Senator Buttimer raised the issue of the "RTÉ Investigates" debate, as did Senator Conway. I am conscious of our need to be mindful of any potential legal proceedings or any potential to impugn the reputation of any organisation or Member of this House. I am very conscious

of that. I join both Senators in commending “RTÉ Investigates” for bringing forward that issue. I watched it last night and I was particularly moved by the story of the Wilson family and Esther, who had money awarded to her because of a terrible accident she had in her late 20s. That money was to provide for her for the rest of her life and Patrick Russell, being a neighbour and friend of the family, would have been aware of those circumstances. It really speaks to the character of a person that could go about and do something of that nature. There appear to be significant questions to answer. We will raise that with the Department around how we might have some sort of a debate in this House within our guidelines that would not bring the House into disrepute in any way. I take the points of both Senators on board.

Senator Murphy raised the issue around elderly people and Eir. I was taken aback to see Eir coming out to suggest the problems with its customer service are because of the call centre in Sligo. I take great offence at that. I was on site in Sligo at the Eir premises a number of years ago and I was a customer of Eir at the time. I went to purchase a mobile phone and it was sent to the wrong location through no fault of my own. They then accused me of having stolen the phone in a kind of roundabout way. It was ridiculous stuff. In any event, to cut a long story short, I am no longer a customer of Eir, nor will I be a customer of Eir while it has the current lack of customer service. I listened to some people who gave comments to the media about being on hold for 30 to 45 minutes. I was one of those people and it drove me to the brink in trying to deal with the lack of customer service. That problem persisted and it was there long before the centre in Sligo was established. My understanding is that the centre in Sligo was set up to deal with the customer service problem. Let us not blame the people of Sligo or suggest there is somehow a shortage of skills in the community to meet the demands of that call centre. It is an outrageous suggestion. I understand from Senator Dooley that the regulator is coming before the Oireachtas committee to follow up on the complaints against Eir. Eir is operating in this country and it owes people and customers a reasonable level of customer service, which has been severely lacking for quite some time.

Senator Currie raised the issue of Black Friday, as did Senator Kyne. Senator Currie also mentioned the campaign around green Friday and the Champion Green campaign. I thank her for bringing that to the attention of the House and the broader public. Let us hope we can turn Black Friday green tomorrow and do all we can to protect Irish business.

Senator Blaney raised an issue around Sport Ireland. I do not have an answer at the minute but I will seek to get a reply to him on that question. I note his remarks in regard to councillors across the country, who will be very appreciative of his support.

Senator Niall Blaney: There was also the issue of the gambling regulator.

Senator Lisa Chambers: I will come back to the Senator on that.

Senator Fitzpatrick raised the issue of the two men who died on the streets of our capital city in recent days. On behalf of this side of the House and, I am sure, on behalf of the whole House, I extend our deepest sympathies to the families of both men. It is a shocking indictment on any country that people should be dying in the streets, and we need to address that urgently. I note it is almost six years to the day that Jonathan Corrie passed away very close to Government Buildings on a doorstep. Things have not really progressed in the manner they should have in terms of homelessness services. An important point raised by Senator Fitzpatrick is that the accommodation is only one part of it. We have listened to comments and feedback from people availing of those services, who often speak about being in a room with other people, some of

whom may be using drugs on site, and they actually feel safer on the streets. That is a serious problem. Individuals have many complex needs and are in need of supports. It is not just about a bed but about the wraparound services that are just not there to the level they need to be. We have a big job of work in this country to address that because this problem seems to be growing, not reducing. I know the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, is genuinely personally committed to addressing this issue and I have no doubt he will do his utmost to make changes in that regard.

As I said, Senator Conway endorsed the comments in regard to RTÉ and we will come back to that issue.

Senator Fiona O'Loughlin supported the green Friday initiative and also gave a personal account of a young woman who was left stranded at a bus stop because cash was not accepted. I do not know the full details of that story but, certainly, cash is legal tender and it cannot be refused. It might be an issue on which the Senator can directly correspond with Bus Éireann to get further clarification.

Senator Bacik knows of my support for the citizenship Bill that Labour is proposing. I am doing my utmost to try to get Government approval for that Bill. I am only one person but I will make my voice as loud as I can. I understand that the Leader of the House, Senator Doherty, is also in support of the Bill and I understand there is engagement with the Department on that, with a view to trying to progress it. The Senator has my full support personally but I know she is looking for Government support and I will do my best on that front. I would love to see that Bill over the line. It is a small gesture for a small number of children, but it would make a world of difference to those individuals.

I get Senator Bacik's point on the zero-Covid strategy, and I know she is raising it on behalf of colleagues. I note she welcomed the debate on the reopening of the country. There are difficult decisions for the Government to make today in regard to next week. I know people's livelihoods, mental health and so much else is at stake in regard to that reopening. I hope we can have a break from lockdown and get about to see our family and friends, and have some time to socialise. However, we have to be honest with ourselves. If we reopen the country for a week or two weeks, and I am sure NPHET will give its advice, it is quite likely we will see an increase in numbers because that seems to be the trajectory of this virus. There is a fear we may be going back into tighter restrictions come January, but we need to be honest with the public that that may be the trade-off to get that break. Who knows? I am not a public health expert and we will await the advice and the decision of the Government. From a Government perspective, I know it is acutely aware of how distressing being in level 5 is for many people and businesses, and, as we approach December, the Government really wants to give that break to people and to let us have some sort of normal Christmas.

Senator Byrne dealt succinctly with the issue around Cuba and I do not need to go over that, although I agree with his comments. He also raised the "shop local" campaign. On the issue of commercial rates funding, it is ludicrous that a model from the 1820s is being used to fund local government today in times when many businesses do not have a physical space and operate online. Clearly, it is a model that is not fit for purpose and it needs to be amended and changed. It puts our small retailers on the main streets of every town and village at a severe disadvantage when competing with businesses that trade solely online. We need to address that. I will certainly seek a debate with the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage on the issue of local government funding that the Senator raises.

Senator Eugene Murphy: Will the Leader send a Standing Order letter to the chief executive of Eir. Is that in order?

Senator Lisa Chambers: We cannot write on behalf of every Member of the House but I will certainly---

Senator Eugene Murphy: I think it is agreed.

Senator Lisa Chambers: -----ask someone from the Leader's office to deal with it. The fact, however, that the regulator is coming before the committee to deal with that will give an opportunity to raise further questions and follow up on the explanations, if one wants to call them that, from the chief executive of Eir.

Senator Paul Gavan: Will the Deputy Leader take a point of information?

Senator Lisa Chambers: Of course, yes.

An Cathaoirleach: No, not at this stage.

Senator Paul Gavan: She said she would.

Senator Lisa Chambers: I will be guided by the Chair as to what is appropriate.

An Cathaoirleach: Is it a point of order?

Senator Paul Gavan: No, I asked if she will take a point of information.

An Cathaoirleach: There is no such thing as a point of information in the Standing Order but, perhaps, the Deputy Leader is willing. It is up to her; she is in possession.

Senator Lisa Chambers: I anticipate that it is with regard to my comments around Cuba.

Senator Paul Gavan: No, it is with regard to Eir.

Senator Lisa Chambers: Go ahead.

Senator Malcolm Byrne: As opposed to an ideological conversation?

An Cathaoirleach: I wish to point out that this is not normal procedure.

Senator Lisa Chambers: Given that it is so close to Christmas.

Senator Paul Gavan: I thank the Deputy Leader.

An Cathaoirleach: Members have an opportunity to raise issues during their contributions. This will not be a general practice.

Senator Paul Gavan: The Cathaoirleach is being very generous. I will point out to the Deputy Leader that this is what happens when one privatises a good State company.

(Interruptions).

Senator Lisa Chambers: We are dealing with recent comments by the chief executive of Eir, blaming the call centre in Sligo for what was, in my view, a problem that existed before that.

(Interruptions).

Senator Lisa Chambers: That is the Senator's view.

Order of Business agreed to.

Sitting Arrangements: Motion

Senator Lisa Chambers: I move:

That, notwithstanding anything in the Standing Orders relative to Public Business, the following arrangements shall apply in relation to the sittings of the Seanad on 30th November and 1st, 2nd and 3rd December, 2020:

(1) The Seanad shall meet in the Dáil Chamber at 2 p.m. on Monday, 30th November, 2020 and the following arrangements shall apply:

(a) Standing Orders 29 and 30 shall stand suspended;

(b) there shall be no Order of Business;

(c) the business to be taken shall be confined to the items set out in the Schedule to this paragraph and, accordingly, no other business shall be taken unless the Seanad shall otherwise order on motion made by the Leader of the House or such other Senator as she may authorise in that behalf.

Schedule

Credit Union Restructuring Board (Dissolution) Bill 2019 [Dáil] – Committee and Remaining Stages.

The Committee and Remaining Stages of the Credit Union Restructuring Board (Dissolution) Bill 2019 [Dáil] shall commence at 2 p.m.

Finance (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2020 – Committee and Remaining Stages.

The Committee and Remaining Stages of the Finance (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2020 shall be taken on conclusion of the Committee and Remaining Stages of the Credit Union Restructuring Board (Dissolution) Bill 2019 [Dáil].

Suspension of Sitting.

On the conclusion of the proceedings on the Finance (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2020, the sitting shall be suspended for 15 minutes.

Planning and Development Bill 2020 – Committee Stage.

The Committee Stage of the Planning and Development Bill 2020 shall be taken on the resumption of the sitting, and shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion after 3 hours, by one Question, which shall be put from the Chair and which shall, in relation

to amendments, include only those set down or accepted by the Government.

(2) The Seanad on its rising on Monday, 30th November, 2020, shall adjourn until 10.30 a.m. on Tuesday, 1st December, 2020 and the following arrangements shall apply:

(a) The Order of Business shall be proposed at 10.30 a.m. in the Dáil Chamber;

(b) Commencement matters shall be taken at 1.30 p.m. in the Seanad Chamber, and up to six matters may be selected by the Cathaoirleach for discussion;

(c) Business ordered to be taken subsequent to Commencement matters, shall be taken in the Seanad Chamber.

(3) The Seanad on its rising on Tuesday, 1st December, 2020, shall adjourn until 10.30 a.m. on Wednesday, 2nd December, 2020 in the Dáil Chamber, and the following arrangements shall apply:

(a) Commencement matters shall be taken at 10.30 a.m. and up to six matters may be selected by the Cathaoirleach for discussion;

(b) The Order of Business shall be proposed at 12 noon;

(4) The Seanad on its rising on Wednesday, 2nd December, 2020, shall adjourn until 9.30 a.m. on Thursday, 3rd December, 2020 in the Dáil Chamber and the following arrangements shall apply:-

(a) Standing Orders 29 and 30 shall stand suspended;

(b) the Order of Business shall be proposed at 9.30 a.m.”

Question put and agreed to.

Sitting suspended at 12.32 p.m. and resumed at 1 p.m.

Health Insurance (Amendment) Bill 2020: Committee and Remaining Stages

Section 1 agreed to.

Acting Chairman (Senator Victor Boyhan): Amendment No. 1 has been ruled out of order.

Amendment No. 1 not moved.

SECTION 2

Question proposed: “That section 2 stand part of the Bill.”

Senator Paul Gavan: I understand amendment No. 1, tabled by the Labour Party and which we were going to support, has been ruled out of order. The other day, the Minister of State alluded to trying perhaps to sort out a solution for these non-EEA students. Will he update us on this please?

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan): I understand negotiations are ongoing. One company was mentioned. There is confusion about the figures. Some have said €650 and others have said it could be down to as little as €160. It is still a lot of money. I understand the departmental officials can meet people such as the Senator to discuss whether there is a way around it.

Senator Paul Gavan: I thank the Minister of State. We will do just that.

Question put and agreed to.

Sections 3 to 6, inclusive, agreed to.

Title agreed to.

Bill reported without amendment.

Acting Chairman (Senator Victor Boyhan): When is it proposed to take Report Stage?

Senator Martin Conway: Now.

Acting Chairman (Senator Victor Boyhan): Is that agreed? Agreed.

Bill received for final consideration.

Acting Chairman (Senator Victor Boyhan): When is it proposed to take Fifth Stage?

Senator Martin Conway: Now.

Acting Chairman (Senator Victor Boyhan): Is that agreed? Agreed.

Question proposed: "That the Bill do now pass."

Senator Martin Conway: I welcome the Minister of State back to the House for the annual health insurance Bill, which is extremely important. On a positive note, we have to count our blessings in this country that we have health insurance which is affordable for the vast majority of the Irish people. We are also very fortunate there is community rating within health insurance. We are also very fortunate that risk equalisation exists because it means our elderly and vulnerable citizens will get health insurance at the same cost as younger healthier people. This does not exist in a lot of countries. We are very fortunate that it does exist in this country. It is only right that we pay tribute to the health insurance companies, previous Governments and this Government for ensuring health insurance is affordable.

However, we need to look at the red tape and the small print in health insurance in this country. There is an obligation on the health insurance regulator, the companies and, by virtue of this, on the Minister for Health to ensure the various plans available from the four insurance companies that provide health insurance in this country are easy to understand, not complex, straightforward and written in plain English, and that there are no tricks in the small print. There is a job of work to be done in this regard. When people are sick and require hospital care and medical intervention, the last thing they should wonder is whether they are entitled to have certain procedures covered and whether it is only a percentage of a procedure that is covered or a percentage of hospital inpatient care. We need to look at uniformity of health plans. We need to take the complication out of it and we need to make it simple. Health insurance needs to return to plain English and, as I have said, we need to eliminate the small print. With something

as important as health insurance we should not have small print. I thank the Minister of State for his time and I commend the fact that the Bill has passed all Stages in the House.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan): I thank the Senators for their contributions on the Bill, which is discussed every year. During the Second Stage debate on Tuesday, I outlined that the objective and basis of Government policy in the area of private health insurance is to ensure that people have access to affordable private health insurance regardless of their age, gender or health status. This means people who are old or sick do not have to pay more than the young and healthy, whereas in other health insurance systems the level of risk that an individual presents directly affects the premium paid.

The purpose of the Bill is to specify the revised credits and corresponding stamp duty levies to apply on health insurance policies from April 2021. Against the background of some uncertainty about the impact of Covid-19 on the health insurance industry, the credit and levy rates for the next year strike a fair balance between the need to support community rating while maintaining sustainability of the market during these unprecedented times. The Bill allows us to maintain our support for the core principle of community rating, which is a long established and well supported Government policy for the health insurance market. I thank Senator Conway for his encouraging remarks on this.

Senators Gavin and Hoey raised the issue of non-EEA students. There were issues and many community rated reasonably priced products are on the market and available for students to purchase. Each of the three open membership insurers have started plans that offer coverage in most public hospitals and they range in price from €490 to €520. Insurers also offer young adult rates on many of their products, which further reduce the premium to the full adult premium for a 26-year-old person. For example, a starter policy for a 20-year-old is available on the market at €183. It is still a lot of money but I am only too happy for the Senator who raised it to meet the officials to see whether we can iron out these issues. Departmental officials are in ongoing engagement with other officials who have responsibility for visa and educational aspects of this issue, including with their colleagues in the Department of Justice and the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science. The Bill will ensure we can continue to provide the necessary support to ensure the costs of health insurance are shared throughout the insured population. I thank all Senators for their contributions to the debate over recent days and for facilitating the passage of the Bill.

Question put and agreed to.

Sitting suspended at 1.10 p.m. and resumed at 1.30 p.m.

Reopening Ireland (Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment): Statements

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I welcome my neighbour and friend, Deputy English, to the House and congratulate him on his recent appointment. I do not think I ever got that opportunity in public until now.

Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Damien English): It is important that I also congratulate the Leas-Chathaoirleach on his coun-

ty's recent success.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I did not want to mention football.

Deputy Damien English: I wanted to say that coming from a neighbouring county which is delighted with how well Cavan is doing during these difficult times. I have plenty of ushers in my ear telling me Dublin is looking forward to playing Cavan. Good luck with that one. It will be a big match. It was a great weekend of football.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: That is very sporting of the Minister of State.

Deputy Damien English: That is difficult for a Meath man to say. It is easier, however, than saying it for Dublin. Good luck with all of that. I also wish the same to Tipperary, as I see Senator Ahearn across the Chamber. I could not leave him out. That was a truly historic day as well. This year, 2020, has been one of those mad years with all that has happened with Covid. I do not think anyone could have predicted the four football semi-finalists we have now. It complements the year. It is a nice throwback to history that the championship is where it was 100 years ago.

I note the clock states "6:00". Is that hours or minutes?

Senator Róisín Garvey: It is not for the Minister of State.

(Interruptions).

Deputy Damien English: I can stretch it out if it is needed.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: We can give the Minister of State extra time.

Deputy Damien English: I have learned from the best like Senator Dooley.

Senator Ollie Crowe: So long as there is no mention of children's socks.

Deputy Damien English: We will not go there. I have been trying to avoid that for a few weeks. Thanks for putting me back in the middle of that one.

(Interruptions).

Senator Timmy Dooley: The pubs in Galway will not be opening for a while so.

Deputy Damien English: I assure the House that there will be no shortage of socks or other items of clothing in the country.

I thought we were having a discussion on Covid but as the Leas-Chathaoirleach said it is about reopening Ireland. It is apt and I hope this prediction is right. We are all focused on trying to reopen and it is important the Seanad is debating how can we reopen safely. Much of the work over the past couple of weeks has been on getting to a stage in which we can reopen parts of our economy and society.

We all recognise how Covid has put much pressure on many parts of our country. It has been a difficult time across every one of our counties. We often debate regional balance here. Covid hit all of us everywhere, our homes and businesses. Everybody is suffering. Hopefully, with all the talk of the roll-out of vaccines and vaccination programmes, we should be in a strong position during 2021 and get back to some sort of a normal life.

Much change will occur as we reopen. Certain parts of business will have changed forever. We need to work with that sector. It is important we focus our minds over the next couple of days to be in a position next week to have retail back, along with hairdressers, barbers, gyms and other businesses which have been under pressure. There is still a significant conversation around the hospitality sector, restaurants, cafes, pubs and hotels.

The Department would rather not be in level 5. Moving to these restrictions was not an easy choice to take. The Tánaiste spoke about this, as did the Taoiseach and many others. We wanted to do our best to avoid level 5 which is why we stayed at level 3 for several weeks, hoping it would make the difference. However, it did not work out. Everyone hoped, when we published the plan back in the summer, that level 3 would be as far as we had to go. The figures did not go that way and we had to protect people's health and livelihoods in the long term.

Many people said to me that the hospitals were not under that much pressure and the ICU bed numbers were steady when they analysed the figures. We do not want people in hospital or ICU with Covid as it is not the place to be. We all know the percentages of people who do not come back out of ICU. It was not just keeping the numbers in hospital down. It was to keep people from getting sick and to stop our loved ones and family members from contracting Covid unnecessarily. It is not a nice place to be. We all have stories of neighbours, friends and family members who contracted Covid and suffered its consequences. Far too many families are without loved ones this year because of Covid.

Many politicians understand that it is about getting the balance right to have a functioning society and economy, as well as managing Covid and bringing the virus under control. The decision was made five weeks ago to move to level 5 to bring the virus back under control. The figures we have seen over the past three or four nights show it is coming under control. It does not mean we are there yet, however. The Tánaiste, the Taoiseach and many others have said that we had hoped to be a little further down the road. To have a consistent figure of 200 cases over three or four nights is a good place to be as we go through our plans to reopen. Hopefully, these figures will keep going down.

When we reopen, however, it will be more difficult to manage the virus. The best way to deal with the virus is to manage our own behaviour but also to limit our number of contacts. When we reopen various parts of the economy, there will be more contacts. The onus is on everyone to adjust their behaviour to ensure when we reopen that we tread carefully, use caution and follow the best guidance to stop the virus spreading among us.

The Health and Safety Authority, HSA, updated the back at work safely protocol which contains much guidance which retail and business are following to protect themselves, their employees and customers. The various committees are meeting today and the Cabinet will meet tomorrow to dissect the advice from NPHET and work out the plans. We are all hopeful that tomorrow will bring good news for many parts of the country. It does not mean all restrictions will be lifted but we will be in a much better place than we are today. Hopefully, we can build on that in the weeks ahead. The protocols and guidance are important.

We all know at this stage how to protect ourselves and our loved ones. One gets mixed reactions in any business, factory and family homes. Some are worried and nervous for themselves and their families. Some are less cautious and are not as convinced about the concerns. It is hard to have rules, regulations and laws which bring us all together on this. The majority of people have come with us on this journey and it is their behaviour that has helped us bring

the virus back under control. Governments can only give advice and put legislation in place to direct us all in a certain way. Sometimes, that means stepping in a little more than we would like to do but, in general, people want to do the right thing and follow the advice, and they are doing that. That is the reason, as a country, we have saved lives and hopefully will be able to get through the months ahead with fewer restrictions when it comes to Covid-19.

I want to touch on a couple of issues. People are probably familiar with all the business supports. I will not name all of them. Sectors and businesses have said to me that the wage subsidy scheme is probably the most important one. We have spoken about that in this House on a number of occasions. All the Members put forward suggestions about additional supports for business. The Covid restrictions support scheme, CRSS, came out of their suggestions and ongoing support to businesses whose premises are closed. That scheme is up and running and will be very successful in terms of companies that are under pressure. We also have the restart grant, the rates rebate and other different supports. I have stressed in previous debates here that the support would not all be in the form of grants but that we would encourage businesses to use their own equity, tap into some of the loan products at the lower cost rates, as well as grants because the taxpayers cannot replace every lost euro. We all wish they could but that is not reality. It is about that blend of supports - lower cost finance, grants, rate subsidies and CRSS payments - coming together along with businesses having to tap into their own equity in some cases.

I want to single out the retail sector, which is my main line responsibility apart from business in general. We have worked very closely with those in the retail sector and they are vitally important to this country in the service they provide. Throughout the Covid-19 pandemic many of those in the retail sector have been on the front line, as well as all those in the health authorities and so on, but retail is very much there. Where they were allowed stay open they stayed open and provided a top-class service to all of us. They put all the changes in place, adapted their work practices, changed their shop models and so on to be able to serve us in a safe way. I recognise that has been a very difficult journey for them and they are under a great deal of pressure. I would shout out to everybody to listen to our campaign to shop local if they can possibly do so and to spread their business around to support local businesses and local jobs as much as possible during the months and the year ahead. We have launched a LookforLocal campaign to encourage people to do that. It is important that we do that.

As a sector, I hope they will be open next week because there is a very busy month ahead. We will support them on this journey and have done but they will need the Members' support also. As we move into 2021 and beyond there will be a massive opportunity for the retail sector to expand even further. Some of that will be online, Covid or no Covid, to try to win back some of the business that we know goes abroad but also to try to win business from abroad. I believe we have a very strong retail sector that can do that. That is something on which I will be working very closely with them. We have a retail forum that meets practically every week at this stage and all the representative bodies of the retail sector are on that and contribute. They have been a major asset to us as a Department and as a Government in managing the Covid pandemic but also in preparing for Brexit.

We are looking to a difficult year ahead in terms of trying to manage Brexit and get through and come out of the Covid pandemic. I appreciate the support of this House for all the various business schemes and supports that have been put in place. They have been essential. Business owners have told me they looked abroad and saw what was going on and they realise the support these two Houses have provided, by using taxpayers' money through the Government

supports, has been a major help. They are still under a lot of pressure, however, and we have to continue those business supports. The Tánaiste, in his speech in the Dáil, referred to having money secured for next year to continue with the supports where they are needed and to roll out new ones, and new ideas, where that is necessary. In addition to what has been allocated in the budget for next year, and our Department got a decent increase to allow us be able to do our work better, including extra money for the Health and Safety Authority to manage all this in terms of safety at work, there is an extra €3.4 billion in the recovery fund, which has not been allocated yet but can be drawn down as we need it for different parts of the business world that need those supports also.

I am here mainly to listen to the Members' contributions, as well as the Leas-Cheann Comhairle's comments, but we hope to be in a position tomorrow to announce the reopening of many parts of our society and businesses but there is still much work to do. I want to reinforce the message that we have to manage our own behaviour in the months ahead. Just because the virus numbers have decreased a lot it is still around and it could very easily flare up again. If we all play our part we should be able to limit that and if we are all in a healthy place and get the virus under control we can get back to having a strong, healthy economy. I am an optimist, as the Leas-Cheann Comhairle knows, even in mad times and even when it comes to football, and I am very optimistic about where our economy can go in the next couple of years.

To refer back to retail, there is a lot of opportunity in that sector if we can just get through this very difficult year that most people probably want to forget about but it is important that we look ahead with hope. I hope that with strong supports from the economy and strong actions by the Government and these Houses, we can do that.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I thank the Minister of State for his trademark positivity. Senators have six minutes each. To avoid an issue that arose yesterday by accident where Members were waiting, if they want to plan their times they should be aware that the Minister of State will reply not later than 3.27 p.m. We will probably be all right in that regard but they should be aware of that. Our first speaker is Senator Ollie Crowe.

Senator Alice-Mary Higgins: If there are copies of the Minister of State's speech they might be distributed.

Deputy Damien English: I had mentioned that they be distributed.

Senator Ollie Crowe: I thank the Minister of State, Deputy English, for coming in again today. To state the obvious, it was always going to be much easier to close down the economy last March than to open it up again. From a realistic point of view and with no disrespect to NPHET, people are going to socialise this Christmas regardless of advice. The choice is between controlled and regulated environments and the uncontrolled environments.

I want to talk about the hospitality sector. It is worth pointing out that in the period the hospitality sector and businesses were open this year, 99% or more followed all guidelines and offered a safe environment. I am talking about restaurants, hotels and bars, in particular. There were more than 30,000 visits by gardaí across the country, as there should have been, and a minute percentage were found to be not adhering to the guidelines. I am sending out the message from this House that if businesses are not adhering to the guidelines the full force of the law should come down on them and they should be closed forthwith.

It is important to point out also that thousands of people across the country use restaurants,

bars and hotels as their main source of socialising. I am thinking in particular of people who live alone. All of us in this House are aware of the impact this period has had on people's mental health in terms of loneliness and isolation. That should not be forgotten. That will be especially important around Christmas, which is a difficult time for many people who may be dealing with bereavements and other issues.

It needs to be stated that the hospitality sector in general, as the Minister of State is aware, has played no role in the spread of the virus in Ireland. Less than 1% of the clusters relate to the environments within that industry. The Minister outlined in his contribution the supports that have been given to the industry. He will agree that there are hundreds of thousands of employees and businesses and the vast majority of them are small, family-owned businesses, particularly pubs in cities and in rural Ireland. Surely it is not too much to ask that they would be allowed open their businesses for the next three weekends because we are all aware that January and February are much quieter months. Discussion is going on in the media that there will be a phased opening in terms of 1, 8 and 15 December but we have to be practical about that. NPHET advise but the Government should decide. I would like the Minister of State to take the message from this House that there is no point in trying to pack it all into two weeks. It would make much more sense to have three weekends and people in the business realise that.

From a practical point of view, there is no point in restaurants, particularly those in Galway city that I know well, closing at 10 p.m. The reality is that many people with young families might not go out until 8.30 p.m. or 9 p.m. The last serving should be 9.30 p.m. and the restaurant or the pub could close at 11 p.m. We have to be practical. It is just not viable to be closing restaurants, bars and hotels, for example, at 10 p.m., when the off-licences are open until 10 p.m. as it is. It is not viable and there is no solution-based thinking involved in that.

In his contribution, the Minister of State outlined the grants and supports, which have been welcome and have kept an awful lot of jobs safe in recent months. I ask the Minister of State to consider using those supports on an opt-in and opt-out basis. There are hundreds and thousands of bars across the country that are too small. Their owners will feel it is not safe to open for a number of reasons, for example relating to the square footage of their premises or the underlying conditions that they or their staff might have. I am asking that they be allowed to open but if they do not want to open, they should have that opportunity. The supports should remain in place for them if they are not in a position to open because of their size or whatever the case may be.

I want to take this opportunity to discuss the importance of physical exercise with the return of gyms, swimming pools and outdoor sports. These are essential activities for people's mental health and well-being. I appreciate that some precautions will need to remain in place but for the most part, it is time to allow these sectors to open up and to get some degree of normality back in our lives. Outdoor training for sports teams in pods of 15 should resume and all outdoor sports and games should resume immediately in January.

I know many people in Galway who are working from home and they hardly see anyone. Their main social activity would be a night out with the local soccer, GAA or rugby team. The absence of this outlet is damaging for the quality of their lives, as I am sure the Minister of State is aware. I appreciate that NPHET has a job to do and that its focus is solely on Covid-19, but the Government must think more broadly and that must include allowing people to start living once again. Those most at risk should continue to take every precaution but we must allow society, broadly, to resume and we must trust people to behave responsibly. I have no doubt that

the vast majority will do that.

As has been outlined in the House this morning, we need to send out the message on green Friday tomorrow. The Minister of State alluded to this in his speech. We need to shop local and forget about Black Friday, unless we are encouraging and supporting Irish and local companies. We have to remember that these companies support local jobs and community initiatives. Online companies will not sponsor community initiatives or GAA clubs, for example. People need to realise that and they need to realise where their people will get jobs.

Senator Michael McDowell: I welcome the Minister of State. I want to make a few general points about opening up the economy. I am not one of these sceptics who believes in deriding the measures taken by the Government but I am sceptical about blanket measures which are non-discriminating in the effects they have and are not based on proper science. I echo the remarks made by Deputy Eoghan Murphy recently in a debate on the response of the country to the Covid-19 pandemic. His words were well chosen and his points were well made.

There are far wider implications from Covid-19 to be taken into consideration than simply mortality. Happily, it appears that medical practice has improved to the point that the health services have kept mortality to a low level. There is more to public health than the Covid-19 pandemic. There are serious mental health issues, for example. There are serious side effects for cancer screening programmes, etc., which have suffered immense damage as a result of the lockdowns. Some of it may be inevitable damage but immense damage has been done due to the non-availability of many medical services. I mention the withdrawal of so many services for dependent persons, adult and children, with mental disability. The suspension of facilities and communal services for them has had a very significant effect. Public health has to be seen in the round, not just in the narrow path of responding to Covid-19.

When it comes to the economic effects of the measures the Government puts in place to deal with the Covid-19 pandemic, it seems to me that the precautionary principle should apply. This principle does not just apply to science, health or risk to health. It also applies to damage to jobs. I do not know whether we are really alert in this country to the issues which were discussed yesterday in Westminster by Rishi Sunak, the UK Chancellor of the Exchequer. Huge costs are piling up all the time. The indebtedness we are running up in this country will have to be paid for by somebody and there will be taxation implications. It is in everybody's political interests to say nothing about this because Opposition parties in the Dáil take the view that they do not want to talk about raising taxation and the Government does not want to do it either. There is a background of enormous economic consequence and damage to be dealt with at some stage in the future and we just have to face up to that fact.

I refer to opening up the economy and our society more generally. Society is more than an economy. Huge damage has been done to the fabric of small and medium-sized enterprises in Ireland, not just in the hospitality sector but across the board. If the Government is going to issue blanket edicts, the presumption should be against restriction, unless it can be proved that it will be effective. If the Government is going to say what kind of stores should be closed and open, it should not be in a position to say that all stores should close. It should work out where there is a significant risk in a particular shop or business opening up. This is something that is providing a highly specialised service to other people. If the Government is going to say that all outdoor sports are to be restricted, it has to go through every single sport carefully and ask if it is a risk. The precautionary principle requires much more care to be taken than we have seen so far in going through every single restriction we impose to see if it is really scientifically

justified.

Perhaps this House, but certainly Dáil Éireann and this House together, should reinstate the Special Committee on Covid-19 Response that Deputy McNamara was chairing. It did valuable business and it is an illusion to think that its activities can be fairly spread around the other committees, which do not have the week-on-week capacity to follow this pandemic and the Government's response to it. I ask the Government to reconsider what I consider was the ill-considered disbandment of Deputy McNamara's Special Committee on Covid-19 Response and to consider putting in place proper Oireachtas scrutiny of the pandemic and the public's response to it.

2 o'clock

Senator Garret Ahearn: I welcome the Minister of State, Deputy English. He has a difficult task today because he will be listening for two hours or four hours to Members putting in requests for what should be opened, what should not be opened and when they should be opened. The Minister of State has to answer those questions, knowing that there will be an official announcement tomorrow and not today.

I will probably do the same, but from a cautionary standpoint, albeit while calling for things to open. I understand the caution. I understand the benefit of being cautious these past number of weeks.

I was someone, as I stated previously, who had Covid. I understand the implications of having it and the feeling one has of guilt of giving it to someone else. The restrictions that we put in place, whether it is in workplaces or in pubs or restaurants, or to socialising, were all about minimising contacts. I was quite lucky. I had two close contacts, which is unusual for someone in public office, and that is because of the measures put in place.

When we are making decisions tomorrow, we obviously have to put the health of vulnerable people to the fore. We need to be honest that if we start opening up sectors of society, the potential for increasing the number of cases quicker than we hope is always possible, but we have to protect jobs and we have to protect the economy. In some ways - Senator Crowe touched on it as well - the horse has already bolted in respect of Christmas. People have decided already what they are doing for Christmas, certainly on Christmas Day. It does not make a difference what level we are on; people are going to their families on Christmas Day. The decisions that we make as a Government need to understand people. These are good people who have adhered to all the messages over the past nine months and have strictly adhered to the guidance that has been given to them from the Government but Christmas is different. They feel as though they need to go to their family, to their parents and to their neighbours or whoever is close in their lives that they need to visit. When we talk about reopening Ireland, we need to be conscious that people have made up their own minds for that short period.

In relation to announcements tomorrow, I would ask that we as a Government recognise the importance that December has for people who go to mass and religious services. Many places can facilitate the number of people they would normally have attending mass. It is important, certainly in my area, that people will get the opportunity to go to mass and to have that service during the Christmas period.

It is a difficult issue but we also need to be able to do something to enable some sort of visit for very close family members of people who have been in nursing homes. They have not had anyone visiting them for weeks and months for good health reasons. It has been extremely dif-

difficult to be confined in one building with no close family members being able to visit for such a long time. I hope there is something we can do, even if it is that one family member can go in on Christmas Day and merely be able to wish someone well and support him or her.

In terms of opening up pubs and restaurants, we need to be consistent on this for all pubs and restaurants. We need to understand that wet pubs have proven that they can do the exact same as pubs that opened up already that served food. Wet pubs are well able to manage it the same. We need to recognise that if we have more pubs and more restaurants open, the flux of people will go to more areas and one will have fewer people in individual pubs.

There has been a number of supports brought through the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, including the online trading voucher. The CRSS payment has been welcomed by many people. One message I get from some pub owners in County Tipperary, in Clonmel in particular, is that if it proves to be the case that they will not be allowed to open, the 10% they get in weekly payment is welcome but for the Christmas period, that should be increased from 10% to a higher rate. This would take into account their fear that the Government will segregate them and treat them differently from other restaurants and pubs that serve food and that this should be recognised.

The restart grants went down well. We have 2,500 businesses in Tipperary getting approximately €20 million from the restart grant, and then from the restart grant plus. I compliment the staff, led by the CEO, Mr. Joe MacGrath, in Tipperary County Council. It is one of the fastest local authorities in the country to deliver, whether it be the restart grant or the restart grant plus. Businesses literally only had to wait until it was in their account to get it and they were so quick with it.

Can the Minister of State give reassurances to businesses in County Tipperary, in particular to the chambers of commerce, that we as a Government will continue to support the retail sector through the Christmas period? Can he give reassurances that we will do everything we can to make sure they have viable businesses going into the new year? Although the Minister of State probably cannot bring clarity today, I seek clarity on the confusion within businesses as to whether the economy will open up on 1 December or 2 December. When the announcement is made tomorrow, perhaps that could be made clear.

I support what everyone else has said in terms of Black Friday and supporting people to shop local. We always do that in Tipperary and Clonmel. Now more than ever, every euro we spend in our local communities brings back €5 to the economy. If there was ever a year for us to shop and to support and buy local, and to encourage people to do so, this is it. It would be appreciated.

Senator Rebecca Moynihan: I thank the Minister of State for coming to the House. This is the first opportunity I have had to make a contribution on the issue of Covid following the introduction of the social bubbles. My party leader and I lobbied hard when I came up with the suggestion and talked to him about it. I thank the Government for taking it on board. It has made a real difference to thousands of people around the country in this lockdown that they are able to form social bubbles. I meet people all the time now who tell me about their bubbling with some person or other. That was a small measure that did not cost anything. They listened to a member of the Opposition and it has made a real difference to thousands of people in the social isolation that is there. I merely wanted to put that on record to thank the Government.

We are moving to a situation tomorrow where, hopefully, announcements will be made and there will be an opening up of the Irish economy. However, this pandemic is still with us. We know that at times, the growth of the virus can be very quick where people gather. I saw with dismay on social media a bus company advertising a bus coming down to Dublin because, as the North was closing down, the South was opening up. Every Member of this House, at one stage or another, has spoken about the need to have an all-island approach because borders are political constructs and they are certainly not recognised by a virus. There is a real danger if we see the likes of that happening over the next months and we have a bustling Christmas, that we will be potentially heading back into this in January. I say that as somebody who has been somewhat sceptical about decisions that have been taken but who realises and understands that it is for the greater good. Such incidents are worrying. There is important public communication to happen around that if anybody is thinking of travelling down.

I would also like to address the issue of tomorrow. In the decisions that we make and the announcements that are made, there should be an element of consistency. The decisions should be made on the basis of evidence but then stuck to. We have seen, for example, a Minister announcing, after a Twitter storm of a video of a street in Dublin, that the Government would ban takeaway pints on which a memorandum would be brought to Cabinet. Why are we in a situation where memorandums are going to Cabinet on the basis of social media storms? We do not know what the basis of that was. It was a short video. I was not there. What I saw of it was people outside. I am not sure it was a contributor but it is important that we do not see such things. The current Minister for Health has certainly proven to be a more shaky hand than his predecessor. He needs to be consistent and stick to the decisions that are made to give certainty for December.

I want to address the issue of some sectors that have been closed but could potentially open safely. Senator McDowell made an important point when he stated that our instinct should not be to restrict activity but to control the virus. I am talking about the arts sector, where theatres, galleries and centres operate in relatively precarious financial positions at the best of times. As anybody who has ever been to a gallery will know, however, they are not jam packed with people walking through. They are safe and controlled environments. I understand that the reason they have been told to close is to limit movement but we need to reconsider that.

I was recently contacted by a regional arts venue about the fact that when it reopens, it will need content and artists who are creating. They will have to have something ready to go for next year or whenever a vaccine comes and the venue reopens. It has hired some artists under the wage subsidy scheme but cannot get confirmation from Revenue that that is okay. The venue is hiring artists on the basis of working a day or two a week as employees of the centre, in the same way as cleaners or administrators who are employees of the centre, but Revenue will not give the centre confirmation that it will not have to pay back that money. The centre told me that the risk is that it will end up having to pay back that money after having paid it out. I have been chasing up the issue, as has a Minister's office. The employee wage subsidy scheme, EWSS, is potentially a solution to allow many performance and artistic venues to keep going over the course of the pandemic. An artist being an employee is not a ridiculous concept but, for some reason, Revenue will not confirm that for the centre.

I raise the issue of faith and mass over the course of December and places of worship being allowed to open. I did not grow up in a religious background. The only times I ever went to mass was when we went to funerals, and we did not even go at Christmas time. I always thought that sandwiches were given out at the end of the service. Nevertheless, it is very im-

portant for many people of faith to have access to faith institutions. Even in January, we might find a way of allowing people, particularly older people who get a great deal of comfort from their faith, to attend gatherings in a safe manner.

Senator Róisín Garvey: I welcome the Minister of State to the House. I attended a meeting on rural isolation earlier with Muintir na Tíre, Social Farming Ireland, Mental Health Ireland, the men's shed movement and a few others. Isolation has always been an issue in rural Ireland, as the Minister of State will be probably know as a man from Meath, where there are plenty of rural areas, but no more so than during this pandemic. I cannot put into words how important is the way in which this reopening is done and that it is done safely in order that society will remain open. We have a significant personal responsibility as citizens in how we behave during this next reopening. I would hate to tell people who live on their own in the middle of nowhere, with no visitors during the week, that they cannot even go to the shops and that there will be another lockdown in January. I appeal to people to think about the issue from the perspective of someone who has had no visitors and does not meet anybody and whose only outlet is to go to a shop or mass. We need to bear such people in mind when we think about our behaviour over Christmas.

Local authorities have worked hard to ensure that we can manage our streets and public realm safely and that they can provide an enjoyable experience over Christmas, with the pedestrianisation, the cycling infrastructure that has been given over and the removal of cars from town centres. Over Christmas, space will be given back to people and it will enable them to enjoy their shopping experiences in a safer way. It will be friendlier for older people, people with disabilities, children and so on.

I want to encourage people, before the reopening happens, to think about supporting Irish businesses. There has never been a more important time for that. Jeff Bezos and all those guys have made €39 billion in the past three months, not a penny of which goes into the local economy. We need to think about that. I know that if I do a bit of online shopping, no matter what I look for, Amazon appears as the first result because it spends millions of euro generating advertisements and ensuring that it appears at the top of the feed. We all know that Silicon Valley is controlling it all anyway, according to "The Social Dilemma". It takes a bit more effort but it is so important that we make that effort to spend even €10 more per week or per purchase and to think really hard about supporting small businesses.

I ask the Tánaiste, and the Minister of State who is with us in the Chamber, that when the final decision is made in the Cabinet, clarity be given, which is all that people want. I acknowledge that the Government has been holding meetings with the business sector up to today. At every age, whatever we are doing in our lives, we want clarity. I plead with the Government to meet the business sector tomorrow, straight after the Cabinet meeting when decisions have been made, to let it know exactly where it stands and what it can and cannot do.

The local enterprise offices got great supports from the Government and, as a result, they were able to give many good supports to local businesses. Even though people might think their local shop is not online, the chances are that it now is. There is a haberdashery at home, James Devitt's in Ennistymon, where it feels like going back in time. He is on Instagram and nobody thought we would see the day. We need to highlight the click-and-collect options. While a shop might seem closed, it could be open online. Customers do not have to go to the large multinationals to buy their things all the time. Some shops are proving that their prices are competitive, so let us not rule them out.

I welcome the look for local campaign, which was launched yesterday by the Ministers of State, Deputies English and Troy, and the Tánaiste with the local enterprise offices. That is important because they support small businesses. Look for local is a good concept. Most of us will have a bit more time over the Christmas and we might have time off work. I urge people to find their local farmers' market and local shop and see what is open and what they can do in their local area. If shops are not able to open, people should consider click and collect, because many shops now have that option.

All my time could be spent talking about the importance of turning Black Friday into green Friday. Black Friday is an American concept and I do not know whether taking on American concepts is where this country needs to go. I am all about a green Friday with 20% off. The Black Friday concept will work in this country only if we turn it into a green Friday and support local businesses offering those discounts. If we all spend €10 more per week for the next four weeks, we will save thousands of jobs in the country.

It is important to remember the artists and musicians of this world. When the first lockdown was lifted, I got to go to a couple of gigs - spaced-out sessions, they were called - in Hotel Doolin. There were only 50 people in a venue that holds 400. I have never felt so safe in my life. I felt safer there than I do when walking the streets of Dublin. Venues can do this safely. What struck me most, apart from how safe I felt, was that the musicians were almost crying because of how happy they were to have an audience. Even if there are only 15, 30 or 50 people in a venue, we need to look out for that sector. Events are good for our souls and for the musicians and artists. We are a nation of creative scholars, writers, poets and artists, and they need outlets to create. We all know that Zoom is not where it is at when real interaction with people is wanted.

The most important thing we can give people over this reopening is our time, and that is free. When we are reopening, we will be able to find time to visit our families and friends and have a peaceful and happy Christmas, no matter what happens with the reopening. We need to do so in a really safe way in order that we will never have to go into lockdown again.

Senator Alice-Mary Higgins: I welcome the Minister of State to the House. I have made no secret of my cautious approach to Covid-19. I regret, for example, that we did not opt for a four-week level 5 lockdown when it was first recommended. I think we could be facing figures of 100 cases rather than the 250 that we still have, and that would be a better place to be in as we move into Christmas. With that in mind, the precautionary principle in Article 191 of the EU treaty is really important and I am big fan of it. The principle has a scientific basis. The burden of proof is not to prove danger but the absence of it. What is unique about the precautionary principle is that in general we try to prove things, but where a health or environmental risk is assessed, we tend to err on the side of caution. I absolutely accept that there needs to be nuance, and we have seen situations where church services have been held in a different way, and music events have taken place outdoors, but the burden of proof in such situations must be that it can be demonstrated that safety will be provided. We need to be really careful on where that burden of proof lies and, where it exists, let there perhaps be nuance, because that is important. Within the general cautious approach, we must also make prioritisations. The issue of schools has been discussed before, and there have been examples of risks being taken in one area to protect others in a different area, which is important.

I believe that at Christmas and over the holiday period, relationships are key. I do not wish to diminish the importance of areas such as sport and business, but family and other relation-

ships are the most important thing at this time. It may be that some relationships are facilitated through community or religious moments that are safely managed, and those moments that concern our personhood and relationships should be protected. I urge that these relationships are not put at risk by any undue haste, and that real care is taken to what we do in the first two or three weeks in December to protect that period of time in late December. People will probably be visiting family, so decisions could be made to reduce risk. For example, if the schools were to close one day earlier on Friday, 18 December, that would allow more time before children, who may have been in a classroom, find themselves with grandparents. The small decision to finish school one day earlier could have a proportionate benefit.

It is similar to the issue of working from home. People are constantly being told to work from home, but many do not have the discretion to decide to work from home, as it is their employer who will decide whether they will be permitted to do so. It is important that the Minister of State and the Government send key messages both to employers and employees to support the idea of working from home. Even in cases where it is not the norm, working from home should be accommodated in the week running up to Christmas to give people a longer gap between their activity in one crowded space and potentially their contact with vulnerable family members.

Depending on our testing capacity, another step that might be taken is that where there are high-risk individuals involved, there may be some role for precautionary testing before they meet with others. We already know that we will need to do that in airports and for those travelling home from overseas.

I am a little concerned about the announcement being made tomorrow. This is another part of nuance. I support the proposal from Senator Crowe on an opt-out. Businesses that know that they will not be safe to reopen, should not have to do so, and staff should be permitted to continue to receive the pandemic unemployment payment, PUP. I know some businesses are worrying about putting their staff at risk because they will not be able to receive the PUP if businesses are required to open, so there must be nuance there. In respect of the qualification for the Christmas bonus element of the PUP, as I understand it, the decision will be based on activity from tomorrow, Friday evening, and through the following week. I am concerned about this. Perhaps the Minister of State can reassure us that the announcement tomorrow will not mean that lots of people who have been receiving the PUP for months will no longer qualify for this bonus simply because they may have a day of work next week.

Concerns also exist around the safety of workers in factories and retail. Will there be clear guidance to support the safety of workers in retail, to ensure they have handwashing breaks, for example, and similar things that are very practical but make a big difference to the safety of workers?

There may be some redundancies in the businesses that do not open, which we do not want to see, given that Brexit will also be happening over the Christmas period. We do not want to see multiple cases similar to that of Debenhams, so it is important that issues such as sick pay and redundancy pay are addressed, as there could be dovetailing with the impact of Covid and redundancies.

While I encourage SMEs, local businesses and others to support An Post, perhaps the Government could also support it, considering the incredibly positive role it has played throughout the pandemic. We know that it traditionally hires extra postal workers at Christmas, so perhaps

some additional resources could be directed to An Post to support it while it, in turn, supports local businesses around this time. That is a very practical measure and a way in which the State could give encouragement to an organisation which has provided great support and encouragement to others.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: The next speaker, as per the rotation, is Senator Malcolm Byrne.

Senator Malcolm Byrne: I thank the Minister of State for coming to the House. I echo the comments of the Leas-Chathaoirleach that the Minister of State always brings optimism to his role, and we need optimism and hope over this period in order that we can come through these difficult times. I welcome the fact that the Minister of State is engaging with the retail forum, as it is very important to engage with the business sector on this, and also the Government's innovative approach in a number of areas, including, as Senator Ahearn mentioned, the CRSS scheme. It is also important that Members of this House thank the retail workers who have kept the supermarkets and other shops open during this period, some of whom are vulnerable. Therefore, they must be thanked and the role they have played must be recognised.

When we come out of this, the best way to get the economic recovery that we all want, and to address some of the economic challenges that Senator McDowell highlighted, is to get people back to work. We must prioritise getting those people back into employment who may have lost their jobs as a result of the pandemic. Of particular concern to me is what is happening with young people. This is not just because of the economic impact it is having, but also the social impact. The Minister of State is aware that during the summer, youth unemployment peaked at over 40%. We must look at very targeted ways of ensuring that young people who have lost their jobs are able to get back into employment or into upskilling and retraining. One specific issue that I ask the Minister of State to address is the waiting list for driving tests, because it is preventing many young people from taking up employment. The waiting time for driving tests is now over 30 weeks, and that has a knock-on effect on the employment market, particularly when people do not have access to public transport.

I want to echo the concerns raised by Senator Crowe around the hospitality sector. I am concerned that we are only receiving announcements this weekend for what might happen in the hospitality sector next week. It is not possible for hotels, cafes and restaurants to simply switch on the lights and presume that they can reopen. I, and other Members of this House, have asked that there will be a lead-in period to reopening, and people will be given notice. It is not just about being able to bring in employees; it is also about being able to order stock, etc. It does not make sense to expect an announcement one evening in which one may be told that one can open within a few days. There must be adequate notice given to the sector. We also need to look at how we can learn from this experience to revitalise our hospitality sector. I recall Senator McDowell once singing the praises of cafe bars and I think that, bizarrely, our experience during this pandemic may lead to - and I hope to see it - an opening of outdoor dining facilities. We must put in place - particularly at local level through local authorities - the supports required to do that. Some of that work has started and it must continue.

There are a few specific sectors that other Senators have mentioned and on which I share their concerns. In the area of sport and well-being, it is important for people's well-being that they are able to get back into gyms. If people are working out in their own corner of the gym, they will not come into contact with anyone else. Any of the gyms that I am aware of have put in place very stringent cleaning measures to help prevent the spread of Covid-19. The Minister of State will be aware that while running on the roads is great most of the time, at this time of

the year it is not, so we should at least give people the opportunity to be able to exercise indoors.

As we are all aware, the tourism sector is one that has been particularly impacted by the pandemic. I want to specifically talk about many of the tourist venues that are not regarded as fully commercial venues, and as a result they have not necessarily been able to avail of some of the commercial opportunities the Government has provided. The income levels of tourist attractions in Wexford such as Hook Head, the Irish National Heritage Park and Dunbrody House are down significantly this year. While some measures have been put in place by Fáilte Ireland, it is not enough to ensure that those tourist attractions will recover quickly.

Like Senators Moynihan and Garvey, I want to make a strong case for the arts sector. Our theatres, galleries and arts venues are controlled environments and can operate safely. It is not just important for them to be able to survive commercially, it is also important for our sense of community well-being. We would meet more people in a supermarket than we would if we walked next door and into the National Gallery of Ireland, as Senator Moynihan has said. We must look at how those venues can be reopened safely.

All of us here want to support local business. I referred to this matter earlier, but there has been a shift in purchasing to the online market. One of the associated difficulties is that it puts the high street and main street businesses at a distinct disadvantage because they continue to pay commercial rates. Commercial rates is a model of funding local government from the 1820s. It is completely outdated. It is a ridiculous situation that the local government funding in this country is determined on the basis of the size of the shop floor of premises when more and more money is being spent online. We, as a Government, need to radically reform the commercial rates system.

I know that the Minister of State is enthusiastic and optimistic. We have to get the country moving again. I ask the Minister of State to take on board the points I have made.

Senator Mary Seery Kearney: The Minister of State is welcome. It is always good to see him and the optimism that he brings.

I am happy and anxious at the same time. We stand at the end of a lockdown period that has been, largely, a great success, whether we agree with it or not. It would appear that we have had a second wave of infection, experienced a peak and are managing the case numbers and caseloads that are coming through. All the trends are downward and that is positive and great.

I am fearful about opening up on 1 December, although I hope we do because many people have made appointments for that date, some urgently. I am fearful that the cycle of positive cases will start going upwards from a fortnight to three weeks after the reopening and that we will end up with an emergency meeting around 16 or 18 December reflecting a rise in cases because people have been out shopping, our hospitality establishments have reopened and people have resumed visiting them. People feel that, after such a long time of sacrifice, they deserve their Christmas and to meet their families. All of that is true. However, 2,033 people are dead. They may not have died were it not for this serious virus that is afflicting our country and the world.

I wish that we were back in the situation we were in during the summer. I wish we were in a place where we were looking at an opening up of Ireland and that we had a plan for what to do next Monday and three weeks later. That was a great success during the summer. The opening up of the economy and life was clear and decisive. People had hope and a date for which to aim. I booked a holiday in Cork for the date on which we could travel. I was gone once we

could go. We were able to pull the original plan back and open even earlier. Christmas, and the here and now, make that a difficult thing for our Government to do. I do not envy the subgroup or the Cabinet who will try to make a decision tomorrow. In an ideal world, we would open everything up, including the hospitality sector, and I would like to be in a position to say that. I see hardship in the group of people who are around me. There are 30 or 40 people who have had a grand time during Covid-19 and have sailed through it. They have worked from home. It has been challenging because of childcare and they are worried about the mental health of people, which is serious in itself, but there are others who have lost their businesses, have had to organise moratoriums on their mortgages and have actually lost loved ones through Covid and otherwise. Those people face into a lonely Christmas without members of their family and need to get together.

There are difficulties around Christmas. There is an impetus to pile pressure and urgency on the Government, especially around the hospitality sector. I do not blame those in the sector. This is the time of year when a lot would be sold across retail and hospitality. It is the one opportunity to store up profits for the lean times of January and February. We are in a difficult place. The only thing I can say is that if the Government is prepared to open things up and, as a part of that narrative, we say that we may have another lockdown in January, we are giving licence to an attitude where people go for it because they think we are going to be locked down again in January anyway. I fear for a relaxation of the adherence to regulations that has brought us to the place in which we are today of having lower numbers of infections. We have lower numbers because people and businesses have made incredible sacrifices. We, as a nation, have complied with the regulations for the most part. We have made good choices.

As much as I want to stand here and give the Minister of State a list of all the things that I believe are urgent, I find it difficult to do so. I worry about small businesses that took out personal loans to advance themselves. I worry about extracurricular activities and the effect their cancellation is having. I have a child who has not had a play date since last March. Moments in people's lives are passing that can never be got back. There are rites of passage that can never be reclaimed. Things are passing. Every day is a huge development for the young. The old are sitting and waiting, fearful that death awaits them if they go out to the shop, church or wherever.

If we are going to open churches, we need to think about every type of church, denomination and religion. It is not just the Catholic and Protestant churches that have fine big buildings. There are newer churches. Many of the international communities that live among us have evangelical churches that meet in community centres. We are going to have to start discriminating the minute we make a decision. We must make a decision around square footage, or something like that.

I do not envy the Minister of State. I urge him to make the communication and vision strong and clear. We must craft a vision for the new year when we can open up because we will have a vaccine and all of these things. We must urge people to adhere to the regulations for Christmas because we want to have a happy new year.

Senator Eugene Murphy: It is fascinating to sit here and listen to every contribution. I am a former Deputy and new to the Seanad. I have to give credit to each of my colleagues. Senator Seery Kearney expressed some anxiety about how we move forward. Senator McDowell seems to be more open to getting things up and running. It is wonderful to hear everybody having a point of view and expressing it honestly. Some really good points have been made.

I want to join other Senators in again praising all the front-line workers, our local authorities and local enterprise offices, LEOs. They have really stepped up to the mark. I also compliment the Department of Social Protection. I deal with the Department on behalf of constituents and its staff are excellent. I want to give a word of praise to the Minister of State, Deputy English. He has been sent out to bat for the Government on many occasions. It has not been easy. A member of my party said to me last week that at least the Minister of State gives us a little bit of hope for the future.

It has been difficult all around. It is difficult for the Taoiseach and the new Minister for Health. I have said before that dealing with the first four months of the pandemic was completely different compared with dealing with the second four months, and I will tell the House why. Every one of us was of the opinion that this would not last. I have praised the previous Taoiseach, now the Tánaiste, and the previous Minister for Health, Deputy Harris, but I also see the work being done by the present Taoiseach, the Tánaiste and by our present Minister for Health. It is not an easy task, not only for the regime in this country but for any government across the world at the moment. The virus has caused problems everywhere.

Senator Higgins mentioned An Post and I think other Members did as well. It was a very important point. I add to that by mentioning the work done by postmen and women, particularly in rural areas where they actually still call to the door, ask people are they okay, bring them out a newspaper or take a message for them somewhere else. All of this is okay by the top brass in An Post. It is fantastic to see that happen and it happens in urban areas as well. It is fantastic to see something that was so important in the past to people now being there again. The Leas-Chathaoirleach will know this as well from the rural parts of County Cavan.

When I say this I am probably not going to please all of my constituents but I am very much in favour of reopening our hotels, restaurants and pubs. Having made that statement I will get 50% of the people calling me saying I was right and 50% telling me I should not have said that and we cannot open them. I will explain where I am coming from on this. The attitudes of many people have changed and they have changed again. Going back to the point I made about people thinking this was going to be a three- or four-month event, now I think most reasonable people understand that even with a vaccine, we are going to have challenges and problems well into 2021. We are probably going to have to wear masks and we going to have to do a lot of things differently than we did in the past. I have a great belief that there is a huge area of personal responsibility with the Irish public, and let us get that message out today. Therefore, if the pubs are allowed to open let us be clear that for publicans who break the rules there will be consequences when they want to renew their licences. This must be a carrot-and-stick approach. I am against opening the pubs for a few weeks and then closing them. We either open them or close them and that is what publicans are telling me. We need to be very careful about that. The level of outbreak from the hotel and restaurant sector when it was open was minimal. It was so low. I think it was 0.12% or something like that. Again, I know from visiting hotels and restaurants that they were fantastic all over the place. They really did what they were asked to do by Government and the experts, and they will do so again. It is important we put our faith in the people. They are exhausted from Covid, they are anxious about it. As many speakers have said, people have anxieties about banks and Revenue. Despite all the assurances and reassurances people still have a lot of worries and quite a number of them will say, "I had X amount of people employed here and I really worry about them". We must have faith in them.

The Minister of State might clarify a few things concerning the reopening. From my own perspective and from a rural one, will we allow some people back into the marts as that is an

issue? Will the shooting season be allowed to happen? I think churches are going to open. A number of Members have mentioned that we speak for all churches. I admit I am a practising Catholic but we must apply this to all churches and all faiths. They should all be allowed to have their desire to go to church met. A lot of people who might not attend church during the year, of whatever religion, nearly all go along at Christmas time. That might create problems in the church but I am sure more ceremonies can be put on. Will non-contact sports like golf and tennis be allowed?

My time is up. This has been a good debate, fantastic points have been made. I wish the Government well with its decisions tomorrow. I am sure the Minister of State will relay our concerns and our views to the Taoiseach and Tánaiste and I thank him for his time today.

Senator Paddy Burke: I welcome the Minister of State to the House. I concur with everything that has been said about this great debate and I wish the Minister of State well with all of the proposals that have been made today.

I have a different issue to raise with the Minister of State. I think it is partly in his area of responsibility but it mainly pertains to the Department of Social Protection. It is an issue I have raised before with the previous Minister for social protection. I am referring to redundancy. While I have been involved in small businesses all my life, it is nearly more difficult to close a business than to open one because one must pay creditors, banks and tax. Winding up a business is a very difficult business. During the downturn there were many businesses, and I am talking specifically about sole traders or self-employed people, which downsized or eventually closed and had to pay redundancy to their staff.

The Redundancy Payments Act 2003 mandated that an employer must pay two weeks wages per year of service to all staff, going back to whenever they started, which could be back in the 1970s, 1980s or whenever. The result is that many business people, sole traders or self-employed people are now facing the prospect of their home being used to pay for the redundancy. Some people downsized, and they cashed in their private pensions to pay the redundancy. Eventually, the day of reckoning always comes and they closed. For the rest of the funds, in some cases they plead inability to pay, with the result that the State paid the redundancy to the staff, and rightly so. I have no problem at all with staff having to get their due amount of money upon redundancy. The problem I see here is that in some of those cases, and this is going to be a huge problem going forward, there are many businesses that will never open again. Let us face it, there are many small businesses that have been employing people for years that will never open again and are going to be faced with the prospect of paying redundancy to their staff whether they are closed at the moment or not. Over the last six months we have seen - and in fairness, one must congratulate the Government as there is a lot of money around - but there is no money around to pay redundancy on behalf of self-employed people or sole traders. What really happens at the finish, at the end of the day, if a sole trader or a self-employed person cannot afford to pay the redundancy is that it is going to be taken out of their estate eventually and that is the family home.

I am going to bring forward a Private Members' Bill to eliminate the family home from such cases. I hope the Government will back me. The family home should not be used in this case. In lots of cases the family home goes back generations. A small business person or a self-employed person who had been employing people for donkey's years is going to be faced with the fact that his or her family home will be taken to pay the two weeks' statutory redundancy for employees, and good employees as well. The Minister of State should bring that back to

Government because I have a number of cases. There are also a lot of former sole traders and self-employed people who are afraid to talk about this issue but that is what is going to happen. I brought this to the attention of Senator Doherty when she was Minister for social protection and I must say that the Government is turning a blind eye to it. However, it is going to be more common as we face into the unknown of what is going to happen after this virus is hopefully beaten when we get the vaccine. It is a very distressing thing for business people who must face into this where they plead inability to pay, where they sell their businesses to pay for redundancies and it may not be enough, and then they face the possibility that their family home will eventually be taken to pay for the redundancies. I hope the Minister of State will take that on board because, eventually, some of those people may end up having to go to nursing homes. There will be problems between the Revenue Commissioners and social welfare which will look for their money back. We will have the person going to a nursing home and the problem with the fair deal scheme. It will, therefore, cause problems as we go forward. If I bring forward the Private Members' Bill, I hope I get a bit of backing from the Government.

In any event, I wish the Minister of State well. The Government has done a magnificent job on keeping the country open, and as previous speakers have said, I hope businesses will be up and running from 1 December because we need that for people's sanity. We need to get back to some form of life where people can go about and do their business, whether that is business or relaxation or whatever. I wish the Minister of State well.

Senator Timmy Dooley: I welcome the opportunity to contribute to this debate and welcome the Minister of State, Deputy English, to the House. I thank him for the work he is doing in dealing with a difficult sector of the economy that has gone through a difficult period in recent months.

There is some light at the end of the tunnel as we begin a process of coming out of the latest level of lockdown and it is incumbent on all of us to show leadership in how we manage that process. The State stepped in, as it had to and should, in protecting businesses to the greatest extent possible with various financial supports through this period. Of course, it is never enough. It never could be enough. Of course, it will not address the significant loss in income that many small businesses have suffered. It has, however, effectively helped them to survive in a basic way during this period. Now, as there is some light at the end of the tunnel, we must be careful how we re-engage with the public, and the public must be careful how it re-engages with social and retail activity.

I believe, as we enter the Christmas period and exit this latest level of restrictions, that the public have learned an inordinate amount about this virus. Much more care is taken by people now. People do not congregate in the same way. They wash their hands much more, wear face coverings and keep their distance. In the main, people have stayed away from events such as funerals, matches and different visitations to houses. Even in important circumstances, people have chosen not to do that. We must, therefore, show people that we trust them, and I believe that requires opening the economy to the greatest extent possible. People have learned a lot. People who feel they have compromised a health situation are saying to me that they could have gone to a work event but did not. They chose to stay at home to protect individuals and family members. They chose not to do the grocery shopping on a weekly basis because they know it might put them in some danger. There is, therefore, much better understanding.

Human behaviour has changed immensely, so let us start to treat people as adults. Let us stop this blame game. I am sure, when restrictions lift, a bunch of teenagers who have been dra-

matically affected by this lockdown will do something we might otherwise say was stretching the boundary. Let us not hammer them, however. There will be small breaches. That is why regulations and rules are there. People will have minor indiscretions. Let us concentrate on the big picture which, for me, is getting that economic activity going. Let people engage with it in a careful and conscious way that limits the risk of them contracting the virus, and where they might be prone to have caught it, to limit to the greatest extent possible the ability to be a spreader of the virus.

Retail is on its knees. The Minister of State does not need me to talk to him about that. We need to see the retail sector open. We need to see beauty care, hairdressers, barbers and nail parlours. That needs to open next week. I argue that we need to see restaurants and pubs open too. There is some argument against opening wet pubs but if we tried to corral everyone into a restaurant right now - because the demand will be there - we will only increase the intensification of people in a social setting. Set certain limits on the numbers that should be there. Set earlier closing times or put greater restrictions on owners regarding sanitation and sanitising certain areas. Let people make choices, however. I believe they have learned a lot and will make those choices.

Cattle marts need to have buyers back around the ring. I appeal to the Minister of State because I see no chance of there being any risk of the spread of the virus in that environment. I mention hunting. I am not a huntsman, but other people are, and for them it is an important pursuit. It is part of their leisure activity. That restriction needs to be lifted next week. Hare coursing meetings are set around the country. I am not into hare coursing. I do not have a dog, but other people do, and it is their livelihood. The return some people might get from the breeding and sale of dogs in a controlled and regulated environment is the capacity to send a kid to college. Hare coursing, in the manner it is now practised, is part of that whole industry. The State supports the industry, and it should, in the same way it supports the horse racing industry because it employs many people. We must let those activities operate again.

I am also taken by the fact that certain activities were allowed in the last period, but something like dancing was excluded. Perhaps, I underestimate it. None of my kids danced in the past when they were younger. I have, however, been taken by the number of calls I have received from people who want to get back dancing. To them, it is not just an important leisure pursuit; it is also good for their physical activity, particularly the kind of figure dancing that is done among a younger cohort of people. Some people go to the gym, some play hurling or basketball and some dance. If it is done in a controlled and careful way, I do not see a good reason for restricting it.

I appeal to the Minister of State to be as trusting as he can be of the Irish people, accepting that there will be indiscretions. Give as much advice and as many guidelines as are necessary so people who want to adhere to them will do so. Place some trust as we head into the Christmas period.

While I listen to what NPHET and the various experts say about international travel and not wanting to seed another cluster of the virus from outside the State, there are people who will want to come home for Christmas to see their parents. In some cases, it might be their last opportunity to see an elderly parent or grandparent. I appeal that by lifting restrictions, we do not create some enormous burden on those who want to come home. Let the advice be that we would prefer they did not, but if they do, let us not put an inordinate burden on them. Let us not put them in some kind of closet or put some kind of shadow over them that they will be

embarrassed to be seen when they come. Let us not do that.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I now call a fellow Clare Senator. My thanks to Senator Conway for accommodating a colleague earlier.

Senator Martin Conway: That is okay, we must accommodate our senior seasoned representatives. In the first instance, like everybody else, I welcome the Minister of State, Deputy English, into the House. He has done a sterling job on late-night TV and radio selling the message of what we are trying to achieve here, which is to flatten the curve and try to live with this awful disease. He has done a remarkably good job in that regard.

I wish to start my remarks by thanking the Irish people for their resilience, patience, determination and sacrifice in helping as a collaborative *meitheal* effort to try to deal with this pandemic. They have been resilient and made enormous sacrifices. Hundreds and thousands of them at the moment are on the PUP because they want to do the right thing to save the vulnerable people in our society.

I hear the calls about opening various sectors and I agree with much of it. I do not see the harm in having a clothes shop or shoe shop open.

This is the time of year when retail outlets need to sell their product in order to provide themselves with a cushion going into the early part of next year when things will be quiet.

I acknowledge the arguments, discussion and discourse taking place about restaurants and pubs, the prevalence of alcohol and the challenge it seems to present to this disease, not just here but throughout the world. The Government has a job to do and, ultimately, it is its decision. I hope that, as we speak, the people responsible for advising the Government are going through the ifs, buts and maybes. I hope we will return with safe protocols on the opening of restaurants, because the last thing we want at this stage is another spike after Christmas. We are so near to a vaccine being rolled out that I would hate to see all of the sacrifices and hard work of recent months being washed away because of a reopening programme that is too ambitious. That said, we do need to try to give people a normal semblance of Christmas, as much as possible. We know it is not going to be a normal Christmas. However, we want to try to create as much flexibility to facilitate people to, as much as possible, have an enjoyable Christmas. It is difficult and challenging.

What we have seen is the Government and society react in a way that would make one proud. Future generations will look back and see the way in which society, the Government and the leadership of all sectors, religious organisations and others responded to Ireland's call. The people who magnify what is great about our communities and country are the many front-line workers who risk their lives. Many of them got Covid and, sadly, a small number of them have died as a result. The sacrifice they have made to protect citizens is remarkable. We owe it to them and to the connective *meitheal* that has happened in this country to be cautious but, at the same time, ambitious.

I agree with people who say 2021 will be a great year. It will be a year where we will have a vaccine that will prevent people picking up this disease. At some stage, if time permits this side of Christmas, we should have a debate on the roll-out of the vaccine because it will be the big challenge of quarters 1 and 2 of 2021. I look forward to 2021 with optimism. We have learnt a lot, experienced a lot and suffered a lot. We have lost loved ones and people have got sick in 2020 but we have come together as a nation and in 2021 we will build on the strength

of character that we have adopted, developed and nurtured. I think of the words of Seamus Heaney: “If we winter this one out, we can summer anywhere.”

Acting Chairman (Senator Victor Boyhan): I thank Senator Conway. Before I call Senator Cassells, I am conscious that we now have seven Senators waiting to speak. With six minutes each, that is 42 minutes and the Minister of State also has to respond. There are only 28 minutes left. I ask Senators to be conscious of their time. It would be great if they could tighten it up so everyone has an opportunity to speak.

Senator Shane Cassells: I welcome the Minister of State. I acknowledge his words and his work in ensuring that businesses that were forced to close as a result of the pandemic and their staff were supported.

It is important that this debate is framed by acknowledging how it was predicted last spring that our economy would shrink by 8%, but now it is predicted that it will only shrink by 2.3%. I wish to highlight the resilience of business in Ireland, especially in the multinational sector and the strong exports by IT companies and pharmaceutical companies that have made sure we will get back to a level playing field. There are plenty of people in this House who tell us what is wrong, but they are missing for this important debate. Their absence is notable. They have a love affair with Cuba. They were at it again this morning. They were talking about Diego Maradona and brought Cuba into it, a country that is in the depths of despair and poverty. There is no sign of them now for a debate about the reopening of this country. We had a predicted decrease in economic activity of 8% and it is 2.3%. Spain’s economy has decreased by 12.4%, Italy by 9.9%, and the UK by 10.3%. There is no sign of the Cubans.

The actions to support businesses during the pandemic and the philosophical approach in general has made sure that this country can recover. Senator McDowell spoke about how the reopening cannot be measured and analysed purely in commercial terms. He is so right. The Minister of State used a phrase in his speech to the effect that we need to support businesses in their journey. He is correct. There will be many journeys. It is not all about pounds, shillings and pence. It is about the very fabric of society. I refer to sport, which is part of the reopening as well. I made the point to the Minister of State at the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media, Deputy Jack Chambers, that we supported these organisations financially, which is welcome, but I argued that elite sports should continue during level 5, and I am glad I did. Many here did not. We saw the joy last weekend in Tipperary and Cavan and the despair in Meath. It is all emotion, but it is all part of making sure that life can continue with some normality. I praise the arts community. We saw the Abbey Theatre broadcast a number of plays online to mark Bloody Sunday. The Solstice arts centre in Navan has continued its visual art performances online as well. Many have spoken about the churches. I do not need to speak to the Minister of State about it, as Fr. Mark would be on the phone to him, but I praise the Taoiseach for engaging with the leaders of all churches.

The retail sphere is the Minister of State’s area of responsibility. I noted his words to the effect that many will need to avail of trading online. I praise the Government for the funds it provided to get small retail operations trading online that would never have engaged in it previously. Here is the rub and the big challenge: we had a problem with retail businesses in town centres before this and we are now encouraging online business for even the smaller businesses that would not have traded online. I am fearful that in trying to help businesses, we could hasten the death of the main street. Last Sunday, the television programme “The Week in Politics” had a segment about our home town of Navan and spoke to many traders based in Navan Town

Centre, including Michelle Coldrick. Ms Coldrick posed the question as to whether she will be there next year. That is the big question. Will we be here next year? We need not just a focus on keeping business alive, but keeping our towns alive, because if our towns die we lose something in terms of the fabric of society as well.

Acting Chairman (Senator Victor Boyhan): Senator Currie should be conscious of the time as the Minister of State must come in at 3.25 p.m.

Senator Emer Currie: I will. I welcome the Minister of State. There has been a more measured discourse in recent weeks about young people and how Covid is affecting teenagers. I welcome that. I remember when summer holidays seemed like an eternity. Lives were changed over the course of three months and yet many of them have had nine months at home with mum and dad and no social life. There is more empathy now than there was for the challenges young people are facing.

I wish to speak about the smallies because they have not had the same amount of attention and everything that has happened has been a massive upheaval for them. As the Minister of State is aware, I have two small children who are six and seven, and he has small children. The thing about small children is that it is not a problem until it is a problem. They have been going through a lot. I thought mine were coping fine until Hallowe'en and I told them there would not be any trick or treating. What came out in one sentence is something that I did not pick up on as being there to the extent it was. My daughter said to me that first it was St. Patrick's Day, then it was Hallowe'en and next it will be Christmas. I wish to flag that. It is completely understandable. We are talking about businesses reopening, but we must also remember the magic of Christmas and that we only have a very small number of Christmases with our children. We do not want them to be afraid of what Christmas is going to be like or that it is anything less this year than other years. I welcome what the Minister for Foreign Affairs said in the Dáil today, clarifying for all children, including my own, that Santa is an essential worker for essential purposes, meaning he does not have to self-quarantine but should observe social distancing.

It is not just about Christmas but it is about January. The data from the schools with a positivity rate of 2.5% suggests we are managing school transmission. Non-contact training outdoors in pods of 15 is working. There have been no play dates, ballet classes, Irish dancing, drama, Beavers or Cubs for small children, however. I fear for them. I want them to have more than just school. This also has an impact on the family as well. I know about this as I am of that age group looking after small children and elderly parents. There is much anxiety around my age and stage.

To have the reassurance that we will be going into January with a more organised calendar, and that it is not just about school but about their hobbies, would be a great relief for many parents and the businesses which run those activities. That is why the roadmap over the next couple of weeks will be important. It is also important that it is clear, incremental and that people and businesses know what to expect.

So much of our focus has been around Covid health. In January, I hope it shifts to general and mental health. Our general mental and physical health are important. We also need to turn our attention to support those who have had Covid.

I welcome the Department's protocol in helping businesses open safely and stay safe. We need a booklet that goes to every home about working safely at home, to ensure people know

their rights, as well as employer and employee obligations in that regard.

I am glad to hear other Senators use the phrase that I asked them to use earlier, namely, green Friday. Tomorrow is Black Friday. We want to turn it to green Friday by supporting and clicking local, championing our local businesses, jobs and communities.

Senator Joe O'Reilly: The safest environment I have ever been in since Covid began has been our local church. By that, I mean social distancing and the way the rules were implemented. It is important all religious practices are resumed. They have done an excellent job and the people are, by nature, compliant with those rules.

If we open any pubs, we should open all pubs. Apart from equity, from my experience in small rural towns - I am not as adept at speaking about Dublin - if every pub were open, one would have a naturally dispersed socially distanced crowd. It is not a difficult thing to achieve in that territory.

We need to begin religious services for everyone. We must open all pubs with strict rules with enforcement if they are not adhered to.

Senator John McGahon: I find it astonishing that we have a serious debate on the reopening of our country's retail but the best Opposition that was ever going to be provided in the history of the State has not even bothered to turn up.

Acting Chairman (Senator Victor Boyhan): In terms of Standing Orders-----

Senator John McGahon: Was there anything wrong with what I said?

Acting Chairman (Senator Victor Boyhan): Sorry. I have some guidance on this. I am advised that referring to Members who may not be here or may be at committees is not the done practice. Will the Senator be mindful of that?

Senator Martin Conway: They should be here.

Senator John McGahon: I will be mindful of it. While I will take the Acting Chairman's advice, with all due respect, they should be here. I am not sure if there are many committees sitting at this time on a Thursday. Perhaps the fact that there are no votes for the rest of the day means people skedaddled earlier. I can only assume and cannot make any real guesses about it.

Acting Chairman (Senator Victor Boyhan): Sorry but-----

Senator John McGahon: Please, Acting Chairman. I have a limited amount of time.

Acting Chairman (Senator Victor Boyhan): Could Members take their seats? I am advised that Members who are not here may be on other business, be it governmental or departmental. We cannot attribute any reason they are not here. If Members would please respect that. It is not my ruling. It is what I have been advised.

Senator Shane Cassells: They are not here.

Senator Martin Conway: It was a point of fact.

Acting Chairman (Senator Victor Boyhan): I am also advised it is not relevant.

Senator Martin Conway: It was a point of fact.

Senator Shane Cassells: They are not here.

Senator Martin Conway: It is not appropriate that they are not here.

Acting Chairman (Senator Victor Boyhan): I have been advised - it is not my ruling - that Members may be on other business. It is a convention of the House. I am pretty new to it. Could we just bear that in mind?

Senator John McGahon: With due respect to you, Acting Chairman, and to help you out in the Chair, I would say conventions are there sometimes to be broken. I like to break them every once in a while but to finish my point-----

Acting Chairman (Senator Victor Boyhan): Sorry, Members-----

Senator John McGahon: Jesus, I have two minutes.

Acting Chairman (Senator Victor Boyhan): Members should just address the subject matter. We are tight for time.

Senator John McGahon: If I could just finish-----

Acting Chairman (Senator Victor Boyhan): Yes, but the Senator must stick to the subject matter.

Senator John McGahon: Going back to the subject matter, which is not about the best Opposition ever provided in the history of the State, I find it is important that I personally turn up to all briefings about topics like this to ensure that I am well-informed so that when we debate specific matters, I can discuss them. That is what I am doing here.

Retail has more or less been sorted this afternoon. However, GD Tours, a company based in Derry, last night proposed to take a bus load of shoppers from Derry on a round trip of 452 km to Dundrum Shopping Centre on 5 December. As retail would be closed in Northern Ireland but open in the South, they felt they could come down here. It has now subsequently put a post on Facebook stating that it did not realise the restrictions in place. Was the company living on the dark side of the moon for the past 12 months? Where has it been since February of this year that it thought it would be acceptable to bus down a whole load of shoppers more than 452 km on a round trip to Dublin? That seriously undermines the real efforts being made on both sides of the Border.

When we talk about an all-Ireland approach to Covid, it works both ways. It is not just about people on this side of the Border having to make sacrifices while people in Northern Ireland think that they can come 450 km down the road to shop here. Perhaps if other people turned up to briefings, they would know that too.

Senator Sharon Keogan: While I am only an Independent, I would like to think I would provide some opposition to the Government parties today.

Senator Alice-Mary Higgins: Likewise.

(Interruptions).

Senator Sharon Keogan: The Minister of State is very welcome to the Chamber to give us an update on how we are going to move forward. Covid is not the problem; the living with

Covid plan of the Government is the issue. It is killing business and society. The silent lie of this Government to those flip-flopping in and out of business is crippling entrepreneurs. There is plenty of money and there are plenty of ideas but the brain drain is sitting at the Government table with no ideas or plans. The Government has little or no respect for the timelines associated with doing business. Can the Minister of State give us details on how much money has been given out to indigenous companies to date? What have been the challenges and how has he addressed them? The problem for many companies is the box they fit into, or do not fit into. There is money in the enterprise centres, Fáilte Ireland and the Strategic Banking Corporation of Ireland. The Government is giving 80% guarantees to the banks, and I am told the banks are refusing to support Irish companies. What is the Minister of State going to do about that?

Living with Covid is a lie. We have had no plan in this country for 12 months while we have been waiting for a vaccine to cure all our ills. What happens if that fails? Already this morning, we have heard warnings about bird flu. Here we go again. Has the Minister of State a plan for that? Who will pay the bills when the Government fails to support enterprise? People are looking for hope. The Government should give them a firm indication that it has a plan for business. Tough decisions must be made and taken. Has the Minister of State respect for business? How can businesses plan for services or production in 2021? Businesses are one cheque away from closing. God forbid that interest rates will increase. Has the Minister of State a plan for that? I am sure he has a plan for keeping inflation down.

We have already heard the many tales of companies complaining about not getting product because of the massive effect of Covid on production and supply. We all know what happens when supply volumes drop; prices go up. Are we ready for that?

One of the best arms of the State is the Revenue Commissioners. If they can get it right, why can we not employ the same standards in health, education and justice? The reason the Revenue Commissioners get it right is that they deal with businesses every single day. The Government should be mindful of the business people in this country. The business community is the lifeblood of the State. It needs a transfusion now so the Government should get on with it.

Senator John Cummins: I thank all the front-line workers who have worked throughout this pandemic. I am very mindful today of all those who have lost loved ones in the pandemic. My family had a bereavement in that I lost my godmother. I realise how difficult it has been for families to grieve during the pandemic. I am particularly mindful today of all the affected families.

The Government's response has been extraordinary. It has provided an extraordinary amount of support to individuals, businesses, schools, sports organisations and communities throughout the country. It has been unprecedented; there is absolutely no question about that.

I would like to mention the circumstances of one sector, however. I am aware there have been discussions about it in the Minister of State's Department. I ask him to examine again the circumstances of companies that do not own their own business premises. A catering company in a city, town or village will have received the restart grant, the restart plus grant, the rates waivers and, now, the Covid restrictions support scheme payment, but a catering company that operates from its owner's home will not have received any of those. I ask that this be considered.

Senator Keogan mentioned the credit guarantee scheme and said the banks are not lending

to businesses. I would like to give the Minister of State an example of the opposite occurring. It concerns a business whose owner came to me a couple of months ago. I made the individual aware of the credit guarantee scheme and said it is not just for new lending. I totally appreciate that some businesses may not want to borrow at this time but they can actually refinance existing loans using the credit guarantee scheme. The business owner who approached me was advised by the business's accountant not to apply on the grounds that the application would not be successful. The owner applied on my advice and, within three days, had approval from the bank, thereby reducing the interest rate from 7% to 2.2%. The scheme has been extended until the end of June next year, which is very welcome, but the take-up has been low. Perhaps it has been low because people are saying the scheme is not working, and perhaps accountants around the country are telling businesses not to apply because they will not be approved. I suggest to them that they should apply. Where there is a refusal, the case can be taken to the Credit Review Office.

Senator Currie mentioned mental and physical health. Coming from a physical education background, I am a strong supporter of gyms. They made strong representations to remain open. I supported them in their calls because not all gyms are the same. Many personal training facilities worked exceptionally hard to try to segregate areas and to have only one, two or three clients in the building at the same time. I am not referring to the big gyms that we know of throughout the country. It is important that when we reopen the economy next week, it remains open. That is what businesses need. They need assurances that they are not just going to be closed again and that they will remain open.

Senator Fintan Warfield: I have just one comment to make, on entertainment. I welcome the Minister of State to the House. On the last occasion that gastropubs and restaurants could open on a limited basis, no live music was allowed. We might have an official announcement tomorrow that some hospitality venues can open. Has the Government had any discussions with NPHET specifically on live music and live performance? The plight of live performers has been well articulated in the Houses so I will not go over it again. Even if live music had no impact on the ability of a venue to impose all necessary social distancing rules, would it be allowed? It would serve us well to have a test case to determine whether a musician could play a hospitality venue in December if guarantees on social distancing are made.

Much of today's businesses will concern the reopening of vital services, such as screening and testing services and therapies. I will be speaking about these later. I draw the attention of the Minister of State to a Bill before the Dáil today, the Mental Health Parity of Esteem Bill, whose aim is to place the treatment of mental health issues and the right to access that treatment on the same footing as the treatment of physical health conditions and access thereto.

I am not sure whether the previous speaker mentioned our not covering about four portfolios in this Chamber, one of which has about ten portfolios within it. Some people would do well to follow their own advice and tone down the attacks on Sinn Féin and other Opposition parties.

Acting Chairman (Senator Victor Boyhan): I thank the Senators for sticking to a tight timeframe.

Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Damien English): I am sorry that I will not have time to answer everyone's questions but I will come back on specific questions and I will try to cover some of the topics. I thank the Senators for the debate, which has certainly been worthwhile. There are ongoing negotiations through

the various subcommittees, there will be the Cabinet today and tomorrow and we will also be dealing with NPHE. I will feed this in. I have sent the Tánaiste some of the messages that have come in already. I am sure the Taoiseach, Deputy Micheál Martin, also has them. All of the concerns and questions raised will be fed in as was the debate in the House on Tuesday. It is worthwhile having this discussion and getting all this feedback. I am conscious many of the Senators have been in touch regularly with suggestions, feedback and ideas and they are all fed into the system as best as we possibly can.

I will identify some of the areas that were asked about, including enforcement and the Garda doing its job to support Government messaging, and it certainly has. The inspections led out by the HSA involve many other Departments. It has brought in an extra 700 inspectors and has carried out more than 20,000 inspections on following the back to work protocol. This is to give confidence in the system and that we are checking up, watching and working with businesses in all sectors, which are going to great lengths to protect their staff and customers.

Senator Higgins asked about planned testing, which is going on in nursing homes and the meat sector. Quite a high number of tests and inspections are carried out. Very positive results are coming back. The Senator is probably asking that we spread it out and it certainly is the plan. Now that we have testing capacity built up, and at one stage 140,000 tests were carried out in one week, we have the capacity to do many more tests and I certainly will bring it forward, as it makes sense. It is working well in the key areas that we had to focus on.

The message about green Friday and shopping locally backs up our campaign that was launched this week on looking to local. A very good message has been sent out and endorsed by everybody here with regard to shop local and green Friday. Earlier, I referenced the importance of working with our retail sector, as well as many other businesses that need our help for a few weeks.

Many Senators raised the issue of business supports and I touched on many of these earlier. We have money set aside to continue these supports for next year in the recovery fund and to take on new ideas that are brought forward. The House brought forward some today and on other days. We will work with them and take them on board as best as we possibly can.

I understand the pressure of the hospitality sector, which was mentioned by many including restaurants, pubs and hotels. I cannot give the answer on what will happen tonight and tomorrow on that. Retail is another major area, as are gyms and leisure facilities for the kiddies and everybody else. Some of the adults also want to go go-karting and want to go to activity centres. Play centres and activity centres are a key area also. Hairdressing and barbers are essential, as we have been told by many people although I question that. I am only joking. There is a bit of work. We recognise the importance of all of these sectors and getting as many as possible reopened next week is the aim.

Senator Higgins spoke about level 5 coming earlier. There was an effort made not to have to go to level 5 and we really felt strongly that had level 3 worked, we would not have had to inflict level 5 on anybody. Nobody wanted it. The effort as we remove and reduce restrictions will be to try to make sure we do not have to go back to level 4, level 5 or anything like that in future. That message was reflected by everybody and most speeches mentioned following the advice and guidance. Governments and health authorities can set out advice, rules and regulations. We would rather there were not rules and regulations and laws but sometimes there have to be. The main message is to be aware of ourselves and our own behaviour. It is within our control

and most people have stepped up to it. Not everyone accepts the necessity of it, and some are very worried, as Senator Higgins has said. Others do not care as much. We need everyone to work together over the weeks and months ahead to protect all of us and our society in order that we can reopen. Everybody must play their part for everybody else, even if people do not share the concerns but people should respect those concerns and that they could be a carrier and could pass it on. We must all play our part. This is what the advice and guidance will be, to reflect the debate here today. Everybody is asking for strong communication and clear messaging. That is the intention and the aim.

People are asking about the science behind particular sectors and areas and why sports, retail or business cannot open up. To be very clear, we understand the pressure for each individual sector. I meet many groups every day of the week in many retail businesses and in other sectors and everyone can state it is not in their sector and it is a standard conversation. People say that it is not in their houses and it is not here and it is not there. We have to understand it is the movement of people and the contacts. That is what we are trying to limit. While some people might say the restrictions and advice did not make sense, it was all about trying to restrict the movement of people and to limit close contacts. What will happen as we remove restrictions is there will be more contacts and we have to make sure they do not become close contacts. This is the effort we all have to work on over the weeks ahead as we try to reopen society for all of the reasons of the benefit to community, society, neighbours, friends and family. The importance of relationships and family was stressed. I stress the importance of business from my background and where I am coming from here today. They are all important and the key is to manage our own contacts and behaviour and follow the advice and guidance.

When people are shopping in the month of December, apart from going local, which is very important, people should work with that sector. People should help whatever business they go into to do their job. They have advice on the door and they have direction. They set out their stores and shops to mind us but we have to work with them. It is difficult for them. Compliments were given to the retail sector that it is very much on the front line along with all of the others who are front-line health services. We have to respect that they did their job for the past seven or eight months so we have to work with them and help them. That is an important message to give.

I would like to be able to answer all of the questions but I cannot. I will reflect. People mention churches, retail, hospitality, gyms, centres, restaurants, cafes and pubs and trying to get them reopened. We know now what is important to us as a community. Family and relationships are number one and that is what this was about. It is about trying to manage the virus to protect ourselves and our families. Next in importance are our local services and local shops and businesses, be they churches, gyms or whatever people like to do themselves. We want to be able to open up as much of these as we possibly can. Important in supporting all this is our economy and most people get that. It is about trying to get the balance right. That is what we will try to achieve tomorrow and the next day and in the weeks ahead.

Acting Chairman (Senator Victor Boyhan): I thank the Minister of State.

Deputy Damien English: There is an issue that Senator Ahearn raised with me. The regulations state that the restrictions are until 12 o'clock on 1 December. The Cabinet is very well aware of this and the Taoiseach and Tánaiste have said they will bring absolute clarity to this tonight or tomorrow when making their announcement. People are wondering whether it is 1 December or 2 December. That will be absolutely clarified when the Cabinet brings forward

its position.

Sitting suspended at 3.37 p.m. and resumed at 3.55 p.m.

Reopening Ireland (Department of Health): Statements

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan): I thank the Cathaoirleach for the opportunity to update the House on the Government's response to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic and to the approach to reopening Ireland.

As Senators will be aware, this country has been developing and reframing our response to Covid-19 for almost a year. Our country moved swiftly to establish the mechanisms to respond to the disease and this was undertaken on a cross-Government basis. Senators will be aware that a National Public Health Emergency Team, NPHET, was established, as well as a number of subgroups and an expert advisory group. The recommendations of NPHET form a key part of the considerations of the Government in its response to the ongoing Covid challenge.

Since the first set of restrictions were announced by the then Taoiseach in March 2020, the aim has always been to return to a level of normality and to reopen the economy and society as safely as possible. I wish to acknowledge the work undertaken by the public sector and by employers across the economy in working with us to ensure that the measures were implemented safely. I also want to acknowledge the forbearance of the public in keeping with us on these public health measures. There is hardly an aspect of Irish life that has not been impacted in some way by coronavirus and it is acknowledged that this pandemic has affected us all very deeply.

The resilience and recovery plan, announced by the Government on 15 September 2020, provides the overall framework by which we allow society and businesses to operate as normally as possible, while continuing to suppress the virus. It is designed to help individuals, organisations and sectors to better understand, anticipate and prepare for the measures that might be introduced to suppress the virus. Given the constantly evolving nature of this pandemic, it is critical that a certain amount of flexibility is built into the plan to allow for a nuanced response. This allows our public health doctors and the Government to take account of disease profile and trajectory at given points in time and to make decisions accordingly.

We are now at an important point in our response to Covid-19. As we face into the challenging season of winter, as well as a time when many families plan to come together for Christmas, it is important to ensure that we continue to observe public health advice, even as we seek to reopen. We have almost reached the end of the six weeks of the measures introduced on 21 October under level 5 of the resilience and recovery plan for living with Covid. It is fair to say that like many other countries, this Government has faced critical decisions on the measures that need to be applied to limit the spread of coronavirus and the impact of these restrictions on the economy and society. I assure this House, as well as all citizens, that none of these decisions have been taken lightly.

It is expected that the Government will this week announce the measures that will be in place once the current set of restrictions under level 5 expire at midnight on 1 December. These

decisions will be taken following recommendations from NPHET, as well as consideration of the cross-sectoral impact of new measures. However, regardless of the measures that will be announced, it is important that we maintain our observance of the recommended public health measures, many of which have been in place since the beginning of this pandemic.

Most importantly, we need assurance as to the safety of any vaccine. Nonetheless, there are grounds for some optimism that we are beginning to see the breakthroughs that we need to move the world out of its current situation. The House is aware that Ireland is participating in the process being led by the European Union to procure vaccine supplies. However, given that it will be a number of months before any vaccine is here and accessible on a widespread basis,

4 o'clock we must continue for the moment to rely on the tools that are immediately available to us. The use of face coverings, social distancing protocols and personal hygiene etiquette remain vital. We must remember that over 71,000 individuals in our country have now tested positive for coronavirus and, sadly, more than 2,000 people have died. Each of the 2,000 deaths represents a mother, father, son or daughter who has sadly passed away due to this disease. It is important, as we discuss the decisions taken by this Government, and its predecessor, that we continue to remember and reflect on these facts. I urge all members of the House to continue to promote the public health messaging on Covid-19 in order that the most vulnerable in our society are protected.

Senator Victor Boyhan: I thank the Minister of State for coming in. I thank the House and the Leader for facilitating two sessions on this matter and it is timely, appropriate and right to have statements in this House on reopening Ireland.

I am conscious in particular of the 2,000 people who have died. As the Minister of State has rightly said, they represent husbands, wives, partners, family, brothers and sisters who connect into a bigger family and, ultimately, a community family and the nation. It is clear to us all, particularly those in politics be it at local or national levels, that none of us is immune to the facts and reality experienced by the many people who have been deeply hurt by the Covid pandemic. It has hurt and broken many people, destroyed many businesses and livelihoods and people are suffering. I am particularly conscious of the number of people who have suffered and are suffering with their personal and mental health. Recently I listened to an RTÉ radio programme where a mother rang in to talk about her 12- or 13-year-old son and how he had lost his confidence and nerve. He had lost his ability to leave his home, to travel to school and to engage. Within ten minutes the radio station received as many as 20 or 30 calls talking about other teenagers. Most people have lost nine months of their lives but let us realise that it will be a year or maybe more and, hopefully, there will be a vaccine in the future.

Many of our businesses, people, parts of society and what holds us together are broken. One of the saddest calls that I received in the last nine months came from a man who lives close to me. He did not know me personally but rang to say that he could no longer visit his wife of 55 years. He told me that they married on his wife's 18th birthday when he was 19 years of age. I received his first call in Leinster House when he asked if I could give him a few minutes and of course I said I could. He talked for 15 minutes about his experience of going to a glass door located on the side of a nursing home to visit his wife who was in the early stages of dementia and being unable to hold her, kiss her, hug her, embrace her and tell her that he loved her. That is the effect that this terrible pandemic has had on people, which is happening all over the country. That is about everyone and our own families. Let us think about being close to somebody yet having that person pass away after being sick for a few months. One would have been unable to visit or see the person or to say goodbye. Moreover, in many cases, people have been

unable to attend the funerals and say farewell. That is something for which we have to prepare because when all of this, hopefully, goes away in a few months, we will have to pick up the pieces, support people and listen to people.

One thing that I would like to see is a bigger campaign about mental health as too many people are suffering in silence. It is not always easy to say that one has issues with one's health, particularly now, and issues that may never have come to the fore before. When society is locked down and shut down and when one experiences a lot of quietness and stillness not by choice then that bubbles up within one, so one must confront issues that may have been parked for a long time. I refer to issues that one chose to forget and decided to avoid. If anything, in this pandemic, many of those issues have surfaced for many people. I say to the Minister of State at the Department of Health that it is important that we address and consider these issues.

I wish to use my remaining time to thank the public sector. I am delighted that the Minister of State has acknowledged the public sector because its workers get a lot of stick from time to time but they have excelled. I thank the gardaí, nurses and front-line workers, be they delivery persons, essential farm workers and whoever they may be. It is important that we acknowledge that front-line workers have stood tall and did their jobs well. I hope that when all of this dusts down, we will remember front-line workers and be strong advocates for them when it comes to their pay and conditions. I thank the teachers and all the people who are involved in all other aspects of life. Finally, I thank the people involved in local government who responded, as well as the volunteers who got involved in the Community Call, which is a wonderful initiative that spans across the 31 local authorities. It was great to have such consensus and support. Finally, I thank the Minister of State, the Government and the previous Government. If I am honest, there are difficulties with this Administration in terms of transition. I have seen a difference in style and communications from the last Administration to this one and there are lessons to be learned. The previous Government demonstrated exceptionally good communication. I know we are in a transitional period and I do not want to use my time to be negative but I urge that messages are crisp, clear and encouraging.

Senator Regina Doherty: I thank the Minister of State for coming in this afternoon and giving of his time to not only update us and listen to what I hope will be constructive suggestions that genuinely will be taken on board. There is no doubt - I certainly hope - that the world is living through a once-in-a-generation crisis. From when that crisis started to become a daily occurrence for all of us last March, we moved very quickly, both in Ireland and in every country, to absolutely protect our vulnerable citizens, front-line workers and the elderly based on the projected models given to us. We moved very swiftly to protect our healthcare delivery system to make sure that we had extra reserves and resources, should those modelling numbers come through. I was privileged to be part of some of the decisions at the outset of the crisis. I vividly remember one interview panel that I sat on with Professor McConkey, who has become a household name, where he projected that by the end of this year, we would have 50,000 Irish people dead. The talk at the time was as stark as it could have been. The response on behalf of the HSE, the Department of Health and the Government was as responsive as it needed to be.

Since March, we have lost over 2,000 Irish citizens. As Senator Boyhan has said, every single one of those lives lost is an absolute tragedy, a massive loss to their family members and to the societies they came from and contributed to, which should never be diminished. What is a very little known conversation is that over 50% of the people who died did so in nursing home settings. We moved so quickly to protect the people in our nursing homes, yet more than 50% of those who lost their lives this year due to Covid-19 were, sadly, residents in nursing

homes. I have to ask whether we have moved effectively enough, knowing what we thought we knew. We learned more week by week about the virus, how it travels and what it does. Have we moved effectively enough given that we are now, thankfully, coming out of a second wave? I want to pose a question. Have serious negotiations continued following what started between Nursing Homes Ireland, on behalf of the nursing homes of this country, and the Department of Health? Have they been maintained since March?

I will speak about the health effects or ill-effects of Covid-19 on the delivery of healthcare and on lockdown as a strategy. I beg the Government to ensure lockdown does not continue to be part of considerations in future. We locked down originally because we were in a major crisis. It was to buy time in March, April and May, which we did. We did not learn during that time what protocols should have been put in place based on the new knowledge of the trajectory of the virus. We failed to spend the summer employing people to track and trace and the track and trace system collapsed only a couple of months ago.

This was felt overwhelmingly in my home town. I know there are certain reasons people might point the finger and ask why we had such an outbreak in my town. Some of the people who tested negative are still waiting on telephone calls from the track and tracing people. We were promised the recruitment of 70 or 80 people to the tracking and tracing system weeks ago. That still has not materialised.

When we go back to protecting our elderly and healthcare systems the most fundamental tools we have are tracking the virus, tracing where it comes from, locking it down and quarantining people. These things still do not seem to be happening. I am frustrated with all the other tools we are employing which involve closing down society.

Senator Boyhan talked about people being lonely. We still have not had a conversation about the loneliness that lockdown is causing, which is having an overwhelming impact. We see the pitting of sections of society against each other. One activity is deemed good and absolutely needed while another must be sacrificed, and to hell with the consequences. We need to have a proper conversation about the strategy. It is not good enough to say we are all delighted because we have four or five vaccines on the way and if we batten down the hatches, we will all be grand. Another six months of loneliness is an absolute lifetime for some people.

Senator Boyhan spoke of a man he met or spoke to during the week on the telephone. I had an email from a man who lost his mother during the summer. While he is devastated at the loss, it was not due to Covid-19. He is absolutely sure it was due to loneliness because she had not one visitor from 6 March until she died. That is not living with Covid-19. That is not recognising that there are vulnerable people whom we need to protect. We need to ensure there are processes in place to mind these people from the virus. We need to find mechanisms to allow people to live and those who are less susceptible to carry on for society, the community and the economy. We need to be able to continue to live until the vaccines come. Please God they will be successful. I call on the Minister of State to give us an update on plans for tracking, tracing and quarantine. "Testing, testing, testing" is a mantra that we have heard for many months but it has not materialised.

I call on the Minister of State to reinitiate confidence in the health service and the messaging by the Government because it seems to have either gone astray or got completely lost. It is not only that we not talking to the adults in the country any more. We heard some weeks ago that we were going to find some mechanism to talk to younger people. That seems to have been

some sort of whim because it never materialised. We heard talk of finding influencers. We do not even have the HSE talking to young people, let alone trying to find influencers. We need to get our messaging back on track. We need to reestablish confidence so there is a strategy other than the idea that when the numbers go back up in January we will lock down again. We need to ensure we do not experience again the number of deaths in nursing homes that we have experienced to date.

Senator Malcolm Byrne: I thank the Minister of State for coming to the Chamber. I agree with many of the comments Senator Doherty made about how we live with Covid-19. The issues around well-being and loneliness need to be addressed, and not only for older people. There is a challenge for younger people as well in terms of how we ensure their well-being is protected.

I want to talk about when the vaccine is finally released. We have two clear communications messages and challenges. We need to stand up for science. We need to talk about the importance of how vaccines work. We need to explain how they work and the verification process that they have gone through to give people confidence. We need to explain that independent regulators will have assessed and ensured that these vaccines are in place. We need to take on the anti-vaxxers in society. I have no problem with freedom of expression that is based on medical evidence but when people make spurious social media claims and spread disinformation, that needs to be taken on. As a society, we need to stand up for science and research. Part of the information campaign has to be about that.

I have a second request. We are clear on the process of the roll-out of the vaccine, who gets it and in what order. We are talking about our front-line workers and those who are most vulnerable. That needs to be explained and communicated in language that is as clear and comprehensible as possible. It should not necessarily be all medical language and it should be done in multiple languages. English and Irish are not the first languages of many people in the State. In communicating the roll-out of the vaccine, that is especially important.

My next point follows from what Senator Doherty said. We have to look at having a real debate on the social impact of Covid-19. In that regard, I echo what the Leader said. We need to look at investment in sociological research in this area. We need to be able to provide funding through our higher education institutions to research institutes and other agencies to examine the impact this period has had on a variety of areas of Irish life. This could be done through the Health Research Board or other agencies. There will be knock-on consequences from this period we have gone through that we have not even thought about. In that regard, it is essential that we are prepared for this, that we learn from it and that we are able to help those who have suffered during this period, whether through loneliness, loss or whatever. Our higher education institutions have adapted well to cope with all these changes. They have invested in research in this area. Specific funding and support will be important to research the impact of Covid-19.

This period has been challenging and difficult for all of us. It is most important that we give people hope that we will come out of this. I put it to the Minister of State that in communicating the messages - I mentioned the message relating to vaccines and so on - we talk about the fact that, as a people, we have shown incredible resilience. We have shown that we can achieve a great deal together when we co-operate. It will be important that we use the meitheal or co-operation we have seen during this difficult period to address our other problems.

I wish the Minister of State well in the next period. I echo the comments made around com-

munications being important. We need to address the importance of vaccines and investment in research in this area. More important, this is about building on the resilience that our people have shown in this period.

Senator Annie Hoey: The issues I will raise are not those I thought I would be talking about. This morning we had the first meeting of the Sub-Committee on Mental Health of the Joint Committee on Health. Senator Black is not here at present, but I commend her on getting that committee set up. We had a fruitful discussion about mental health during Covid and the knock-on effects that we will see for society and our mental health services beyond Covid. I will mostly talk about some of the issues we discussed this morning. We have had reference to mental health already.

An interesting point that came up was around accessing mental health services at present. The group talking to the sub-committee was Mental Health Reform. It feels that those with mental health difficulties are less likely currently during Covid to reach out to seek help with pre-existing mental health conditions. I was taken aback by that. This is a very difficult period for people. Everyone is struggling through this, and when the group said that, it was the first time I had heard that it feels that people who have pre-existing mental health difficulties have been reticent to come forward.

We went on to discuss accessing mental health services post Covid or towards the end of it. We have not had in living memory perhaps such a far-reaching collective experience as a nation of struggle and difficulty, and everyone being in the same boat, while simultaneously having the most individual and isolating experience. I certainly do not recall us having such a collective experience and I hope I never have to again. We discussed how we are putting out messages about how to keep oneself well that will possibly have an impact on people feeling that they can come forward and say that this has been hard and it is affecting their mental health. We are all listening to the podcasts, baking the banana bread, going on our walks and doing all of our things, but that will not be enough for many people. While we are all saying that we should pull ourselves together, we are all in this together and everyone should put their best foot forward, we discussed earlier how that will impact people feeling a stigma around coming forward. There is a lot of stigma around mental health as it is. We are constantly trying to encourage people to talk about it, but it was a very interesting discussion around how we have all gone through this and put our best forward.

I am interested to know if there are any plans, not that the Minister of State has to answer me right now on this issue. In that context, however, I wish to flag to him that we may need to think about mental health and how we are accessing people in a different way. While we are putting out the message of collectivism and we are all in this together, that may result in people feeling that they do not have a right or a reason to put themselves forward to say that they are struggling with this. I just thought I would flag that with the Minister of State.

We talked about expenditure on mental health as an investment. I would say it is an investment when we invest in mental health services, not a cost. It becomes a cost when people cannot access services. It becomes a cost to them personally and to the people around them - their friends or their family. Then it becomes, I would say, a cost to the State because it becomes more costly to treat people with mental health difficulties the longer it takes for them to access them. I thought I would flag that we need to have a strong plan of focus on mental health going forward.

Reflecting on the Keep Well campaign that launched a month ago, that involves real steps that we all can take. I can look on that website and recognise a suggestion for me to do, but we need to make sure that there are a series of things that are beyond the things that I can do within my own daily realm of well-being and life. This investment is important.

Someone said at the subcommittee earlier that the fourth wave of Covid, which they think will be the largest and longest wave of Covid, will be the mental health wave that comes afterwards. While we prepare for exiting out of Covid, that is what I want to emphasise because it was the first meeting of the Sub-committee on Mental Health today and it was such a brilliant discussion. I would recommend it, if anyone wanted to listen in on it. Mental Health Reform was brilliant in talking us through a litany of issues. It was a brilliant subcommittee meeting this morning. We really need to prepare, and we have to move quite quickly in making plans for what will come at the other side of Covid.

I will quickly hop on to the almost weekly waltz I have with the Minister of State concerning our front-line workers and the respect and pay we give to them. We cannot come out of the global pandemic where we have all been lauding our front-line workers, where we have all stood at our front doors clapping, where we have put candles in the windows and where we have done all of the things that we can do and not have a fundamental shift in how we treat, appreciate and value our front-line workers in terms of their pay and working conditions. I cannot, and I would certainly think that no one else here would, stand over us continuing to treat them the way we do. Of course, I will put in my pitch, as I do every week with the Minister of State, for our student nurses. They are on the front line, they are not being paid, and they are on the Covid wards. I would hope, as we look at our plan for exiting out of Covid, that we really think about how we value and treat the front-line workers who got us through it.

Senator Fintan Warfield: I add my voice to many of the comments, particularly from Senator Hoey, in terms of front-line workers and, as the Minister of State stated, to remember that more than 71,000 people in the State have tested positive and to remember the 2,000 people who have died.

I welcome the progress on developing a vaccine. We have now several viable contenders which hope to be able to distribute a vaccine in the first quarter of next year. Vaccine availability, while a few months off, will come quickly and we need to be as ready as possible to hit the ground running in that regard.

I wanted to include in my contribution a particular ask of the Minister of State, Deputy Feighan. I know he has done good work in terms of keeping addiction and outreach services open. The Minister of State at the Department of Health has always had a particular interest in sexual health and from mental health to sexual health, to give it some hearing in these Houses, I would like him, having written to the HSE a couple of weeks ago, to ensure that the HSE re-opens the gay men's health service in the Meath hospital as a matter of urgency. I am hugely concerned about its continued closure. It is the only statutory public health service for gay and bisexual men who have sex with men and the trans community. Since its establishment 28 years ago, it has provided a range of services that now include a full sexual health service, a pre-exposure prophylaxis, PrEP, service, a hepatitis A and B and HPV vaccine programme, and counselling as well. We all know that STI tests and HIV tests cost a considerable amount of money privately. The staff in the gay men's health service, GMHS, are world class, and I have first-hand experience of that.

The service was closed in March to enable the redeployment of staff to Covid-19 test centres. Most other public sexual health services, as I understand it, are also closed as staff have been redeployed to the Covid-19 response, but some of them have since reopened with reduced capacity. The services at GMHS were availed of by 12,000 last year. It is extremely important work. The fight against HIV in Ireland depends on it. Various language services in the health sector were mentioned by Senator Byrne. I am especially concerned about vulnerable groups in the community - young men, sex workers, migrants - as members of these groups generally face more difficulties in accessing services and treatment. I would ask the Minister of State to talk to the HSE to ensure that the GMHS is reopened as a matter of urgency.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: I thank the Leader for having this debate, which I requested. I am glad it is broken up into two parts.

Conscious of the 2,033 people who have died and the thousands of people who have tested positive, I am mindful of the gargantuan work being undertaken in our hospitals and in community care settings by our public servants. This debate is important. Earlier this week, I was walking in the gates of Leinster House and I met a man who had Covid-19 last April, and he told me that he still to this day is affected by it. That is the backdrop to this debate.

Senators Hoey and Boyhan very eloquently spoke about mental health. If we were to undertake an analysis of the world, the collective mental health of people has been severely impacted by this pandemic. Therefore, there is a real need to have a conversation about mental health. I am conscious that we are in a dilemma and that we are at a crossroads in our society about the competing demands of public health and of business. There is a balance that we need to achieve. I am mindful that we have had the good news of vaccines being announced but I am also conscious that, today, AstraZeneca acknowledged there are manufacturing errors in its vaccine. Let us look at that.

I know I am semi-detached from Government, although not really. I want to make this appeal as an ordinary citizen on behalf of many who are petrified, who are afraid who turn on the six o'clock news or the 5.30 p.m. news to get the numbers of the day, and to hear the public press conference. I appeal to Ministers and the representatives of NPHET to stop flying kites in the media. The selective releasing of information is not good enough. We are feeding a beast, and we should not. Let us make our decisions and announce them, and do so on behalf of the citizens and the public servants of our country. There is a need for Government and NPHET to work together and to have differences, absolutely, but we must have a roadmap whereby we can coexist with Covid-19.

Senator Doherty is right when she speaks about the whole issue of contact tracing. I made this point here two weeks ago. There are people to this day who have not had a phone call from contact tracers. There are people to this day who have not had a scintilla of information from the HSE. There is confusion around messaging, which there should not be.

I am extremely conscious that everyone is trying to do their best. However, as the Minister of State has testified, we are focused on Healthy Ireland, the well-being of people and the holistic approach to looking after each other. One of the positives of Covid-19, and I do not mean this to sound controversial, has been the re-emergence of community. The “meitheal” without being a meitheal has been reformed, if Members understand me. People are now looking in on one another. The act of neighbourliness has become part of our daily routine and whereas it was gone before, now it is back. Cork City Council won an award today from Chambers Ireland on

the whole issue of community - the gathering of people without gathering, if Members knows what I mean.

There needs to be confidence around contact tracing. I very much welcome the appointment of Professor Brian MacCraith and the whole issue around vaccine supply. I wish him well. I appeal to the Minister of State, as somebody who understands people, that the vaccine supply group that Professor MacCraith chairs has to succeed. We cannot go back to the old days of, dare I say it, Joe Jacob and the iodine tablets. We must move on from that and we must be prepared to plan. Look at what is happening in America, with Joe Biden, the incoming President, and his corona task force planning. Planning is critical.

There are people today in nursing homes who cannot have a visit from a loved one and people who are working tirelessly for all of us. It is our job to work to support them. It is the Government's job to govern. Please let us not do so by the selective giving of information.

Senator Mary Fitzpatrick: I thank the Minister of State for coming to the House for this important debate. We appreciate his time as there are enormous demands on him and his Department. His Department is to be commended, along with NPHET and all of government, for the continuing efforts and outstanding commitment to helping our country tackle and survive this pandemic.

Before I say anything else, it is important to not lose sight of the thousands of people who have lost their lives, and the many thousands of their friends and families who have been bereaved, the many thousands who have been infected with this terrible virus, and all those who work on the front line - our nurses and doctors, but also our bus drivers, binmen, postal workers and gardaí. It has been tremendous the courage that all of those people have demonstrated, and their courage has encouraged all of us to do our best. I point to the Community Call response, co-ordinated by our local authorities and the GAA. In my own constituency of Dublin Central, Oliver Plunkett's, Na Fianna and St. Finbar's GAA clubs have all worked with Dublin City Council and volunteers. That has given people hope and confidence as well.

We have talked a lot today about mental health. I was talking to a GP recently in Glasnevin who, completely spontaneously, commented to me how he had never witnessed in his long career such elevated levels of anxiety among his patients. He specifically said it involved patients of all ages. He talked about how elderly people experienced the isolation of doing the right thing, of keeping their distance and of confining their movements to the home, the bare essentials and the absolutely necessary journeys. He spoke of the very young people and the parents of toddlers, preschool and early schoolgoing children, and the fact that three-year-olds and four-year-olds know what the virus is. When there was a lifting of restrictions and they could potentially see their grandparents again, they were saying, "The virus must be gone. The flu must be gone." There are also the young adults.

Everybody is doing their best and we are all pulling together, and there is no doubt the Government and NPHET have been a huge support to us all. We have to recognise that the achievement of getting Ireland to having the second lowest level of infection is a tremendous achievement for us all - it is a huge achievement against such an insidious virus. As we look to the opening in the next month coming up to Christmas, the Government has big decisions to make to help guide us over this Christmas period. That is all the Government can do: it can really just guide us. We all have to wash our hands, keep our distance and wear our masks. The Government cannot come and police that, and I think it largely recognises that.

The Minister of State will be involved in the debates among the Cabinet. Who would want to be in their shoes, having to make these choices and issue the guidelines? We all want a Christmas and I am sure the members of Cabinet want a Christmas as much as anybody else. The main thing that people are saying is that they have all got into the habit of taking responsibility, so can the Oireachtas look at managed settings and places that people can go to and behave in a responsible manner? That includes churches, gyms and playing pitches. People have been allowed to train for juvenile sports but they should be allowed to recommence competitive matches.

One knows the good, real pubs in Dublin from seeing that they are professionally-run, with a professional barman and no bouncer or security at the door, because the barman knows his job and can smell trouble from outside the door and will not allow it in. He cannot see or smell the virus. These are mostly family-run pubs. They have been closed since March. I am thinking of families such as the O’Gara, Hughes, Hedigan, Kavanagh and Walsh families. These are Dublin families who have been left without anything. The people who are living in their communities want to have some access to socialising but do not want to resort to ordering kegs and taps to their home, as some irresponsible people are, and having pints, drinking along the canals and streets. That unregulated, unmanaged socialising has to be recognised and maybe we should trust the professionals.

I would appreciate if the Minister of State could refer in his response to how the health service is using all of the funds that have been provided and how that will look as we exit the lockdown. On tracking and tracing, on two occasions, I have had to be tested, not because I was infected, since I tested negative, but because of people I spent time with. I commend that service. It is a well-functioning, efficient service, between the scheduling of the appointment, texting and follow-up. I commend those involved in its provision.

Senator Micheál Carrigy: I welcome the Minister of State. I echo the comments of a number of Senators paying tribute to staff in front-line services, in hospitals, care homes, An Post, the gardaí and carers, who we sometimes forget. They are the people who work with the HSE and go into the homes of elderly people seven days a week. It is important to pay tribute to them for the work that they have done and the care that they have given to so many elderly people. I echo Senator Hoey’s comments and mentioned a couple of weeks ago that we have many student nurses who are working in hospitals but are not being paid. I do not think that is fair. Student gardaí are paid when they are doing probationary work, etc., whereas the nurses who have gone into hospitals are not getting paid and are not allowed to work in other settings where they would have been earning money to put themselves through college. That needs to be looked at.

I will address two areas in the health sector that have been affected by Covid, and I think there will be consequences long afterwards. I spoke about it this morning and they are the lack of speech and language therapy and occupational therapy, and services for younger people. I refer to a figure from September, that more than 21,000 people under the age of 17 are waiting for a first occupational therapy assessment. While we understand that Covid has put many services on hold, we were told by the Minister that much work has been done to recruit people into services, to track and trace and to swab, so that those front-line people can get back and assess young children who need assessment. However, we cannot see this on the ground. Occupational therapists and speech and language therapists who are supposed to be dealing with those children have spent the past seven months doing contact tracing in the HSE. How many of them have returned to their positions? I do not think any have. As far as I can see, until this

is done, this already serious situation will get worse.

I was at a meeting for the CHO 8 area which I live in, in Longford, Westmeath and Meath. Twelve people were employed when the call went out last September to employ new people so that we could bring the specialists back into the services. Only 12 people were employed but all of them had to be kept tracking and tracing, including the speech and language therapists and occupational therapists. Nobody came back on to the front line to assess those kids that needed it. We will have a serious problem after that. I spoke with numerous parents in my own county, Longford. These are real families and real people. Each number on the waiting list is a child and a family desperately seeking evaluation. I ask that this be addressed immediately.

On the issue of alcohol, I always firmly believed that the pubs should have been open. We have driven alcohol consumption nearly underground. We have not brought in the legislation for minimum pricing for alcohol, and we have cheap drink on sale in off-licences, which have not closed. We have closed our pubs, which are regulated, and now we have underground drinking and parties in houses, which many cases are coming from. If we were in a regulated setting, this would not have happened. That legislation for minimum pricing for alcohol will have to be brought in quickly because I think we will see a serious problem with drink come out of this. We have seen an increase in domestic violence and much of this is attributed to a high use of alcohol available at a cheap price.

An issue that is quite personal to me is visitation to care homes over the past eight months. I have personal knowledge of it. My late mother was in hospital throughout this period and we as a family found it extremely difficult when we could not visit a loved one at any stage. We went for a number of months where we had only one or two visits where we physically saw her. The same thing happened in the nursing home. I compliment its staff on the care that they gave, not just to her but to all the patients. It is extremely difficult for families. Many families have suffered greatly because of that. We are extremely grateful to the home where my mother was that we got in in the past couple of weeks before she passed away, with a concession from the HSE, but many families were not able to get that. The effect that it has on the person who is sick and also on their family needs to be looked at.

Many issues will have to be dealt with post Covid and I look forward to working with the Minister of State. I ask that when this is all over in 12 months or whenever it is, that we look back, develop a plan, learn from the mistakes that we have made and make sure that we have a plan in place in case something like this ever happens again.

Senator Fiona O'Loughlin: There is no doubt that the past few months have been the most difficult that we have ever seen, with difficult political decisions that had to be made regarding Covid. They had to be made quickly while not knowing what was coming down the line but we had a sense of what had happened before and what we had seen in China and Italy. There was an effort to save our citizens and give everybody the best opportunity to be healthy. It was all difficult, particularly with regard to the Department of Health. We have to thank those who led us through the crisis and once again give our thanks to all those in medical professions on the front line, and of course those in our food shops and teaching in schools. We are anticipating announcements over the next 24 hours about where we will be in the next few weeks. It is a very difficult place to be for those in Cabinet making that decision and for those who are providing advice, particularly NPHET. I said it before and I say it again, while NPHET is giving great service to the country, it is risk averse. Its job is to give the worst possible scenario. Now more than ever, political decisions need to be made, absolutely based on NPHET's advice,

but that must not be the sole voice in deciding where we go over the next few weeks. Now is when businesses should be at their busiest and they are still closed. All going well, they will hopefully be open next week and will remain open. Next week, we also hope to see the reopening of cinemas, hotels, gyms, etc., and, from what we hear, pubs and restaurants will open the following week.

Obviously, the speculation is that only gastropubs, with their own kitchens and chefs, will be allowed open. I think that is completely wrong. Many of our villages and small towns have no pubs with such facilities. There will be places where none of the hospitality industry will be open. People need to have the opportunity to socialise, albeit in a very limited way with family and friends in their community because they have really suffered over recent months. The suggestion of pubs possibly closing at 10 p.m. and restricting the number of occupants is fine. No house party could ever be as safe as being in a properly regulated environment. Previously, some pubs opened by bringing in pizzas, fish, burgers and chips. It is completely wrong that they would not be allowed to open because they do not have kitchens. All pubs and restaurants should open with regulations and of course with restrictions. If young people cannot go to pubs, they will continue to go to house parties, which is to the detriment of us all. We need to bear in mind that a significant number of jobs are at risk.

It is really important that places of worship should open. By their nature, our churches and other places of worship are very large buildings and are ideally suited to maintaining social distancing. For many older people, going to Mass is part of the social structure of their lives. It is where they get to see friends and acquaintances and get to check in on one another, and particularly on vulnerable members of the community. The closure of these churches has left a gaping hole in their lives. At an online meeting involving the Taoiseach and Irish Church Together, all religious leaders committed to taking the necessary precautions.

In Ireland, our sense of family and community is one of the things that defines us. We must put our trust in people to behave responsibly. We need to allow them to live positive and meaningful lives as we continue to battle this virus. We know there is good news on the horizon in terms of the vaccines. It was wonderful to see Teresa Lambe from Kildare, a professor at Oxford, being interviewed about her input into one of these vaccines.

As we head towards Christmas, we owe an enormous debt of gratitude to many people who have put in so much work over recent months. We also want to allow those people who have worked so hard to have some respite and the opportunity to spend a small amount of time to catch up with others.

Senator Aisling Dolan: Our first priority is to save lives. We are in a battle against Covid and every measure we take, every response and every part of our national armour is to protect Irish people and families. It is the worst crisis we have faced in generations. I think of the more than 2,000 families who have lost loved ones, of people who have gone to funerals with limited numbers and of people who cannot hug during a period of grief. We stand together with them. Ireland stands united in this battle. I pay tribute to everyone who has adhered to the rules relating to this lockdown. I know the challenges and difficulties of loneliness and isolation. I know the impact on businesses and the stress that loss of income puts on families. I know the anxiety that everyone feels every day and the fear of spreading Covid. I know sometimes the load feels too much to bear, but the end is in sight.

Thanks to the response of our public health advisers, through NPHET, and that of the Gov-

ernment, Ireland is one of the leaders in Europe. Only Finland and Iceland have lower numbers. In the next day or so we will hear positive news for people in Ireland to move out of level 5, as we all hope and wish for, and to have more normality as Christmas approaches. However, our guard needs to stay up. Our job is to keep people out of hospital.

The Minister of State, Deputy Feighan, is here today. What is the advertising campaign for the winter flu vaccine, which is a major part of keeping older people out of hospital? There has only been a 20% uptake rate in respect of a free vaccine. Nursing homes have also been mentioned. I think of one close to my home. What further measures has the HSE put in place to ensure an immediate response to any new outbreaks? It should not take Twitter to ensure that we get a response.

This morning, I was very proud to speak at the very first meeting of the Oireachtas Sub-Committee on Mental Health, chaired by Senator Black. We heard from representatives from the Mental Health Reform group. I am very happy that the Government has allocated €1 billion in respect of mental health, an increase of more than €50 million on last year's budget. It comprises €38 million for new measures, including a continuation of the Covid-19 supports. However, Jigsaw notes a 50% increase in referrals. The HSE's child and adolescent mental health service has also noted an increase in referrals. In what way can we help with an online, print and television campaign regarding how people of all ages can reach out? There is a very dark aspect to mental health at the moment. I remind people to text "hello" to 50808 or log on to *mentalhealth.ie* for help.

How are we working with eHealth to access technologies to support reducing the numbers on our waiting lists for acute interventions? I know Healthy Ireland falls within the brief of the Minister of State. What policies does Healthy Ireland have to keep people in good mental health?

Scientists and researchers in our colleges and universities are working together to find a solution. Research will save lives across pharma, medtech and healthcare. Safety and efficacy are crucial for the vaccines they are working on. The way we roll out the vaccine is crucial.

5 o'clock We need to work with the community on the uptake of these vaccines. The European Medicines Agency needs to be given the time and space to approve the right vaccine for us to go forward with. What plans does the Government have to inform and build awareness and hope for the vaccine? What area of the HSE will be involved in managing the communications on the vaccine to ensure good uptake?

I offer my thanks to the Leader, Senator Doherty, in her previous role as a Minister, and to all of those who stepped up at a time of crisis. I thank all the heroes and volunteers in our communities who help others in challenging situations. I thank our healthcare and front-line staff who have been going non-stop since March and have done Trojan work. The best of us are working to keep people safe and to keep our country running.

It is to know that the measures taken by the Government are to put people first. There will be a better year in 2021. We will get through this, and we will have an approved and safe vaccine. Until then, I thank all those who are working to do their best for us.

Senator Garret Ahearn: I thank the Minister of State for attending. When the Minister of State, Deputy Damien English, was in the Chamber, I touched on one topic in my contribution and I thought it would be important to bring it up with the Minister of State, Deputy Feighan.

My colleague, Senator Carrigy, spoke extremely well about his experience of nursing homes and caring for people. It has been an extraordinarily difficult time in many sectors of society and for many groups but it is very important to highlight the situation of individuals in nursing homes in the past couple of months. Since we went into the level 5 restrictions, they have not been able to have any visitors. The Government will make announcements tomorrow and there will be a lot of talk of hotels and pubs, and I am as guilty as anyone else in focusing on those, but behind it all, one of the most serious issues is people who are very lonely in an environment where they are well looked after by people who do fantastic work and where they enjoy being most of the time but who miss their families. It is vitally important at Christmas time that they get a visit from either a close family member or, if they do not have one, a neighbour or a guardian who is very close to them. It is something we need to consider that will make a very big difference because people in that situation have had a very difficult time. They are very lonely. They know they are in a vulnerable position. They know of nursing homes that have had outbreaks. They know it can happen to them at any time and they have not been able to confide in their family, friends or community. I urge the Minister of State to use his influence, if he can, to make it possible in some way for families to meet, even if it is one or two family members, in a nursing home during the Christmas period. We have a next-door neighbour who has been in a nursing home for a long number of months and he has not been able to meet his brother. They are both in their late 80s and they are lost without each other's company. Everyone will focus on the economy, and rightly so, but there is also a human aspect to this.

I thank the Minister of State for his presence and the Acting Chairman for the time.

Senator John McGahon: I want to focus on three issues in my remarks. The first is what I would describe as a public relations strategy that will combat vaccine scepticism. We have seen reports in the past week alone that one third of Irish people are wary about the vaccine. A total of 12% of people believe they will not take it. If a vaccine were to be introduced into Ireland that had, say, a 90% effective rate we will need 85% of the population to take that vaccine for it to have any sort of effect. It is very important that we make it clear-cut and obvious that this vaccine is safe to take, that it has to be taken for the greater good, and that there will not be any problem with it. That will be a difficult task because we have seen the issue trending on social media. Conspiracy theories, downright lies and whatever can take hold of the public imagination and, for want of a better description, spread like wildfire. As Senator Malcolm Byrne said earlier, we need a clear, pro-science approach based on logic and data that will show that we have to take the vaccine and that it has to be done as soon as possible.

The second issue I want to focus on is what I spoke about earlier in the week in the Seanad, which is the roll-out strategy for getting out the vaccine across the entire population. That can be done in a couple of ways. In the first instance, when the Taoiseach brings this to Government on 11 December, as he said he wants to do, that should be published for the public at large. That would be very welcome coming out of this lockdown because it would show people that there is real light at the end of the tunnel, that this is the vaccine roll-out strategy, this is what we intend to do to get it through our population, and that these are the timeframes and targets for when we want to do it. That would give solace to people going into December and the Christmas period and into early January. The roll-out strategy should involve a list of tiers of people we will vaccinate first, namely, the most vulnerable, the elderly, healthcare workers and people working in front-line jobs. We would work down the list in that way. We want to have those people vaccinated by certain dates to ensure there is a clear trajectory and timeline whereby people can say that X number of the population will be vaccinated by the end of January, X number will be

vaccinated by the end of February and so on. That would be a good idea in terms of reassuring people on 11 December.

My final point relates to the concept of lockdown strategies. I am torn about that. On one level it is easy to listen to people who say we need to open this or that or do this or that. It is clear that this virus thrives in crowded places. That is the one aspect we know about it. It will be another two years before countries across the world can sit down and say that Ireland, New Zealand or Sweden did it right when clear, clinical data will be available to people. That is the only time when the world will be able to say that this or that country got it right or this or that country could have done better. Like every other country in the world, we are dealing with something that is unprecedented; we have never seen it before. That has to be acknowledged.

Lockdowns are a blunt strategy but at this point in time they are the most effective strategy available to us. I would much rather be at level 3 and the concept of a third lockdown, possibly next year, has to be forgotten. I do not believe that is feasible because the virus has changed so much since March of this year. We know much more about it. We should not be necessitating lockdowns based on the metrics of case numbers given by RTÉ and so on every night. Lockdowns should not be decided upon case numbers. If the point is to live alongside Covid-19, as a society we should be happy with restrictions and case numbers bubbling around at a certain level. I do not believe that necessitates putting the entire country into a stricter lockdown. We did it this time. I backed that, but I believe we would find it extremely difficult to get public buy-in for that a third time around. However, if we have a clear vaccine roll-out strategy that would allow us tell people that this is the final extra time, as such, in this Covid nightmare that started nearly ten months ago, it would give people much more confidence to buy into anything else that is coming down the road.

Acting Chairman (Senator Aisling Dolan): I thank Senator McGahon, and all other Senators, for their contributions on reopening Ireland and the Government's response. I want to acknowledge the comments of Senator Carrigy on the loss of his mother. Our thoughts are with him. I ask the Minister of State, Deputy Frankie Feighan, to respond.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan): How much time do I have?

Acting Chairman (Senator Aisling Dolan): The Minister of State has 45 minutes, if he wishes to use it all.

Senator Fintan Warfield: He has to answer our questions.

Deputy Frankie Feighan: I thank Senator Warfield. I also thank all the Senators for their contributions to this debate on Covid-19. It is clear that we have a common goal of reopening Ireland safely. While we would like to open Ireland completely at this time, unfortunately, that is not possible. The virus is still circulating in our community and while at large, it poses a very real threat to all of us, particularly those who are most vulnerable. As referenced earlier, 71,000 cases of Covid-19 have been detected in Ireland, with 2,000 deaths, sadly. Worldwide, there have been more than 59 million cases of the disease reported to the World Health Organization, with the number of deaths standing at almost 1.4 million. Many countries have seen significant challenges in their response to this disease, with some facing impacts on their healthcare systems as capacity is stretched with cases requiring hospitalisation. Thankfully, we are not yet at that level in Ireland, but it is precisely the type of scenario that we are trying to avoid. As such,

any new measures will require careful consideration of what can be safely opened in society without increasing the risk that case numbers will increase dramatically.

We know that this disease has had a significant international impact, and as of 23 November 2020, in a group which includes the EU, EEA and the UK, Ireland ranks 29th in respect of the 14-day case notification rate. In Europe, only Finland has a lower 14-day incidence rate, and our 14-day incidence rate has fallen from 309.9 just over four weeks ago to 108.7. While we have made significant progress in Ireland over recent weeks, we know that it is possible to reduce case numbers from our experience earlier in the year.

As we approach the Christmas and holiday season, we need everyone to follow the public health advice so as to limit the transmission of Covid-19 in Ireland and protect those who are most vulnerable in our families and communities. We are urging the public to combat the disease by limiting their number of daily contacts. People should work from home and stay at home as much as possible. A small additional effort to reduce our contacts will make a big difference to reducing the incidence of the disease before 1 December. We are also asking that those who have been deemed to be close contacts take up the offer of testing when advised to do so. This will improve our ability to reduce the risk of onward transmission of the disease.

The HSE has put in place a robust testing and tracing strategy, and our testing programme has expanded enormously since the onset of the crisis. We now have the capacity to undertake up to 140,000 tests per week, and in excess of 1.8 million tests have been done since the pandemic began. We are continuing to undertake serial testing of all staff in nursing homes and in the food production sector while also performing mass testing where it is required. If we do those things, it will give us the best chance to continue to suppress the virus until vaccines are widely available.

When the virus is transmitting, there is a direct link between the numbers getting infected, the numbers being hospitalised and then subsequently admitted to intensive care units, and the number of people who, sadly, pass away. This is why the Government has taken extensive measures throughout the pandemic to limit the transmission of the virus when required to ensure that we have not had a situation where our hospitals and intensive care units have been overrun. Such a situation would not only impact on those needing treatment for Covid-19, it would also impact upon those needing to access hospital for the treatment of other diseases and in emergencies.

I acknowledge again the work undertaken by the public sector and by employers across the economy in working with us to ensure that measures have been implemented safely over the past year. I thank the Senators for the contributions they have made today. Senator Boyhan raised the issues of physical and mental health, businesses, and nursing homes in the context of the pandemic. He also raised the issue of the Keeping Well campaign that we launched on 29 October, with a focus on physical and mental health, the five tenets of which are keeping active, staying connected, switching off, eating well and minding one's mood. Effectively, what we are trying to do with this programme is to get those at home or in different situations to reflect on their mental health. The campaign works with others in the area doing things such as community calls, and they have been very helpful. However, it has been a difficult time for everyone and their mental health.

There are a range of funded efforts in place in the area of mental health, including the provision of online and telephone counselling through NGOs. The national psychosocial response

framework focuses on the impact of Covid-19, and the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, in collaboration with the Department of Education, recently launched the winter health support leaflet for young people.

Senator Doherty raised the issue of nursing homes and also testing and tracing, which was mentioned by others. As I said previously, we have the capacity to complete a total of 140,000 tests per week. I thank the German lab which has supported us in this effort. As a member state of the EU, we can enjoy such support, and we are not competing with bigger countries in respect of accessing a vaccine, because there is an exchange of knowledge and information through the EU and the WHO. In the context of a pandemic, the importance of being part of an international group becomes clear. As regards contact tracing, there are now more than 700 people undertaking this work and in excess of 1,000 working in swabbing.

Senator Byrne rightly talked about vaccines and made the point that information on any vaccine should be issued in multiple languages, which is very reasonable. He also mentioned the Health Research Board, an organisation with which I have had contact. It is very active, does great work, and provides advice and information on where this country is going in relation to health issues. It is good to have accredited information at our disposal. Within the EU we are involved in the procurement exercise for vaccines and the EU is seeking to develop a portfolio of different vaccines. The preparation for the Covid-19 vaccine programme has been completed and the programme will be rolled out as soon as vaccines become available, and across Government a task force has been established to oversee and support the immunisation programme.

Senators Hoey and Warfield spoke about front-line workers and highlighted the importance of treating them well, particularly student nurses. The Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation and student nurses have raised the issue of student nurses' pay, and the Minister for Health, Deputy Donnelly, is considering proposals to support student nurses further to continue clinical learning, and we hope we can work on that. Senator Warfield also raised the issue of gay men's health services in the old Meath hospital. I have emailed the hospital for a response on the issue and I will get back to the Senator as quickly as possible. I thank him for raising that important issue.

Senator Buttimer raised the issues of contact tracing and supplies of the Covid-19 vaccine. Again, I think I have already addressed that to a certain extent.

Senator Fitzpatrick talked about Christmas, young people and the virus, following the guidelines and practising good hygiene etiquette. I would say that the Government cannot wash people's hands for them, so there has to be buy-in from the public. I thank the 99% of people who have worked with the Government and together with their families and communities, because they have saved lives. However, there are people out there who have their own information and it seems that everyone becomes a virologist overnight after going on the Internet. It was the same when we experienced the downturn in the economy and the country was in peril, and everybody was an economist. I like to get my information and take my advice from health professionals and people who know their stuff, and that is what the Government is doing. It is taking that advice and then we have to make those important decisions. However, it will be a Christmas like no other. With regard to pubs, churches, gyms and pitches, it is a difficult time for everybody.

Senator Carrigy talked about the really difficult times in nursing homes, the student nurses

and about alcohol and minimum unit pricing, which is an issue under my Department. Many of the staff dealing with alcohol and tobacco were dealing with the Covid crisis. They are back now. I would love to bring in the minimum unit alcohol pricing. We want to bring it in and we feel it is necessary. There is an issue, which is that we are waiting on the jurisdiction in the North of Ireland to come with us. They are working on that and I hope that, early in the new year, we will be in a position to work with our colleagues in Northern Ireland. It is the wrong time in the Covid-19 crisis to bring that in but I would not like to bring it in unless we are working with our colleagues. It might send out the wrong signal as we want to work this on an all-island basis. It is on the top of our agenda to get it in. I pay tribute to the staff in my Department who are working extremely hard so we are all on the same page. It was introduced in Scotland, and in Glasgow it reduced alcohol purchases by 8%. Furthermore, it reduced deaths directly related to alcohol by 20%. The Senator is right regarding cheap alcohol that targets vulnerable people. Minimum pricing will increase the price but we are trying to affect vulnerable people who will abuse alcohol. We want to bring it in and there is a huge push to get that sorted.

On care homes, the Senator rightly said the passing away of his mother in that nursing home was a huge strain on his family. I cannot imagine the strain and hurt that it caused. The Senator addressed it and said that families are going through huge issues. It is something we need to work on but I thank the Senator for articulating that as sensitively as he could.

Senator O'Loughlin talked about pubs and places of worship. I congratulate and thank the Taoiseach for meeting with church leaders and faith leaders. They genuinely want to open up the places of worship. I have seen first hand that they have put the necessary restrictions in place to protect the public. I would like to think that in the coming weeks that work will be acknowledged and the churches will be allowed to open. However, we have to rely on NPHET and it will be a decision for the Cabinet subcommittee.

Senator Dolan talked about grief, funerals and the winter flu vaccine. I got the winter flu vaccine. I had to wait two or three weeks for it. I have always said it is something that, at a certain age, we all should get. Especially now with Covid, there are huge implications if the winter flu takes hold. It is important.

Acting Chairman (Senator Aisling Dolan): Does that include the children's flu vaccine?

Deputy Frankie Feighan: My child got it about a month ago and it seems to be going well but I was not sure about the 20% take-up. We can follow that up. The Acting Chair is on the mental health committee and I praise Senator Black for heading up that committee. It is hugely important and she has done great work on many of those important issues and I wish her well in that committee.

The Acting Chair also praised Senator Doherty. Think of the work the Senator did in her Department when this Covid crisis arose and she was not elected to the Dáil. I pay tribute to her. She was a great leader, along with all the health professionals, front-line staff and all the people in the Department of Health. I am in that Department, having come from a business background, and I am hugely impressed by the talent, commitment and the fact that these are people at the top of their game. I came from a private background, having employed 30 people at one stage. Most of these people in the Department of Health could be put in as CEO of any multinational, not just in Ireland. That goes for most Departments I have seen. We are so thankful for the public servants and front-line staff we have. It is wonderful and I say that without fear or favour.

Visiting guidelines have been introduced to improve the safety of residents and patients. The Government is conscious of these difficulties. The Health Protection Surveillance Centre is reviewing visiting guidelines in tandem with stakeholders, including Nursing Homes Ireland. We are talking about resumption of services and building capacity for winter 2020 and 2021. This is a priority and is under way. The HSE financial allocations for 2021 include funding for ongoing Covid response, including personal protective equipment, PPE, and test-tracing; additional capacity for acute and community settings, an increase of 2,600 beds in such settings; increased community care, including home care hours, and enhanced community services; and improved access to care, including alternative pathways.

I come back to Senator Warfield, who spoke about addiction services reopening.

Senator Fintan Warfield: I commended the Minister of State's work.

Deputy Frankie Feighan: I pay tribute to my staff and all the drug and alcohol task forces. There was a collaboration between all the services for people who are homeless, use drugs and so on. It showed the work that was done and I thank the Senator for acknowledging that. I pay tribute to the people in the Department for the work they have done.

The Government will review current level 5 measures and consider the next phase of the response to Covid under the living with Covid plan. This will include consideration of any recommendations from NPHET in this regard, as well as monitoring of the international situation. I urge Members of the House to continue to promote the public health messaging on Covid-19 so the most vulnerable in our society are protected.

I thank all Senators for their vital and valuable contributions. I hope that we continue working together as we have done across parties, across the House and across communities. To all the people out there and their families, I hope they have a peaceful and safe Christmas. Next year is 2021 and we are all looking forward to a different year from the one we are having this year. I hope there is light at the end of the tunnel. Deep down, we are better because there are many opportunities arising out of Covid. We learned how to relax more and enjoy our families more. We have also learned that the simple things in life, such as a walk or fresh air, have been good. There are challenges ahead and we can only face them by working together. I thank Senators.

Acting Chairman (Senator Aisling Dolan): Hear, hear. I thank the Minister of State, especially for those heartening words at the end. It is true that the end is in sight and 2021 will be a better year for the world, for Ireland and for the families living here. In accordance with the order of the Seanad today, the House stands adjourned until 2 p.m. next Monday.

The Seanad adjourned at 5.30 p.m. until 2 p.m. on Monday, 30 November 2020.