



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

SEANAD ÉIREANN

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

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SEANAD ÉIREANN

Dé Máirt, 15 Nollaig 2020

Tuesday, 15 December 2020

Chuaigh an Cathaoirleach i gceannas ar 10.30 a.m.

*Machnamh agus Paidir.
Reflection and Prayer.*

An tOrd Gnó - Order of Business

Senator Lisa Chambers: The Order of Business is No. 1, fifth report of the Committee of Selection, to be taken on the conclusion of the Order of Business, without debate; No. 2, statements on the commencement of the Irish Sign Language Act 2017, to be taken at 2.45 p.m. in the Seanad Chamber and to conclude at 3.45 p.m., with the time allocated to all Senators not to exceed six minutes and the Minister to be given no less than five minutes to reply to the debate; and motion 25(8), Private Members' business, to be taken at 4 p.m., with the time allocated to this debate not to exceed two hours, and any divisions demanded thereon to be postponed until immediately after the Order of Business on Wednesday, 16 December 2020.

Senator John Cummins: I thank the Waterford hurling team and management. Although we were not successful in our 61-year wait and endurance, they brought great joy to every person in Waterford.

Yesterday the interim report from the Central Bank on motor and home insurance was released. It found that dual pricing was widespread in the market, which will come as no surprise to anybody. When it comes to motor insurance renewal time, one will ring around alternative insurance providers and, more than likely, get a lower quote that sometimes one's own insurance provider will match.

I want to focus on one group of people, especially in light of the findings that loyalty premiums and price walking were evident, whereby insurance premiums increase incrementally each year for existing customers at renewal time. The consumers in question are those with outstanding claims who are essentially tied to their existing insurer until such time as a claim is settled or goes through the court system. I am one such person. Only two weeks ago, I had an outstanding claim against my insurance company determined in the High Court after nearly six years, which the judge dismissed, just as a Circuit Court judge had done two years ago. I could not fault my insurance company. It defended the claim at significant cost and rightly so. However, as I had an outstanding claim, I was not able to shop around the market as any regular person could. Accordingly, over the past six years, I have been paying higher insurance premiums.

I am not alone in that regard. It is an issue that needs to be addressed as part of the wider reform agenda to which the Government is committed. In light of the fact that the new Office

for Insurance Competition will meet for the first time today, which is a welcome step, statements on the insurance sector would be useful in the new year. Will the Deputy Leader arrange a debate whereby Members can feed into the insurance reform agenda our experiences from talking to our constituents, as well as our personal experiences? It is important that any reform in this space has the desired effect of reducing premiums for customers and does not have the reverse effect of increasing premiums for all.

Senator Michael McDowell: I welcome the fact that overnight that the four statues at the Shelbourne Hotel reappeared a few months after they were first mentioned in this House.

There are two substantial matters I want to raise. The first is the statement in the newspapers today that the question of revised legislation on judicial appointments is to go before the Cabinet and that a new scheme for a judicial appointments commission Bill is to be considered by it. I welcome the fact that there is willingness to change from the previous model, insisted upon by former Minister, Shane Ross. I ask the Leader to ensure that, on a matter of such importance, the pre-legislative scrutiny procedure is deployed. The proposed legislation should go to the justice committee so it can examine all its implications. It is funny that we in this House can get legislation tendered by Ministers without any pre-legislative scrutiny at all whereas if legislation is going through the Dáil Chamber, pre-legislative scrutiny must be sought under Standing Orders. Who are we to complain about it?

The second point I want to mention concerns vaccination. If and when the vaccine becomes available in this country, which, according to ministerial statements, looks like it will be in the early part of next year, possibly as early as January, it will be very important that the elected representatives of the people give a lead in the matter. I am not suggesting that everybody must receive the vaccine as a matter of absolute obligation, because it cannot be compulsory, but it occurs to me that elected representatives should be willing to give an example and a lead to the rest of the community. It would be unfortunate if anti-vaccination propaganda took root and if a view that the scheme was being imposed on the people by the State or politicians gathered any degree of support. Some cynics will say that if we give an example and opt to be vaccinated earlier, we will be jumping the queue in some respect, but we either give an example or we do not; there is no point in giving an example at the end of the queue. It would greatly assist with the proper running of Leinster House if not merely the elected representatives but also all the staff were given an opportunity to be vaccinated.

Senator Marie Sherlock: I support Senator McDowell in calling for all in the Seanad to show leadership. All Senators received a letter from my colleague, Deputy Kelly, last week urging them to sign a pledge stating they will take the vaccine.

I support the call for a debate in the Seanad with the Minister for Finance on insurance. The findings in the report of the Central Bank are extremely serious. They point to a majority of firms within the insurance industry engaging in dual pricing, an abuse of market power and cross-subsidisation between those who are able to shop around and those who are less able. Senator Cummins made the valid point that there are wider issues at stake. Dual pricing, on which my colleague Deputy Nash will launch a Bill later today, needs to be legislated for, but there is a wider issue to be considered regarding insurance in this country. I am currently dealing with an adventure centre in my constituency, Dublin Central, that deals with very disadvantaged groups in a very disadvantaged area. The groups include prisoners and children. The centre has been put out of business. It claims it is no longer able to seek insurance in this country. There are issues, therefore, not only with the offering of insurance products and com-

petition but also with the activities of companies participating in the Irish market.

Today was due to be the first of a two-day work stoppage by workers across the country who work in section 39 organisations. These organisations provide vital mental health services, disability services, homelessness services and other health services. The workers traditionally had their pay linked directly to HSE pay but that link effectively broke over the past four to five years with the restoration of public sector pay. I am relieved and delighted that the Government belatedly agreed a deal last Thursday with trade unions, particularly SIPTU and Fórsa, for workers employed in section 39 organisations. There has been much talk about valuing workers, particularly health workers and front-line workers, over recent months, yet section 39 workers have had to countenance two workday stoppages - one this week and another the week before Christmas - to get across the message that they are no longer willing to stand for pay inequality. I thank the Government for moving on this. There is currently a dialogue forum for voluntary bodies. It is representative of service providers, clients and patients but there is no voice for workers at the table. The purpose of the forum is to tease out all the issues regarding service provision in section 39 organisations across the country. I ask the Leader to relay to the Government that workers' representatives should have a voice at the table in the forum.

Senator Róisín Garvey: Táim ag iarraidh labhairt inniu mar gheall ar áiseanna a d'fhógair an tAire Iompar, Teachta Eamon Ryan, inné. It is a positive news story as we edge towards Christmas. There are to be 120 new jobs created in Bus Éireann. For the first time in 15 years, we see absolutely proper, clear, well-thought-out planning and investment in rural transport. We are to have Bus Éireann services where there have been none for several years, or perhaps one bus per week, all around rural Ireland. In my constituency, if a passenger clicks her heels three times and prays to the Gods, she might catch a bus in west Clare going to Ennis. Now we are going to have multiple services daily. The official press release from Bus Éireann states: "Service enhancements on the West Clare Network which connect to rail at Ennis, will enable passengers to travel between West Clare and Dublin in a single day". More important, the services will enable people from Dublin to come down to west Clare on public transport for the first time ever. That is great news. I have worked around west Clare for a long time and I have often met people with disabilities and older people who rely on taxis, relations or neighbours to have the time to bring them places. The enhancements are important for connectivity and enabling people. I often use public transport so I have seen the disconnect between bus services and train services. The last train would get to Limerick five minutes after the last bus would go to Clare. For the first time ever, there is a really good plan with connectivity, such that when a passenger gets a bus to Ennis from west Clare, there will actually be a train there waiting to go to Dublin. The passenger will not have just missed one. I welcome the initiative.

There are 120 new jobs. A total of 15% of the posts have been taken up by women so far. I encourage more women to consider becoming a bus driver. For the first time ever, we will have a bus that will connect areas all along the coast of west Clare, including Kilkee, Doonbeg, Quilty, Miltown Malbay and Lahinch, meaning a passenger will not have to go inland to Ennis to come back out to west Clare. This is welcome news. Many rural counties will find on Bus Éireann's website an announcement to the effect that, for the first time in many years, they will have proper rural transport options.

The insurance rip-off is ongoing. Many small businesses around me are affected. As Senators have implied, it is not just car insurance that is at issue. Anyone who wants to run a cycling event or any other kind of outdoor activity is seriously limited because of insurance costs. I welcome the positive news today on the best investment in rural transport we have seen for a

very long time in Ireland.

Senator Lynn Boylan: The Government came within a whisker of ratifying the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement, CETA. If it were not for the 100 civil society organisations, trade unions and Opposition parties rallying on Friday evening, CETA could have been passed today with just 55 minutes of debate and a simple vote in the Dáil without this House having any say in the matter at all. People power clearly worked to postpone the vote but the battle is far from over. There are some very serious questions to be answered by Green Party Ministers. Why did they let this go on to the Dáil schedule with a mere 55-minute debate? Why, if the Government is so confident of the benefits of this deal, is it not happy to debate it? Why, if it is so cocksure of the protections included in CETA, is it running scared of having it discussed in the Dáil and Seanad? Why will it not conduct an assessment of the impact of the trade agreement? It is clear from this morning that there has been a Damascene conversion on the part of the Green Party leadership. The same cannot be said for the environmental NGOs, the human rights organisations and the environmental lawyers. The CETA trade deal has not changed since the leader of the Green Party was so vehemently against it. It still sets up a one-way corporate court system that involves a special tribunal that gives corporations special rights to sue states for laws, regulations and government measures that potentially affect their business. Corporate courts are a legacy of colonialism.

Senator Michael McDowell: Hear, hear.

Senator Lynn Boylan: Anyone who has social justice and human rights values at their core cannot support corporate courts.

The former UN expert on human rights, Alfred-Maurice de Zayas, referred to corporate courts as an attack on the very essence of sovereignty and self-determination. Ireland has a thriving open economy. It has trading relationships all over the world. We have never had, nor have we ever needed, a corporate court system. Introducing such a court system now leaves us hugely exposed. We are told we are scaremongering about the corporate courts but even without these courts, we only have to look at the regulatory chill or impact of the threat of legal action. We have yet to roll out a smoky coal ban throughout the country because the coal companies threatened to sue the State. Imagine what it will be like when they will have a one-way court system they can go through to oppose public policy. Even if they do not win, the process of going to court to defend our right to make policy to protect our citizens will accrue huge costs to the State.

What is the impact of CETA on the programme for Government plans to ban fracked gas importations? What is its impact on the climate emergency Bill, passed by both Houses but yet to be implemented? Surely these concerns warrant a debate. Surely they deserve scrutiny at our Oireachtas committees. I call for the Deputy Leader of the House to confirm that, if there is to be a motion on the ratification of CETA, the House also be given an opportunity to debate it.

Senator Eugene Murphy: I concur with Senator McDowell on the vaccine. I am certainly willing to take it because I believe in Professor Luke O'Neill and Professor Sam McConkey. I have great faith in these people. Most of the time medical people are right, not all the time but they are the experts. I am more than willing to lead by example with the vaccines and I hope everybody else will do the same.

I also want to raise the issue of Bus Éireann, as did Senator Garvey. I welcome the creation

of new jobs and new routes. A short time ago, we had the removal of services, particularly for many rural areas. It is a very positive move by the Government and the Minister. However, there is still an issue, particularly in parts of south Roscommon and east Galway, where an awful lot of routes were closed down. I call on the Deputy Leader to contact the Minister with regard to all of the parts of east Galway, such as Ballinasloe, Creagh and Moore, into Ballydangan and Athlone and other parts of south Roscommon where, unfortunately, in recent years we have lost a service that was very important to people in isolated areas. The local bus stop has gone and it is not coming back. We have a duty and responsibility to stand up for the people affected. There were great promises about the extension of Local Link, which is a very good service operating in many parts of the country, but the right thing to do when we are expanding services is to take into account those places that have lost their bus services in recent years. Many parts of Roscommon and Galway have good services. I live along the M5 and we have a fantastic service from Westport to Dublin, which picks up people along the route and takes in almost all of the towns along the way. Bus services have disappeared from many parts of south Roscommon and parts of east Galway. People are annoyed about that. I welcome the news that more than 15% of the new posts are held by women. This is a great improvement and we need more women to apply. I really want to see services re-established. Perhaps the House will consider writing to the Minister for Transport, Deputy Eamon Ryan, on establishing something to get services moving again.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: I join Senators McDowell, Murphy and Sherlock in asking the Deputy Leader to facilitate a debate on the issue of vaccination. Many of us have been very supportive of the vaccine regime for a long time. We do not need to be told to sign a pledge to support vaccination. It is imperative that we show leadership collectively and that we dispel urgently the myth around vaccination. Vaccination works. All of us, in our roles as leaders in the House and as citizens, must promote and support vaccination. The vaccination plan being announced today, and being agreed by the Cabinet as we speak, is one we should debate in the House. It is so important that we should meet next week to debate it.

We need to support further the HSE immunisation office in terms of funding, in particular on the issue of education and the promotional work it does. I make the point separately to Senator McDowell that we should demand leadership of public representatives and we should challenge those Members of the Oireachtas who are leading anti-vaccination marches and leading the charge against vaccination to come up and debate it in these Houses in an open and transparent manner. The anti-vaccination propaganda must be challenged and debunked on behalf of all of us.

Senator Sharon Keogan: I raise the issue of local authority rental sector arrears, which are becoming chronic. The 31 local authorities are the main providers of housing for people who cannot afford housing from their own means. As of December 2019, local authority rental sector arrears stood at almost €86 million, more than €20 million higher than the figure at the end of 2014. This is a further €20 million in unpaid rent in the space of five years. I cannot help but wonder whether the rent arrears figure has mushroomed dramatically during the past year of rolling lockdowns. I suspect it has. Has the Minister figures indicating the expected level of rent arrears by year end? For how long will we allow rent arrears to snowball? It seems nothing has been done to reduce the growing mountain of rent arrears.

The local government efficiency review group has recommended that social housing rents be deducted directly from social welfare payments. It states this would reduce overheads associated with revenue collection in this area and substantially reduce arrears, as well as streamline

processes for local authority tenants and avoid accumulation of arrears. The group also recommended this should be a condition of new tenancies. The group recommended these measures more than a decade ago.

There is an existing statutory mechanism to implement the recommendations of the group. Section 53 of the Housing (Miscellaneous Provision) Act 2014 provides for the deduction of local authority rents and rent arrears from social welfare payments. It is a moderate provision. The amount deducted from payments is capped at a maximum of 15%. However, six years on this section of the Act has not been commenced. I ask that the Minister explain to the taxpayers of Ireland struggling to pay their taxes in addition to huge mortgages or crippling rents why everyone is not being asked to make some contribution in accordance with his or her means, even if those means are a social protection payment.

I am aware that anybody can fall on hard times, especially over the past year. I work with families and homeless people to try to put a roof over their heads. At the same time, it is only fair to the taxpayer that those failing to pay anything at all for their house should make some contribution. We also need to look at easier ways to pay rent to local authorities. This is a pressing matter to be addressed by the Minister for Social Protection and the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage. I hope the Deputy Leader can get this commenced very soon.

Senator Catherine Ardagh: I wish to discuss the housing assistance payment, HAP. Nearly 59,000 households are supported by means of this payment and many of us on the ground know that those in receipt of it are struggling to pay their rent. Many of them are topping up their HAP to their landlords so that they can stay in their homes. Topping up HAP was never meant to be the case. The system is significantly flawed. Unfortunately, landlords are reluctant to take on HAP tenants. The system does not give tenants any security of tenure. We need to review it. There are so many people in receipt of HAP that it would be difficult to phase it out overnight, but we need to consider a system of longer-term tenancies. This could incentivise landlords to take on HAP tenants and would give tenants a longer security of tenure. Will the Deputy Leader ask the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage to come to the House for a debate on HAP and what we can do to review, improve or possibly get rid of it? We need a better system for tenants. We will be relying on the private rental market, but we need to do better for tenants. I would appreciate a debate on this matter.

11 o'clock

Many colleagues, including Senator Buttimer, have spoken on my next point. Many of us are on WhatsApp groups and not a day goes by that I do not receive what someone thinks is a funny anti-vax video or gif about the vaccine. The anti-vax campaign has taken off. We are naive. We must do much more to act as strong ambassadors for the vaccine. I saw “Claire Byrne Live” last night where Mr. Johnny Giles did a fantastic job as ambassador for the vaccine, but it is incumbent on us as local representatives in our communities to show people that we are not afraid to take the vaccine and that, ultimately, vaccines create adults.

Senator Aisling Dolan: In a shocking incident at the Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology, GMIT, a recording showing lecturers making personal references to students when grading them in virtual assessments has outraged students and parents. As Fine Gael’s spokesperson for education and further and higher education, and being from Galway, I am shocked and sorry to hear that this took place. It was disrespectful and hurtful to students who were dealing with a disruption to college life due to Covid-19 and were doing virtual presentations. I understand why students are questioning the assessment systems. What happened is unacceptable and

highlights a serious level of unprofessionalism. I appreciate that GMIT's president has apologised to the students. However, we need more measures. This behaviour gives us an insight and means that we can now take action. As a Government, we can ensure that systems are in place that are accountable to students and families. We can also ensure that we support third level institutions in having the best practices in place.

Conscious and unconscious biases have a serious impact on decision making. This has been well proven by Nobel laureate Dr. Daniel Kahneman based on decades of research. Each of us judges, each of us has a bias. We are influenced by our environment and it causes us to jump to conclusions and impacts on the judgments we make. In this case, the magnitude of the decisions influencing a student's future is incredible. As part of HR requirements for staff at NUI Galway, we had to conduct unconscious bias training prior to conducting any interview in recent years. This exists at third level and should be rolled out to all staff involved in making continuous assessments.

We have an excellent education system, but there is always room for improvement. We have the highest number of students per lecturer, which leads to exhaustion and breakdown. We need more investment in third level. In the west, GMIT, IT Sligo and Letterkenny IT are planning to bring transformational change through a technological university. We must maintain the integrity of our systems, including assessment and governance systems. The Minister, Deputy Harris, is introducing governance reforms for third level. A note will go to the Cabinet and the matter will be before the Houses in quarter 1 of 2021. I call on all stakeholders to take part in this discussion and have our views heard.

Senator Mark Wall: I wish to discuss two issues, the first of which is one my colleague, Councillor Níall McNelis, has asked me to raise. It relates to something that he and other public representatives in Galway have been facing recently, namely, giant trawlers fishing in Galway Bay and offloading their catch of tiny juvenile fish. We have all seen clips of these trawlers sweeping thousands of tonnes of sprat up in large nets from Galway to Clare. These young fish are crucial to the food chain's ecosystem, but it seems that they have been transferred to other fishing ports to be turned into pellets to feed farmed fish. As Councillor McNelis has stated locally, there is a deep concern that there will be no fish in Galway Bay next year. Will the Deputy Leader raise this important matter with the Minister and ask what he will do to allay these fears and whether this practice can be stopped or just reduced?

The second issue is one I have raised numerous times, namely, that of the Defence Forces. Given recent media reports of the serious concerns of representatives of our Defence Forces about pay talks, I ask the Deputy Leader to seek an urgent debate with the Minister for Defence. When one hears representative associations coming out of recent public pay talks stating that they feel ostracised, it asks questions about how our Defence Forces are being treated. On the Order of Business three weeks ago, I mentioned how figures that we had obtained showed that up to 500 personnel would leave the Defence Forces by the end of the year. The recent commentary in the media will not encourage the new recruits we need to restore the strength of our Defence Forces to the Government's figure of 9,500 personnel. I have joined Senator Craughwell and other Senators in asking for a debate with the Minister on the terms of reference of the forthcoming commission on defence, which will be before the Cabinet today. Will the Deputy Leader contact the Minister at the earliest opportunity? The Department of Defence needs to play a crucial role in the commission. There needs to be a review. We need a debate on the fears of our Defence Forces' representative groups.

Senator Robbie Gallagher: Like other Senators, I wish to raise the issue of Bus Éireann. For many people in rural Ireland, their only form of transport is Bus Éireann. If someone from Monaghan, Cavan or many other parts of rural Ireland wishes to travel to Dublin, the only hope of getting there is a Bus Éireann bus. People in Cavan and Monaghan do not have a train service that links directly to the capital city. People in Monaghan who wish to travel to Dublin take route No. 32, which is the main route from Letterkenny to Dublin. By the time the bus stops in Monaghan, though, there are no seats left. Being left standing with no service available is frustrating for people. Many of them are attending hospital appointments or going to work or college. The service is not up to scratch and people are being discommoded as a result. For people with travel passes, for example, elderly people attending hospital appointments, there is the added frustration of there being no facility to book a seat on the bus. This is not the case with Iarnród Éireann. In light of the lack of a service available to people in Monaghan and the shambles that is the school transport system, we need an urgent debate in the new year on bus services, particularly in counties like Monaghan and Cavan where the bus is the only show in town. The service that Bus Éireann provides has many good aspects, but I am saddened to say that the experience in Monaghan is very disappointing and not good enough. People should not be expected to live with a second class service. The people of Monaghan deserve no less than anyone else.

Senator Micheál Carrigy: I wish to discuss the disabled drivers and passengers scheme, which has effectively been put on hold for new applications because primary medical certificates are no longer being issued following a decision of the Supreme Court in July. The scheme is for people who have to get their cars adapted and entitles them to have their vehicle registration tax returned, not to have to pay road tax, etc. I understand that an amendment to the Finance Bill is needed to give legislative effect to the medical criteria for primary medical certificates. This amendment needs to be made immediately in order to allow people with disabilities to avail of the scheme. I also ask that there be a review of the scheme's restrictive nature and that groups representing the disability sector be involved. I ask that this matter be dealt with immediately. I will give the example of a family friend of mine whose 21-year-old son recently lost his leg, which was amputated due to cancer. The young lad wants to get back to college and be able to drive and live independently. He is unable to do so because this has been held up due to that Supreme Court case. I know many other families in the same position who have elderly people in nursing homes, etc., and must adapt their cars so they can bring them out when we return to normality post-Covid. I ask that this be dealt with immediately.

Senator Ned O'Sullivan: Yesterday we learned of the sad passing of Mr. David Cornwell, the famous writer who was better known, of course, as John le Carré, who gave great joy to many people over long periods writing about spies in the Cold War setting, such as, for instance, *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* and *Smiley's People*. Many of those novels have been turned into films and series on television. He followed a long line of English literary types, such as Graham Greene, who had some experience of the secret service and it showed in what they wrote.

As someone who has been following the Moscow rules all my life and has been known to use a dead letter box every now and again, I feel sadly his passing, which brings me neatly onto something. When the Berlin Wall fell, I believe many of us, in our naivety, thought the Cold War was going to be over as well and that kind of murky espionage would be consigned to the history books. How wrong we were.

I read an interesting article in *The Sunday Times* about the attempted poisoning of Mr. Alexei Navalny, the opposition leader in Russia, or out of Russia, I should say, because he cannot be

there for most of his time; he is constantly under threat. That followed, of course, the blatant poisoning of the husband and wife team in Salisbury a couple of years ago when well-known KGB hoods came over and poisoned these people and escaped scot-free. They gave some story that they came over to look at the spire of the cathedral and it was a big laugh at the time. What amazes me is my left-wing colleagues in these Houses are quick to raise human rights issues when it comes to normal western democracies. There is, however, a desperate resounding silence out of them when it comes to any of the doings of Mr. Putin and the thugs who work for and support him. It would be no harm if we invited the Minister for Foreign Affairs in here at his convenience to give us a talk on how he sees the threat Russia poses to western democracies, not alone Belarus, Ukraine and Croatia. Anywhere people try to stand up for their rights, they are squashed. It is not a joke; it is a serious matter.

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: I support Senator Wall on the commission for defence. If the terms of reference do not include the Department then I do not know what the function of the review or the commission will be. It is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to get it right so we need everything, including the Department, involved.

I know the Cathaoirleach is deeply concerned, as am I, with community employment schemes. I wish to raise two issues. I need to be vague by necessity in what I say now. I wish to address the responsibilities the system has placed on the shoulders of supervisors who run these schemes.

Last week, I engaged with the supervisor of a scheme who, during the course of our conversation, explained how his job involves providing psychological support, as well as everything else, to his clients. As the conversation developed, the supervisor told me how a member of the scheme's work force had to cope with a family suicide. I was deeply saddened and shocked to hear how things progressed from there because in the middle of the first lockdown of Covid-19, that same employee, regrettably, also committed suicide. On learning of the suicide, the scheme supervisor contacted the Department of Social Protection to advise it of what had happened. I understand there were a few calls on the day between the supervisor and the Department to establish the full facts. On learning the suicide took place in the early hours of a midweek day, the Department's only response was to instruct the supervisor to ensure he deducted a sum of money from the outstanding salary which would have been due to this person. I understand people have jobs to do and the management of Government finances and moneys is an important fact. If this had occurred, however, in a school, training centre or anywhere else, psychological services would have been brought in straight away to assist.

The second issue, which I will briefly mention, is the issue of pensions for community employment, CE, supervisors. It has been going on for years. People with 30, 35 and 40 years' service to the State as supervisors of CE schemes already have a Labour Court judgment on their pension entitlements. What is keeping it? I ask for a debate on CE schemes in this House with the relevant Minister. I thank the Cathaoirleach for allowing me to go over time.

An Cathaoirleach: It is all right as long as the Senator does not make a habit of it.

Senator Mary Seery Kearney: I wish to address a pressing issue for the leaving certificate students of 2020, particularly that cohort who went through their course with a pattern of high achievement but were marked down and have missed places in medicine. Many sat the exams in November and now face the deadline to register for the health professions admission test, HPAT, which is a necessity for medicine.

15 December 2020

The registrations for that opened today and the deadline is 15 January with an extension until the 1 February. The problem is the leaving certificate results will not be out until late February. Consequently, if these students do sufficiently well to exceed the points then they get to carry their 2020 HPAT over into 2021. If they do not, they will need to sit the HPAT in 2021 but they will not know that until they get the leaving certificate results. We therefore have this anomaly where they do not know whether to register.

I have written to the Minister for Education and the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science and I am not getting any traction. To be fair, the latter Department is taking action on it. I ask that we write a letter to the Ministers on behalf of these students who need to know with certainty. They have been through enough. They have had enough mental torture with their leaving certificate and the manner in which they were handled, which is currently before the courts. They now have the anxiety of their results coming out and need some sort of certainty regarding their HPAT and whether to register for it. We need certainty so I ask for action on that issue.

Senator Garret Ahearn: On Wednesday morning, the people of Carrick-On-Suir woke up to the devastating news that St. Brigid's District Hospital would be closed. St. Brigid's has been in the town of Carrick-On-Suir for 200 years. It is a hospital with 18 beds which provides respite and palliative care.

Earlier in the year, the hospital was repurposed to potentially be used for Covid-19 if it was needed. During the summer months, calls were made for its reopening because, luckily enough, it had not been used for Covid-19 at the time. The residents and the community of Carrick-on-Suir, however, wanted it to be brought back into its original use, which was respite and palliative care. A commitment was made in August by the Government and the Minister, Deputy Donnelly, that this would be the case. The perception in Carrick-on-Suir was that palliative care and respite care beds were going to be brought back. A number of parliamentary questions were asked with that perception in place.

The announcement last Wednesday was a huge shock for the area when it had been given reassurances the hospital was being opened. We had a meeting with the HSE last night and found out that a review had started in July on the closure of St. Brigid's. It is therefore understandable that people in Carrick-on-Suir feel they have been misled. I call on the Deputy Leader to invite the Minister to come in and explain why the decision was made and, most importantly, where the palliative care and respite care beds will be for the people and the region of Carrick-on-Suir going forward.

Senator Niall Ó Donnghaile: Mar dhuine as Contae an Dúin, ba mhaith liom comhghairdeas a dhéanamh le hiománaithe Chontae Aontroma as an bhua s'acu ar an Domhnach. I wish to begin by congratulating and commending the County Antrim senior hurlers for their Joe McDonagh Cup win at Croke Park on Sunday. There is a real burgeoning resurgence in hurling in the county and while it is not confined to Belfast alone, we all know the very rich hurling history and heritage of the Glens. I particularly want to reference Gaelfast and what it is doing at a grassroots, community level in the city of Belfast to build the GAA at an underage, grassroots level across the city. We are starting to see the fruits of that labour in the illustrious and important win for the county at the weekend. I commend everyone involved in that initiative but, more importantly given the weekend that has been in it, the team itself, the entire panel, the backroom staff and coaches, and everyone involved in bringing us a great deal of happiness and joy at a difficult time.

Many fans from Antrim were unable to make the journey to Croke Park. I dare say a big crowd of them would have made the journey to Dublin but could not because of Covid-19 restrictions. With that in mind, it was deeply disappointing and quite offensive that as Conor McCann, the Antrim captain, uttered the first words of his speech, RTÉ cut to an ad break. That was offensive to him, his family, club mates, fellow players on the county team and everyone watching at home. There is a wee bit of a pattern there. It is not my job or that of anyone here to tell RTÉ what editorial decisions to take, but certainly when it comes to six of our counties, there is a wee bit of a pattern of insult emerging more and more. That was unfortunately reflected negatively on an otherwise happy and positive occasion on Sunday.

Senator Martin Conway: I raise the issue of tourism and the effect that the pandemic has had on the sector, particularly on the coach operators who are one of the main actors in the industry in Ireland. The €55 million strategic fund that is being administered by Fáilte Ireland and was announced in the budget is extremely welcome but, unfortunately, the coach operators do not have access to that fund. Thousands of people are employed to drive coaches and to maintain them. It is worth in the region of €400 million a year to the economy and those operators are mainly small, family-run businesses that spend money going abroad marketing themselves each year.

I know that the Minister recently wrote to the umbrella group of coach and tourism operators to state that she would pass their correspondence on to Fáilte Ireland and ask it to consider it. I would like a little more than that. The coach operators are the backbone of tourism in this country because they bring people from A to B to C very eloquently. They sell our country on a daily basis when they bring people around to see our beautiful island. I believe that they should have access to that €55 million fund because they have to keep their fleets of buses insured and maintained. They also need to pay mortgages and loans on those fleets of buses, which are not cheap.

I ask the Deputy Leader to facilitate a debate early in the new year with the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media, Deputy Catherine Martin, on the important role that the coach industry has in rebuilding our tourism industry, post pandemic. As the Cathaoirleach knows because of the county from which he comes, the first thing that got us out of the most recent recession and helped to rebuild the country was tourism. That will happen again but it will not be as successful as we would like unless the coach operators in this country are kept in business.

Senator John McGahon: I want to talk about the issue of housing maintenance, particularly in my own county of Louth. This follows on from issues on which I have been working and from the meeting that all Louth Oireachtas Members had yesterday with the council executive. There is, essentially, no housing maintenance budget in County Louth. The three engineers are each down to approximately their last €1,000. I spoke this morning to the director of services who was able to tell me that we are spending *circa* €344 per unit and we have 4,500 units in Louth County Council. By comparison, the average spend in England and Wales is approximately £650 to £700.

The problem is that the three engineers are now spending more time watching their budgets than being able to go and carry out works. Some people have been on to me who cannot get windows replaced. The council is prioritising severe issues such as heating and that type of thing. The reason I bring it up today is that it feeds into my point. Louth County Council is one of the few councils not to increase the property tax. It has stayed the same for the past six years,

since I was first elected to the council. Other local authorities of similar sizes have increased them by 10% or 15%. The only income that Louth County Council has this year is from parking charges in Dundalk and Drogheda. There needs to be a time when the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage looks at some local authorities which, on certain issues, could be considered to be underperforming, for want of a better term. Louth County Council genuinely does not have the money. It has practically run out of funding and is counting its pennies when it comes to housing maintenance. I think in situations such as that, the Department should be able to step in and bail out a local authority, for want of a better word, and give it a bit of extra funding as we approach year end. I do not think it is acceptable that engineers have to count pennies towards the end of the year because they have run out of funding.

Senator Barry Ward: Insurance companies and other financial institutions, including our retail banks, occupy a privileged position within our economy. It is a privileged position because they operate within a regulated, profitable and fair environment in this jurisdiction. I am not saying they should not be allowed to make profits but the recent report from the Central Bank shows the contempt in which they hold the operation of their businesses here. They clearly do not have respect for the consumers of this country whom they are supposed to serve. We know that the Houses of the Oireachtas, since the 2004 creation of the Personal Injuries Assessment Board, have bent over backwards to facilitate insurance companies in what they have stated is the problem with the market, that is, the compensation culture and the levels of claims and awards that are being given here. There is undoubtedly some truth to that. However, in recent years, we have seen an increase in premiums and insurance company profits at the same time that the numbers of claims and levels of awards are going down or staying static.

We, in this House, need to put down a marker to say that if insurance companies are not serving the people they purport to insure, we have to step in to do something about it. There are businesses throughout this country that have closed down because ridiculous occupier's liability premiums mean they cannot operate with profitability. Individuals who seek motor insurance, for example, face a situation that has been exposed in this report whereby they are disadvantaged if they seek to shop around the market, as they are constantly advised to do by the Government and public representatives. I have no penalty points, driving convictions or previous claims and yet my insurance premium goes up every year and when I complain, it is easy for the company to knock down the price. It seems to me that there is a practice among insurance companies to continually exploit the people they are supposed to be serving. I am calling for a debate on this subject so that we can put down a marker that shows we will not continue to facilitate insurance companies in this regard.

Senator Tim Lombard: I raise the issue of the rural regeneration moneys that has been proposed by the Minister for Rural and Community Development, Deputy Humphreys. It is an important scheme. It is about making sure that rural Ireland gets back on its feet and many projects have been pushed through following the previous two calls for money. The most recent call for money closed last week. It is important that we have accountability for how the system works. Cork County Council has proposed five projects, as was the case previously. A project in Schull has not been proposed even though it made the cut on the previous two occasions. We have to look at where the public representative fits into this space. Members of the local authority were very supportive of the Schull marina project but it did not get through the process at Cork County Council level and that is very disappointing. The project will, effectively, run out of planning permission and how to progress it is going to be an enormous issue for us.

I believe we need to debate the powers that councillors have at local authority level. Is

it now acceptable that the executive decides what projects go forward for national funding, whether from Bord Fáilte or the rural regeneration fund, without engaging with the local authority to a meaningful degree? I do not think that is appropriate. The new model of funding from national Government is coming through in batches from the rural regeneration fund or Bord Fáilte. Councillors need to have a stake and holding in how that happens. Unfortunately, that does not happen at the moment. We now need to find another mechanism to make sure that projects that the executive does not think appropriate can still happen. When one looks at the Schull project, planning permission will run out in the next 18 months. We need Cork County Council to actively work with the local community to ensure this project goes ahead because if it does not, the entire Mizen Peninsula will suffer.

Senator Vincent P. Martin: I would like to commend the BBC on its public broadcasting investigative work. It has exclusively revealed, as recently as yesterday, further abuses of the Uighur population in the western region of Xinjiang in China. This is further *prima facie* evidence of concern regarding enforced labour. The BBC was able to identify a so-called detention or overnight long-term accommodation camp that is part of a newly constructed textile factory. This region of China produces one-fifth of the world's cotton. This House unanimously supported a Private Members' motion a few short months ago, sponsored and supported by Senators Mullen and McDowell. However, the campaign of vigilance must be ongoing. It does not stop with the motion this House supported. We have to identify where this cotton is being distributed and put up for sale.

I said during that debate that a delegation from Seanad Éireann should visit China if the country has nothing to hide. In response to the BBC, China said that the story is entirely fabricated. If it is entirely fabricated, China has nothing to hide from a delegation from Seanad Éireann. They can show us this widespread abuse, as I understand it, of human rights with more than 1 million Uighurs being subjected to forced sterilisations and abortions and indoctrination to the communist message.

I ask the Seanad to stay vigilant in respect of this and to keep our eyes firmly on this. Passing that motion was an exercise in democracy and that voice had to be heard but the effort does not stop there. We must do so much more. People are normally ahead of governments so we should not wait for governments, consumers and retailers to act. We should not allow the sale of cotton from these forced labour camps.

Senator Aidan Davitt: I am sure the Cathaoirleach is a happy man today following the formal ratification of the election of Joe Biden yesterday. As he said, it is a good day for democracy. I congratulate him and welcome that, as the Cathaoirleach has. The Cathaoirleach has been a great advocate for democracy in this House and long may that continue.

I would like the Minister with responsibility for planning to address the House. There are a lot of development plans going through and the regulator has dealt with some of them. There are serious concerns on behalf of city and county councillors throughout the country on the handling of some of the proposed plans by the regulator. That is something I might try to have a Commencement debate on and we might see if we can get the Minister to come to the House to address this.

It might be a bit soon to offer congratulations but I would like to wish the best to the Westmeath ladies football team. They are in the intermediate all-Ireland ladies football final on Sunday. They are playing our close neighbours so Senator Keogan and I are looking forward

to that one and, hopefully, the best team wins on the day.

An Cathaoirleach: I wish both teams the best of luck. I call the Deputy Leader to respond to the Order of Business.

Senator Lisa Chambers: Senator Cummins opened the Order of Business with the issue of the Central Bank report on insurance, in particular motor insurance, and other Members have raised the issue as well. It is an extremely serious issue and a request will go in from the Leader's office this morning to have a debate on that. There is no doubt that insurance companies are creaming it off people, exploiting them and punishing loyal customers. It is unjustifiable, inexcusable and it will not be tolerated. I listened to a representative of the insurance industry on RTÉ's "Drivetime" with Cormac Ó hEadhra yesterday, trying her best to justify or explain it and she did a poor job. She was well questioned by Mr. Ó hEadhra and he used the phrase "creaming it" because that is exactly what is happening. It is disgraceful.

Senator Cummins raised a specific issue and I had a similar matter come up in my office. It concerned a young male driver who was locked into his insurance company because of an outstanding claim. It is more than a year since this minor claim occurred, which took very small money to settle. The claim is still open so he was not able to shop around. He was given a quote of approximately €2,000 and he tried to shop around but he realised that he could not do so. He then went back to the insurance company and was quoted €4,000, even though his situation had not changed at all. I was in a position to get on to the insurance company and with the help of others, we managed to get a new offer issued for just under €2,000, without an explanation as to why the initial quote was effectively doubled. There was no reason for it, other than the fact that the company thought it would get away with it. How many other young drivers are out there who do not have somebody to advocate for them or somebody to go to? It is utterly disgraceful and I made it clear that I expected the claim to be closed the next time his insurance is due for renewal. Listening to Senator Cummins, it is clear that many people are impacted by that. They are not able to shop around and they are locked into an insurance company. It probably suits the insurance companies to keep these claims open for as long as possible.

Senator McDowell raised the issue of the judicial appointments commission Bill, contending that it must undergo pre-legislative scrutiny. I will pass that onto the Department as I agree with that. It is important legislation that exercised this House for many hours during the previous Seanad. Let us avoid a repeat of that and let us build consensus around this important reforming legislation so that we can get agreement across both Houses. We all agree that reforms are needed but it is important that this is done in a way that involves all stakeholders. That includes the judicial profession and the Judiciary, because they have to operate under the new regime.

I agree with call for elected representatives leading on the vaccine. Senator McDowell was speaking about us as elected representatives needing to lead the way and take the vaccine. I will take the vaccine as soon as I can get it but when he raised the point that it could be seen as jumping the queue, that echoed my first thought. We will have to get in line and get it when are supposed to. Lining all of us up ahead of other people would probably not be the right image to portray. Perhaps party leaders could even stand together and take the vaccine or do something along those lines just to show that leadership.

Senator Sherlock also raised this issue and she mentioned Deputy Kelly's pledge. I agree with Senator Buttimer that we do not need to sign the Labour Party pledge to show that we sup-

port vaccines. We are big boys and girls and we can show our support in our own way. Senator Sherlock raised an important issue regarding section 39 organisations and she welcomed the Government's settling of that matter. I commend the Minister of State at the Department of Health, Deputy Rabbitte, who was instrumental in securing the funding for that deal. Three quarters of the budget for the pay restoration for section 39 workers is coming from her Department. I commend her and the Minister, Deputy Stephen Donnelly, who both ensured that money was set aside in the budget negotiations to make this deal happen. Had that not been done, we would not have a deal today.

Senator Garvey again raised the issue of rural transport. To give credit to her, she is consistent in her raising of that issue. She is an important rural voice on an important rural issue. I am sure it will be transformative for the people of west Clare to have that direct link to the capital city and, as she pointed out, to have that link from the capital city to west Clare in one day is welcome. We need more of that.

Senator Boylan raised the issue of the CETA trade deal between the EU and Canada. That deal has been ten years in the making. While I listened intently to the Senator's comments on CETA, she did not articulate what the issues were, only that there were issues. Perhaps she will want to go a little bit further on the next occasion in outlining her disagreement with the trade deal. She raised an issue regarding the 55-minute debate. If more debating time is needed, that should not be a huge difficulty but that is a matter for the Business Committee to schedule. All parties have input to the scheduling of business in the Dáil so I am sure that committee can come together and schedule its business, as it does every week.

With regard to the Comprehensive and Economic Trade Agreement, as a small, open island economy in the middle of the Atlantic, we rely on exports and we export a great amount of goods. Some €4 billion worth of exports went to Canada in 2019. That is the most up-to-date figure we have. This trade deal benefits Ireland and Irish business and jobs. A particular issue has been raised around the corporate courts. The Court of Justice of the European Union has adjudicated on this and it found that the dispute resolution mechanisms in CETA fully comply with and do not in any way undermine European Union law. I am satisfied that this meets the requirements. Given that this agreement has been discussed and negotiated for nearly a decade, I am confident that, with all member states included, it will be a good trade deal for Ireland.

Senator Murphy raised the issue of bus services and the need to extend them throughout rural areas. I concur with that view. There is a lack of transport in many rural parts of the country. Many parts of County Mayo do not have a daily bus service. They may have a weekly one with a rigid timetable, which means that people rely on family and friends to get around. This makes it particularly difficult for elderly people to stay connected and get around to do their bits and pieces.

Senator Buttimer raised the issue of vaccines and asked for a debate. A debate has been scheduled for the first week after we return in January. That will be timely as we do not have time in the schedule for this week. When we return in January the vaccine will have only started to be rolled out and that will be an opportune time for the House to discuss the roll-out and plan and to see how they are progressing.

Senator Keogan raised the issue of rent arrears in local authorities. I take on board her point that everybody should make a contribution based on ability to pay. We have a very good social safety net to cater for people who fall on hard times. We need to protect and look after people.

If people who are able to pay choose not to do so because they could not be bothered, that is not fair on everybody else. We need to be fair across the board for those who are making genuine efforts to pay what is owed. We have to help people who cannot pay. Everybody should play their part and make a contribution because that is how we all live alongside one another in society.

Senator Dolan raised Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology and outlined very eloquently the issues for students. I note that the two lecturers involved in the case she raised have apologised, as has the college. It was an unfortunate situation. The lecturers thought they were speaking in private. That does not in any way excuse the commentary. Things happen and people make mistakes. I hope that measures are put in place to ensure that something of this nature does not happen again. It must have been very hurtful to the students who were the subject of the comments. That is not right.

Senator Ardagh raised the housing assistance payment. I agree that the HAP system is flawed. We need to have a debate on it and I have made a request to the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage in that regard as well as on the planning issue raised by Senator Davitt. We are hoping to have the Minister in the Chamber in the next term for the multiple debates that Members have been requesting on housing, planning and local government.

Senator Wall raised the issue of fishing in Galway Bay. From what he said, it sounds like what is happening is illegal but I do not know if that is the case. The authorities certainly need to be alerted to the matter, including the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine. Sustainable fishing is of great importance as without it, we will have no fish stock for future generations. If trawling for smaller fish using smaller nets is happening, that is illegal. If that is an issue in Galway Bay, the authorities should be alerted and Galway County Council should take the lead on the matter, working with An Garda Síochána.

I concur with the comments made by Senators Wall and Craughwell on a commission for the Defence Forces. The commission should take all issues into consideration. There are issues with the Department of Defence, as we all know, particularly those of us who have worked on defence issues in recent years. The commentary from serving and former serving members indicates that they have an issue with the way the Department is run. Any Department worth its salt should be open to reform, change and working with those it is tasked with protecting. Nobody should have a closed door. There should be an open-door policy and I believe the Minister for Defence, Deputy Coveney, is committed to that. He is a genuine person when it comes to defence matters. I look forward to debating this with him in the House in the coming year. We will certainly make a request of a debate.

Senator Gallagher raised an issue with the Bus Éireann service and the link between Cavan and Monaghan. He said that by the time the bus from Letterkenny arrives in Monaghan, there is no space left on it. That is a genuine issue that needs to be raised with the Minister because that is not an acceptable service. People should not have to wait on the side of the road in 2020, only to find they are not given a seat on a bus in 2020. That issue needs to go straight to the Minister. I suggest that the Senator raise it as a Commencement matter because it is a localised, specific issue that would be suitable for a Commencement debate.

The issue raised by Senator Carrigy in respect of disabled drivers would also be suitable as a Commencement matter. He referred to the passenger scheme and changes around the primary medical certificate. For the small number of citizens who greatly rely on this scheme, it makes

a big difference to be able to afford a vehicle that can accommodate a driver transporting a family member with a disability and assist in having a better quality of life. These are often the people who are caring and do not have time to have these battles and rows. They need others to advocate for them. This is a very important issue and I have had great difficulty in my constituency with the primary medical certificate because it is really cumbersome. It requires people with significant disabilities to travel to Dublin for an assessment that cannot, for some reason, be done in the community. I have never been able to understand that.

Senator O'Sullivan raised the threat of Russia and the abuse of human rights. He is correct that we very often focus on certain countries which we are very quick to criticise. There is often a quietness or vacuum there when it comes to the activities of the Russian Government. That is an important issue to be debated in our foreign policy.

Senator Craughwell also raised the issue of the commission for the Defence Forces which I dealt with. He also raised the issue of supervisors of community employment schemes. It has been a long-standing policy of the Fianna Fáil Party to try to get pensions for these people. They have served their communities and I agree that they do far more than just supervise the work. They are people who are confided in and to whom people go to get help. They do much more than what is on paper. We need to recognise that community employment schemes are very important for rural communities. They pick up the slack where the Government may have taken its eye off the ball and we greatly rely on them.

Senator Seery Kearney raised the issue of leaving certificate 2020 students and those who were marked down and had to resit their exams. I will certainly pass that on to the Minister for Education, Deputy Foley. She has been speaking about this directly to the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, Deputy Harris. A small number of students have been severely discommoded, for example, if someone working towards getting into medicine who has probably been studying very hard for many years has his or her grades moved down. It has been a difficult situation to manage and the former Minister, Deputy McHugh, made the best decision he could at the time with the information available to him, namely, to cancel the leaving certificate. This was the right call to make at the time. One will never get it right across the board and the Minister, Deputy Foley, then had to carry on that torch. To be fair to both Ministers, they did their best with the information they had. The vast majority of students were very happy with how it was handled. Some students have been disadvantaged and we have to make every effort to look after them.

Senator Ahearn raised the issue of St. Brigid's District Hospital, Carrick-on-Suir. This is quite a localised matter and I do not have any specific information on the hospital. I suggest that the Senator submit a Commencement matter on this to call the Minister before the House to respond on that specific matter.

Senator Ó Donnghaile raised the Joe McDonagh Cup and I join with him in congratulating the Antrim hurlers. I commend the ongoing work of the GAA in Belfast, which I was not aware of, and the building up of the grassroots movement there, which is very important. We know of the important role that the GAA has played in many communities across the country and I have no doubt that it is doing the same in Belfast.

Senator Conway raised the issue of tourism, the pandemic and coach drivers not having access to a fund. They have been hit hard and the Senator has been consistent in raising the impact of the pandemic on the tourism sector. I know he is acutely aware of it in his own part

of the country. I agree that we need to do our best to help this sector because we need it to get back on track when we open up again to bring tourists to all parts of the country. Coach drivers are an integral part of the tourism sector and they keep things moving.

Senator McGahon raised the issue of housing maintenance in Louth County Council and stated the council had run out of money. I do not doubt the Senator's bona fides in raising this issue which he is doing with the best of intentions for the people in County Louth. I am not quite sure, however, why a local authority has not raised the local property tax for six years if it is so bereft of funds and has no money to run its services. In County Mayo, two thirds of the local authority members, the Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael councillors, voted to increase the local property tax, not because it was popular or easy to do, but because they had to do it. The local authority needed the money to keep the show on the road, the potholes filled, the hedges cut and the lights on. It was the right and difficult decision to make and they took flak for doing that. Would it be fair on local authorities, such as Mayo County Council, which have raised the local property tax and have done the good and the responsible thing as elected representatives, to have to bail out other local authorities that did not take the tough decisions? To be honest, that is not fair. A conversation needs to be had. Every year that the local authority passes its budget, it decides where the money goes and how it is spent. A long, hard, reflective look at how that budget is being run for the people of the county may be necessary. Politicians have to make the right call and take responsible decisions rather than the popular and nice ones all the time.

Senator Ward raised the issue of insurance and banks. I have dealt with those issues. I agree that there is a lack of respect being shown to customers and it is exploitation. We will have to have that debate as soon as we can.

Senator Lombard raised the issue of rural regeneration and the power of councillors in terms of determining what projects get funded and applied for. This is constant toing and froing in every local authority for all councillors where the executive has considerable influence over which projects get put forward for funding. It is a difficulty. Elected members are there to represent the people of the county. They should be listened to and need to have input into the selection of projects that go forward for very significant funding in the county. It should not be a case of what councillor is "in" with the chief executive. The best projects should get funded because that is what is in the interests of the people of the county. Elected members have their ear to the ground and know where those projects are and the difference they can make in communities so if they are not having input, that is not in the interests of citizens in those local authorities.

Senator Martin raised the issue of the BBC's coverage of the Uighur population in China. That issue has been raised previously in the House. We concurred across the House that it was a violation of human rights. The BBC's investigative work on this shows the importance of good journalism, including investigative journalism, and the importance of resourcing it properly. There has been an ongoing debate in this country as to how we protect investigative journalism so it does not all go on Twitter and is not all about getting it out quickly. The BBC has a bigger budget than most but it does fine work. I concur with the Senator's comments in that regard.

I join with Senator Davitt in formally congratulating President Joe Biden - it is great to be able to say that. I know the Cathaoirleach has already made contact along with the Ceann Comhairle with the office of the President to invite him here. We look forward to that engagement. It would be great to welcome him back with his strong Mayo roots as soon he can settle back on Irish soil. I must acknowledge his strong Louth roots as well.

I agree with Senator Davitt regarding county development plans. It is a significant issue across local authorities. Councillors are doing their damndest to stop some of the changes for very good reasons. Massive changes are taking place under the radar. There has been a lack of public consultation on this because of Covid and citizens are not getting the full picture. We need to be very careful about this because once these changes come into effect, it is very hard to go back. A county development plan dictates planning for a county for the next five years until it is renewed. I commend councillors from all parties and none from across the country who are leading this fight. The Department has a fight on its hands. I do not think councillors are going to roll over and take this. Certainly they will find support in this House when it comes to making sure that proper scrutiny and consultation take place with regard to these plans because the impact on the citizen is immense.

On a very positive note, I wish the Westmeath ladies well. It is great to see ladies football getting the recognition it deserves. There have been some very unfortunate events in the past number of weeks where ladies football and women's sport in general has not been shown the respect it deserves. I know Deputy Smyth has been leading a campaign to look at how those organisations are funded. To this day, we still do not have a proper explanation why the Ladies Gaelic Football Association, LGFA, is a separate organisation from the GAA. The GAA is the Gaelic games athletics association. It should cover all Gaelic games in the country - men and women. The only reason I can see why they are separate is that all the funding is in the GAA while the LGFA is the poor relation. If it comes in under the one umbrella, the ladies will get more support and it will be spread around more evenly. If we are serious about supporting women's sport in this country, let us show it the degree of respect it deserves and let us learn from the mistakes on that front this year in terms of even televising the semi finals. It was utterly disgraceful. It is 2020 heading into 2021 so it is time we showed the respect to 50% of the population that has been lacking to date.

Order of Business agreed to.

Report of Committee of Selection: Motion

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I move:

That the Fifth Report of the Committee of Selection be laid before the Seanad.

Question put and agreed to.

Sitting suspended at 11.55 a.m. until 1.30 p.m.

Gnó an tSeanaid - Business of Seanad

Acting Chairman (Senator Mark Wall): I have received notice from Senator Jerry Buttimer that, on the motion for the Commencement of the House today, he proposes to raise the following matter:

15 December 2020

The need for the Minister for Finance to provide an update on the payment of annual dividends by credit unions to their members.

I have also received notice from Senator Annie Hoey of the following matter:

The need for the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science to address the removal of Higher Education Authority funding from students who withdraw from academic study due to dissatisfaction with online learning during Covid-19, and their subsequent eligibility for future funding under free fees and SUSI grants.

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

The need for the Minister for Health to outline the level of State support available for the purchase of prosthetic limbs.

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

The need for the Minister for Health to make a statement on the requirement for capital investment in a new critical care wing at the Rotunda Hospital.

I have also received notice from Senator Rebecca Moynihan of the following matter:

The need for the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage to make a statement on the plans in place for the protection of the Iveagh Markets building, Francis Street, Dublin 8.

I have also received notice from Senator John McGahon of the following matter:

The need for the Minister for Health to outline the planned strategy for the roll-out of the Covid-19 vaccination.

I have also received notice from Senator Fiona O'Loughlin of the following matter:

The need for the Minister for Health to ensure that the drug, Patisiran, is made available to those suffering from hereditary amyloidosis.

I have also received notice from Senator Tim Lombard of the following matter:

The need for the Minister for Education to make a statement on the site acquisition for Summercove National School, Kinsale, County Cork.

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

The need for the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment to make a statement on the difficulties being faced by persons working as content moderators.

I have also received notice from Senator Sharon Keogan of the following matter:

The need for the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage to make a statement on the current restrictions on the maximum number of new housing units that may be built in each county prior to 2026 as set out in the guidelines of the Office of the Planning Regulator.

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

The need for the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine to make a statement on the supports available to those affected by the avian flu.

I have also received notice from Senator Barry Ward of the following matter:

The need for the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine to set out the provisions that will be available to local authorities for the management of harbours within their functional areas.

The matters raised by the Senators are suitable for discussion and I have selected Senators Buttimer, Hoey, Byrne and Fitzpatrick and they will be taken now. The other Senators may give notice on another day of the matters that they wish to raise.

Nithe i dtosach suíonna - Commencement Matters

Credit Unions

Senator Jerry Buttimer: I wish to share time with Senator Ahearn. I propose that he takes one minute of my time.

Acting Chairman (Senator Mark Wall): Is that agreed? Agreed. I welcome the Minister of State to the House.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: The Minister of State and I have had a good discussion about this matter and, as he will be aware, credit unions are the bedrock of many local communities. Members save, members borrow and credit unions are the peoples' bank in many cases. I am a former supervisor of my own credit union in Bishopstown. At this time of the year a lot of credit unions hold their annual general meeting, AGM, and we have passed legislation to provide for virtual AGMs, which we all welcome.

Many people rely on the dividend payment. I know in some cases it is a small amount. The number of outcomes in terms of dividends is significant. Each share equals a dividend and the Central Bank, I am led to believe from ongoing representations I have received from people, has called for a prudent approach to be taken. The payment of the dividend and the members' rebate has been put into abeyance because of a letter from the Central Bank in September. It wrote to credit unions outlining the uncertainties relating to Brexit and Covid and mentioned that it did not want to see any distribution by way of dividend or loan interest rebate in credit unions' 2020 final accounts.

The AGMs have not been allowed; they are now virtual. The payment of dividends is important. They are small amounts such as €100, €200 or €300, and in many cases, they are used at this time of year. It prevents people from having to go to moneylenders and we know the consequences of that. I ask that the Minister, the Central Bank and the Irish League of Credit Unions, ILCU, work to ensure that members can receive dividends.

Senator Garret Ahearn: It is very upsetting that the Central Bank sent out a letter to credit unions not to pay out their dividends. I encourage the Minister of State to support the credit unions to make dividend payments to their customers. The credit union in Clonmel had a fantastic year. It had a surplus of €3.6 million with a dividend of €1.7 million to be shared by members, equating to approximately €200 or €300 each. That money is spent locally. Credit unions only exist because of the support of their members and the community. It is really important and sacrosanct that the dividend be paid to members, especially this year more than most. I urge the Minister of State to support that.

Minister of State at the Department of Finance (Deputy Sean Fleming): I thank both Senators for raising this issue. The Government recognises the important role credit unions play in society as a volunteer co-operative in the area of financial institutions. In the current environment, credit unions are appropriately focusing on the health and well-being of their volunteers and staff, and on continuing to serve the needs of their members. Credit unions are important at local and national level given the community presences they have across the country.

In accordance with the Credit Union Act 1997, credit unions need the approval of their members at an AGM to pay dividends. In the rules set by members at local level, most credit unions cannot pay a loan interest rebate without having first paid a dividend. I stress these are rules brought in by members in individual credit unions. There is no Government rule to say that this should be the case, but some credit unions have instituted such a rule at local level.

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, credit unions have not been able to hold physical AGMs as is normal while virtual AGMs were not permitted under the Credit Union Act 1997. It is for this reason that the Government progressed priority legislation, the Finance (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2020, to allow for virtual AGMs, among other matters. When I say virtual AGMs, it all depends on the Covid restrictions. When AGMs come to be held early in the new year there could be a physical meeting combined with a virtual meeting. It could be a blended meeting. It might be somebody on an iPhone or a laptop, or it might be somebody phoning in depending on the mechanisms the individual credit union puts in place. It does not have to be virtually held; it can be partly held by virtual means and partly held by physical means, depending on the Covid restrictions.

The Bill completed all Stages in the Seanad on 30 November 2020 and completed all Stages in the Dáil last Friday. The Bill is currently with the President for signing. Once signed by the President and enacted, the legislation will take immediate effect and credit unions will be able to convene an AGM to seek whatever approval may be required from members in respect of paying dividends and a loan interest rebate. In addition to the removal of the legislative barrier to holding an AGM credit union boards will have to determine whether their financial situation warrants a distribution. The Senators will be aware of the financial challenges facing the sector in recent years, which have been exacerbated by the pandemic.

On 4 September, credit unions received a letter from the Central Bank outlining that it expects credit unions to take a prudent approach to their reserve management, given the risk and uncertainty regarding the economic outlook. It expects priority to be given to the maintenance of building up reserves over the payment of any distribution to members. The Central Bank is independent of the Department of Finance, the Minister for Finance and the Government. They are independent regulators and, therefore, I am not in a position to say to the Central Bank precisely what it should do on that matter.

The Central Bank stated that it did not expect that proposed distributions, dividends or loan interest rebate, would feature for the 2020 financial year, which was the end of September. Where a credit union may be considering the potential for a proposed distribution, however, they are expected to contact the Central Bank at an early stage to clearly outline the rationale for proposing this course of action.

Senator Ahearn mentioned the surplus of €3.6 million in Clonmel credit union last year. Not all credit unions actually made a surplus last year. Some credit unions might have made a small surplus but relative to their assets would not be considered substantial. The Clonmel credit union is proposing a dividend of €1.7 million. The Central Bank has issued the letter across the board to all credit unions. If a credit union wants to consider that, it will have to take it up on a case-by-case basis directly with the Central Bank.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: I thank the Minister of State for his reply. I hope the credit union movement, which is supportive of and immersed in local communities, continues to sponsor local organisations. There is a hardship welfare fund available. I also hope the credit union movement will not move away from that ethos and neither will it be allowed to move away by the Government and the Central Bank. It is about accessibility and community. I take the Minister of State's final point about surpluses.

Senator Garret Ahearn: I thank the Minister of State for his reply. Obviously there is a separation of power, rightly so, between himself and the Central Bank. It is important the Government supports credit unions and that they continue to support their local communities. That is the bedrock on which credit unions are founded.

I thank the Minister of State for his reply.

Deputy Sean Fleming: As I already said, the Central Bank is independent in its role but I hope it is aware of this debate and takes it into consideration. It will not change its view on the matter but, at least, it will hear what is being said about it.

The various credit unions should contact the Central Bank where they feel they need to make these payments. They can propose a mixture of a small dividend, large interest rebate, or 50:50 or whatever the local arrangements historically have been. If the credit union is satisfied that the Central Bank will allow that happen, notwithstanding the fact an AGM might not happen for several weeks, at least people will know the amount of a payment to expect in due course. Perhaps on an individual, member-by-member basis, if the case arises, arrangements can be made with the credit union in the full knowledge that if a payment is approved, how much it will be and when it will be received. Perhaps some local measures can come into play to assist the cash flow position of individual members if the need arises between now and Christmas.

Third Level Education

Senator Annie Hoey: I am raising the need to address the issue around higher education funding being potentially lost to students who withdraw from their courses and the knock-on consequences that this will have not only for free fees - a term I use lightly - but also for their access to Student Universal Support Ireland, SUSI, grants.

There is a certain point, usually at the end of October, by which students must withdraw

from their courses or serve notice that they do not wish to continue their learning if they want to be able to access learning the following year, still be able to get free fees and the like. I am concerned about this because this has been an extraordinary year. Students have had to adapt to new learning styles, as lecturers have had to adapt to new teaching styles. We have all had to adapt to a whole new system. I am concerned about the impact this will have on students, their interaction and the sense of the course they are undertaking. This is through no fault of their own. Neither is it through any fault of their lecturers, the support staff in the educational institutions or the State. The coronavirus happened and we have to make the best of it. There is an opportunity, however, to do something about it.

I do not need to go into too much about the consequences of dropping out from a course. There is no shame in dropping out of a course if it is not the right course for one. The knock-on consequences, however, for those who feel they have to drop out because of financial reasons or because the course was not right for them often mean they are not able to continue on with their learning. It is important that students have been able to leave courses before October which would not have a knock-on consequence for their education.

However, I have spoken to some people in the past while who just do not know. That is because they have not been able to get a sense of their course, themselves, their space or being, all of the things with which we are all trying to grapple too. These people are concerned about the consequences of either staying in a course that is wrong for them or staying in a course they simply should not be in and out of which they will not get any value. This also means there is a knock-on cost to the State and wider society. These people feel that if they bite the bullet and drop out, they will then lock themselves out of coming back next year to do a different course. They will also lock themselves out of being able to access the SUSI grant and other supports. There are also students for whom circumstances are changing dramatically. We still have coronavirus, people getting sick and knock-on consequences for families.

As it is an exceptional year, I am asking for exceptional leniency and understanding for the circumstances in which students may find themselves at the end of 2020 and in 2021 with their education. I have always said, both inside and outside Leinster House, that education is the great leveller. Both the Minister of State and the Minister, Deputy Harris, have also spoken about how education is a great leveller and that we need to work more on easing access to it. I am pleading with the Minister of State for understanding and leniency that we do not lock anyone out due to circumstances beyond his or her control this year and for exceptional understanding for exceptional circumstances.

Minister of State at the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Niall Collins): I thank Senator Hoey for raising this important matter.

Under the Department's free fees schemes, the Exchequer provides funding toward the tuition fee costs of eligible undergraduate higher education students with students paying the student contribution. The student contribution applies to all students on an annual basis who are eligible under the free fees scheme. The current rate is €3,000 per annum. Currently, 60,000 students had all or part of their student contribution paid on their behalf by the State via the student grant scheme.

To satisfy the terms and conditions of the SUSI and free fees schemes regarding progression, a student must be moving from year to year within a course, having successfully com-

pleted the previous year, or be transferring from one course to another where the award for the subsequent course is of a higher level than the previous course.

Under the progression-previous academic attainment criteria of the schemes, a grant or funding will not be paid to a student for a repeat period of study on the same course, or for a different course at the same level. The objective of this policy is to help as many students as possible to obtain one qualification at each level of study. However, once an equivalent period of study has been completed on the new course, the student may be eligible for student grant assistance or free fees funding for the remainder of the course.

Typically students are not supported for a repeat period of study under the free fees initiative. However, in exceptional circumstances or where a student receives a leaving certificate uplifted offer from their original CAO application following an appeal, an exception may be allowed.

The student contribution applies to all students on an annual basis who benefit under the free fees scheme. If the student receives an uplifted place and, subsequently, switches courses during the academic year, they will only pay one student contribution. If a student leaves the current course mid-year, he or she may be eligible for a partial refund of the contribution from the higher education institution. Students should discuss this with their institution in the first instance.

In addition, under the student grant scheme of 2020, SUSI has discretion to award a grant for a repeat period of study in exceptional circumstances which impacted on a student completing a particular period of study or undertaking exams. SUSI treats each application for repeat funding on a case-by-case basis. It is a matter for the individual student to demonstrate to the satisfaction of the awarding authority that there were exceptional circumstances.

If a student leaves his or her course, normal rules apply and the student will not continue to receive a student grant payment. Students must inform SUSI that they are no longer attending their course.

My Department is acutely aware of the needs of students. The student assistance fund provides financial assistance to students experiencing financial difficulties while attending third level. Students can be assisted towards the rent, childcare costs, transport costs and books or class materials. The total allocation for the fund in 2020 and 2021 is €18.2 million.

Additionally, in response to Covid-19, a once-off fund of €1.9 million for access and support services was provided as part of the July stimulus package in 2020 for higher education institutions. This funding has been ring-fenced to meet the wider demands of vulnerable students and target groups. The funding will be used to support activities such as: support learner and student access; engagement or re-engagement activities; retention; progression and positive learning experiences; student success measures; the recruitment of temporary staff to support access services; student advisory support; enhanced orientation programmes; outreach; and pre-entry work.

Senator Annie Hoey: I thank the Minister of State for that. He indicated that an exception may be allowed. He also stated that a student who leaves a course mid-year may be eligible for a partial refund of contribution from the relevant higher education institution. Would that effectively set students who would not be eligible for a SUSI grant back to point zero? I note that SUSI has discretion to award a grant for a repeat period of study in exceptional circum-

stances. Will the Department be advising SUSI to consider circumstances related to Covid-19 as exceptional? Do we just have to hope it will address matters on a case-by-case basis? Will the Department be stating this year has been exceptional owing to Covid and that this could have had a major impact on students' experience?

Deputy Niall Collins: We are aware of the difficulties students have been facing during the pandemic. We encourage any students who are struggling to cope with studying at home to contact their educational institutions or access officers in order that they can be informed of the wide range of services that are available to support them on their journey prior to making any decisions regarding a cessation of their studies.

In recognition of the challenges facing full-time third level students, the Government approved once-off funding of up to €50 million to provide financial assistance in this academic year. That resulted in a payment of €250 for SUSI students and a €250 credit for all EU full-time undergraduate and postgraduate students attending publicly funded higher education institutes. It will be allocated in the coming weeks. SUSI and the higher education institutions will be communicating with students shortly in this regard. That builds on the additional supports that I referred to, namely, the doubling of the student assistance fund, the €15 million technology fund for devices for students in further and higher education, and the €3 million provided as part of the July stimulus to support enhanced mental health services and well-being initiatives.

If the Senator communicates with me separately on some of the issues referred to in her supplementary question, I will get her a more definitive reply. I am just not in a position to give a reply on the issues now.

As early as yesterday, the Government approved a review of the entire SUSI system, to commence immediately. The system has not been reviewed in a number of years. The review will cover all aspects of the system, including criteria, payments and eligibility. It will be all-encompassing. All the stakeholders, including the student unions, will be consulted as part of it. I envisage that there will be an opportunity for public submissions to be made. Public representatives will be able to avail of this facility also. I hope that helps.

Medical Aids and Appliances

Senator Malcolm Byrne: I thank the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, for coming to the House to address this issue. Over 1,000 people in Ireland require the use of artificial limbs every year. Many people will have heard Saoirse tell her story on the "The Late Late Toy Show" but there was also a piece on "Prime Time" last week with Louise Byrne. A number of stories were told in the programme, one of which was that of Darragh McDonald, a friend of mine from Gorey. He is a gold-medalist Paralympian. He told his story. In his case, because of the limbs he requires, the cost is in the order of €16,000 every two years. The Minister of State will also have heard the story of Darren Kelly, who spoke about his son Éanna, who needs two prosthetic legs, at a cost of €5,000 to €6,000 each per year. If one breaks, the total cost could be €15,000 in a year.

The only way those who require prosthetic limbs can apply for them is by getting a medical card. In many cases, they have to apply for a discretionary medical card. That process can take a long time. I am aware that the Minister of State shares some of my concerns about means testing in the case of permanent disability. Those who require prosthetic limbs need them for

their entire lives. There is a problem in that families always have to apply for renewal. Even when this is approved, they have to wait a number of months for the limbs to become available. A growing child, in particular, may not be able to get around. “Prime Time” addressed the issue of the HSE and the postcode lottery that exists. There is a commitment to trying to resolve this but the difficulty is that there has not been an improvement in processing times.

It is a question of determining how we can allow those with a disability to play their full part in society. I am aware that the Minister of State is very committed to this. We must ensure those with a disability can reach or exceed their potential. We achieve this in so many other areas. With regard to getting people into higher education, we have the disability access route to education, DARE, scheme in place. We talk about trying to increase the number of people with a disability in the workplace but, with regard to prostheses, sufficient support is not made available. If we compare our health system with others across Europe, we note that we are clearly behind the curve.

For people like Saoirse, Darragh and Éanna, and thousands of others, I ask that we be innovative and consider putting in place a proper scheme, be it through guaranteed discretionary medical cards or tax deductions, whereby those relying on prostheses do not face a barrier and their families do not have to spend the whole time campaigning or fundraising. I ask the Minister of State to intervene with the HSE to take action on this.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): I thank the Senator for raising this really important issue. He is quite right in that Saoirse stole all our hearts two weeks ago on the “The Late Late Toy Show”. Also, he quite rightly stated that there are so many more affected, including Darragh and Éanna. The issue can be very problematic for parents and children because the latter grow so quickly at a young age. It is an important issue and I am glad the Deputy has raised it.

The term “community-funded schemes” is a collective title for all of the many products, supports, supplies, appliances and aids that are provided through community services. A variety of products and services are provided under the schemes. The HSE provides a wide range of medical and surgical aids and appliances, such as prosthetic limbs, wheelchairs and walking aids, free of charge to medical card holders and people on the long-term illness, LTI, scheme. Assessment by a relevant health professional is required. The products and services play a key role in assisting and supporting service users to maintain everyday functioning and to remain living in their homes and local community. They also avoid the need for a hospital presentation or admission while facilitating early discharge from hospital back into the community.

Under the LTI scheme, patients receive, free of charge, drugs, medicines, and medical and surgical appliances directly related to the treatment of the diseases and disabilities covered by the scheme. People who cannot, without undue hardship, arrange for the provision of medical services for themselves and their dependants may be eligible for a medical card. In the assessment process, the HSE can take into account medical costs incurred by an individual or a family.

Prosthetic services are currently provided by a range of private providers, and the cost of prostheses for eligible service users is charged to the HSE. Clinical governance arrangements vary depending on the location where services are accessed. Each community healthcare organisation, CHO, operates standard processes for the allocation of funding for medical and surgical aids and appliances.

In terms of eligibility criteria, each application for a prosthesis within a CHO is assessed for medical card and long-term illness card patients by the local resource allocation group. A determination is made regarding approval based on priority and funding availability within local budgets.

At times, due to the demand for resources exceeding the available capacity, waiting lists may apply for some categories of items provided through the medical and surgical aids and appliances budget in a particular CHO. CHOs undertake a range of initiatives to ensure optimum use of resources.

As part of the HSE's service improvement programme for community funded schemes, a work stream has been dedicated to standardising provision of aids and appliances at national level. This work includes the establishment of a national approved list of items, national guidance for prioritisation and standardised provision across the entire country to help ensure that

2 o'clock the quality and equity of access to the service is improved and that what is sometimes referred to as the postcode lottery becomes a thing of the past. While the availability of sufficient resources will undoubtedly remain a challenge for individual areas in meeting demands for these services, it is expected that there will be a significant reduction in the geographical variation that has previously existed. This does not speak to the issue the Senator raised about those who do not have medical cards and who have to fundraise. I will certainly give this consideration and address it with the HSE and the Minister.

Senator Malcolm Byrne: I thank the Minister of State. It is welcome that the postcode lottery will be a thing of the past but it does not solve the bigger question. It is a crazy situation that families have to continue to apply for a discretionary medical card. These are permanent disabilities. As the Minister of State knows, they are not disabilities that will disappear. I ask that once a medical card is granted, it should be allowed to continue so it will give those families and parents certainty.

Where we have somebody who may exceed the income threshold for the medical card, and I am speaking about someone like Darragh who needs to spend €16,000 every two years, it requires a lot of income to be able to do this. We are not providing the incentive for people to go into the workplace if they know they are going to have to come up with this level of funding. We as a society want those with a disability to play their full part and we have to ensure we have a health system that is designed to support it. There needs to be a complete review not just of the postcode lottery but about how we can help each individual child and as they grow into adulthood that we can provide them with the necessary limbs that they are not put out of pocket to the extent they are at present and that they can continue to play a very strong role in our communities.

Deputy Mary Butler: I thank the Senator for the practical and pragmatic way he has raised this matter. It is a serious issue for many families. As he has said, the spotlight in recent weeks on young children with prostheses has shown that it can be very problematic for many families who might not have access to a long-term illness card or a medical card. As Senator Byrne said, if they are trying to raise an extra €16,000 every two years it is a huge amount of money for any one family to come up with.

The HSE states there are many demands on community funded schemes but thousands of products and appliances are provided through the schemes each year and they provide a key

role in assisting and supporting service users to live at home and maintain their day-to-day activities. The HSE endeavours to meet needs in an equitable way within available resources and, given the many demands, the HSE prioritises eligible patients with the greatest needs.

I welcome also the programme for the community funded schemes, the work stream that has developed to standardise provision of aids and appliances at national level and the fact we will finally try to move away from the postcode lottery, which is something we are so used to in all services. It is something that has to become a thing of the past. I thank the Senator for raising this matter and I will certainly take back to the HSE the issues he has specifically raised. We know there are supports out there but unfortunately not everyone is able to access them.

Maternity Services

Senator Mary Fitzpatrick: I thank the Minister of State for coming to the House to respond to my Commencement matter, which calls on the Minister for Health and the Department to commit to providing €2.5 million in funding for the Rotunda Hospital on Parnell Square in Dublin. For those who are not aware, the Rotunda Hospital is the world's oldest maternity hospital. It is the country's busiest maternity hospital. It delivers on average 8,000 babies a year. One in every six babies in the country is born at the Rotunda Hospital and one in every four neonatal babies is born in the Rotunda Hospital. It is not just a local hospital for me or the women in central Dublin, it is a hospital that serves women from throughout the country. Some of the most vulnerable of patients and the most complex of pregnancies are enabled and supported in the Rotunda Hospital.

It dates back to 1745 and as well as being a very busy maternity hospital delivering babies and caring for mothers, it receives 500 gynaecological referrals every month. A woman only gets referred for a gynaecological appointment after her routine appointment has thrown up some anomaly. There are more than 3,500 women on the waiting list for basic female health services. Far too many of them have been waiting for more than 12 months for an appointment. To my mind, and in the mind of the Government, it should be totally unacceptable that women in Dublin today would be waiting more than 12 months for a gynaecological appointment.

According to HIQA, the Rotunda Hospital building and infrastructure is overcrowded, out of date and not fit for purpose. Essentially, it delivers 21st century health services in 18th century facilities. Going back to 2018, I brought the then Fianna Fáil spokesperson for health, the now Minister, Deputy Stephen Donnelly, to the Rotunda Hospital. Following our visit and lobbying by others, the then Minister, Deputy Harris, commissioned an independent report. KPMG completed that report and I understand it has been delivered to the Minister. The report examined nine different options to help deal with the overcrowding, lack of space, poor infrastructure and high risk of infection. It concluded the best option is the development of a new critical care wing on the west side of Parnell Square.

There is a one-storey outpatient department at present. The proposal is to demolish this and replace it with a fit-for-purpose critical care wing in a four-storey building over a basement. It is considered the most cost-benefit advantageous solution with a 2:1 ratio. It would provide the greatest range of benefits and is consistent with the long-term plans for the Rotunda. To move the project forward next year will only cost an investment of €2.5 million. It is a very modest investment not just in the women, babies and mothers but also the 1,000 staff who work in the Rotunda Hospital. I was lucky enough to have my three babies in the Rotunda Hospital. Given

the care provided to everybody when they walk in the door by the amazing security man, cleaners, doctors, nurses and midwives they deserve to be provided with fit for purpose facilities. The mothers and babies of Ireland deserve it too. I hope the Minister of State can give us some good news on this request.

Acting Chairman (Senator Mark Wall): The Rotunda Hospital is also very important to me as my two sons were born there and my wife trained as a midwife there. It is very important.

Deputy Mary Butler: Many people are interested in this Commencement matter. As Senator Fitzpatrick has quite rightly said, the Rotunda Hospital is the world's oldest and Ireland's busiest maternity hospital, with the phenomenal number of 8,000 babies being delivered every year. I thank her for raising the issue and giving me the opportunity to outline to the House on behalf of the Minister, Deputy Stephen Donnelly, the position on the Rotunda Hospital.

Project Ireland 2040 provides €10.9 billion for health capital developments throughout the country, including funding to support implementation of the national maternity strategy. Co-location of maternity services with adult services provides mothers with access to a full range of medical and support services should the need arise. The availability of these services helps ensure the delivery of an optimum, safe service, particularly for high risk mothers and babies.

Work on the co-location of the Rotunda Hospital with Connolly Hospital Blanchardstown, in line with health policy, is progressing. The programme for Government includes a commitment to "Progress the planning, tender and design stages for the relocation of the Coombe Hospital to St James's, the Rotunda Hospital to Connolly, and Limerick University Maternity Hospital to University Hospital Limerick." A master plan has been prepared for the Connolly campus in support of the co-location of the Rotunda Hospital.

In the short term, it is acknowledged that there is a need to address the highest infrastructural risk and capacity issues at the existing hospital on Parnell Square on a prioritised and interim basis pending development of the new hospital in the medium term. The Rotunda Hospital has proposed the development of a critical care wing to address its identified key clinical risks. There has been engagement between the Department of Health, the HSE and the Rotunda to clarify the scope and extent of the development needed at the Rotunda to resolve patient safety risks arising from infrastructural challenges at the hospital. In the context of the long-term objective of relocating the Rotunda, however, any infrastructural development on the site should be confined to the minimum necessary requirements and designed only to address the priority patient safety risks.

In 2020, €4.6 million was provided by the HSE to the Rotunda Hospital to address capacity and infrastructural needs in the foetal assessment unit, neonatal intensive care unit, emergency theatre and delivery suites. Given the age and condition of the original hospital buildings, however, other issues remain. In this regard, additional funding of €100,000 has been provided by the HSE to the Rotunda to prepare a strategic assessment report and preliminary business case in support of the proposed critical care wing, as required under the public spending code. These reports have recently been submitted to the HSE and are under consideration. A projected €250,000 will be allocated in 2021 to assist further in progressing proposals to address areas of critical risk in the existing hospital buildings.

Senator Mary Fitzpatrick: I appreciate the Minister of State's reply, but I am disappointed. I cannot be satisfied with it. I do not mean that personally where the Minister of State

is concerned, but this saga has been ongoing for years. I believe the first proposal to move the Rotunda dates back to the 1990s. The women of Dublin and the women of Ireland deserve better. There was a planned move in 2007. In 2015, an announcement was made by the then Minister to the effect that the three maternity hospitals were going to be relocated. The other maternity hospitals have received significant investment and I accept that the HSE has given some funding to the Rotunda, but there was no point in spending €100,000 on a strategic assessment if we were not going to act on it now.

The Government's spend is €10.9 billion. That is a great investment in health services, but the women of Ireland deserve some of that. This is a modest, pragmatic and sound investment proposal. The total cost of creating a critical care wing in the Rotunda would be €61 million. The Connolly proposal is over €500 million. What will be the period involved? Will it be 15, 20 or 30 years? I implore the Minister of State to speak with the Minister. I would like him to meet the master of the Rotunda. If the Minister of State could attend that meeting as well, it would be great. It is important that we not ignore the risks facing not only the mothers, babies and families every day, but also the staff. It is unfair to put staff into these risky situations. It is also unfair on the mothers and babies who are relying on the Rotunda for their health services.

Deputy Mary Butler: I thank the Deputy for her subsequent statement. In 2020, €4.6 million was provided by the HSE to the Rotunda Hospital to address capacity and infrastructural needs. Given the age and condition of the original hospital, additional funding of €100,000 has been provided by the HSE to the Rotunda to prepare a strategic assessment report and preliminary business case in support of the proposed critical care wing, as required under the public spending code. A projected €250,000 will be allocated in 2021 to assist further in progressing proposals to address areas of critical risk in the existing hospital buildings.

The proposed interim upgrade works are intended to address the key clinical risks and capacity concerns identified by the hospital prior to its co-location with Connolly Hospital Blanchardstown in line with programme for Government commitments. All capital development proposals must progress through a number of approved stages in line with the public spending code, including detailed appraisal, planning, design and procurement, before a firm timeline or funding requirements can be established. Approval must be received for each stage to ensure that the proposal delivers value for money and remains affordable and that sufficient moneys are available to fund the project to completion, including equipping and commissioning costs.

The delivery of capital projects is a dynamic process and subject to a number of key considerations, including service prioritisation, classification of scope, determination of affordability and the successful completion of the various capital project approval stages, which can impact on the timeline for delivery. However, I will bring the Senator's concerns to the Minister. I suggest that she write to him. There has been a previous visit. It is the oldest hospital in the world and the busiest in Ireland, with more than 8,000 babies delivered per year, and that is aside from the gynaecological work that is done in the hospital. This matter is of major concern to the Senator and many other people, including me.

Acting Chairman (Senator Mark Wall): I thank the Minister of State for her engagement with Senators.

Sitting suspended at 2.17 p.m. and resumed at 2.45 p.m.

Commencement of Irish Sign Language Act 2017: Statements

An Cathaoirleach: I am delighted to chair this important debate on the Irish Sign Language Act 2017 commencement review. I welcome the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, to the House. I thank the Minister of State for coming in for this important debate on the commencement of the Irish Sign Language Act 2017. I thank Members for taking the time to come here today. As Members know, three years ago we passed the Irish Sign Language Bill in the Seanad and the Dáil and then it came back to the Seanad and it was eventually signed by the President on Christmas Eve 2017. This is important legislation because it gives human rights to the members of our deaf community and to the 50,000 Irish Sign Language users in Ireland.

Three years ago, when we passed the Bill, we dedicated it to the memory of Daniel and William McCarthy, who were in their 70s and who died in extreme isolation in Dublin. They were deaf brothers who lived together and they died together in tragic circumstances. They were buried in Dingle in their native Kerry.

The importance of the Bill is highlighted by the fact that we are here today to look at how far we have come in giving those rights of access to State services to members of the deaf community and to inform them of their rights. We have come a long way but we have a long way yet to go in the fight for equality for all of our citizens. I thank the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, for taking the time to come to the House to discuss the commencement of the Act.

Minister of State at the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): I thank the Cathaoirleach, Senator Mark Daly.

It is important that I start with the right words said in the right way. I have just had my first lesson in sign language and I will not be as good as the Cathaoirleach in the fluency of his delivery but as I look at my notes, I will try my best. To people watching I encourage everybody to try to learn a few words in sign language. It has been a very enriching experience. I am delighted to be here today to talk to the House on this very important occasion and I am proud to speak a few words in the Irish Sign Language, ISL, which is one of Ireland's unique, native and recognised languages. This is something to be celebrated.

We are approaching the third anniversary of the passing of the Irish Sign Language Act, which we will shortly commence. The commencement of the Act is a milestone moment for the sign language population for whom this is among the most important legislation ever passed in this country. However, each and every one of us should share in celebrating this moment. At the end of this most difficult year, we have here the opportunity to recognise, celebrate and commit to support our unique, native and independent language. It is my pleasure to confirm to the House that a commencement order is being finalised and this will commence the Act on 23 December. I will, therefore, take this opportunity to give a brief overview of the progress in the key areas of the Act.

I acknowledge all those who worked and called for the realisation of this Act. This has been so important in the journey to its commencement. Unfortunately, time does not allow me to go through the long list.

As the House will be aware, the Act places an obligation on public bodies to do all that is reasonable to ensure that they provide ISL users with free interpretation when availing of or seeking to access statutory entitlements and services. Secretaries General are being reminded of this fact and encouraged to remind their staff and the agencies for which they are responsible

of this. The fulfilling of this duty will require that there are a sufficient numbers of accredited interpreters available. The Department of Social Protection, working with the Citizen's Information Board and the Sign Language Interpreting Service, has taken steps to ensure that this becomes a reality.

A company has been established to maintain a register of Irish Sign Language interpreters and to develop a quality assurance scheme which will strengthen and guarantee the quality of ISL provision. The Department of Social Protection is piloting an app which will allow access to interpreters via phones and other devices. This is an exciting opportunity and I look forward to seeing it work for ISL users so that it can be expanded as part of our suite of options for them. The Department is also responsible for a voucher scheme which will allow ISL users to book and avail of interpreters to ensure that they have access to them when participating in cultural, social and educational events. This is key to removing barriers that deaf people experience in engaging in their community and in enjoying access to the arts and other important activities. The voucher scheme is well advanced but Covid-19 has impacted its readiness. However, I also understand that this will be realised over the course of 2021.

Equal access to justice is key to our society. For many years, our courts have arranged and paid for sign language interpreters where required in family and criminal law cases. For civil proceedings, the protocol has been that litigants cover the cost of interpretation themselves. The legislation provides that this practice in family and criminal proceedings becomes an obligation for the State. As a result, the Courts Service will be required to arrange and bear the cost of ISL interpretation in civil proceedings. The Courts Service is committed to implementing this responsibility.

In the education of our young ISL users and their families, the Department of Education and the National Council for Special Education are ensuring that there is an ISL tuition scheme available to families and that dedicated visiting teachers support the work of class teachers. For our teachers, Dublin City University has an ISL bachelor of education course that enables deaf and hard of hearing people who use ISL to enter primary teaching. This is a significant step towards ensuring access and inclusion for all in the classroom.

I take this opportunity to thank the ISL interpreters who have supported the Department of Health's nightly briefings on Covid-19. They are a crucial part of the communication of key public policy health messages and confirm, once again, the Act's importance.

Realising the transformation envisaged in the Act will take time. I celebrate the progress made but I recognise that there is more to be done. As the person now charged with the duties as Minister of State with responsibility for disability matters, I emphasise my commitment to ensuring that the Act is fully implemented as soon as possible. I believe strongly in the goal of ISL users to participate fully in Irish society, as is their right.

Senator Lorraine Clifford-Lee: I thank the Minister of State for such a comprehensive summary of progress. Her sign language skills were very good and I commend her on her efforts in that regard. I also pay tribute to an Cathaoirleach, Senator Mark Daly, for his vision and commitment over the years to bringing this legislation to fruition. I thank him for all of his efforts. I was very proud to be one of the proposers of the legislation in 2017 but it was the Cathaoirleach who championed this issue from the outset.

One of my first memories after my election to Seanad Éireann was of being metaphorically

pounced upon by Senator Mark Daly to talk about Irish Sign Language legislation. It was what he wanted to see passed in his term in the Seanad. I commend him on having the vision to bring forward a Bill on Irish Sign Language. As we know, language rights are human rights, and that is the case for all languages, be it the Irish language or Irish Sign Language. Language rights are directly linked with human rights.

The Cathaoirleach referred to two very tragic deaths. None of us will forget the day we passed the legislation and the tributes we paid to the two men who died. Without doubt, deaf people are among the most marginalised groups in the country. This legislation starts us on the long road towards equality for deaf people. We are not going to reach the end of that road any time soon. I know the Minister of State is personally committed to this, as are many Members of both Houses. I hope we will all travel this journey together in the years ahead.

Having the commencement order on 23 December is probably the best Christmas gift the deaf and the hard of hearing community, and their families, can get this year. It has been an incredibly difficult year. I know from people who are deaf or hard of hearing who contacted my office that they are having a particularly difficult time. As people are wearing face masks, the inability to lip-read has had a significant impact on their health and well-being and their ability to make their way in the world. This Act is a good recognition of the difficult time they have had in recent months. This is a fantastic occasion.

I am very glad the Minister of State referenced the Irish Sign Language, ISL, interpreters assisting the Department of Health with the health briefings. The symbolism of that alone was very significant. The more people outside the Irish Sign Language community see of that the more it normalises it and inspires other people to take those lessons and to better include the deaf people living within our communities.

I would like to pay tribute to two other sign language interpreters, Amanda Coogan and Aisling Dragoi - I hope I pronounced Aisling's surname properly - who interpreted the recent "Late Late Toy Show" and did a fantastic job. I do not know if anyone saw their interpreting of the toy show but it was only the second year the toy show was interpreted in Irish Sign Language. That is probably as a direct result of the vision the Cathaoirleach, Senator Mark Daly, had a number of years ago. That toy show was the most widely watched ever and it was the most watched programme in the country. It was watched abroad also. To have those two interpreters interpret with such enthusiasm and dance along to every song being sung included deaf children and their families - I am sorry but I am getting emotional even thinking about it - and made their Christmas special. I thank the Cathaoirleach and the Minister of State very much for that.

I was particularly glad to hear in the Minister of State's contribution that the Courts Service will have the responsibility of providing interpreters for civil litigation procedures. That is ground-breaking because up until that time, nobody could take the financial risk of bringing any civil litigation proceedings. It is a big enough risk taking a case but to have that extra risk heaped on people just because they are deaf was an outrageous barrier to access to justice. I am particularly happy to see that.

I am particularly happy to see also that my local university, Dublin City University, will be providing the new Irish Sign Language bachelor of education course to further assist deaf and hard of hearing children in our education system and to allow those children aspire to be

teachers. The most wonderful thing any child can have is the aspiration to achieve their goals.

I thank the Minister of State for her comprehensive run-down of the legislation. I will celebrate with a glass of champagne on 23 December and I will brush up on my Irish Sign Language skills on that day to celebrate with her everybody involved.

An Cathaoirleach: I thank Senator Clifford-Lee. I thank her for sponsoring the Bill all those years ago because at the time we were still campaigning and there was no certainty that it would be passed. I call Senator Boyhan.

Senator Victor Boyhan: I welcome the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte. I was told a long time ago when I first came into these Houses to watch her because she was a fast learner. That is clearly the case. We have seen her tenacity, grasp of issues and determination in action in the past few weeks and well done on that. It is not an easy task to come into these Houses and to be a Minister of State. The Minister of State and her colleague from Waterford who we had in the House yesterday are a formidable pair. They are two people to watch for the future and Leinster House is a better place having them in government as Ministers of State with two important portfolios. I wish them well and acknowledge that. It is important that we acknowledge talent and skill but also the determination and fast learning I have witnessed here today, as it reflects everything I have been told about the Minister of State. I say that in the best terms.

I have known the Cathaoirleach, Senator Mark Daly, a very long time. The very first day I met him he was talking about this issue. Since I have come in here he was talking about ISL. He, too, is a very determined man, as the Minister of State, and Members of this House, know. When he sets his mind on something he is focused, driven, forensic and determined. We owe a lot to him. I know he is involved in one of the deaf organisations in terms of his nominating body.

I have been a director of Irish Guide Dogs for the Blind for many years and I equate blindness with deafness. To close one's eyes and see nothing or to have one's ears covered and hear nothing are two profound disadvantages in life. Somebody asked earlier what was this about. This is about human rights, access, communication, the skill of engaging with other people in one's community and the capacity and ability to play a meaningful role in one's school, church, community or place of work. This is an important communication skill that we all need. Many of us who have the ability to see and hear still have not quite learned how to communicate. There is a real art in communication. It is about empathy and many other things. We have many faculties that we never put into use. I am reminded of a woman who is blind from birth who told me one day when I met her that I was not in good form or I was in a bad mood. I told her I was not but she said she could sense it. She could smell it. She said she could hear me as I came up the path. We have many senses that we lose because we have never practised them. It is important to be aware that while people do not necessarily hear, they have other senses.

This is an important day and it is important that we celebrate it. Senator Clifford-Lee spoke about the "Late Late Toy Show". I saw it, too. I liked the strong images of the sign interpreters in respect of the Covid-19 restrictions. That was important because we need to bring people to the front. We need to show that there are many ways of communicating with people.

I was delighted that the Minister of State referenced DCU because it is a wonderful university. It operates a range of courses that assess people and support them in realising their potential and ability, which is what it is all about. It is about each and every one of us realising

and maximising our full potential to be relevant and meaningful citizens within our community.

I thank the Cathaoirleach, Senator Mark Daly. I also want to thank Grace Coyle, who works in his office. She is the other half of the engine that operates up there. I acknowledge her because she did a great deal of work in the background, and it was not easy. It is hard to believe but three years ago, we were wondering if there would be enough support in this House for the Bill. We wondered if there would be an issue with having a sign language person in the House to interpret. We remember the lovely movement when we finished our debate. They put up their hands and waved indicating “Thank you” and “Goodbye”. Communication is not that complicated if people are given the space and the time to communicate.

I want to acknowledge also the work of the Minister of State’s predecessor, Finian McGrath, because he did a lot of work and it was not easy for him either. There was a Government in place very similar to the one we have today, a confidence and supply arrangement. He had difficulty in getting time and getting people to listen to what he was trying to advocate.

Well done to the Cathaoirleach for driving this Bill. Well done to the people who came on board but, importantly, to the families and the advocates of the deaf community who did not give up and believed they were right and entitled to fight and push for their right to be able to communicate and engage. I hope it will not be too long before we see a member of the disability community or, for that matter, the deaf community having a meaningful role and engaging here in Seanad Éireann and, hopefully, in Dáil Éireann. I thank everyone involved and I wish the Minister of State well with her work.

An Cathaoirleach: I thank the Senator for his kind words. I call Senator Martin Conway.

Senator Martin Conway: History was made here today because I do not recall a Member, a Cathaoirleach or a Minister ever speaking in sign language in this House. It is yet another first in the Seanad Chamber. The work the Cathaoirleach has done on this issue has been immense. I can stand here in front of him and say that we would not be where we are today but for what he did, his commitment and dogged determination over the last number of years to get this over the line. I will never forget that Christmas Eve in 2017, speaking to the Cathaoirleach on the phone when the President signed the legislation into law. As far as I am concerned, it was probably one of the most important pieces of legislation we ever put through this House. One might say three years is a long time to commence it but, when one looks at many pieces of legislation that we have had in this country and the length of time it has taken to commence legislation, 36 months is not bad. Why has that happened? It has happened because people like the Cathaoirleach, the Minister of State and other colleagues in the House did not stop campaigning. The Bill was a first step. Bills are great, putting legislation through is fantastic and it is what we are here for. However, it is when legislation works its way down to helping people and getting people the type of equality they need and deserve that it really works because that is when history is made.

We are now at another incrementally important step: the commencement of the Act. The Minister of State will have done her bit in terms of signing the necessary orders and so on. Now it is up to the Secretaries General of the various Departments, the public bodies, institutions and third level bodies to implement the law. We will have to keep an eye on them to make sure they are doing so. When the Minister of State addresses us afterwards or, if she does not, when she comes in again, perhaps she will talk about how she sees us monitoring this to ensure it is implemented, that there are proper complaints procedures and how that will work.

There is nothing as challenging as not being able to hear and relying on movement and so on. The public were brought a long way in this conversation with the HSE briefings on Covid-19 and the constant presence of people like Lisa Harvey in the background delivering the message in Irish Sign Language. They did a phenomenal job in raising awareness. The six interpreters who worked on the HSE, Government and Department of Health briefings did a phenomenal job and we owe them a debt of gratitude. They are the ones we see but the ones we do not see interpreting every day of the week in various circumstances in families, institutions and workplaces and so on are fantastic people as well. I am delighted that Dublin City University is playing its part because the biggest challenge we will have is the availability of interpreters. I hope the Minister of State through her good offices and through the Minister for Education will ensure that whatever funding is needed to develop and to support programmes will be in place.

I would love to be able to do some Irish Sign Language, as the Cathaoirleach and the Minister of State did. I remember in University College Dublin attending a sign language lesson when I was a student. The realisation hit me quickly that someone with a visual impairment will find it hard to pick up sign language by watching. I am sure there are other ways of doing it so I will have to become more creative in how I go about learning. The Cathaoirleach and the Minister of State have given me inspiration to try and take baby steps in learning it. The more languages we have, the better, especially of our own native languages. This is our third language, thanks to the Bill passed in this House.

I thank the Minister of State. After less than six months in office, to deliver this is a fantastic achievement. As Senator Boyhan and others have said, she has only just begun.

An Cathaoirleach: I thank the Senator for his contribution through the years on this important debate on sign language recognition.

Senator Annie Hoey: Can I share my time with Senator Wall?

An Cathaoirleach: Yes. It is six minutes. Does the Senator want three and three?

Senator Annie Hoey: Yes, three and three is fine.

An Cathaoirleach: Is that agreed? Agreed.

Senator Annie Hoey: I thank the Minister of State for coming here. It is great to come into the Seanad after all the work has been done in the years beforehand and be able to say “Well done” on getting this legislation through. This is a delight. I was watching on the screen closely and the Minister of State was doing the exact same as the person signing on the screen and it was very clear.

We talked about hopefully someday having representation in this House and I remember during the Seanad election campaign there was a candidate who was deaf. I was ashamed of myself that when I spoke to that person I was not able to communicate beyond being able to spell out the alphabet. It is not the most practical way to communicate to someone by trying to spell it out. I felt bad and that this was not good enough. I can communicate in Irish, even if it is struggling along through a few words. I thought about what I could do to try and be better, such as always having subtitles on videos and stuff like that.

A couple of Members have spoken about the impact face masks have on people. I downloaded an instant audio-to-text app to my phone so, if I ever meet someone again who I am

unable to communicate with, I can hold the phone beside my mouth and, as I am speaking with the mask on, the text will come up across the screen. It is not the same as learning sign language fully but it means I always have that on my phone if needed. I suggest if people want to do that to download an instant audio-to-text app to their phones. It means that one is at least a little prepared while we hopefully go forward and try to learn a bit more sign language. I also downloaded the concise Irish Sign Language app. It was only a couple of euro and it teaches one how to do letters and 1, 2, 3, 4. Hopefully, I will get on better. That was a pitch for two apps and I am not sure if we are allowed to do that. I particularly suggest people download the audio-to-text app to their phones. As long as we have masks, and even beyond that, it is a reasonable thing to do.

Some 5,000 people speak Irish Sign Language and 40,000 use it in their daily communications. That is the same population as Drogheda. For anyone listening in, and everyone here knows how important it is, that is a significant number of people in Ireland for whom this is an important issue. It is important that Irish Sign Language be more widely recognised and we make things accessible, with subtitles on videos, apps on our phones, commitments to go beyond the basics of A, B, C, D and, like the Minister of State, learning to communicate.

The World Federation of the Deaf has a Charter on Sign Language Rights for All. Only four countries have signed up to it so far, namely, Iceland, Venezuela, Colombia and Bolivia. Something we might need to look at as a next step is to get Ireland to sign up to that charter. The basic charter is to demonstrate a country's support for the rights of deaf people to realise their full human rights through sign language. It might be a significant step for this House or the Minister of State to get Ireland to sign up to this charter to demonstrate that we are fully committed to facilitating, understanding and engaging with people and their human rights through their language. It would be great if we were to do that.

An Cathaoirleach: I thank the Senator for informing the House about those two apps, which will be useful for communication. It is a good idea that we, as a country, sign up to that charter.

Senator Mark Wall: I thank Senator Hoey for sharing her time with me. I welcome the Minister of State into the House and join in the tributes to the Cathaoirleach for his work on this legislation. As a councillor receiving his many letters on ISL over previous years, it was excellent. Today we see the fruits of that labour and it is important we acknowledge the Cathaoirleach as the person who has driven this through the Houses of the Oireachtas. I congratulate him on that.

I will mention a couple of people and groups the Cathaoirleach will be familiar with.

I wish to highlight the work of a fantastic community group in my home town, Athy, which has made it its business to teach Irish Sign Language to children, teenagers and adults in a fun and friendly way. The Athy Sing and Sign Club was founded in 2005 by Aiden McHugh. In 2007 the club was joined by its teacher, Maggie Owens. She is a brilliant and inspirational community campaigner who has instilled a love of the Irish Sign Language in the people of Athy and its surrounds. The club has performed on television, in musicals and on stage.

I have had the pleasure of supporting many of its members in completing QQI levels 3 and 4 in ISL with the Irish Deaf Society. Recently one of its members, Aoife Harrington, qualified as an ISL interpreter following four years of study through the Centre for Deaf Studies in Trinity

College. The group and its committee of Maggie, Majella, Linda, Breda and Mary produce an annual ISL booklet and hold an annual ISL festival in the town which is always well supported and remains one of the highlights of the yearly calendar of events in Athy. They are also involved in every civic and community function and event held in the town.

I will finish by highlighting the club's mission, which is to provide a supportive and positive learning environment in which all individual members have the opportunity to develop their ISL skills and learn about deaf culture and the deaf community. Their members will also get an opportunity to develop their leadership skills in a youth-friendly environment which, in turn, leads to self-confidence and personal growth. Athy Sing and Sign is a group of which we are rightly proud of in Athy and which has rightly put ISL to the forefront of our thoughts and actions. Long may that continue.

An Cathaoirleach: I watched the club's performance on social media last night. It was truly outstanding and long may it continue its great work.

Senator Róisín Garvey: This is an important debate. There is nobody who suffers from hearing issues in the Houses of the Oireachtas. Somebody has to be their voice. I thank the Cathaoirleach for the work he has done over the years, and the Minister of State for putting all of the support behind the hard work that has been done. It is important that we thank the working group. Politicians are great at talking but we are not experts in different areas. We heard from experts.

I refer to the working group. I want to acknowledge the work of the Irish Council for Sign Language Interpreters, the Irish Deaf Society, the Centre for Deaf Studies in Trinity College, Dublin, Chime and members of the deaf community who gave of their time voluntarily and repeatedly, and provided proper input into the process which resulted in a useful Act with super recommendations.

I want to highlight a couple of people from my own experience. I have full hearing and do not have any concept of what it is like to be deaf. An amazing woman called Marion Lafferty from my village, Inagh, had a child who is deaf. The people in the area are friendly. She gave free classes to people of every age. It was super. I went to them 20 years ago. I am chatty, but I did not know how to communicate with her son. However, as she had set up free classes we were able to communicate. It was amazing. I hope those kinds of supports will be provided under the Act so that it is not always the case that parents have to provide extra support so their children can have links with communities. What she did was remarkable because it enabled her son and I to connect.

There was a deaf unit in Holy Family Junior National School in Ennis. Noreen O'Connell worked tirelessly there for years and did a lot of work with the children of the deaf community. I did a project with some of them when I was working to get them to park and stride and walk to school. I spoke to a group of children who had hearing impairments of different severity. One little girl told me that because she cannot hear cars, it is very difficult to know how fast they are going. We do not realise it, but we use our hearing a lot to dictate how fast things are moving because of the sound. Thanks to her writing a letter and working with me, extra seconds were added to the green man outside the school. If we have not listened to her perspective that would not have happened.

The most important thing is that we listen to deaf people and those with expertise. That is

why we have come to where we are today, where we have a strong Act. I again thank everyone for all of their work and look forward to supporting them in any way I can. I always subtitle my videos. It is a token thing, but I have done that consciously because I was made aware of these issues by people like Marion Lafferty in my village many years ago. I have to improve my vocabulary.

Senator Niall Ó Donnghaile: Nelson Mandela said:

If you talk to a man in a language he understands that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his own language that goes to his heart.

That is a very important sentiment as we reflect on the passage of the legislation.

I led the Sinn Féin team on the Act in the last Oireachtas, and colleagues have rightfully acknowledged the Cathaoirleach's leading role in that legislation. I celebrate the passage of the Act. Being involved with it was a very positive experience. We now need to be at a point where we move beyond that celebration and, as Senator Conway rightly said, we are talking about its implementation, roll-out and effectiveness within the community in a way that positively impacts and enfranchises members of our deaf community. The Act also informs and assists all of us, as Senator Garvey rightly said, in terms of how we, as parliamentarians, legislators and citizens, engage with and understand our deaf brothers and sisters in a better way.

I have a series of questions for the Minister of State. She touched on quite a few of them in her opening remarks. I hope we see her back here soon to discuss this issue. I want her to tell us how it is going so that we, on behalf of those whom colleagues have rightly acknowledged, are able to hold the legislation to account. As someone who is very proud and active in the Irish language community, I know that legislation is not a panacea and does not cure all ills in respect of linguistic issues.

While colleagues have rightly said that this is an issue of rights, equality and societal justice, for me it is also an issue of fundamental liberation. This is about liberating people. One of the key phrases we consistently heard during the passage of the Act in the last Seanad was the extreme marginalisation faced by the deaf community. That is how they put it. That took many forms, some of them very tragic and devastating for the community. Others were quite mundane and affected things that the rest of us would take for granted in our day-to-day lives.

The deaf population of the State, including people watching today, are delighted that we are happy. Equally, I am sure they also want to see action, delivery and results. The Cathaoirleach and I will disagree on a lot of things, but on this issue we have a champion.

I will flag something as a warning. The only time we see headsets in here is when there are specific statements on the Irish language. I do not want it to be the case that someone is only speaking in Irish Sign Language in the corner of a television screen when there are specific debates on issues around the deaf community. All issues impact on the deaf community. The community is us and we are them. We need to take steps, but today is a day of reflection on, and acknowledgement of, the hard work and effort put in by a range of people, not least the deaf community and representative groups. We should have a very keen eye on this the next time the Minister of State is in the House. It is to be hoped she will have a lot of good and positive progress to report.

Senator Eugene Murphy: Níl mé ábalta sign language a úsáid mar atá an Cathaoirleach

agus an Aire Stáit ach b'fhéidir go mbeidh lá éigin. Is lá an-speisialta é seo, gan dabht. Gabhaim mo bhuíochas don Chathaoirleach. Rinne sé a lán oibre ar an issue seo agus bhí sé ag obair go crua ar son na ndaoine bodhra. He brought this legislation forward three times, and in so doing showed unbelievable perseverance, and he got it passed. It is great to hear the Minister of State's commitment today, and I want to compliment her on the way she has spoken.

This legislation represents a huge advancement in the human and civil rights of the deaf community. Through the Act, the State will recognise the right of ISL users to use ISL as their native language. Designating sign language as a native language empowers the deaf community, by permitting it to be used in legal proceedings. The Act also requires the State to provide interpreting services for students who use ISL. It is important that we move as quickly as we can with this and I have no doubt as to the Minister of State's commitment to this issue. I am confident she will do what is required.

ISL is the language of the deaf community. As has been highlighted, there are 5,000 deaf people in Ireland, and approximately 40,000 people communicate using sign language, whether it is with family, friends or co-workers. As we all know, sign language is a visual and spatial language, with its own distinct grammar. It is not only a language of the hands, but also of the face and body. It is an indigenous language of the deaf community, and research shows that sign language is a full language with its own complex linguistic structure, rules and features. ISL was recognised in Northern Ireland and not in the Republic. This will be rectified with the commencement of the Act. ISL is different from all other sign languages, such as British and American sign languages. Ireland is unique in that sign language differs based on gender, due to the fact that males and females are educated in separate schools. The deaf community views itself as a linguistic and cultural minority group, as opposed to being disabled.

It is great to see that the Seanad can co-operate so well on these issues. I also want to pay tribute to my own neighbour, Grace Coyle, who has done so much fantastic work in this area behind the scenes. At some stage, perhaps the introduction of ISL lessons for Oireachtas Members could be considered and perhaps the Minister of State and the Cathaoirleach could even provide some of the lessons. It would be a great idea for us all to get a handle on the basics of the language so that we could communicate in ISL. I certainly would love to be able to do that. I thank the Minister of State and the Cathaoirleach for all their work. It is lovely to hear all the Senators speaking so positively on this issue and hopefully the work will come to fruition before too long.

An Cathaoirleach: I thank Senator Murphy for his comments and I echo his praise for his neighbour, Grace Coyle. I can guarantee Members that without her tenacious work on this matter, it would not have happened.

Senator Ivana Bacik: I welcome the Minister of State to the House. It is always a pleasure to have her with us in the Seanad. My colleagues, Senators Hoey and Wall, have spoken very eloquently for the Labour Party to say how much we welcome the commencement of this important Act and how pleased we are to see the Minister of State announce 23 December as the date for it. It is very positive news to receive this week, before we go off on our Christmas break. I could not let the opportunity pass without paying tribute to the Cathaoirleach, or Senator Mark Daly, as he was known then, for his incredible persistence and commitment in steering the Bill through the House. Many of us did our best to help him along the way with it and it is great to see it come to this point. Therefore, I pay tribute to him.

As a Senator representing the University of Dublin, I want to pay tribute to my great colleagues in the Trinity Centre for Deaf Studies. Others have spoke of their immense work on this project, in particular, Professor Lorraine Lesson and Dr. John Bosco Conama, both of whom have been tireless advocates for ISL and the deaf community. I also want to pay tribute to the Irish Deaf Society. As the Cathaoirleach will recall, we had many meetings with activists from the deaf community, the Society and the Trinity centre over the period of time when the Bill was being steered through the Houses of the Oireachtas. It is really great to see this day arrive, and I want to take a few moments to put my thanks on the record and to pay tribute to the Minister of State for taking the final step in the commencement of the Act. I also want to pay tribute to, and thank, the brilliant signers who we see at the bottom of our screens currently and who also stand quietly - but play such an important role - on so many stages and podiums at all our live events pre-Covid, and all recorded events now. I thank all those involved in bringing this Act to its final point. Finally, I would also like to echo Senator Murphy's words. It would be a great idea to have lessons in ISL. I know that Senator Hoey has spoken about trying to learn ISL. I think it would be a great new initiative to introduce in the Oireachtas.

An Cathaoirleach: I thank Senator Bacik for acknowledging the work of the professors and researchers of the Trinity Centre for Deaf Studies, such as Professor Lorraine Lesson and Dr. John Bosco Conama, and others who have passed on, who have excelled in this area and who have championed this cause long and hard over four decades. I call on the Minister of State to respond.

Minister of State at the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): I was delighted to make the announcement when I came to the House today, and I was also very proud to be a colleague of the Cathaoirleach and to have worked with him for the past number of years. All of his colleagues here recognise his ability, determination, tenacity and willingness to get something done when he puts his mind to it. However, the Cathaoirleach has not been alone in doing the work he has done, and we have acknowledged the work done by Grace Coyle on this project.

This legislation represents a unique project on which the Members of the House worked collaboratively. One of the special things about Seanad Éireann is that when Members work together, the good is served. All Members of the House worked with the Cathaoirleach on this project. Everyone recognises and knows the value of this project. Senator Boylan spoke earlier about communication. As politicians, we recognise the value of communication and of getting our message out. There are those who do not have that opportunity to get their message out, and without a Bill or a commencement, they are being denied. That is why the work must be completed. I must praise all Members for their support in ensuring that the Act has now become law. It is now my job to be held to account with the public officials and to ensure that the project is completed.

I also wish to pay tribute to the newly formed Department of Justice. Departmental staff are here today. They have worked really hard over the last three years to get us where we are today and to have 23 December as the commencement date. Every Member of this House has spoken on the issue and been involved in the work.

I will take two things away from with House today. The first relates to what Senator Hoey said about using audio-to-text and ISL apps. I think we should circulate that information among all Oireachtas colleagues, because we know how difficult it is to communicate, particularly with the wearing of face masks. There is an impediment there that must be addressed. Second, I

take Senator Murphy's suggestion about ISL lessons on board. In the last week I have enjoyed immensely taking ISL lessons and it brought me to a new level of ability. I was very nervous coming to the House today, and I felt the pressure of delivery for the first time in a long time, in ensuring that I did not let the sign language community down. There is a confidence that we all need to build among ourselves. If we are to expect the Civil Service to embrace ISL, we should lead by example. We should take that on board, and no different to embracing the Irish language, we should also embrace Irish Sign Language. I look forward to bringing that initiative through at some stage.

I thank the Cathaoirleach for all the work he has done with this team and the years he has dedicated to the project. Each of us who knows the Cathaoirleach from his Seanad campaign knows that it was one of his priorities to get this done and I am delighted to be associated with it.

An Cathaoirleach: I thank all Members for their contributions and the Minister of State not only for coming to the House, but also for learning sign language for her opening contribution. We should also remember the Minister of State's predecessor in the Department of Health, former Minister of State, Finian McGrath, with whom we had long arguments in this House on this issue. I am sure Senator Bacik remembers them. Senator Bacik, as a person who has passed legislation in opposition, will know that, at the time, this was one of only six Bills to have passed after having been introduced by Opposition Senators since the enactment of the Constitution. That shows what a job it is, as she will be aware, to pass legislation.

Not only was Grace Coyle very important in getting it passed on my end, but other officials from the Department, such as Gerry Maguire, a tireless worker whom the Minister of State will know, sat in on many meetings for many hours, along with Deaglán de Bréadún from the Department of Justice. I recall one meeting that went on for seven hours and had to be translated into sign language. It was like a Committee Stage debate in the House but it had to be translated into sign language, over and back, as it should have been. There were 24 people at the meeting. It demonstrated the level of dedication of Finian's staff and of Deaglán, Gerry Maguire, Grace and the Senators from all sides of the House who attended those meetings. Eventually, the legislation got over the line. I pay tribute to the Irish Deaf Society and all its members. They spent four decades campaigning.

We are delighted to have got this far. I thank the Minister of State for attending, as well as all Senators.

Sitting suspended at 3.42 p.m. and resumed at 4 p.m.

Access to Contraception: Motion

An Cathaoirleach: I thank the Minister of State, Deputy Feighan, for coming into the House.

Senator Pauline O'Reilly: I move:

“That Seanad Éireann:

acknowledges that:

15 December 2020

- our nation has taken a significant step forward by repealing the Eighth Amendment to Bunreacht na hÉireann, thereby enabling people in this State to access abortion care;

- the Programme for Government commits to the rolling out on a phased basis of free contraceptive care, commencing with women and girls aged between 17 and 25;

notes that:

- a key recommendation of the Report of the Joint Committee on the Eighth Amendment of the Constitution is that free contraception be rolled out in Ireland. In its final report, the Report of the Joint Committee on the Eighth Amendment of the Constitution recommended ‘the introduction of a scheme for the provision of the most effective method of contraception, free of charge and having regard to personal circumstances, to all people who wish to avail of them within the State’;

recalls that:

- the Joint Committee on the Eighth Amendment of the Constitution heard evidence of a survey of women who had contacted an online abortion provider before access to abortion was made available in Ireland; the survey found that 44 per cent had not used contraceptives, while a worrying 56 per cent used a form of contraception that failed;

- this finding has now been further supported by a recent report from the Dublin Well Woman Centre which demonstrated that 51 per cent of women aged 17 to 45 have had sexual intercourse without using contraception;

- while contraceptives are free under the medical card the Joint Oireachtas Committee on the Eighth Amendment of the Constitution reported that for those who fell slightly short of qualification for the medical card the costs were prohibitive;

- 18 per cent of those surveyed by the Central Statistics Office in 2010 reported that the cost of contraception is an issue;

- the Irish Contraception and Crisis Pregnancy Study (2010) found that 11 per cent of study participants reported difficulties with access to contraception;

- the Growing Up in Ireland study (Child Cohort 2016), reported that at age 17 to 18, those from more socially disadvantaged backgrounds were less likely to report using contraception (73 per cent), compared to those from more advantaged families (83 per cent), demonstrating a clear cost barrier;

- the Report of the Working Group on Access to Contraception noted that in formulating policy on contraception a number of factors which are not related to cost benefit should be taken into account:

- health;

- policy context following the enactment of the Health (Regulation of Termination of Pregnancy) Act 2018;

- women’s rights;

- the Report of the Joint Committee on the Eighth Amendment of the Constitution found

that Irish women availing of abortion services in the United Kingdom did not benefit from post-abortion contraceptive services, which were standard to women in the United Kingdom;

- the introduction of State-funded abortion services in January 2019 did not include the provision of post-abortion contraceptive methods free of charge and the majority of women continue to pay out of pocket for contraception;

- the costs associated with the provision of free access to contraceptives are low; for 17 to 24 year olds the cost is €18-22 million per annum according to the Working Group on Access to Contraception;

believes that:

- if we are truly a progressive country, we must expand care to all of those who do not wish to become pregnant, as well as supports for those who do, and to all children in the State;

- access to contraception is a matter not only of public health but of women's rights;

- access to contraception is also a matter of human rights;

- contraceptives have the benefit of enabling individuals to plan the number and spacing of any children they choose to have, reducing unplanned pregnancies, and sexually transmitted diseases, increasing the uptake of smear tests, and helping in the management of menstrual health conditions;

- cost is a barrier to contraceptive use in Ireland, as laid out by the research;

- not every contraceptive suits every person and, in order to ensure choice, all methods of contraception should be available freely;

- the inclusion of stakeholder engagement in the development of any scheme for access to contraceptives is essential to the success of the initiative;

notes that:

- the Irish Council for General Practitioners advocates for free and universal access to contraception as a matter of priority for public health;

- the National Women's Council supports access to free contraception for overall reproductive health;

- the Irish Family Planning Association in advocating for a universal State-funded contraceptive scheme points to the importance of the removal of all barriers, including cost, lack of local access to contraceptive services and poor access to information;

calls on the Government:

- to implement the Programme for Government commitment to roll out free access to contraception to women and girls aged 17 to 25, as a matter of priority;

- to set out a timeline for the development of a scheme for universal free contraception in the lifetime of this Government, in consultation with stakeholders."

Given the history of the State with regard to women, women are now owed proper healthcare and I am asking that we take the next step today. A huge leap forward was made when we, as a nation, repealed the eighth amendment of the Constitution but if we are truly a progressive country it is time to deal with other aspects of reproductive care and care for children.

I note more announcements today from the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, Deputy O’Gorman, on additional supports with regard to childcare, which are incredibly welcome and go to the heart of this motion, but we are also looking for supports for those who do not wish to become pregnant.

The history of this issue is that in 2016 we had a Citizens’ Assembly and it found that reproductive healthcare included a right to free access to contraceptives. In 2017, in its final report, the Joint Committee on the Eighth Amendment of the Constitution recommended the introduction of a scheme for the provision of the most effective method of contraception, free of charge, and having regard to the personal circumstances of all people who wish to avail of it within the State.

In 2018, the then Minister for Health, Deputy Simon Harris, committed to the introduction of universal free contraception and commissioned the Working Group on Access to Contraception.

In 2020, in our programme for Government, Our Shared Future, we committed to, and we, the Green Party, pushed for, the provision of free contraception over a phased period starting with women aged 17 to 25. I commend many of those Senators, particularly women Senators, who have raised this issue since we took our seats in this House. In particular, Senator Clifford-Lee, who I hope will speak in the debate, has raised it with the Minister. What we are looking for is movement on that commitment and on outlining what will now be this phased universal healthcare.

When we talk about free contraception we are talking about it in a number of different contexts. One of those is the one many people will know, that is, with regard to crisis pregnancies. We know that greater use of contraception lowers the rate of termination. That was a frequent point of discussion in the deliberations of both the working group and also the Joint Committee on the Eighth Amendment of the Constitution. France, Italy, Turkey and Portugal have reduced their termination rates by introducing post-abortion free contraceptives. We did not introduce such a measure and now is the opportunity to do that. As a Government, we have committed to that so I ask the Minister to outline his thoughts on that issue.

Crisis pregnancies happen for a number of reasons. One of those is that people are not using contraceptives, which I will address shortly. Another is because people do not have access to contraceptives. A further reason is that people may not feel that they are able to ask for contraceptives. I am thinking of one group in particular, that is, women in situations of domestic abuse, who may not have ready access to the financial provisions to be able to pay for them. In their deliberations on that matter, the members of the working group discussed the fact that the medical card provides access to free contraceptives but despite that, 18% of people said the cost was a barrier.

I spoke to the president of the Union of Students in Ireland today, Lorna Fitzgerald, who told me that there are free healthcare facilities on campus which provide prescriptions free of charge and that the only thing they do not provide free of charge is contraceptives. As a country

we have to ask ourselves what the reason is for that. Is that because of our history and the way we have treated women, particularly the topic of sex and menstrual health, through the decades and indeed the centuries?

That brings me to the point of cost as a barrier. In that particular instance it may be that young people do not want to go home and ask their parents for money for reproductive health-care of any form. Many people in this country do not want to talk about it with anyone, even their partners, but it is also true to say that cost is a barrier. I was on a Newstalk programme this morning and was challenged on that. The accusation put to me was why should everybody else have to pay for the contraceptives of another person. We know that over time it reduces the cost to the State. We are providing free abortion care so why would we not provide this service as well? In addition, with respect to the facts, A Growing Up in Ireland study from 2016 showed that 17 and 18-year-olds from a lower socioeconomic background reported using contraceptives less than those from a higher socioeconomic background. Clearly, cost is a barrier and we need to address that as a State if we are serious about the well-being of our citizens. It is simply not good enough to say “Just go out and buy it yourself”.

Sometimes people say using a condom is very cheap. The roll-out of the national condom distribution service last year is to be commended. However, that is not always the best form of contraception. The pill is not always the best form of contraception. One could pay €300 upfront for some forms of contraceptives but they may be the ones that are the best in the circumstances for the particular women and it is usually women when we talking about that chunk of money. The Irish Family Planning Association has told me that it is incredibly difficult in that a woman may have had abortion care, which is free, and following that be given advice on what is the best contraceptive for her. Even though she may chose a form of contraception she may not want, either because she is prioritising other people within her family or does not have money, she does not want to spend €300 up-front. However, over the lifetime of that contraceptive choice it is a cheaper form of contraceptive. For us as a State, it is not a huge outlay. A spend of €300 over the lifetime of that form of contraception which could be ten years is not a huge outlay. Women often prioritise school books for their children, rent and putting food on the table over the purchase of contraception. They may not be eligible for a medical card but that still does not mean that cost is not a barrier to them. This is a human rights and a women’s rights issue but it is also a right for everyone, male, female and those of all genders. That is why I ask the Minister of State to lay out a plan for free contraceptive care for everyone.

Regarding women who reported they had used abortion care in the UK before we repealed the eighth amendment, the women with whom they had sat side by side in those clinics received free contraceptive care following their abortion. That reduced the chance they would have to come for a future termination or abortion but Irish women were not receiving that. One would expect that when we rolled out termination or abortion services we would also roll out that contraceptive care following it.

In referencing a form of contraception that may cost €300, not every contraception suits every person. That may be due to the different stages of life they are at or the cost involved. However, research shows that 44% of those who were using online abortion providers said they had not used contraceptives and 56% said they had used a form of contraception that had failed. What is behind those figures is the fact that people intend to use contraception, be it condoms or taking the pill every day, but that is not always the reality of people’s lives. Longer term contraceptive use can work better in those circumstances.

If we are providing free contraceptives we must consider providing all the care that is associated with that to help people to make the best choices. That comes down to education and also the education of the healthcare providers. A problem that has been identified to me is that it is not happening at the moment. General practitioners are not getting the access to education they need to be able to advise people on the best form of contraception. When the Department is coming up with a plan, I would like it to consider using the type of implementation group for contraceptive care that was used for abortion care and that it would be a bottom up approach involving engaging with the stakeholders. For example, what do GPs need in order to be able to provide this care? What do women accessing the service need to have to be able to access this care?

Education is also a key factor for people in society generally. I have said to the Minister for Education, Deputy Foley, previously and I reiterate it here that we need free contraception and when considering reproductive rights, there are three elements, that is, abortion care, free contraceptives and education. From speaking to those in third level institutions, I know they are trying their best with respect to the concept of consent, but we cannot have people arriving in an institution at the age of 17 or 18 not having received the proper education they need to have received in primary and second school. As a State, it is time to fess up and, essentially, provide proper sex education instead of the antiquated religious indoctrination type of approach we have had in the past. The ONE Study from the National University of Ireland, Galway, NUIG, earlier this year found one incident where a boy in secondary school was told the best form of contraception was going by a woman's cycle. That person will go on to lead a sexual life when he goes to university or starts to work with no proper understanding of the contraceptive choices available. Let us also address that issue.

Honestly, we are a progressive country. It is extremely welcome that we have this commitment in the programme for Government. I thank the Minister of State for coming to the House today. Great work was done by many non-governmental organisations and ordinary people in repealing the eighth amendment. Let us now get that last barrier lifted. I ask everybody to support this motion and thank them for the time they have taken to consider it. I ask my colleague, Senator Garvey, to second the motion.

Senator Róisín Garvey: I second the motion. It is 2020. It is no longer good enough to have periods, tampons and active sex lives as taboo subjects in this country. We must accept that and move with the times. Our young people are begging us for that. We have only recently started to talk about the concept of consent. That concept of consent is so lacking which is why there are all these unwanted pregnancies. It is why today it is important that we discuss at this time the need for choices for women around contraception. I thank all the people who worked very hard to repeal the eighth amendment, especially in the non-governmental organisation sector, the women who fought for it and the men who got involved to get it past the line. Part of the agreement from the committee and research was that we also had to consider contraceptive care and access to it. The Irish Family Planning Association has said that a major issue in that respect is location. Coming from rural Ireland, I know from talking to many young people and from my own experience when I was younger that sometimes one cannot access contraception of any kind. As my colleague has pointed out, not everything in life is predictable. People can be abused, raped or subjected to unwanted sex. Contraception should be accessible for all women. There should be no financial barrier. It should not be a socioeconomic issue whereby those who can afford to do so can go to a private GP and pay for contraception. It should be accessible to all and that is why it has to be free.

I note 51% of the population is female. If we were coming from a matriarchy, this issue would not even be on the table today. However, because we are unfortunately in a patriarchy, we have to look for this. It is great that 40% of the House is female and it was the first thing I noticed on my first day in the Seanad. We need to step up to the mark and show that we respect women and their choices, and provide them with choices.

On freshers' day in colleges, a few free condoms might be thrown out but there begins and ends many people's education on anything to do with sexual activity. I again reiterate the importance of education on consent. A lot of the time, we are struggling to know what is right and wrong and lack the words to allow us to be in control of what is happening to us or what we are doing to other people. Consent, contraception and the right to abortion are all part of the journey people go through in life.

Those living in rural areas where there is no chemist cannot access the morning-after pill. Many pubs do not have condom vending machines. There are none in female toilets, so they have no choice, and men are lucky if the ones in their toilets are working. If they do, it could cost €10 for a pack of three. It is ridiculous; it is like something from the 1970s or 1980s. That is where we are at. It is not good enough any more.

We have to trust our young people. They have much more cop-on than we did. We have to give them these choices and show them that we have moved with the times. We cannot be stuck in the dark ages, telling people to say three Hail Marys and wait until they are married. That is a joke and an insult to every young person. If we said that, they would think we were mad. We have to keep up with the times.

We cannot always jump through hoops immediately in government. The eighth amendment was repealed a couple of years ago and we have to match it with what was promised, namely, that we would provide free contraception. This debate is about women aged 17 to 25 years but in the long term, all women need access to contraception. Then they can make choices and will have access to those choices.

This is a rural issue. Let us not pretend that Saturday night is not the most common time when unplanned sex happens. The next day all of the chemists in rural areas are closed and people cannot drive because they are over the limit. GP practices are all closed. If people happen to find a chemist that is open and it is their local one, everyone will know who they are. People will not avail of that service. That is a significant part of the cause of unwanted pregnancies. Let us face up to that fact, trust our young women and give them these choices for free in order that we are not discriminating against people who cannot afford contraception.

It is time we moved into 2020. I thank the Minister of State for his attendance today and look forward to his support of the motion.

Senator Lorraine Clifford-Lee: I warmly welcome the motion and commend my colleagues in the Green Party on tabling it. I entirely echo the sentiments expressed by Senators Pauline O'Reilly and Garvey. They hit the nail on the head in their contributions. As Senator O'Reilly outlined, I raised a Commencement matter issue on this topic on 25 September. I hope the Minister of State will not mind me saying that I was less than satisfied with his answer on the day. I hope the position has moved on since 25 September.

Senator Garvey referenced the patriarchal society that we are living in. The response of the Minister of State on the day echoed that patriarchal society because he referenced the condom

distribution scheme currently in place. While it is welcome, it is a male-based method of contraception and the control lies with the man, which is completely unsatisfactory. Condoms do not suit everyone and do not have a 100%, or even a very high, success rate. Therefore, it is completely unsatisfactory that we are saying this is what is available to the women of Ireland, who make up 51% of the population, as my colleagues have outlined.

The working group on access to contraception was established in April 2019 by the then Minister for Health, Deputy Harris, to examine the policy, regulatory and legislative issues around the rolling out of a universal access to contraception scheme in Ireland following the recommendations of the committee on the eighth amendment. The working group produced a report more than 12 months ago which identified the various barriers facing women when accessing contraception. It stated that the choice of contraception, in particular, was an issue. The main barriers that exist involve the choice of contraception. As my colleagues have outlined, that is the key issue.

It is not good enough to say there is one method of contraception available which can do girls, and they should go off and make the best of it. That is not acceptable, and I do not think anybody sitting in the Chamber today thinks it is acceptable. We will not accept it in the future. This is an issue that has been a long while coming. We repealed the eighth amendment but we have not gone away and are not satisfied with the lack of progress on this. I will continue to raise this issue, and I know my colleagues here will do the same, if we do not see some real action.

The most effective forms of contraception, that is, those which are long-lasting, are not available unless one has a lot of money. As my colleagues pointed out, women, no matter what socioeconomic group they come from, will always prioritise their family whether that is paying for education, extracurricular activities, putting food on the table and keeping a roof over their heads. That has always been the case. Women, traditionally, have not been able to access politics because they prioritise their families. Contraception is another area in which they prioritise their families.

The cost of delivery of free universal access to contraception for everyone is €80 million to €100 million per year. The working group emphasised that the considerations that the Department needed to take into account when assessing the merits of the universal scheme go far beyond the financial aspects. They include the health and well-being of the female population of Ireland. In particular, a universal scheme would negate the negative effects of unplanned pregnancies in Ireland. I note that 69% of women who travelled to England and Wales in 2018 to access abortion care were over 25 years of age. The motion specifically references the cohort aged between 17 and 25 years which, I am delighted to say, was included in the programme for Government. That is just the first step on the road, however.

We need to make sure that women over the age of 25 can access contraception. In fact, we need to make sure that women who are suffering from medical conditions such as endometriosis – we know thousands of women are suffering in silence in this country and have to access contraception to deal with this medical issue – are included as a priority in the scheme because to do otherwise would be completely unacceptable. I for one will not stop until this is delivered.

The phased approach being suggested, which is also in the programme for Government, will cost between €18 and €22 million per year, which is very small money when one considers the societal benefits it will deliver for us. I hope the Minister of State will be able to give us a clear

outline on the roadmap to delivering this. The then Minister for Health, Deputy Harris, promised the Dáil that the scheme would be available at the start of 2021. While I acknowledge we have had an election and a pandemic in the meantime, the pandemic has accelerated the need for this scheme because women have been suffering during the pandemic.

Women's ability to access contraception is brought into sharp focus when one thinks about women who are living in economically deprived situations, abusive homes or who may have to travel far beyond their community but who are now limited because of a lack of public transport options in urban or rural Ireland. We need to deliver this. It is not good enough that this is not available. We need some commitments from the Minister of State on the legislation that will be needed to introduce this scheme.

Can we have a clear timeline in order that we can hold the Minister of State and his colleagues to account on this? This is just the first piece of the jigsaw. When will it be rolled out to everybody else? Has the Department costed this and projected it? It is part of the recommendations of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on the Eighth Amendment of the Constitution.

Long-acting contraceptive methods are the best and many women cannot access them. As my colleagues in the Green Party have pointed out, not every contraceptive method suits every woman and women's needs change as their lives move on. This really needs to be taken into account.

I want to refer to the education mentioned by my colleagues. The lack of knowledge about people's reproductive systems and their contraceptive needs extends to the issue of period poverty, which is an issue I have been campaigning on for a long number of years. It is amazing the number of women who do not understand their own cycles and cannot then decide and make the best choices for themselves based on this.

We do not have a proper sex education system in our schools. We have been failing our young people in this regard. We are all products of this dysfunctional sex education system. We need to start educating parents. Even with the best will in the world, because they have gone through this dysfunctional education system with a complete lack of sex education, they are not able to educate their children. They do not have the tools to deliver this education, even with the best will in the world, in their own homes. This really needs to be looked at.

We will not sit idly by and let this issue slip down the priority scale. It is a major health issue in this country. I know we are in the middle of a pandemic but women need to be prioritised.

Senator Martin Conway: I commend and welcome the motion from our Green Party colleagues. I note the fact it is a clear commitment in the programme for Government. Furthermore, it is a recommendation in the report of the committee on the eighth amendment. While many recommendations in the committee's report gained huge traction and coverage at the time, this particular recommendation did not. It is a critical recommendation of the good work done by that committee, in which many colleagues from the House, including Senator Clifford-Lee, were involved. It is urgent at this stage that this recommendation, which is now a key commitment in the programme for Government, is delivered.

It is believed the recommendation would cost a total of €80 million to €100 million. That is cheap. It is very good value for money. As has been said, young people between the ages of 18 and 25 put the rent, food and survival on the table first as opposed to contraception. This is just human instinct and human nature. Therefore, this is where the State, which is supposed to

be there to protect people, should intervene and should be there to facilitate what is extremely important.

We have come a long way and the referendum on the eighth amendment reflects this. It was an amazing step forward in how people treat other people and how society treats women who find themselves in a vulnerable situation. I was very proud at the time to play an active part in campaigning for a “Yes” vote. I think of the Oireachtas Members at the time. We could count on one hand the number of them who put up posters calling for a “Yes” vote in the west coast and rural areas, which was a pity because they did not really read the mood of the people. I was absolutely convinced at the time that the people would repeal the eighth amendment.

I want to speak for a moment about the issue of sex education. As Senator Clifford-Lee quite correctly pointed out, we all went through the system 20 or 30 years ago and it was non-existent. My fear is that it is extremely patchy. I also agree with the point that parents need to be educated on how to educate their children in sex education. Many parents do not have the skill set because their generation never experienced sex education. This is something that needs to happen. How it happens I do not know but it does need to happen.

Approximately two years ago, I was away with Senator Clifford-Lee representing the Parliament abroad. The first time I heard of period poverty was then, when she spoke to me about it. I was horrified at the concept. I commend her for the work she has done in highlighting the issue of period poverty. We as a State need to step up to the plate in this area.

The motion is super. It really does highlight the commitment in the programme for Government that needs to be delivered on. The three parties in government have a responsibility to deliver on it. I know everyone is committed to it and everyone speaks about wanting it to happen but let us make it happen.

I should have said at the outset that the Minister of State is extremely welcome to the House. I have no doubt about his commitment in this area. These motions are ideal for the Seanad because the Seanad gives us an opportunity to articulate a view which, I hope, informs the Government. Over the years, the House has done this so often and has succeeded. Let us hope that today the motion will give a gentle reminder to the Government that the clock is ticking and let us get on with it.

Senator Emer Currie: I lend my support to the motion and I commend my Green Party Seanad colleagues for bringing it forward. The programme for Government commitment is to expand access to free contraception to those aged between 17 and 25 as a starting point. This is €20 million that will be very well spent. I was at university in Queens in Belfast 20 years ago. We were entitled to GP access and prescriptions, including contraception. The hook to us at the time was free contraception. We were not living at home and just starting out being independent. That was the initial reaction but then, of course, we totally recognised it was a social support and something we were really supportive of.

It is bigger than this as it helped us develop a relationship with healthcare. It was a relationship with healthcare that was mine for the first time at that age, not coming through my family GP or through my parents’ pockets. I had a job but going to the GP is expensive. Prescriptions are expensive. It empowered me to take responsibility for my own healthcare. It is independent entry-level healthcare. How often do most 17 to 25-year-olds have to go to the doctor? This is a very important touch point in their lives about their sexual and general health. It is something

that stands the test of time. No matter what happened me then, if I had to engage in healthcare, particularly when I was having a smear test and having my children, it really helped with being confident in how I engaged with the healthcare system.

We speak about the barriers of cost, embarrassment, inconvenience, lack of knowledge and local access. All those things are bang on. Breaking down those barriers in general for health, however, is also important. It states in the report that, “contraception use in Ireland is high and stable and difficulty accessing contraception is only a challenge at the margins”, in the overall population. Then, however, one sees the Dublin Well Woman Centre research which found that 51% of women aged 17 to 45 had sex without contraception. We need to focus on that and we must work to it. Frankly, women need this support at a universal level. We must find ways to help women to be proactive and not reactive about their health.

I want to echo the words of Senators O’Reilly and Clifford-Lee on contraception and choices around contraception. There is no one-size-fits-all approach or method. It does not just take one visit to the GP and then it is all sorted. A person may have had to go back to the GP throughout the duration of their life or depending on their life stage. Perhaps, a person’s initial contraception method will not work for them; it depends on their lifestyle. We need to empower women to be able to visit their GP, discuss the issues and find the contraception that is absolutely right for them. All methods should be available.

I know the Department will talk about finalising its approach or legislative proposals and ensuring the implementation of service delivery and so forth. I believe, however, we need to prioritise this and get on with it. We must look at a better education, continue to break down the barriers and taboos around contraception and deliver basic women’s health.

Senator Annie Hoey: It is unusual to be here today and not talk about student nurses with the Minister of State, as we have done every week for goodness knows how long at this point. It is a different topic today.

I welcome the spirit of this motion. I thank the Green Party for putting this forward. We need access to contraception and it is high time we sorted this out. I know we have talked about it and there is a phased approach in the programme for Government. I am, however, deeply concerned about how sometimes when we do things step-by-step, we can get stuck on a step, and the impact if we do this and then do not move any further and have the cut-off at 25 years of age.

As a member of the Labour Party, I am proud of our party’s history on matters on contraception. Many a former Labour Party Deputy or Senator found his or her voice to be in the minority opinion when speaking about this issue in the not-too-distant past. I am proud of the role we have played in advocating for the access to and decriminalisation of contraception.

One of the most significant interventions was made by Deputy Howlin, who legislated for the legal sale of condoms in Ireland in 1993 when he was Minister for Health. It is not that long ago. Even I was alive in 1993. It was really not terribly long ago that we were only legalising the sale of condoms. It is a particular issue the student movement is terribly proud of. We were putting condom vending machines into buildings and they were being torn out of bathrooms and such, and the great student battle went on to have access to condoms. The issue was that the then Minister did not suggest it only needed to be made available to people aged under 25.

When the former Labour Party Deputy for Limerick city, Jan O’Sullivan, spoke about pro-

viding free contraception, she referenced that providing it only to women aged 17 to 24 would be considered the wrong approach. She said on the record that:

I welcome that a report has finally been produced outlining pathways to providing free contraception in Ireland. However, it is not acceptable that only a certain cohort – women aged 17-24 – would receive free contraception. [...]

As a country we can't just provide free contraceptive pills or condoms and think that we have done a good job. A comprehensive provision of the full range of methods, including long-acting reversible contraceptives such as the copper coil and implant, would cost less in the long run than the provision of short-acting methods alone. Evidence suggests that the overall cost to the State would fall year on year as women and girls switch to more reliable and cost-effective methods.

There is no one-size fits all approach to contraception – what works for one person may not work for another. This is our one change to get the provision of contraception right for all women, not just a chosen few and we need to make sure it is done right.

These sentiments around the full range of contraceptive methods we need have been echoed in the room already, particularly more long-term ones which, certainly, when I was younger, were not talked about a huge amount. It is important, however, to recognise that we do not lock people out of this and there is a firm commitment to going beyond. Senator Clifford-Lee asked what next steps are. What commitment is being made to move this to being universally available to all those who need it, rather than it just being acceptable? We are not back in the 1960s.

The working group on access to contraception made it plain in its report. The committee recommends, “The introduction of a scheme for the provision of the most effective method of contraception, free of charge and having regard to personal circumstances, to all people who wish to avail of them within the State.” The recommendation was that everyone should be able to access them. The most adversely affected would be women who find themselves aged out of access to free contraception but still stuck in the economic reality of being unable to afford to access it privately. That position can be dealt with if there are no particular age limits.

I hope the thinking is not that all women over the age of 25 will have the means to purchase contraception, or that they have reached an age where safe sex does not need to be practised. I do not think that is the assumption. Perhaps, however, sometimes people looking in might believe that is the assumption the Government is putting forward. I really want to drive in on that. I want to know what we are going to do for people over the age of 25 and what the plan is over the next couple of years to make contraception accessible to all.

Obviously, contraception being accessible is a preventive measure. We have talked much about that here. I believe everyone recognises that. I know more women, however, who have accessed contraception for medical and health reasons rather than for “sexy time”, or whatever one wishes to call it.

My own experience of this numbers more than 22 years. I am only in my early 30s so that gives an idea of how young I was when I had to begin this battle with my health. It has taken me until my early 30s to find a doctor who said I deserve both physical health and sexual well-being. It has been a long journey to find someone who was willing to work with me to find something that worked with my body to deal with medical issues, and that other parts of my life should not have to suffer. I hope that when we make it more available and normalised for

people to be able to access contraception at a much younger age, not only will it deal with their sexual well-being but also the enormous physical well-being benefits. I know we sometimes think of contraception as being for one particular area. Many women, however, will actually say they have to use it for medical reasons to manage their well-being.

Senator O'Reilly spoke succinctly around the importance of preventive measures so I do not need to go into all the facts and figures again; she outlined them well. I want to highlight the importance of long-acting reversible contraceptives, LARC, which I mentioned before. Certainly, when I was starting out in college or in my teens, it was not talked about. That set women and young girls my age onto a cycle of expensive monthly prescriptions and doing all sorts of things. I would certainly speak in favour of that as an option if it is one that will work for women.

We spoke about the Repeal the 8th campaign. During that campaign, I remember meeting three women in their mid- to late 30s who were done with having their families and having children. They had their children and did not want any more. Their local GPs in rural areas refused to give them a prescription for contraception. Those three women from different parts of the country all ended up pregnant. They did not want to have any more children or continue their families. At the time, they ended up going down the road of availing of the Internet to access abortion care. Obviously, we do not have to do that now.

When we talk about contraception, however, we also need to talk about some of the assumptions made around contraception. People genuinely need to be able to access contraception. That conversation, perhaps, needs to happen with GPs around people and their family planning, and a woman's right to be empowered to decide when she has had her family or, indeed, that she does not wish to start a family. It was only three years ago that this was happening.

I want to reiterate the points I made about education. We need a proper sex education curriculum that is inclusive of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender, LGBT, community. We need to do proper work on people having healthy sexual relationships that are built on trust and consent. It is too late to begin consent conversations at third level. I was involved in the student movement and I came up with the hashtag #AskConsent for that campaign. That precludes an awful lot of people because not everyone goes on to third level. While we are discussing access to contraception, we also need to discuss access to informative, reliable sex education from a younger age. To reiterate my earlier point, I know of women my age who still find themselves trekking around towns trying to find pharmacies in which they can access the morning-after pill.

It is great that we are having this conversation, and I welcome this motion from the Green Party. I would love to hear how we are going to make sure that everyone can access contraception. The motion highlights the fact that in many places there is still a long way to go in the context of women being able to access contraception in their local pharmacies when they want to do so. We also have a long way to go when it comes to providing healthy and informative sex education for younger people so that we will not have to deal with it when they are older or when they reach third level.

Senator Lynn Boylan: I am here to speak on behalf of Sinn Féin's Seanad team to say that we welcome this motion and are happy to support it. As has been said by many others, this State has a long history of denying women the right to make decisions about their bodies. The referendum to repeal the eighth amendment was an important step in redressing that but the country still has a way to go.

Previous speakers mentioned the issue of period poverty, which is addressed in the programme for Government. We would hope to see progress on this because periods did not stop during the pandemic but access to period products was severely hampered for homeless people and for those in direct provision centres. I commend the work being done by the Homeless Period Ireland and Claire Hunt, the woman who runs that organisation from her kitchen table. She does not take any charitable donations and she is not a charity. She just did it because she saw a film about a person being criminalised for stealing period products and it motivated her to set up this organisation and to go out of her way to help. She does that with a group of volunteers but it goes to show once again that it is women who are put in the position whereby they cannot have access to the products they need.

Contraception is similar and it should be provided by the State for free. A person's decision about his or her healthcare should be up to him or her alone and should not be dictated by the State or by economic circumstances or ability to pay. Unfortunately for some people, the cost of contraception is a significant barrier to accessing it. According to the report that was released last month by the Dublin Well Woman Centre, the cost is a significant consideration for 44% of women when choosing their methods of contraception. For women who are just above the qualification criteria for a medical card, the cost can be prohibitive. Autonomy should be central to the State's approach to women's health and making contraception free would go some way to achieving that.

In addition to the cost of contraception, there are several other barriers that should be looked at when designing a State-funded scheme. One of the main barriers is distance. Contraception should be available to women all over the country, no matter where they live. Senator Hoey talked about this and I am shocked to hear that women are still having to travel to find pharmacies. I remember 20 years ago having to travel to find a GP who would prescribe emergency contraception. We know from the Dublin Well Woman Centre report that it is not the case that it is accessible to women all over the country. The report found that 18% of women still have to leave their home towns in order to avail of the contraception of their choice. That is not good enough and it is clearly something that we need to look at when we are designing the scheme.

We also need to be cognisant of the fact that certain groups will face greater barriers than others. I am talking about young people, refugees, asylum seekers, migrants, people with disabilities, Travellers and other marginalised groups. Specific measures must be introduced to address their contraceptive needs in any State-funded programme. We also need to be cognisant of the LGBT community. Although the burden of contraception all too often falls to women, it does not have to be theirs alone. We should give consideration to supporting men who wish to avail of contraception, particularly vasectomies. Although that procedure does not provide protection against sexually transmitted disease, it can give another option to couples or individuals who are seeking contraception.

Important work has been undertaken by the Department of Health through its working group on access to contraception. The Irish Family Planning Association has expressed its concern that no progress appears to have been made since the publication of the working group's report over a year ago so more must be done. I know that Sinn Féin representatives recently co-signed a letter to the Chairman of the Joint Committee on Health, with the aim of ensuring that sexual health and reproductive health and rights are central to Government policy.

I and Sinn Féin welcome that the motion calls on the Government to honour its commitments in the programme for Government. The Government should implement the roll-out of

contraception to women aged 17 to 25. I agree that we need to look at providing contraception to all women for when they need it and that we should set a timeline for universal free contraception. I welcome the motion's role in reminding the Government of what it committed to in respect of contraception in the programme for Government.

Senator Alice-Mary Higgins: I join others in welcoming the motion. It is a good and timely motion because the issue of access to contraception and to the full range of sexual health and reproductive rights has been identified as something that was a concern in many parts of the world during the Covid-19 crisis. It is good to remind ourselves during the health crisis we have more widely in terms of Covid-19, that there are lots of other time-sensitive health needs and it is important that we do all we can to ensure they can be accessed. There are many positive elements to the motion, which, as already stated, I support. However, I want to highlight a number of elements within it that are particularly important and positive. I like the fact that the motion recognises that this is an issue of women's rights and of human rights in the wider sense. It is important to recognise, as was said, the needs of the LGBT community and other needs when it comes to access to contraception.

The motion identifies the multiple reasons that people may need to access contraception, a matter which others have spoken about. It mentions multiple health needs and addresses issues such as disease prevention and pregnancy prevention but there are other huge issues, such as family planning and health needs. The motion recognises that breadth of purposes.

I note the emphasis on that ancillary recommendation from the Joint Committee on the Eighth Amendment of the Constitution. It is really important because we know that received a huge focus from the committee. It was not necessarily the part that got all of the headlines in the media but I know the members of the committee put huge thought and work into the detail of the ancillary recommendations. As we approach the review of that legislation, it is important that we have demonstrable progress on those ancillary recommendations.

As others have said, there have been recommendations on comprehensive sex and relationship education, which will be really important. We need to move forward on that, including on the issue of consent. We need to look at consent before college age and we need to recognise the different realities and experiences of young people and make sure they are reflected in that education.

The other key recommendation was on free contraception. There was an important line in that recommendation, which others have touched on. The committee recommended: "The introduction of a scheme for the provision of the most effective method of contraception, free of charge and having regard to personal circumstances." That matter needs to be addressed. Members have talked about long-acting reversible contraceptives, LARCs, and how for many people and women, that is the right choice. That is especially true when it comes to particular personal circumstances such as those who are in rural areas, those who are in difficult family situations and those who have economic difficulties. It is important that they are given access to LARCs and that there is a choice so that they have that opportunity to identify the right form of contraception for them.

The motion focuses on people aged 17 to 25, as a matter of priority, but it also calls for the development of universal free contraception within the lifetime of this Government. It will be good if we are given a timeline for universal contraception in the next few months. It might not just be about age cohorts though we begin with 17 to 25-year-olds. There are, as has been

discussed, particular vulnerable groups such as people living in direct provision and in other situations. We should not simply think of the roll-out just in terms of time but make sure that it is planned according to need.

I strongly welcome this positive motion but I want to highlight that it sits in a wider context. Last week, I was re-elected to the executive of the European Parliamentary Forum for Sexual & Reproductive Rights. It produces a global contraception atlas every year that considers access to contraception at a global level. The 2020 atlas highlighted that in some northern European countries there is a 73% level of general access to contraception, it is 69% in parts of western Europe and 66% in Ireland, which is lower than the European average. Crucially, in Ireland there is still an unmet need for contraception rate of 6%. The atlas highlighted a few other key issues. One is that there have been positive policy changes in a number of countries regarding financial barriers, as proposed and is being attempted here today, but there has been a rollback in some countries.

Last year, was the 25th anniversary of the International Conference on Population and Development. There is a huge unmet need for contraception internationally. I hope that in the spirit of what we are doing about access in Ireland that the State will, in its international development policy, support access to contraception on a global level. That is particularly important following a very difficult period in the global gag rule when many international health needs were compromised. We must continue the same spirit of providing access to the people who need it most here in Ireland and, indeed, universal access on a global level.

Senator Vincent P. Martin: An awful lot of ground has been covered. With the level of erudite debate, fire and passion and zealous commitment, the advocacy of women's rights has never been as strong in this country. Any young person, be it a boy or a girl, who witnesses this debate will be inspired by the respect, fire, passion and intelligence of the debate. Women's rights and the advocacy for same are in a safe and good place. However, my fellow Senators would be the first to say that the Government will be judged on results on which I am quietly confident. That is an ongoing battle but we have brilliant people in the battle. I am privileged to be in this Seanad with extremely capable Senators and, by coincidence, the vast majority of them are women. I have not let Senator Conway away with it as I am the second male Senator to make a contribution. Senator Clifford-Lee has a great background in this issue as does Senator Currie who spoke earlier.

The Seanad will be judged on results and I am quietly confident regarding this issue. We also have very fantastic debates when we agree to disagree. I am heartened to see the goodwill shown towards the Green Party motion and I commend my Green Party colleagues, Senators Pauline O'Reilly and Garvey. The Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, Senator Pippa Hackett, who, as a super junior Minister, while in the background is very supportive of the motion. It is a time and a country where men cannot be behind the door. I was heartened to hear the contribution made by Senator Conway, with which I fully concur and I concur with all of the other remarks. Well done to everyone on this small step in the right direction. The Green Party has a very vibrant women's movement, Mná Glasra, which will be very proud of the actions taken by Senators O'Reilly and Garvey. No one political party has ownership of this. As I have often said, it is counterproductive for one party to be associated as a monopoly when it comes to climate change and equally so with these issues that go to the heart of society, and how we value and treat people equally, how fair we are and how we protect human rights.

One Senator is missing today but I am sure that she is unavoidably absent but she had a fantastic deputy in Senator Hoey. I refer to Senator Ivana Bacik who has been at the forefront of this issue for many years, unlike myself. She has devoted her adult life to these causes. There is also Senator Alice-Mary Higgins. The Labour Party has not always been rewarded electorally but it deserves some credit for being on the right side of history, which is a good enough memory, karma and pride to have. That does not always translate to votes in an election box but this is much more important than that. The Irish Labour Party has been a beacon and I would like to think the same applies to the Green Party and many others. I say to those parties that have not been so strong on these issues in the past that we are not into judgementalism. The late Brian Lenihan Snr. spoke about “the futility of consistency”. People are entitled to change their minds and should be respected for same. We will have real progress in this country when all parties are onboard, including Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. I anticipate that the Minister of State, Deputy Feighan, will make a very positive and uplifting address because I know his track record.

Senator Martin Conway: Parties are always evolving.

Senator Vincent P. Martin: They are always evolving and changing. No one should every be afraid of change. Evolution is a good thing.

Senator Martin Conway: Exactly.

Senator Vincent P. Martin: I commend everyone and feel privileged to be part of this erudite debate. I thank Senator Pauline O’Reilly who moved the motion and will close the debate. Finally, I thank the Leas-Chathaoirleach for his indulgence.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I welcome the Minister of State back to his alma mater and he has 15 minutes.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan): I thank Senators Pauline O’Reilly, Garvey and Martin, and the Minister of State, Senator Hackett, for tabling this important motion. I thank them for the opportunity to set out the commitment of the Government and my Department to expand access to free contraception to all women aged between 17 and 25 and, indeed, the commitment to promoting women’s health more generally through the work of the women’s health task force in the Department of Health.

Like Senator Martin, I am humbled and very thankful to attend this very reasoned, informed and welcome debate that included advocacy on behalf of women’s groups. He rightly said that no one party has ownership of this issue. However, I would like to thank the Labour Party, as it has always been taken the lead on a very liberal agenda. In 1993, Deputy Brendan Howlin led the way in with the significant, landmark decision to legalise the sale of condoms. I agree that sometimes the Labour Party is not rewarded electorally. It has always led the way and brought parties, like my party of Fine Gael and many other parties, along a journey that we followed and I thank them.

I have listened to all of the individual contributions that were made with real passion and knowledge of the topic. I strongly agree with many of the points that have been well made by Senators.

Recent studies, such as that undertaken by the Dublin Well Woman Centre and the ERSI-HSE report, Talking about Sex and Sexual Behaviour among Young People in Ireland, have

shown that some Irish women face real barriers in accessing contraception. Senators have reflected that research in this motion. It referred to rent, food, education and survival. Senators Garvey and O'Reilly outlined the challenges and barriers in rural areas, small villages and towns. It brought it home to me.

The results of this more recent research broadly reflect the findings of a working group report on access to contraception, published by the Department of Health in October 2019. This working group was established in April 2019, following recommendations from the Oireachtas Joint Committee on the Eighth Amendment of the Constitution. It was charged with considering the range of policy, regulatory and legislative arising issues in enhancing access to contraception. The group's high-level report provided a clear overview of the challenges associated with accessing contraception and outlined the potential for State intervention to address those barriers. The report highlighted the need for any new contraceptive scheme to provide women with the opportunity to choose the most effective and suitable type of contraception for them, based on their individual health and lifestyle needs and preferences.

As a result, there is rightly considerable focus on the existence of barriers to contraception. However, it is important to acknowledge that cost is only one such barrier. The working group report and the wider research literature show that local accessibility, embarrassment and lack of knowledge or information are also important factors that need to be considered. The interaction between contraceptive usage and cost is complex and should not be framed only in simple binary terms as to whether an individual can or cannot afford contraception. Rather, the question must also be whether cost factors may be influencing decision-making on the type of contraception used or how effectively or consistently a particular method of contraception is being used.

I say this not to dispute the points that were so well made earlier in this debate, but rather to caution against the view that simply making contraception free is enough to make contraception more widely available. We need to adopt an approach that targets all of the often interrelated barriers in a coherent and strategic manner to have the best impact on this problem. This is particularly the case if we are to encourage and enable the use of LARCs, which research has clearly shown can be the most effective form of contraception for many women. It is, therefore, essential that as well as rightly stepping up and tackling the cost issues, that we also ensure that services are readily accessible across the country, that policy initiatives are supported by educational and informational campaigns and that there is sufficient qualified capacity among healthcare professionals. A free contraceptive service is of little use if there is no local access to the service or if an individual is not informed about the different options that are available to them and about their potential benefits.

The Government's initial focus on those aged 17 to 25 is evidence of just such a strategic approach as we are prioritising that cohort of people who are most at risk for crisis pregnancy and are more likely to find cost a barrier to contraception. This does not mean that older age groups do not require supports. It is the Minister's intention to consider an appropriate timeline for the roll-out of a universal State-funded contraceptive scheme, alongside the work that will be undertaken to develop and finalise the policy approach in respect of the 17 to 25 age group. However, further stakeholder consultation will be essential as we progress work in this area.

One of the strengths of the working group process was that it allowed an extensive public consultation process with more than 5,000 responses received, while also creating the opportunity for more extensive engagement with several key stakeholders, including both the Irish College of General Practitioners and the Irish Family Planning Association, IFPA, among oth-

ers. There is a positive working relationship between State, voluntary and community groups working in the field of sexual health and well-being more generally. The Minister is looking forward to building on those relationships to help develop the best ways to improve access to contraception across the State.

I am sure Senators will join me in acknowledging and welcoming the fact that contraception use in Ireland is high and stable. It is important to recognise that Ireland is not an outlier in contraception policy. The European Contraception Atlas for 2019 ranked Ireland 12th of 46 countries with a rating of 65% for Government policies on access to contraceptive supplies, family planning counselling and the provision of online information on contraception. Senator Hoey mentioned she is in her 30s. I grew up in the early 1980s. It was a much different country back then. We have come a long way but we have much more to do.

This is not to say that there is not room for improvement. There is always space to do more but it indicates the measures and supports that we already have in place through the HSE's sexual health and crisis pregnancy programme, and through the sexual health strategy, are having a positive effect. It also proves that we have a strong foundation and solid base in place to go forward together and take that next step of widening access to contraceptive services as set out in the Fine Gael, Fianna Fáil and Green Party programme for Government commitments.

For instance, the national condom distribution scheme, which is administered by the health and well-being unit of the Department of Health and falls under my remit as Minister of State, was established to promote condom use among individuals and groups who may be at increased risk of negative sexual health outcomes. It freely distributed in excess of 730,000 condoms and almost 450,000 lubricant sachets in 2019. This scheme has been expanded to include third-level colleges with the roll-out of condom dispensary services to over 23 third-level colleges to increase the opportunities for younger people to make safer-sex choices. It is envisioned that this service will be further expanded in the future. Senator Clifford-Lee felt that this might not be enough. This service includes migrants, young people, gay, bisexual and other MSM, sex workers, those with addiction issues and those with HIV. Take-up of the service has doubled. Senator Clifford-Lee is correct that we need to do more in this respect. She also wanted this prioritised. I will bring that back to the Government. Choices around contraception can be expanded too.

Embarrassment and lack of information have been identified as important barriers to contraception. With this in mind, a key goal of the national sexual health strategy is to ensure that everyone receives not only a comprehensive, age-appropriate sexual health education but has access to equitable high-quality sexual health services and robust information. In this regard, Senators may be interested to note that in partnership with the Irish Pharmacy Union, the HSE launched Play it Safe in August, a major new information campaign encouraging young adults to consider their sexual health and well-being during the current pandemic. This campaign involves making sexual health protection packs available in pharmacies nationwide, offering valuable information and supports to young adults, who we know from public health data are most affected by crisis pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections.

Beyond these initiatives, which seek to address the issue of access to contraception within the wider framework of sexual health, we must not lose sight of the fact that those individuals who hold a medical card already have access to most types of contraception free of charge. Almost 125,000 people have availed of contraceptive drugs and special services through the general medical services, GMS, scheme in 2019, while others who hold a GP visit card are also

supported by reducing the clinical cost element of contraception. At the same time, the Minister for Health is acutely aware that for those who fall slightly short of qualification for the medical card, cost can be a real barrier to accessing the preferred or most appropriate form of contraception. Again, this can be a particular issue in respect of LARCs, which have a high upfront cost.

Although contraception is not solely a woman's issue, the ability to decide whether and when to have children has a direct impact on the physical, psychological and social well-being of women. It is in this wider context of women's health that the Government wishes to further expand access to contraception, and I wish to take this opportunity to briefly highlight the work underway on this wider agenda. Budget 2021 provided for a dedicated €5 million for a women's health fund to progress a programme of actions arising from the work of the women's health task force, which was established to improve women's health outcomes and experiences of healthcare. This funding complements the additional investment delivered across women's health services as part of budget 2021, including the €12 million investment in delivering the national maternity strategy and improving gynaecology and fertility services, and the €10 million investment in screening services, including BreastCheck and CervicalCheck. In sum, there should be no doubt about the commitment of the Minister of Health and that of the Government as a whole to promoting women's health and that includes providing access to free contraception for all women aged 17 to 25. Nonetheless, it must also be accepted that this is not a straightforward issue, and a sizable body of work needs to be addressed to develop and finalise the policy approach, bring forward the necessary legislative proposals and to finally ensure the implementation of service delivery arrangements.

Regrettably, as with most areas in my Department, work on this issue has been disrupted significantly by the need to prioritise the response to Covid-19. This was unavoidable due to the significant scale of the public health emergency we have faced, but it does not mean the issue of access to contraception has been forgotten. Indeed, as I have outlined, the opposite is the case. There has been considerable financial investment and a lot of valuable work undertaken to alleviate the barriers to contraception. The next step is to address the issue of cost on a wider scale. The Minister for Health recently met with the IFPA to discuss this particular issue and to help chart a path forward. I spoke to him briefly prior to this debate about this issue, and it is clear that he is looking forward to working with the IFPA and other stakeholders to deliver on the Government's commitment in this regard. As a result, the Government will not oppose the motion, and I thank the Senators and the Minister of State present for raising this very important issue and for the opportunity to reaffirm our commitment to the issue.

As Senator Higgins said, we must provide the most effective, long-acting contraception free of charge, and I note her point. We also must prioritise this issue in government and I have heard the message loud and clear. Senator Martin summed it up perfectly when he said that the debate was both informed and robust. I thank Senators for bringing many of the relevant issues to the floor of the House. I look forward to working with them in the coming weeks and months in prioritising this agenda.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I call Senator Pauline O'Reilly who has five minutes to respond to the debate.

Senator Pauline O'Reilly: I believe Senator Fitzpatrick wants to contribute.

Senator Mary Fitzpatrick: I did not have the opportunity to follow the debate as I was in committee, so the problem is that aside from being aware of the issue that was being debated, I

have no idea what has been spoken about in my absence. I thank the Minister of State for giving his time to this motion, and I apologise for not being present. Unfortunately, I was attending a committee meeting at which we were dealing with an important report on the unmet needs of children with special needs and their families.

This is a hugely important issue for this Government, and I know the Minister of State appreciates that, but it is also a hugely important issue for every man, woman and child in the country. We need to move beyond the point of consensus that we have established, and that has been documented, articulated and promoted. The Government must get on with rolling out free contraception. There is an identified target group in the initial phase of the roll-out, namely, 17- to 25-year-olds, which I wholly support. I do not know how the Minister of State responded to the motion, but I hope that it will make for good reading later and that I will find it encouraging. If that is not the case, I will be back here in January, tabling the same motion, and asking the Minister of State to return to the House. I am sure that my colleagues will join me in re-engaging with the debate. The women of both Chambers are committed to this issue, and we have shown this month-on-month. We want to see action taken on this promise in the programme for Government. It is an extensive and ambitious programme for Government, but it is one that we support and we believe that it can and should be delivered on in the near future.

Senator Joe O'Reilly: It is my great pleasure to support this motion along with my colleagues today. It is a motion that should be supported. I am happy that the Minister of State has also been supportive of it. I was unaware of the fact that speakers could make contributions after the Minister of State had responded to the motion. Perhaps I should have been aware of this and I have been terribly negligent. It was a slip-up on my part. I had intended to speak on this issue, but I did not anticipate having the opportunity to do so.

While the provision of free contraception is part of the programme for Government, it is worthy and worthwhile that Senators Pauline O'Reilly, Garvey, Martin, and the Minister of State, Deputy Hackett, brought forward this motion, because it is an important one. There is a commitment in the programme for Government to make contraception freely available to all women, and that is as it should be. However, the motion is also timely and important because it will give impetus and strong, public support to the issue. It will also leave the Government on notice that is a commitment that must be honoured, and that those putting forward the motion are insisting that it be honoured. That is a worthwhile exercise, and it is representative of how the democratic system and our parliamentary system works.

The principle that all women should have access to free contraception is a good one on a number of levels. It removes an inequality at the income level, which is a real form of inequality. It also deals with situations where people are in extremely difficult, barbarous, horrendous and medieval relationships, and where they may not have a supportive partner or another who can help them to access contraception. These women may be victims of domestic bullying or violence, or a combination thereof, who cannot access contraception because they have to purchase it. That is a very important dimension of this motion. Tragically, not all relationships and situations are as they should be. It deals with that scenario and with the scenario whereby there is an inequality of income. There should be no issue there. It should assist people who are living in long-term poverty, who are unemployed and so on. It should be across the board. Access to contraception is and should be a woman's right in a civilised and modern society that can afford to facilitate it. In many ways, it could be seen as an act of atonement to women for years of it being wrongly the other way, for want of better English. The weight of injustice was so great for so many years in the opposite direction that it would be an exercise in atonement or

a public apology through practical support. That is another reason to do it.

The Minister of State alluded to the fact that the free availability of contraception has to be accompanied by good sexual education, good public health education and supports, in educational terms in a good programme in schools, etc. It is not enough to do this in an isolated fashion. I am sure the proposers of the motion would accept that it is not enough to suggest that contraception be made available in the absence of the necessary support system, health services, education and so on.

I know from working with him and from being in this House with him for a long time that the Minister of State brings a big heart to politics and will be the first to say that we cannot use these things as excuses. We have to get on with the legislation, put it in place and provide the necessary supports in parallel. There can be no excuses. Sometimes you hear somebody saying that they do not want such a neighbour living beside them because there are not enough schools or supports. In essence, they do not want the neighbour in the first place and they use these excuses. The same principle applies here. We cannot put any barriers in the way. It is the right thing to do and we should do it.

Those are the substantive points I want to make. Sex education or sexual education - whatever the correct terminology is - in our schools is crucial. People should be educated in relationships, in mutual respect and in the integrity of the other individual. A good programme into schools is a *sine qua non*, as is a good, supportive public health system for our women. It should be an interventionist system where that is needed in order that there will be intervention where wrong exists. We should, as a priority, introduce free contraception to deal with income disparity, lack of access to resources and, specifically, abusive relationships and circumstances where people have addictive personalities or have other ways of spending their income to the detriment of their well-being. It is important that a supportive system be put in place in this regard.

I indicate, as my colleagues have done, that we strongly support the motion. We support the Green Party in bringing it forward. It is progressive and right and it should not be the subject of debate. I do not think it is the subject of debate. All that is at issue is saying we want it to happen as quickly as possible. We do not want it to go off the radar. It does not give rise to any cleavages or disagreement. I described the Minister of State as a man with heart earlier. I do not think anyone with a heart, a mind or a combination of the two could oppose this motion. It should happen and the fact that it should happen is not a reason to ignore it. It is important that the motion is there and that it happens. One cannot assume that the right thing will happen if one says nothing. I congratulate the Green Party. This is an excellent motion. My main objective is to indicate the universal support in the Fine Gael group for it. That emerged at our meetings and everywhere else. There is nothing but enthusiastic support in our group.

Acting Chairman (Senator Vincent P. Martin): It goes to show the sincere seriousness of the debate that the Leas-Chathaoirleach asked me to take the Chair in order to facilitate him in addressing the House. I was happy to do that.

Senator Joe O'Reilly: I thank the Acting Chairman. I appreciate his stepping in.

Senator Pauline O'Reilly: I thank the Minister of State and all Senators. I was not entirely sure how today's debate, for want of a better word, would go because there are people who have different views from some Senators who are not present in the House. It shows that

across this Chamber there is predominant support for the rights of women. As was mentioned by my colleague, Senator Garvey, 40% of the Members of the House are women. If one looks across every other area of politics in Ireland, one does not find that. That is why I feel passionate about this matter.

The Leas-Chathaoirleach put it well when he said that it is almost like atonement. There was a sense of frustration over many years among women that they were seen as second-class citizens. It reached a tipping point when it came to the eighth amendment. I still feel that sense of anxiety and almost shame, dare I say it, about the fact we are not putting into practice what Senator Higgins referred to as the ancillary recommendations. She said it in such a way as to suggest they are ancillary but they are crucial and they took up so much time when people were doing their deliberations on the eighth amendment. It is crucial and despite some of the findings alluded to in the working group on how great we are doing on contraception, globally we are doing quite poorly on contraception so it is not a high bar.

If we talk about being progressive, why can we not be progressive and number one? It has been outlined time and again that women do not have access. All the facts and figures are on our side to show that people do not have the access they need. For every person in a situation of a crisis pregnancy or, as Senator Hoey stated, relating to their own healthcare, we need as a society to act now and we have to take into consideration the historical context in this country and not deal with this as if it is a minor thing on the side. This is critical to who we are if we are saying that we are moving forward and coming out of the dark ages. It is women who have been pulling this country out of the dark ages and this is another step.

I do not like to point out that I congratulate the men here because I also congratulate the women here and any non-binary person who happens to be discussing this issue. It is an issue for all of us and no one should be held higher than another person.

I will talk about a few things people have said while they remain fresh in my mind. An excellent point was raised by Senator Higgins on global responsibility. That is key and it is not in the motion but it is an important point. Ireland is held up as a country that assumes its global responsibilities in terms of the climate and overseas development aid. We now need to determine whether we can include these issues in that as well.

Senator Garvey spoke about local access in rural areas and small towns. The Minister of State spoke about the same issue passionately. As Senator Boylan mentioned, the Well Woman Clinic pointed to this as one of the key factors, in that people must still travel for contraception. People feel shame and embarrassment.

Senators Conway and Clifford-Lee raised the question of education. The latter called it a dysfunctional system. Will the Minister of State speak to his ministerial colleagues about this point? His Government could be the one to transform the way we educate our children and, consequently, educate them as parents.

This could also be the Government that provides free access to contraception, which is a right in many countries like Portugal and the UK. It was in the programme for Government. Senator Clifford-Lee mentioned that she had raised this as a Commencement matter. Free contraception was to be rolled out soon. I would like to know when. I acknowledge that these have been difficult times for the Government, but we need a timeline. We know what the problems in the healthcare system are. I do not want to be completely negative, but it is my job as a Member

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of the Upper House to hold the Government to account. That is why I have tabled this Private Members' motion. Like Senator Fitzpatrick, I will be back in January and most of us will continue putting this matter on the agenda so that we can see the timeline for it.

I welcome the €5 million for the women's health fund in budget 2021. I draw the House's attention to the €12 million investment in delivering the national maternity strategy. It was a great shame that, after all of the work that was put into the strategy, it did not see the kinds of gain we expected during the term of the previous Government. The current Government needs to invest heavily in alongside care, which was a key part of the strategy. Alongside care has not progressed. I will also table something on this issue.

There has been major investment in screening services, including BreastCheck and CervicalCheck. I congratulate the Minister of State and the entire Department on that.

We still do not have a timeline, but this motion is a step. That is what I have told everyone. I ask the Minister of State to listen fully to the call not only of the women of this nation, but of the women of this Chamber. We do not outnumber men in the Seanad, in the Lower House or on local authorities. Unfortunately, we do not have female representation. Perhaps that is why we are still fighting years later for the most basic of services for our overall health, menstrual health, sexual health and mental health. This is a country that needs to think not just about the economy but also about people's well-being.

Question put and agreed to.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I congratulate the Senator for moving the motion. When is it proposed to sit again?

Senator Pauline O'Reilly: Tomorrow at 10.30 a.m. in the Dáil Chamber.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Is that agreed? Agreed.

The Seanad adjourned at 5.45 p.m. until 10.30 a.m. on Wednesday, 16 December 2020.